Filipino Teachers' Understanding and Promotion of Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience Among 4- to 6-Year-Old Children

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ABSTRACT

This Case Study explores Filipino Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers' understanding and promotion of social-emotional skills and resilience among 4- to 6-year-old children in the Philippines. It begins by highlighting the country's susceptibility to natural disasters and the importance of resilience in facing such challenges, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was done in 2023-2024, post pandemic. However, since resilience develops over time, the perceptions and practices for nurturing this is still relevant. The study investigated teachers' perceptions and approaches to nurturing resilience, starting with a preliminary survey in a focus group discussion with school authorities and head teachers to find out their own understanding of these terms and their suggestions on how to present these terms to the teachers in their school. Findings of the main case study survey reveal varying depths of familiarity with the terms "social-emotional skills" and "resilience" among the ECE teachers, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding. Teachers recognize the importance of social-emotional skills in children's development, associating them with emotion regulation, social interaction, and relationship building. Regarding resilience, teachers perceive it as the ability to learn from difficult situations, demonstrating adaptability and bravery. The study further explores specific activities and practices implemented by teachers to develop resilience in children, including restorative justice chats, peace circles, and peace corners, along with educational programs and materials aimed at nurturing resilience. Overall, the study underscores the significance of fostering resilience and social-emotional skills in early childhood education to support children's holistic development and well-being. Various cases highlight different perspectives of teachers from various kinds of schools and different ages.

Keywords: resilience, early childhood education teachers, social-emotional skills, peace circles

Introduction

With its geographical vulnerability to frequent storms and environmental challenges, the Philippines has cultivated resilience among its populace, shaped by factors like poverty, family support, and community cohesion (Bankoff, 2007). This resilience, crucial in children's development, has gained significance amid the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the need for early nurturing of resilience skills (Ungar, 2008; Cusinato et al., 2020; Cohn et al., 2009).

While teaching curricula exist to promote resilience, educators' comprehensive understanding is vital for successful implementation (Las Hayas et al., 2019; Pinto et al., 2021; Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018). The MATATAG Curriculum, which originally aimed to instill Filipino values and nationalism, has evolved to encompass resilience against various challenges, including the pandemic (Zara et al., 2022). The Philippines' Basic Education Development Plan 2030 prioritizes transformative education to nurture globally competitive and resilient youth (Department of

Education, 2024). MATATAG, although an actual Filipino word for resilience, is also an acronym that shows the four pillars of the new curriculum:

> **MA**ke the curriculum relevant to produce competent and job-ready, active, and responsible citizens;
> **TA**ke steps to accelerate delivery of basic education facilities and services;
> **TA**ke good care of learners by promoting learner well-being, inclusive education, and a positive learning environment; and
> **G**ive support to teachers to teach better.

It is the third pillar, "**TA**ke good care of learners by promoting learner well-being"… where we put our focus for this study. Strategies for developing socio-emotional skills and for developing resilience are found mostly in the subject for Values Education, however, the skills for critical thinking, decision making, resourcefulness, creativity and flexibility are embedded in all other subjects of the curriculum.

Moreover, the country's cultural context, influenced by natural disasters, has shaped resilience and coping mechanisms, evident in community support systems like **"Bahala na"** *(we leave it up to God)* and **"Bayanihan"** *(cooperative endeavor)* (Songcayaon et al., 2020). Previous research underscores the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in promoting resilience and academic success, highlighting the need for supportive school environments (Cavioni et al., 2020; Rungduin & Reyes, 2016).

Additionally, the relationship between emotional intelligence and resilience underscores the significance of personal development and adaptive coping strategies (Sotto et al., 2022). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, research on pedagogical resilience among teachers in Thailand and the Philippines emphasizes adaptability and collaboration as key factors (Zara et al., 2022). **Religion, spirituality,** and **community support** are highlighted as essential coping mechanisms in facing adversities (Rungduin & Reyes, 2016).

