

EMBRACING CHANGE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WITH THE MATATAG CURRICULUM REFORM

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Abstract

Transforming the educational landscape through a new curriculum involves numerous challenges and requires significant effort before it can be fully implemented. This study explored the lived experiences of early childhood educators in Surigao del Sur as they embrace the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in the Philippines. While the reform aims to strengthen foundational learning, educators report challenges including insufficient training, lack of clear implementation guidelines, and limited instructional resources. Guided by Michael Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, a qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with five ECE teachers selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: limited orientation and preparedness, adaptive struggles amid resource and time constraints, and a strong commitment to professional growth and collaborative resilience. Despite emotional uncertainty and logistical challenges, participants demonstrated innovative teaching strategies, reflective practice, and peer-driven adaptation to reform demands. The findings highlight the critical role of teacher support systems in ensuring the success of curricular transformation. It is recommended that educational leaders prioritize sustained professional development, clearer guidance, and resource provision to empower teachers as key agents of change.

Keywords: Curriculum implementation, early childhood educators, educational reform, MATATAG Curriculum, teacher experiences, professional development, Fullan's change theory

1. Introduction

Transforming the educational landscape through new curriculum will take a lot of challenges and efforts before its total implementation. In the study of Kilag et al. (2024), they highlighted that the MATATAG curriculum is an innovative strategy for education in the Philippines, with the goal of empowering students and increasing their competitiveness on the global stage. Around the world, early childhood educators are increasingly expected to adapt to reforms that emphasize holistic development, social-emotional learning, and active student engagement (OECD, 2020). However, such reforms often present challenges related to teacher preparedness, resource availability, and professional identity, especially when implemented rapidly or without sufficient support (Zhang & Sun, 2023).

In the Philippines, curriculum reforms have been pivotal in addressing the evolving educational needs of Filipino learners, with the recent implementation of the Matatag Curriculum aiming to strengthen foundational skills and holistic development in early childhood education. While the reform promises improved learning outcomes, early childhood educators have expressed concerns about readiness, limited training, and the abrupt shift in pedagogical expectations. A study by Magallanes, Chung, and Lee (2022) highlights those Filipino teachers, including those in early childhood education, faced significant concerns

during the implementation. These challenges are compounded by long-standing issues in the Philippine education system, such as resource gaps and administrative overload, which affect the successful delivery of reforms.

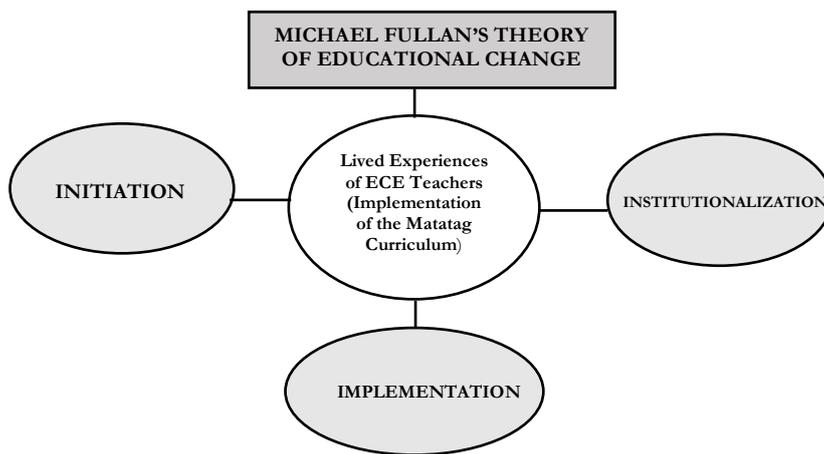
In Surigao del Sur, the implementation of the Matatag Curriculum reflects the province’s commitment to improving foundational literacy, numeracy, and values education among young learners. However, early childhood educators particularly those working in multigrade and underserved settings, face significant challenges including limited access to instructional resources, inadequate training, and the ongoing pressure to adapt to diverse teaching strategies (Naparan, G. B. (2021). These local realities highlight the need to examine how teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas experience and respond to national reforms.

As a multi-grade elementary teacher handling Grade 3 and Grade 4, I have encountered several difficulties in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. One of the main challenges is that I have not undergone any formal training related to its content and instructional strategies. Even with the big goals of the MATATAG Curriculum, we still don’t hear enough about what it’s really like for teachers who are living through and working with these changes every day (Bejasa, 2025). Their stories and struggles are often overlooked, even though they play a key role in making these reforms happen in the classroom. This study aims to fill that gap by capturing the voices of ECE teachers as they implement the MATATAG Curriculum, shedding light on the realities of reform at the classroom level.

