

## Teaching Covid-19 Concepts to Learners: Filipino Early Childhood Educators' Narratives

Inero Ancho  
University of the Philippines Los Baños  
Philippines  
ivancho@up.edu.ph

Leonora Varela  
Philippine Normal University  
Philippines  
varela.lp@pnu.edu.ph

Liza Legaspino  
Philippine Normal University  
Philippines  
legaspino.lc@pnu.edu.ph

Abegail Karen Lee  
Philippine Normal University  
Philippines  
lee.akm@pnu.edu.ph

### Abstract

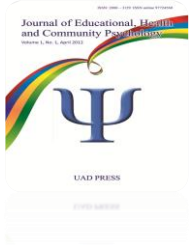
What challenges do early childhood educators encounter when teaching COVID-19 concepts to kindergarten learners? How do these educators employ strategies to address these challenges? This study delves into these initial inquiries, aiming to capture the narratives of Filipino early childhood educators as they navigate the educational landscape amidst the ongoing health crisis. The research design adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of Filipino ECEd teachers in teaching COVID-19 concepts to their young learners. The study includes six Filipino ECEd teachers who represent the three main islands of the Philippines—Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. These educators have a minimum of three years of teaching experience before the pandemic and are currently active in the profession, where they have encountered the task of imparting COVID-19 concepts to their students. Teaching the concept of COVID-19, while essential, poses challenges, particularly in making it accessible to young learners. To facilitate comprehension, educators often incorporate new vocabulary and visual aids. Additionally, the grim reality of COVID-19-related fatalities induces fear and concern not only among students but also among teachers themselves. The myriad challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitate ECEd teachers to adapt and employ innovative strategies to equip their young learners with the knowledge and skills to practice health and safety protocols effectively.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 concepts, early childhood education teachers, pandemic, teaching and learning

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### Introduction

As the global health crisis persists, its impact on the education sector continues to shape the teaching and learning process. Educational institutions have taken proactive measures to create optimal

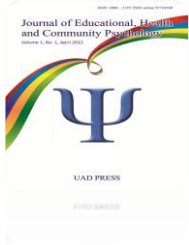


learning environments for students amid the ongoing pandemic. School closures and limited face-to-face interactions have forced educators to grapple with challenges related to internet connectivity and access to technological devices, further highlighting the difficulty of achieving quality and equitable education for all. It is concerning to observe a disparity in children's access to quality education based on their economic status, as noted by Dias et al. (2020).

Online learning, as a form of distance education, has experienced significant growth due to the pandemic (Kim, 2020). Health protocols and standards remain a central focus in educational settings, shaping the perception of effective teaching and learning even two years after the emergence of COVID-19. While the pandemic and associated lockdowns have disrupted early childhood education systems (Davies et al., 2021), public education remains a priority, with the aspiration of producing skilled and specialized future human resources to drive national development and economic recovery. To ensure that no learner is left behind, policies and programs have been implemented to harness the resilience of the education system, leveraging existing technological infrastructure and innovative approaches. The pandemic has brought existing issues and weaknesses within the early childhood education system to the forefront (Eadie et al., 2021), emphasizing the importance of delivering uninterrupted education because learning is an ongoing process.

Globally, children have been unable to attend physical face-to-face classroom sessions due to the pandemic. This significant shift in the education landscape has presented substantial challenges in terms of processes, structures, and various aspects of education. The disruption caused by health concerns has hindered children's growth and development (Spiteri, 2021). Teachers and students have turned to online, modular, and digital platforms as remote learning has become the new norm. Undoubtedly, the pandemic is not only a global health crisis but also an education crisis, affecting countries and educational systems worldwide (Timmons et al., 2021).

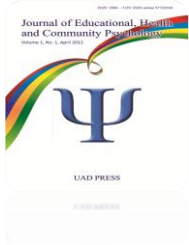
In the new normal of education, teacher innovation and creativity have taken center stage. Educators are adopting various practices to effectively engage students in a home-based learning environment, where distractions are abundant. Moreover, there is a heightened emphasis on enhancing teacher capacity and training to deliver lessons remotely. The mission is to continue teaching despite the



numerous hurdles and challenges, as outlined by Atilas et al. (2021). These challenges encompass balancing personal and professional commitments, managing health issues, and addressing financial and mental health concerns. Early childhood educators face specific challenges in teaching COVID-19 concepts to kindergarten learners. This study aims to explore these challenges, the strategies employed by educators, and how they are addressing these issues. The research seeks to collect narratives from Filipino early childhood educators as they navigate the educational landscape amidst the ongoing health crisis.