The Philippines has a unique geographical and cultural context, cultivating resilience in its population, especially amidst challenges like frequent storms and poverty. The significance of resilience in children's development is highlighted in the country's education policies and curriculum aimed at nurturing holistic well-being. Research underscores the role of emotional intelligence in fostering resilience and promoting socio-emotional learning in schools. The country prioritizes creating supportive environments and leveraging community support to foster resilience among its learners.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers in nurturing resilience in 4-6-year-old children and their social-emotional skills. The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, including a preliminary survey and a main survey conducted through interviews. This involved a preliminary survey with school administrators aimed to gather data for developing interview questions for the Main survey, and a main survey with ECEC teachers.

Preliminary Survey: The preliminary survey was conducted September and October 2023. As shown in table 1, it involved a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with eight school authorities, all female, mostly from private schools (87.5%) and others from public schools (12.5%); with 71.4% having over 15 years of experience working in ECEC, and 62.5% having 15 years or more administrative experience.

TABLE 1. *Experience of School Authorities in ECEC*

Experience as ECEC worker	Experience as School Authority	Duration
0.0	25.0%	Less than 5 years
14.3%	0.0	5 to less than 10 years
14.3%	12.5%	10 to less than 15 years
71.4%	62.5%	15 years or more

Main Survey: The main survey conducted January and February 2024, after the preliminary survey. This used a Case Study Method, interviewing 15 female teachers from various schools. Among them, 66.7% were from private schools, and 33.3% were from public schools. In table 2 is shown the teachers' teaching experience in ECEC, with 26.7% having less than 5 years of experience and 20% having 15 years or more. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis.

TABLE 2. *Experience of ECEC Teachers*

Experience as ECEC worker	Duration
26.6%	Less than 5 years
26.7%	5 to less than 10 years
26.7%	10 to less than 15 years
19.9%	15 years or more

Results

The results show (1) the teachers' understanding of the terms social-emotional skills and resilience, and (2) the promotion or development of these among 4- to 6-year-old children.

1. How Teachers Understand the terms Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience:

Preliminary survey (FGD) (Interview with ECEC facility managers and senior teachers)

The perceptions of "social-emotional skills" and "resilience" among Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) facility managers and senior teachers reveal a comprehensive understanding of these concepts.

For **"social-emotional skills,"** participants acknowledge its importance in children's development, encompassing self-identity, belonging awareness, emotion recognition, and expression. They recognize the significance of self-regulation in managing emotions and behaviors. Themes from focus group discussions (FGDs) highlight different aspects of perception and nurturing of social-emotional skills, emphasizing age-appropriate interventions and the influence of environment and parental emphasis on academics.

Based on the initial codes from the data gathered, the following themes for social-emotional skills emerged:

Theme 1: Definition and components of social-emotional skills: *"emotional regulation", "self-identity", "sense of belonging", "expression of emotions", "decision making"*

Theme 2: Attributes of children with high social-emotional skills: *"happy", "safe", "connected", "relaxed", "confident", "interact effectively with others"*

Theme 3. Importance of nurturing social-emotional skills: *"essential in overall development and well-being"*

Theme 4: Specific social-emotional skills to nurture: *"establishing friends", "emotional regulation", "self-identity", "decision-making", "boundary-setting", "executive functions"*

Regarding **"resilience,"** participants understand it as children's emotional flexibility and ability to adapt to new experiences. Resilience training is integrated into the curriculum, with a focus on perseverance and inner strength. Administrators view resilience as essential for children to cope with challenges and persist through difficulties, akin to concepts like grit. Themes from interviews underscore the understanding, development, and contextualization of resilience in educational settings, particularly in the face of adversity like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the initial codes from the data gathered, the following themes for resilience emerged:

Theme 1: Definition & components of resilience *"adapting to new experiences", "emotional flexibility", "coping abilities", "perseverance", "determination", "strength of character"*

Theme 2: Development & encouragement of resilience *"through learning from mistakes", "adapting to changes", "fostering emotional regulation"*

Theme 3: Contextualization of resilience in education *"integration of resilience training & understanding into educational practices in relation to specific cultural contexts", & "include in teacher training programs"*

Administrators note that teachers have undergone training in social-emotional skills and resilience, with activities and practices implemented to foster these skills. Diverse educational backgrounds contribute to varied perspectives on resilience and social-emotional skills, and it is necessary to have a common understanding before implementing strategies. Educational programs and materials in their schools focus on promoting values formation, team building, and emotional awareness, aiming to cultivate resilience in both teachers and students within a supportive school community.