This study aimed to highlight the personal experiences and stories of early childhood teachers regarding the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in Surigao del Sur for the school year 2024–2025, which will serve as a foundation for developing a proposed support implementation plan for teachers. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following question: What are the personal and professional experiences of early childhood teachers as they embracing change in the implementation of the Matatag Curriculum Reform?

This study is grounded in Michael Fullan’s (2007) Theory of Educational Change, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how educators experience and manage systematic educational reforms. The theory emphasized three critical phases of change: Initiation, Implementation, and Institutionalization. Each Phase represents a stage in the change process that teachers undergo as they respond to, adapt, and ultimately embed new practices and policies within their professional environment.

Figure 1. Paradigm of the study (Michael Fullan’s Theory of Educational Change)



2. Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore and interpret the lived experiences of ECE teachers. This design allowed for deep, narrative-driven insights into how educators perceive, adapt to, and internalize the Matatag Curriculum within their specific teaching environments. The design aligns with the study's aim to capture personal and emotional dimensions of professional practice amidst change.

The study was conducted in Surigao del Sur, a province in the Philippines known for its multigrade and resource-challenged public schools. This locale was chosen due to its representation of geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas where educational reforms often face heightened implementation difficulties.

A total of five ECE teachers from public schools in Surigao del Sur were selected using purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on three criteria: (1) currently teaching in early childhood or kindergarten levels; (2) having at least one academic year of experience with the MATATAG Curriculum; and (3) being willing to participate and share their experiences. This sampling strategy ensured that participants had firsthand, relevant insights into the implementation process. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is effective in phenomenological studies where deep, information rich cases are prioritized over breadth.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected teachers to gather qualitative data on their personal experiences. The process involved establishing rapport, securing informed consent, and using open-ended questions to elicit comprehensive narratives. Audio recordings were transcribed and validated by the participants to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis grounded in Michael Fullan's Theory of Educational Change. Responses were coded and categorized into themes corresponding to the phases of change: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. This framework helped in identifying patterns, insights, and the progression of teachers' responses to reform.

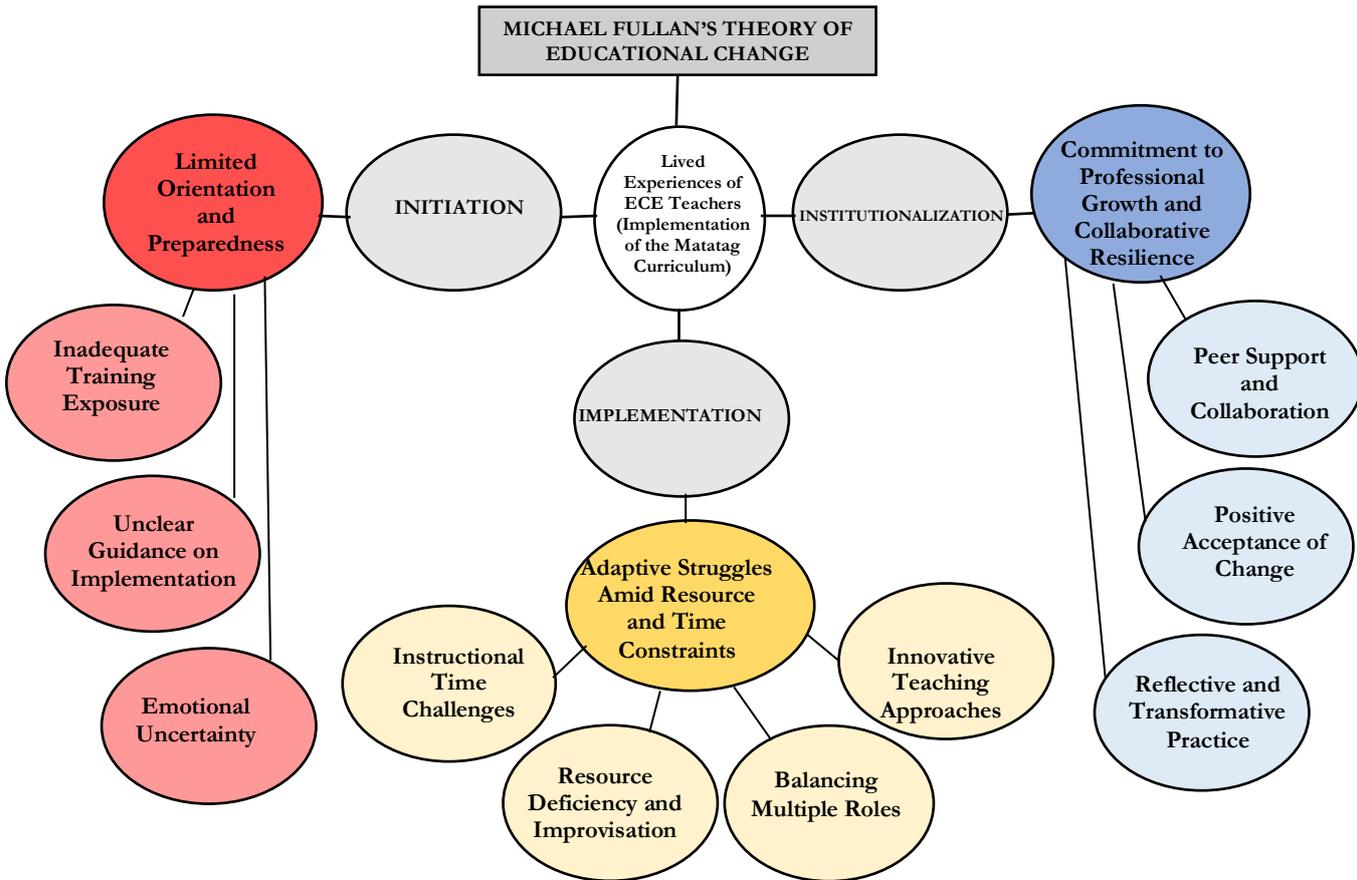
The study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Identities were anonymized in all transcriptions and reports to protect participants' privacy.