A critical aspect to consider is the level of awareness among early childhood learners regarding the pandemic, which may include exposure to unverified or incorrect information. Gayatri (20220) advocates for consistent open communication between teachers and parents as a key factor in successful online learning for children. Many parents are still overwhelmed and unprepared to take on the role of educators at home (Munastiwi, 2020). It has been noted that, during the pandemic, parents bear a significant responsibility for their children's learning, even more so than teachers (Solekhah, 2020). Capitalizing on the learners' interests, discussions about health crises could serve as a starting point, allowing them to choose topics they would like to explore. Accessible online literature can serve as reliable and convenient resources. Additionally, conveying to children that the health crisis presents an opportunity for discovery and learning can foster a proactive mindset. According to Yuliejantningsih (2020), both parents and teachers have grappled with finding the most effective approach to teaching children during the pandemic. While COVID-19 concepts may initially seem abstract or complex, proper contextualization and an appropriate approach can yield significant benefits, not only for early childhood learners but also for families and the entire education community.

This study holds significance in describing the experiences of the participants and providing valuable insights for future educational practices. It offers a theoretical foundation for effectively teaching COVID-19 concepts to early childhood learners by examining field practices. Moreover, the study contributes to the limited existing literature on early childhood learners and the teaching of COVID-19 concepts, as most available literature primarily focuses on subject content teaching during the pandemic rather than the broader context of addressing the pandemic itself.



## Method

### *Design*

Phenomenological design was used in the study in exploring what ECEd teachers have experienced in teaching COVID-19 concepts to learners. As a qualitative design, it seeks to highlight the commonality of this particular group's experiences

### *Research Locale*

The participants of the study are all based in the Philippines where they practice their profession as early childhood educators.

### *Participants*

Six Filipino ECEd teachers are the participants in the study. All the participants are early childhood educators and currently taking graduate studies in the Philippines. They have been teaching for at least 3 years prior to the pandemic and are still currently in the profession where they have experienced teaching COVID-19 concepts to learners.

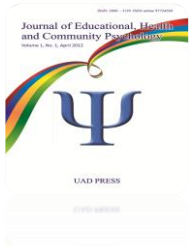
### *Sampling Procedure*

Purposive sampling was used in selecting the participants of the study. Participants were selected based on the following: (1) finished undergraduate ECEd program, (2) must have been teaching at the ECEd level for 3 years prior to the pandemic, and (3) must have been teaching (including COVID-19 concepts) in the kindergarten level during the pandemic regardless of modality.

### *Instruments*

An FGD guide served as the main instrument of the study. It was subjected to experts' validation. Each FGD session lasted for 1.15 – 1.5 hours. Sample items of the FGD guide validated by the experts include:

1. *What are your challenges in teaching conceptual/abstract ideas to your ECEd learners?*
2. *How do you effectively relay conceptual /abstract ideas to your ECEd learners?*



### *Data Collection*

The ECEd teachers were interviewed individually and focused-group discussion sessions were also held to gather data according to their preferred schedules and time. Zoom platform were used during the interview and FGD sessions.

### *Ethical Considerations*

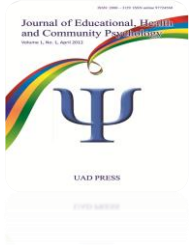
The proponents of the study were guided by ethical research protocols in gathering the data needed to address established research problems. All participants of the FGD were required to accomplish an online informed consent form that stated their voluntary participation in the study. As the sessions were held online and the topic of the study did not pose any threat to both the researchers and the participants, no ethical and safety risks were observed. Handling of data was executed with the utmost confidentiality and its utilization was only for the sole purpose of this study.

## **Results**

The research presents the various strategies that early childhood education teachers used in introducing concepts on COVID-19 to young learners. The four (4) following themes were extracted based on the research questions given. They are 'COVID-19 is Invisible in the Eyes of the Child', 'Explaining Death caused by Covid-19 to Young Children', 'Teacher-made Stories on COVID-19', and 'Integration of COVID-19 Concepts into Video Lessons'.

The first theme highlights the unclear understanding of the young learners on COVID-19. The second how fatality of the disease is explained to them. The third highlights how ECEd teachers used stories to elucidate the concepts of the disease. The last articulates the how these concepts are embedded in the video lessons.

RQ#1 What are the challenges faced by ECEd teachers in teaching the COVID-19 concepts to kindergarten learners?



