

Teaching Math in Primary Grades: Experiences of Selected Bachelor of Elementary Education Students from Occidental Mindoro State College

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ABSTRACT: Teaching primary grade schoolers is one of the most challenging tasks of educators all over the world. This requires in-depth classroom management, effective communication, and a lot teaching methodologies, techniques, and strategies. This pure qualitative-phenomenological research was conducted mainly to determine the essence of the lived experiences of ten (10) purposively selected student teachers of Occidental Mindoro State College as they practiced teaching primary grade learners in public schools for the 1st semester of the School Year 2024-2025. Data were obtained using an Interview Schedule via one-on-one interview; and was analyzed using content and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that teaching math to primary grade learners were difficult and challenging for the student teacher-respondents, yet enjoyable and fun. The overall essence of their lived experiences was symbolized by fish for patience, scissors for creativity, heart for love and compassion, target for having a clear goal, sun for fun and enjoyment in teaching, bulb for discipline, anchor for guidance, flower for happiness in teaching, wedding ring for commitment and dedication in teaching, and ice for being cool and calm in teaching. The lived experiences and symbolisms shared by participants led the researcher to conclude that the student teachers were ready to face the real world of teaching primary grade learners. Yet, university administrators and cooperating teachers' roles to guide them are still crucial.

KEYWORDS: Lived Experiences, Primary Grade, Primary Teachers, Teaching Math

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Teaching primary grade schoolers is one of the most challenging tasks of educators all over the world. This requires in-depth classroom management, effective communication, and a lot teaching methodologies, techniques, and strategies. This also presents unique challenges such as managing diverse learning needs, fostering internal motivation, and effectively communication with young learners. Additionally, the breadth of subjects, potential for disruptive environments, and the need for strong classroom management skills contribute to the demanding nature of this role. These were the significant roles of primary teachers come into play because there are other challenges living across every process of the teaching and learning.

In Asian countries, primary grade teachers also face numerous challenges including large class sizes, inadequate resources, curriculum overload, and diverse student needs. These factors can lead to low learning levels, poor teaching quality, and a lack of foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, Southeast Asia has made remarkable progress in expanding access to education, surpassing many other developing regions in bringing children to school. However, ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy—core indicators of the quality of basic education—remains a pressing challenge across the region. Various education reforms, programs, and initiatives supported by governmental, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations have been implemented with mixed success (Asadullah et.al, 2025). Yet, primary graders still do not receive the expected learning. In fact, the most striking finding of Neman & Gentile (2025) was that teaching is poor quality in large parts of the Asian region because some economies in the region have very low levels of learning; in at least six Asian countries, more than half of children are not even achieving basic literacy and numeracy by the end of primary school. Therefore, it is widely accepted that poor teaching quality is a major reason for these low learning outcomes.

In the Philippines, numerous issues are also experienced by primary school teachers which are usually brought about by inadequate resources, teacher shortages, and the need for better training and support. These issues are further compounded by geographical isolation, socioeconomic disparities, and the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students. In fact, Rondero

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& Casupanan (2024) found that classroom and time management, failure to consider the diversity of learners, inadequacy of teaching materials, and teaching burnouts; were among the challenges faced by primary school teachers.

Considering these scenario and issues, the researcher considered that challenges encountered may not only be the real challenges experienced by these teachers, and these requires great attention for provisions of solutions and/on interventions. The researcher believed that improvement in learning of the learners will be possible if the teachers are in a state of readiness in terms of teaching strategies, materials, instructional materials, and other needs. These may be identified by digging deeper to their daily experiences which could not be investigated using quantitative research alone, as what previous researchers undertaken.

Therefore, the researcher conducted this study to investigate the lived experiences of ten (10) purposively selected student-teachers taking Bachelor of Elementary Education at Occidental Mindoro State University; during their practice teaching for the 1st semester of the School Year 2024-2025. The essence of these lived experiences may be considered as basis for identifying other problems and challenges in handling primary grade school learners.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was conducted mainly to determine the essence of the lived experiences of selected student-teacher participants who were taking Bachelor of Elementary Education at Occidental Mindoro State College; during the period of their Practice Teaching for the 1st semester of the School Year 2024-2025, handling primary grade learners.

Specifically, the following questions were provided with explicit answers and solutions:

1. What are the experiences of the Bachelor of Elementary Education student-teachers in handling primary grade learners, during their practice teaching for the 2nd semester of the School Year 2024-2025?
2. How do the student-teacher participants illustrate their overall learnings and/or essence of their experiences in handling primary grade learners?