Credibility was ensured through member checking, where participants reviewed and validated their interview transcripts. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through consistent documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures.

3. Results

Insights from in-depth interviews with five ECE teachers revealed key themes in their lived experiences of embracing change, grounded in Michael Fullan's Theory of Educational Change. The Paradigm highlight three key phases: Initiation, Implementation, and Institutionalization. Each phase marked by distinct yet interconnected themes and sub-themes.

Figure 2: Emergent Themes and Subthemes on Lived Experiences of ECE Teacher Anchored on Fullan’s Theory of Educational Change



Theme 1 Limited Orientation and Preparedness highlights the significant challenges encountered by Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in implementing the Matatag Curriculum due to insufficient orientation and readiness. Three sub-themes emerged under this category: Inadequate Training Exposure, where teachers reported minimal or no participation in training sessions essential for understanding the curriculum; Unclear Guidance on Implementation, which left educators uncertain about proper procedures and expectations; and Emotional Uncertainty, reflecting the stress and lack of confidence experienced during the transition to the new curriculum.

“Wala ko nakaapil sa usa ka semana nga training, mao nga murag nahibilin ko gamay. Kailangan pa gyud nako tun-an pag-ayo ang mga materyales aron masabtan gyud nako ang mga gikinahanglan sa bag-ong kurikulum.”

(“I wasn’t able to join the one-week training, which makes me feel a bit behind. I know I need to go over the materials more carefully to truly grasp what’s expected in the new curriculum.”)

“Bisan pa man nga nakaapil ko sa usa ka semana nga training alang sa implementasyon, dili gihapon kini igo aron epektibong matudlo ang mga leksyon ug learning competencies, labi

na tungod sa kakulang sa igo nga mga learning resources.”

“Even though I was able to attend the one-week training for the implementation, it still wasn’t enough to effectively teach the lessons and learning competencies, especially due to the lack of adequate learning resources.”

“I experience mixed emotions like worry, excitement, and stress as I embracing the changes.

“Sometimes, I feel anxious, not knowing if I’m doing it right for my students.”

Theme 2 Adaptive Struggles Amid Resource and Time Constraints, captures the challenges ECE teachers faced as they adjusted to the demands of the new curriculum within limited timeframes and with insufficient resources. Four sub-themes emerged under this category: Instructional Time Challenges, where teachers found the 45-minute periods too short to deliver lessons effectively and meaningfully; Resource Deficiency and Improvisation, which led educators to create their own teaching materials, often using personal time and resources; Balancing Multiple Roles, as teachers managed both instructional and administrative responsibilities, increasing stress and reducing focus on teaching; and Innovative Teaching Approaches, where educators adopted learner-centered, discovery-based strategies to better engage students and enhance learning despite the limitations.