Main survey (Case Study Interview with ECEC teachers)

Teacher interviews reveal the understanding and importance of social-emotional skills and resilience, learning sources and difficulties for children aged 4 to 6, successful adaptation and approaches to nurturing resilience, inclusive practice and communication with parents, and interactions as a Childcare Worker and Feedback to Parents.

Word perception of "social-emotional skills" by ECEC teachers. The main themes from the interviews regarding social-emotional skills are: (1) Definition and components of Social-Emotional Skills; (2) Traits of Children with High Social-Emotional Skills; (3) Importance of Nurturing Social-Emotional Skills; (4) Specific Social-emotional skills to nurture; and (5) Nurturing social-emotional skills.

Theme 1: Definition and components of social-emotional skills: Teachers recognize the importance of social-emotional skills, emphasizing their role in regulating emotions and interacting with others. They define these skills as encompassing abilities such as *"building relationships", "managing emotions" and "behavior", "taking perspective"*, (Cases 2, 4), and *"coping successfully with conflict"* (Case 6).

Theme 2: Attributes of Children with High Social-Emotional Skills. Teachers describe children with high social-emotional skills as *"happy", "safe", "connected", "relaxed", "confident", and able to "interact effectively with others"*. in other words they are effective communicators who demonstrate resilience, adaptability, empathy, and confidence in social settings. Case 1 perceives children with high social-emotional skills as children who are *"able to express what they're feeling*" and *"understanding why they feel a certain way, being able to respond and communicate* (verbally or non-verbally) *with others*"

Theme 3: Importance of Nurturing Social-Emotional Skills. Here, the emphasis is on the significance of nurturing social-emotional skills in children, highlighting its essential role in their overall development and well-being.

Theme 4: Specific Social-emotional skills to nurture. This theme identifies the specific social-emotional skills that are crucial to nurture in children, including *"establishing friendship"* (Cases 2, 7, 8), *"emotional regulation"* (cases 6, 12), *self-identity* (cases 14), *"decision-making", "boundary-setting",* and *"executive functions"*.

Theme 5: Nurturing social-emotional skills. This theme encompasses the initial codes from the interviews on *"relationship-building", "coping with failure", "trust in teachers" or "trust in the school environment", "managing emotions", "sharing", "taking turns", "caring for others", "understanding perspectives", "sociability", "confidence", "empathy",* and *"friendliness"*.

Word perception of "resilience" by ECEC teachers: The main themes from the interviews regarding "Resilience" include: (1) Definition and Understanding of Resilience, (2) Qualities of a Resilient Child, and (3) Importance of Nurturing Resilience.

Theme 1: Definition and Understanding of Resilience: Teachers understand resilience as *"the ability to recover from adversity and adapt to difficult situations"*. They highlight resilience as crucial for children, describing it as the capacity to *"learn from challenges", "maintain a positive attitude", "persist in tasks",* and *"seek help when needed"*.

Theme 2: Qualities of a Resilient Child. Resilient children are seen as *"tough", "flexible", "adaptable", "strong",* with a *"positive attitude in life and brave", "facing one's challenges courageously",* with the ability to *"process emotions", "reflect on experiences",* and *"interact confidently with others"*. One of the teachers described resilience as something *like a "bamboo that can bend in different situations that are happening around them"* (Case 3). Another teacher emphasized perseverance: *"like in play-no matter how many time the blocks would fall, they build it over and over again"*

Theme 3: Importance of Nurturing Resilience. All the ECEC teachers believe that it is very important to nurture resilience among children. *"When we nurture them in their early age, we are developing their ability to handle difficult situations in the future."* (case 4).

Where ECEC teachers learned about "social-emotional skills" or "resilience". Teachers gained knowledge about social-emotional skills and resilience through various educational experiences, including *undergraduate studies, occupational therapy work, seminars, reading materials, and personal life encounters*. They emphasize the importance of these concepts in both

academic and practical settings, highlighting the role of formal education, professional experiences, and personal observations in shaping their understanding.