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

A qualitative research design which involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Bhandari, 2025) and explores or provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Tenny et.al, 2022); was utilized in this study. Among its different types, phenomenological research method was applied. At its core, phenomenology is essentially looking into the "lived experiences" of the participants and aims to examine how and why participants behaved a certain way from their perspective (Cleland, 2017). Researchers using phenomenological research design assume that people use a universal structure or essence to make sense of their experience; and they interpret the participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs to clarify the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Dumlao, 2024). In this study, the researcher dug deeper on the lived experiences of Ten (10) selected Bachelor of Elementary Education students from Occidental Mindoro State College; during their Practice Teaching for the 2nd Semester of the School Year 2024-2025. The essence of their experiences was highlighted to understand the challenges in handling primary graders.

The participants were chosen using purposive sampling technique, a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that the researchers need in their sample (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Data were obtained via one-on-one interview and student-teacher participants were also asked to draw the representation of their overall experiences and learnings in teaching primary grade learners. To analyze the data, content and thematic analysis were used. Content analysis is a research method used to identify patterns in recorded communication and it is done by systematically collecting data from a set of texts, which can be written, oral, or visual (Luo, 2023). While thematic analysis is a method which involves the identification and reporting of patterns in a data set, that are then interpreted for their inherent meaning (Naeem et.al, 2023; Lienbenberg et.al, 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020).

RESULTS

THE EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING PRIMARY GRADERS

The following are the actual responses of the primary graders' student-teacher participants showing their lived experiences in teaching their learners.

P1: At first, I was so afraid. But it came to sense that they were just children whom I can control with. As time goes by, I realized that I need to bring with me a lot of teaching strategies in teaching Math to meet the demands of my diverse learners. There are teaching strategies which easily caught the attention of learners, but not all of them; especially those who are ("sobrang kulit") very naughty. Teaching these sweet and loving kids requires a lot of patience. It is not only the teaching strategy that

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will bring them to learning; but a loving heart despite of their naughtiness and misbehaviors. It really needs commitment and dedication.