“Nakaatubang ko og daghang adjustments tungod sa bag-ong time limit, kay kada subject karon itudlo na lang sulod sa 45 minutos, nga lisod na kaayo ipasabot og tarong ang uban leksyon, hinungdan nga ang uban kalihokan akong gahatag isip homework o ipadayon na lang sa sunod adlaw.”

“I faced many adjustments with the new time limits, as each subject is now taught in only 45 minutes, making it hard to fully explain some lessons causing other activities to be given as homework or continued the next day.”

“Lisod para nako nga i-adjust ang akong pagtudlo tungod sa limitado nga oras nga gi-allocate karon para sa matag leksyon, labi na kay naghandle ko og multigrade nga klase.”

“It’s difficult for me to adjust my teaching because of the limited time now allotted for each lesson, especially since I am handling multigrade classes.”

“Usahay, ako na lang ang maghimo sa akong kaugalingong mga materyales, bisan pa man og maggamit ko sa akong personal nga oras ug kaugalingong mga gamit.”

“Sometimes, I just create my own materials, even if it means using my personal time and resources.”

“Dili lalim i-balanse ang pagtudlo ug ang mga administratibong responsibilidad, sama sa pag-print og dugang nga mga materyales, pagtuman sa mga report, o pagkompleto sa mga buluhaton sa opisina usahay. Kini nagdugang og stress ug nakapakunhod sa akong pagtutok sa pagtudlo sa klase.”

“It’s not easy to balance teaching and administrative responsibilities, such as printing additional materials, completing reports, or sometimes handling office-related tasks. This adds stress and reduces my focus on classroom instruction.”

“Kinahanglan ko nga maghimo og mga activities nga makatabang sa akong mga studyante nga sila mismo ang makadiskubre ug makasabot sa kahulugan sa matag leksyon. Dili lang

kini bahin sa pagtudlo, apan sa paggiya kanila nga maghunahuna ug masabtan gyud nila ang ilang gikat-onan.”

(“I need to create activities that help my students discover and understand the meaning of each lesson on their own. It’s not just about teaching, but about guiding them to think and truly understand what they are learning.”)

Theme 3 Commitment to Professional Growth and Collaborative Resilience, reflects how ECE teachers demonstrated dedication to continuous improvement and relied on collective support to navigate the changes brought by the new curriculum. Three sub-themes emerged under this category: Peer Support and Collaboration, where teachers leaned on their colleagues, Master Teachers, and School Heads for guidance and encouragement through Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and shared experiences; Positive Acceptance of Change, reflecting a shift in mindset as teachers gradually embraced the reforms as part of their professional duty; and Reflective and Transformative Practice, where educators turned challenges into meaningful opportunities for growth, adapting their teaching practices to better meet the needs of their learners.

“We seek support from our educational colleagues. We attend trainings/seminars, we have LAC session and ask professional guidance with our Master Teacher and School Head. Through that, we were able to digest the new system and just accept the changes to keep our peace of mind.”

“We welcome the challenges brought by this reform as part of our duty as educators. Even though it's not easy, we stay devoted to doing our best in carefully preparing our lessons and teaching in ways that support not just the academic, but also the emotional and social growth of every child we teach.”

“Bisan pa sa mga kalisod, gipili nako nga dawaton ang kausaban and I served it as a meaningful learning experience.”

(“Despite the difficulties, I chose to embrace the change and treat it as a meaningful learning experience.”)

As both a researcher and fellow educator, I am deeply moved by the resilience and dedication demonstrated by ECE teachers in the face of the Matatag Curriculum’s challenges. Their stories highlight not only the practical struggles of limited training, resources, and time but also the emotional weight of navigating change with little guidance. Yet, what stands out most is their unwavering commitment to their learners and their willingness to grow professionally despite the odds. It also reminds me that true transformation in education starts not with policies alone, but with empowered and supported teachers at the forefront.

The participants in this study are Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers who are directly involved in the implementation of the Matatag Curriculum. They come from various public schools and represent diverse teaching contexts, including multigrade classrooms and resource-challenged settings. Their insights and lived experiences provide valuable perspectives on the practical realities, emotional responses, and adaptive strategies employed in response to the curriculum reform.