### *COVID-19 is Invisible in the Eyes of the Child*

The concept of COVID-19 has challenged ECEd teachers on how it will be introduced to young learners. Scientific concepts and vocabulary demand more explanation and visual representation for children to understand. This becomes the challenge of the teachers in their locale. In the Philippines, COVID-19 is prevalent in the National Capital Region (NCR) compared to its provinces. However, though the pandemic was apparently existent, the young learners tend to have an unclear perception of this global phenomenon. ECEd teachers narrate their early experiences during the first wave of the pandemic where kindergarten learners cannot fully grasp the depth of how COVID-19 will affect their community:

*...more than ever here in the province where people feel safe in their environment because they know that it is still free from the virus. Children sometimes see their parents not wearing face masks and they will immediately think that COVID-19 is not really present.*

*... if I just tell them (kindergarten learners) that it is not safe to go outside because of COVID-19, then they will feel indifferent about it because of this new concept that seems vague to them.*

Although children are knowledgeable about the situation concerning the pandemic, ECEd teachers still have to think of ways to address the thorough concept of COVID-19 to their learners.

### *Explaining Death caused by Covid-19 to Young Children*

During classes, the discussion of COVID-19 for young children consists of prevention, symptoms, and practice of safety protocols. ECEd teachers equip themselves with facts to also give reliable information to their learners and parents. ECEd teachers are faced with the challenge that some learners talk about deaths caused by COVID-19. Children express their fears about how the virus may harm not only themselves but their families and friends as well (Thompson et. al, 2021):

*...it really feels heavy and challenging on my part as a teacher when I encounter children telling me about those who died because of COVID-19. I am asking myself how I will explain and process the children if I am also having worries about it. In reality, we are all vulnerable in this time of pandemic.*

RQ2# What strategies do early childhood educators employ in teaching COVID-19 concepts to kindergarten learners?

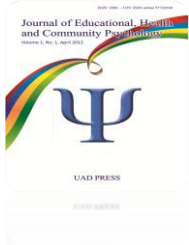
#### *Teacher-made Stories on COVID-19*

The frequent strategy that emerged which ECEd teachers conveyed is through teacher-made stories about COVID-19. ECEd teachers created stories about COVID-19 to allow the learners to understand the pandemic situation. From the supplementary materials provided by the local government, teachers modify and make the information developmentally appropriate for kindergarten learners. Children's stories are crafted to teach concepts that may seem too technical if explained to children. All teacher-made stories discussed how the COVID-19 virus can harm people. Stories ensured safety and instill the routine of washing hands and keeping oneself clean. The wearing of masks as part of the daily routine of the characters of the story was highlighted to remind the learners to do the same.

*Humor in children's stories.* ECEd teachers inject humor into the stories to allow learners to enjoy the stories and be engaged at the same time.

*Happiness with the family despite lockdown.* ECEd teachers have expressed that the initial shift in the modality of classes made children wonder about the sudden changes such as learning at home and the mandate of lockdown. ECEd teachers emphasized that COVID-19 is not a hindrance to enjoying and finding happiness at home.

*Hope and healthy choices as the central message in children's stories.* ECEd teachers emphasized the value of hope in their teacher-made stories. The teacher-made stories emphasize that the pandemic will soon be over and the characters can already play outside with their friends and they can go to school where the virus has already been eliminated. When children are exposed to different worlds through literature, the more they can have wider perspectives and empathize with other individuals.



### *Integration of COVID-19 Concepts into Video Lessons*

The modality of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was mainly through synchronous and asynchronous meetings. Online learning was one of the avenues in which young learners attend classes and video lessons are created for concept building. COVID-19 concepts are integrated most especially in Science where lessons on body parts and taking care of oneself are discussed. In other subjects like Language where community helpers are introduced, the significant contribution of frontliners is being emphasized by ECEd teachers in the video lessons. The other members of the community helpers, the essential workers are also given importance to the role that they bring to the community despite the pandemic circumstance. The concept of community helpers is further strengthened as children witness how adults are working to prevent the spreading of the COVID-19 virus.

### **Discussion**

There were challenges that the teachers faced to teach their learners about the fatal disease. Indeed, complex concepts and terminologies are too perplexing for the young learners to grasp; hence, they must be explained well. In Jerome Bruner's learning modes, children ages 1-6 years are in the iconic stage of learning. Children in this stage store information with the aid of visual representations, thus, learning new concepts with pictures is fundamental (Halloluwa et al., 2011). According to Thompson, et.al (2021), it was noticeably evident how children relayed the transmission of COVID-19 and its adverse effects but there was a difference in their awareness of how the virus may enter the body. According to UNICEF (2020), the awareness of communities in rural areas has less awareness of precautionary measures compared to those living in urban areas. Taking note of Bruner's theory, the delivery of instruction for new concepts requires an appropriate way of teaching (Zhou, 2020).