- P2:** Handling primary graders is not that difficult for me, especially in teaching Math. I just need to be always ready before facing them. Even if there are no resources in the school, I need to extend efforts in preparing instructional materials that I think will bring these learners into an interesting learning process. I need to be resourceful to the extent that I need to spend my own money for my visual aids. Doing these, helped me teach my learners easily, motivate them to participate in class discussion and activities, and achieve my everyday objectives. There are limitations in school, but as a teacher, I believe that I can surpass these limitations through efforts and diligence.
- P3:** (Mahirap po talaga magturo ng mga bata, lalo kapag Math...kahit sino naman) It's really difficult to teach kids especially if it Math...even others do. You need to have a very very long patience, especially to learners having hyperactive behaviors. Sometimes, I need to act not only as a teacher but also a parent or a caregiver. My job extends beyond teaching, so if you don't love what you're doing; you will really have the feeling of giving up. But for me, its just normal in this level. These kids are explorers, full of questions, investigators, and they loving too...so sweet! These could not be experienced by teachers in higher level, so its still worth it to be teaching them, despite of normal challenges.
- P4:** The main goal of teachers to ensure that learners learn from them. My difficult experience is to bring all the learners into this goal in learning mathematics, especially those who are non-readers or having numeracy difficulties. Instead of focusing how to teach your lesson, I need to extend time for these learners to teach them how to read and/or teach them basic knowledge in numeracy. Here, I see how important it is for primary teachers in lowest level to really ensure that before they promote the learners to the next level, they already obtained the basic skill of language and numeracy. Reading is one of the most important basic skills that learners should have in this level, so I make sure that in my time; I got to help them. This is the only way I could help my cooperating teacher for the lives of primary graders under her supervision.
- P5:** For me teaching primary graders math subject is challenging...but, (ito para sa akin ang pinaka-masaya na maaring maging parte ng isang buhay ng teacher) this is the happiest part of life of a teacher. In this level, learners have innocent minds. The ones I handled (ay talaga namang napakalalambing) are very sweet, generous (lagi silang nagshe-share ng baon nila) as they always share their snacks, and (kung anu-ano mga tinatanong sa mundo) asking different questions about the world. Yes (minsan, talagang mauubos pasensiya mo lalo ka kapag yung itniture mo di nila nagagawa) sometimes, you will really lose patience especially when they cannot put into practice what you are teaching to them. But overall, the everyday experience made me always excited to come back to school and see them...(at marinig ang napakarami nilang kwento sa buhay) and hear their stories in life.
- P6:** Teaching and preparing instructional materials in teaching Math for the learners in primary level is not that difficult as it is only part of teachers' tasks. What makes teaching difficult in this grade level was when they are mixed with learners with special needs. In this case, I need to make wide adjustment in teaching or sometimes spend a separate time in teaching these learners. The inclusive education can be acceptable for specific parts of the everyday lessons, but not in all its parts. Therefore, I still suggest that learners with special needs should be taught separately from those who are not. Teachers having these kinds of learners mixed with normal learners should also have special training. That made my teaching and handling difficult because I don't have enough knowledge and skills to handle learners with special needs. I spend more time in dealing with them which sometimes resulted to less time teaching the majority of the learners inside my classroom.
- P7:** (Kung ako lang ang tatanungin, ayoko talaga sa ganitong level dahil mas gusto ko sana ng high school para mas madali magturo) If you are to ask me, I'd rather teach high school students who are easy to be taught than this level. But God placed me in this kind of learners. (Sa palagay ko dahil iba yung dulot nilang saya sa pagtuturo) I think because they are bringing unique joy in teaching. As I was into teaching these learners, I was able to explore different strategies and techniques in teaching. I need to exert more efforts in preparing instructional materials...(minsan bawal matulog) sometimes, sleeping is prohibited! (Pero kapag ginamit mo na lahat ng pinaghirapan mo na visual aids tapos Nakita kung gaano sila na-motivate na matuto, parang worth it na lahat) But, its worth it seeing them being motivated to learn after using the visual aids prepared for them. (Lalo na kapag nalaman mo sa mga outputs nila na talagang natuto sila sa iyo, doon pa lang talagang sulit na yung pagod mo). Especially when I proved through their outputs that they really learn from me...all my efforts are paid off. (Kaya ngayon, mas pipiliin ko na magturo ng primary grade kaysa high school, baka maging seryoso ako masyado sa pagtuturo) So for now, I will choose to teach primary grade than high school which will bring me to become a serious teacher.
- P8:** When I entered the school in which I was assigned to render my practice teaching, I was so excited. Bringing me into the primary grade also had excitement in my heart. But when I encountered how naughty and noisy are the learners, it brought me a feeling of disappointment and fear. I was thinking if I could finish my practice teaching being with these kinds of learners

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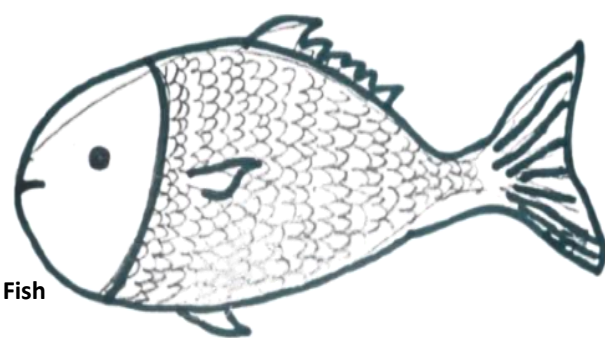
every day. It was good that I got to observe how my cooperating teacher handles these learners. I was surprised to witness how rude a teacher could be just to tame learners. I am thinking of not doing this as there are other options to bring learners into a positive discipline. Challenged but excited for me to be given a chance to handle the learners...Yes it was so difficult at first, but when I got to find and know who they are, be loving, be patient, be giver, and be all that you can do for them; I was able to change the negative learning environment into positive ones. In teaching this level, I learn that I always need to bring a heart full of love and compassion especially to learners who unable to feel such love from their parents and other people around them. Be giver for them to become giver, talk with respect for them to become respectful, be calm for them to become calm, be patient for them to become patient, be disciplined ones for them to become disciplined individual...I need to show them all the characteristics that I want to build among them. I should be a good role model of values and morality because this is the time where they used to imitate everything they see.