4. Discussions

Theme 1: Limited Orientation and Preparedness reveals how many ECE teachers felt overwhelmed and

underprepared as they faced the demands of implementing the Matatag Curriculum. According to Fullan (2007), successful change begins with clear direction and strong support systems but for these teachers, the journey began with uncertainty. The sub-themes of Inadequate Training Exposure and Unclear Guidance on Implementation show that many educators either missed out on essential training or came away from it still unsure about how to apply what they learned in the classroom. A study by Mendoza and Abad (2022) revealed that while some teachers appreciate the focus on critical thinking and student-centered learning, others feel overwhelmed by the increased demands and lack of adequate training. This lack of clarity led to Emotional Uncertainty, with teachers expressing a mix of anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt as they tried to make sense of a system they weren't fully equipped to handle. A study by Jaina Fortuno Loza (2024) highlights that teacher often face anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt when adapting to new curricular changes. Without a solid foundation of understanding and emotional readiness, the change process felt isolating rather than empowering, running counter to Fullan's emphasis on building capacity and ownership from the ground up.

Theme 2: Adaptive Struggles Amid Resource and Time Constraints brings to light the day-to-day realities teachers face as they try to bring the new curriculum to life in settings where time and materials are often in short supply. In Fullan's view, deep change happens when teachers are given the tools and space to experiment and grow but here, the reality was far more demanding. Teachers spoke of Instructional Time Challenges, struggling to fit meaningful learning into tight 45-minute periods, and Resource Deficiency and Improvisation, where they often had to create materials from scratch using their own time and money. According of Bejasa (2025) that teachers encountered difficulties in managing time and pacing lessons, as well as limited materials and resources hindering effective teaching. On top of that, the burden of Balancing Multiple Roles juggling teaching with administrative tasks left little room for reflection or creative planning. A study by Algar et al. (2025) highlights those Filipino teachers frequently manage multiple roles beyond instruction, including administrative work, student supervision, and school event coordination. Despite all this, many still found ways to push forward, showing Innovative Teaching Approaches like hands-on, discovery-based lessons to keep their students engaged. These efforts reflect Fullan's belief in "learning by doing," but also underscore the need for better systemic support if such innovation is to be sustained.

Theme 3: Commitment to Professional Growth and Collaborative Resilience shows the brighter side of change how, even in the face of difficulty, teachers leaned on each other and grew stronger together. This theme reflects Fullan's idea that real, lasting change happens in cultures where collaboration, trust, and shared purpose thrive. Through Peer Support and Collaboration, educators found strength in their fellow teachers, mentors, and school leaders, especially during LAC sessions where they could learn from one another and make sense of the new expectations. A study by Khasawneh et al. (2023) indicates that such settings enable educators to share experiences, strategies, and support, fostering a collective approach to understanding and implementing new educational expectations. As they moved through the process, many began to show a Positive Acceptance of Change, choosing to embrace the reform not just as a mandate, but as a professional responsibility they cared deeply about. A study by Magallanes and Lee (2022) highlights those Filipino teachers often embrace educational reforms not merely as mandates but as integral aspects of their professional responsibilities. Most inspiringly, through Reflective and Transformative Practice, teachers turned challenges into opportunities for growth revisiting their strategies, listening to their students' needs, and finding new ways to make learning meaningful. Their stories remind us that when educators are supported and connected, they don't just survive change they become the change.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of the Matatag Curriculum, when seen through Michael Fullan's Theory of Educational

Change, highlights just how important the real, everyday experiences of teachers are in making educational reform work. Fullan reminds us that meaningful change doesn't happen through mandates alone it needs clear direction, strong support, and a culture where teachers feel empowered and connected. For many ECE teachers, the shift to the new curriculum came with uncertainty. They felt unprepared, confused by unclear guidelines, and emotionally stretched as they tried to make sense of the changes. Yet, despite these difficulties, they showed remarkable resilience. They adapted, found creative ways to teach, and leaned on each other for support. Over time, many began to embrace the change not just as a requirement, but as a chance to grow professionally and personally. Their journey shows us that real change is not about perfection from the start, but about progress, shared learning, and the courage to keep moving forward together.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that greater focus be placed on truly supporting teachers not just through formal training, but by providing ongoing, meaningful guidance that meets them where they are. This means offering more in-depth and accessible professional development, clearer implementation strategies, and consistent follow-ups that allow teachers to voice concerns and share insights. It's also important to lighten their load by ensuring they have enough time, materials, and manpower to do their jobs well. Most of all, schools and education leaders should continue to nurture a culture of collaboration, where teachers feel heard, valued, and empowered to grow together. Change is never easy, but when educators are supported as partners in the process, it becomes not only possible but deeply transformative.

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