Furthermore, in reality, young learners must become adept with the prevention, symptoms, and safety protocols to fight against the disease. This leads to drive that teachers must learn these to teach such essentials to their learners. In this way, false information is prevented which can cause fear and anxiety in the class (UNICEF, 2020).



Moreover, as mentioned, though teaching the literature to the students is quite challenging, teachers were still able to manage how to do so and this is through their teacher-made stories. Children's literature is an avenue for young learners to make choices, gain a set of values, handle conflicts and challenges, and participate in an array of learning experiences (Pulimeno et. al, 2020). Using stories as a springboard to complicated concepts help children grasp ideas better, especially Science concepts (Banister & Ryan, 2001).

Humor in children's literature benefits children's learning. Some stories that were created included the element of humor to make the concept of COVID-19 less threatening. Also, the hints of humor make the story feel happy and enjoyable (Chu-Chun et. al, 2016). Thus, the strong preference for funny literature among children helps increase reading motivation (Johnson, 2010).

As confirmed by the teachers, students also wonder why there is a sudden change of learning means. In fact, the only means to communicate with families are through different applications (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Since children cannot physically go to school, ECEd teachers emphasize in the stories that they can still have fun with their families while learning at home. The role of their family plays an important role more than ever during the pandemic because young children depend on their parents (Morelli et. al, 2020). The family values are strengthened in the stories they have created and allow learners to enjoy the company of their family members despite lockdown.

Children are entitled to read literature with valuable life lessons that allow them to create meaningful experiences, expound learnings on other people's cultures, explore their imagination, and somehow break away from reality (Simpson & Cremin, 2022). Children's literature fosters young readers' good decisions making skills and socio-emotional development for healthier well-being (Pulimeno et. al, 2020). Protagonists in children's stories uncover their own strengths, capabilities, and responsibilities that make the reader reflect on their own lives (Gibbs & Earley, 1994). Empowering the characters in the teacher-made stories is an avenue to allow learners that they can participate and be capable of being part of the solution in stopping the spreading of the virus. The healthy choices that they can make such as following the health and safety protocols advised by the government is their participation to eradicate the COVID-19 virus. Hope is emphasized in the works of the teachers. It

is illustrated as a movement in the story that allows children to pursue a pathway leading to the possibility of positive circumstances in the future. (McAdam et. al, 2020). In the stories made, it is highlighted that pandemic will end soon and children will be able play around again.

The advocacy for children's holistic development is supported by children's literature. The narration is an avenue to educate and accommodate young learners that can be used as a didactic, pedagogical, and therapeutic function for fostering home and school development (Pulimeno et. al, 2020). Exposing children in a wide array of lexicon will improve their own vocabulary.

Educators adjusted learning modalities to allow children to learn at the height of the pandemic (Munastiwi, 2020). Lessons are delivered online primarily. Taking care of oneself and the efforts that front liners have done are the contents of the lessons. Learners gain an understanding that health workers take care of people who were infected with COVID-19 and how they face the challenge of their own safety (Rise, 2021). Through these contents, the heroism shown by the health workers, and the sense of unity among the members of the community are given utmost importance.

## **Conclusion**

Early childhood education teachers play a critical role in the concept building of young children. The COVID-19 concept although may be challenging to introduce, still needs to be delivered to allow learners to gain an understanding of the pandemic situation. COVID-19 can be vague to some young learners, for that reason, it requires being familiar with new vocabulary and additional visual cues for better understanding.

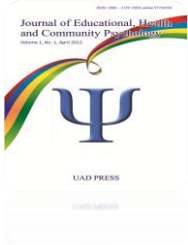
The reality of deaths caused by the virus creates fear and worries not only for the learners but the teachers as well. The many challenges brought by the COVID-19 compels ECEd teachers to modify and employ creative strategies to let their learners be equipped with skills to practice health and safety protocols. The teacher-made stories show the learners the COVID-19 concept in a developmentally appropriate manner and ensured that the characters from the story reflect the learner's context.

Kindergarten learners are empowered to participate in the prevention of spreading the virus by making healthy choices. In meeting the goals to allow learners to understand the concept, it is equally important to instill values especially hope among learners. This is to motivate them to still engage in active learning and look forward to coming to school physically in the future without the threat of the virus.

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