Difficulties or adversities for children aged 4-6 according to ECEC teachers: Teachers identify challenges such as *separation anxiety, emotional expression difficulties, discrepancies between home and school environments*, and *limited social interaction* as adversities for children aged 4 to 6. Case 11 pointed out that *there are discrepancies between home and school environments which make "following routine in schools… difficult since in their homes the rules are less."* These challenges underscore the importance of addressing emotional and environmental factors in supporting children's holistic development.

Successful adaptation or bouncing back for children aged 4-6 according to ECEC teachers: Teachers describe successful adaptation or bouncing back for children as *the ability to persist in learning despite challenges, seek help when needed, interact with others confidently, and maintain a positive attitude towards life.* "*Not allowing any of the mistakes or 'failures' to stop them from trying to learn new things or continue developing their skills or trying new experiences*" are some ways that children show resilience as shared by Case 1. They emphasize the role of *support from parents, guardians, and teachers* in fostering resilience and adaptability in children.

2. How teachers Promote or Develop Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience Among 4- to 6-Year-Old Children

Specific Activities, Practices, and Interactions ECEC Teachers Implement to Develop Resilience In Children. The teachers in this study presented various specific activities, practices and interactions, as well as programs for promoting social-emotional skills and resilience among 4- to 6-year-old children. Table 3 shows specific activities, practices, and interactions ECEC teachers implement to develop resilience in children:

TABLE 3 *Specific Activities, Practices, and Interactions ECEC Teachers Implement to Develop Resilience In Children*

Restorative justice chats
Peace circles
Peace corners
Talking about (discussions) situations that cause big emotions
Acknowledgment Of Feelings,
Encouragement Of Expression,
Perspective-Taking,
Resolution with classmate
Incorporating resilience lessons during circle time, play time, story time
Providing encouragement in difficult situations
Hands on activities that encourage interaction with classmates to develop social skills

These approaches aim to foster emotional regulation, communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills among children.

Educational programs and materials implemented at different facilities to teach important life lessons to children and nurture resilience. Two teachers from a certain private school have been trained with a foreign program that fosters social-emotional skills and resilience. This is part of the "Peace Education" that the school has adopted even before the pandemic. The other teachers from different schools have attended local trainings or did self-study after the pandemic. These are found in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Educational programs and materials implemented at different facilities to teach important life lessons to children and nurture resilience.

Peace Education: Peace Circles, Peace Corners
Restorative Justice Chats
Storytelling
Evaluation of goals
Visualization exercises
Socio-Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL),

Peace Education includes: (1) *Creating safe spaces like Peace Circles and Peace Corners, (2)Restorative Justice Chats for conflict resolution, storytelling sessions, evaluation goals focusing on social skills, visualization exercises, and holistic approaches to address the socio-emotional needs of children.* Case 2 describes **Peace Corner** as *a safe space wherein children can calm down, recognize their feelings and become more ready to process a situation that affects them: "when faced with big emotions, 1) allowing them to calm down enough to be ready to talk about their emotions, 2) talking about the social situation that occurred that cause their big emotions, 3) acknowledging how they feel, 4) talking about what would be just in the situation they are in, 5) perspective-taking, and 6) resolution with the classmate."* She also explains that **Restorative Justice Chat** is *a way to process a situation with the children and make sure that they come up with a just resolution. This chat is inspired by the published works of Margaret Thorsborne wherein the opposing parties are asked a series of questions to help them process the conflict that caused the incident.*

Case 1 also mentions **Socio-Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL),** a program that they use from abroad that contributes to their curriculum on peace education, aimed to help understand oneself and others better socio-emotionally, and to navigate social relationships more peacefully. SEEL follows the specific SEE Learning program of Emory University as the school where case 1 and case 2 teachers is the first Philippine School that received the facilitation certificate for Social Emotional and Ethical Learning. SEE Learning activities are implemented during Peace Education class where they meet once a week, however, SEE Learning practices are embedded throughout the course of the day from morning meeting to every subject up until the day's end. This Peace education has been in place in the school even before the pandemic years.

Scenarios:
Part of the teacher interview included giving scenarios and finding out how the teachers or childcare providers would interact with the children in those situations, whether or not they have articulate definitions of the terms social-emotional skills and resilience and to find out how they would promote socio-emotional skills and resilience in various situations.

Scenario 1: if a child was left out or not included in a group of friends. This involves strategies for promoting inclusion and addressing exclusion in the classroom when a child is left out. Teachers emphasize respecting autonomy (Case 1), mindfully including excluded children, and addressing class issues through social stories (Case 2). Encouragement, discovering talents, introducing children to each other, and finding solutions are highlighted approaches among different cases.

Scenario 2: if a child had a fight with his/her friend. This outlines a mediation process for resolving conflicts between children. The mediator listens to both sides, encourages empathy, and helps them understand the consequences. The goal is a peaceful resolution, involving checking in with the children, encouraging apologies, and reinforcing positive behavior, emphasizing communication, empathy, and understanding.

Scenario 3: if a child's close friend, a child's favorite teacher, or any other person with whom the child has a close relationship, moves away. This discusses strategies for supporting children coping with the departure of someone important. Approaches include allowing the expression of feelings, providing explanations, encouraging new friendships, facilitating communication, establishing trust, offering comfort, and consistent reassurance during times of transition and change.

Scenario 4: if an upsetting incident occurred at home (like if the child was scolded by his/her parents, or if the parents had a fight, etc.). This addresses upsetting incidents at home, emphasizing understanding students' feelings, investigating root causes, and providing support and guidance. The approach involves asking about feelings, sharing experiences, discussing solutions, and promoting open communication, reassurance, and empathy to address emotional needs.

Interpretation

The concept of "Matatag" has evolved beyond its original nationalist context to encompass resilience in various challenges, emphasizing flexible adaptability akin to bamboo swaying in the wind. This resilience, crucial from a young age, nurtures traits like love, forgiveness, and perseverance, essential for facing adversities. While the Philippines has historically demonstrated resilience against annual storms, the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded rapid adaptation, testing resilience in new contexts. Resilience, recognized as a learnable skill, is exemplified by educators who have swiftly adapted to guide and support children through challenging times. Educational systems globally faced significant challenges during the immediate transition to online education prompted by the pandemic.

However, they exhibited resilience, maintaining functionality amidst adversity. Resilience in education encompasses people, technology, and processes, with a focus on teacher resilience. Factors like strong leadership and community building were identified as crucial amid challenges, reflecting internal, interpersonal, and external resilience.

The preliminary survey results indicate a comprehensive understanding of social-emotional skills and resilience among ECEC facility managers and senior teachers. They recognize the importance of these skills in children's development and emphasize age-appropriate interventions.

Furthermore, the main survey results support these findings, highlighting the role of social-emotional skills and resilience in regulating emotions, building relationships, and adapting to challenges. Teachers' knowledge of these concepts stems from various educational experiences, shaping their understanding and approach in educational settings.

Challenges faced by children aged 4-6, such as separation anxiety and limited social interaction, underscore the importance of addressing emotional and environmental factors. Successful adaptation for children involves persistence, seeking help, and maintaining a positive attitude, with support from parents, guardians, and teachers. Specific activities and practices implemented by ECEC teachers aim to foster emotional regulation, communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills.

There is an intricate interplay between social-emotional learning (SEL) and resilience, particularly within the context of Filipino culture and educational practices. For educators, resilience, though easier to articulate due to its prevalence in discussions, is deeply intertwined with SEL. Public school teachers perceive resilience as coping within and outside the school environment, emphasizing the crucial role of social support and positive reinforcement. Training equips teachers with strategies to support students effectively, although some rely on practical, rather than scientifically grounded, approaches.

Notably, SEL encompasses more than just explicit components like emotion management; it extends to nuanced aspects like communication and trust. While private school teachers may possess more defined concepts of social-emotional skills, both groups recognize resilience as an adaptive capacity ingrained culturally and developed over time through facing challenges.

However, there is a need to enhance SEL practices, particularly in self-management and conflict resolution, beyond common-sense approaches, by providing structured tools and training. Ultimately, SEL serves as a foundational resource for fostering resilience, crucial for navigating the rapidly changing world and achieving personal and societal goals.

This research provides valuable insights into educational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing adaptability, communication, and support networks. Practical implications include ongoing professional development and effective communication strategies for educators. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on resilience in education and highlights its relevance in crisis situations, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

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