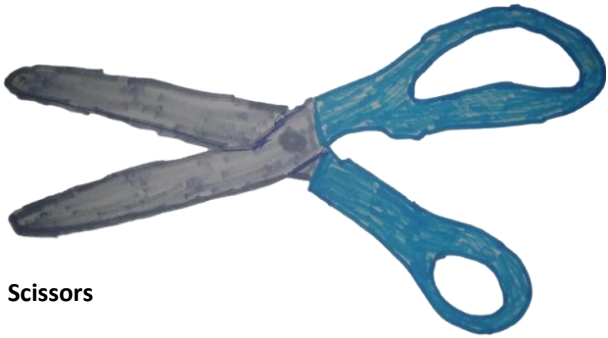
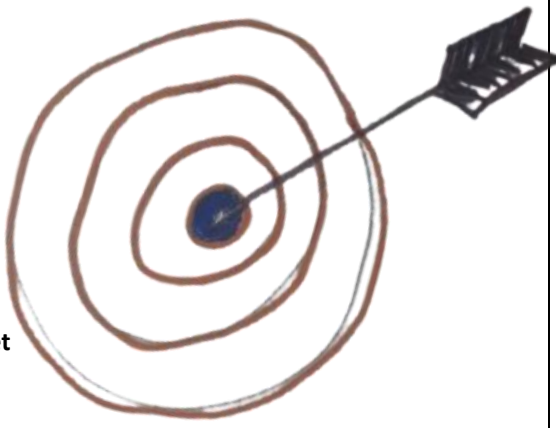
P9: (Para sa akin nakaka-enjoy magturo ng primary lalo na kapag Math ang subject) For me, its enjoyable to teach primary especially during Math subject. (Sa school na pinagturuan ko, madaming kulang lalo na sa mga gamit sa pagtuturo) In the school I was assigned to teach, so may are lacking especially in terms of teaching materials. (Talagang kailangan mong maglaan ng madaming oras sa paghahanda ng mga kagamitang ito dahil iba ang primary, bago mo makuha ang attention nila, kailangan madami kang mga makukulay na visual aids) You really need to spend a lot of time in preparing these materials because primary learners prefer colorful visual aids to get their attention to learn. (Madalas gumagastos talaga ako ng sarili kong pera sa mga materials kaya ang ginagawa ko nirerecycle ko na lang yung mga materials para sa mga susunod na lesson) I usually spend my own money for these materials and so, sometimes I recycle these materials for the next lesson. (Maliban dito, may mga bata talaga na mahina o mahirap turuan dahil hindi pa marunong magbasa) Aside from this, there are learners who are having difficulties to learn because they cannot read. (Kaya hindi ka lang gagastos ng sarili mong pera, magbibigay ka din ng extra time para turuan ang mga batang ito para hindi sila maiiwan) So, aside from spending my own money, I also need to spend extra time teaching these learners for them not to be left behind. Being a teacher in this level means sacrifice.

P10: If I were to choose, I would shift to Secondary Education. It is when I experienced how difficult it is to handle primary graders. My personality does not fit the characteristics needed for a primary school teacher. I easily get mad to misbehaving learners, very serious, and not creative. A primary grade school teachers need to be patient, fun and joyful, and very creative; the opposite of my characters. That's why I salute those who are teaching this level especially in Math subject, one of the most difficult subjects. The experiences I had made me realized that being a primary teacher is mission greater than other teaching. Like math, it requires calculations of your own characteristics to fit the needs of the learners.

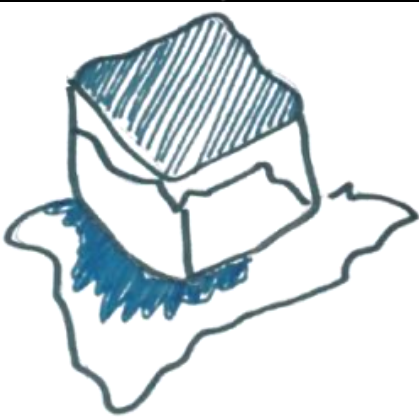
THE ILLUSTRATIONS ON THE ESSENCE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES

The following shows the drawings of the student-teacher participants showing the symbolism of the overall essence of their experiences being a primary grade level teacher. Corresponding reasons I also indicated.

Drawn Symbolism	Reason/s
 Fish	P1: Fish is very good symbol for patience. Before you can eat the tastiest part of it, you need to be patient in taking off the scales and its bones. In teaching primary, you need a lot of patience and understanding so you could taste the flavor of your efforts through their outputs and learnings.

 Scissors	P2: Scissors because as a primary grade teacher, I need to be creative and resourceful. Preparing different visual aids and using available resources to innovate and develop new teaching or instructional materials could help to motivate learners to learn and listen.
 Heart	P3: The heart symbolizes love. This also symbolizes my overall learning in teaching primary grade learners. As one of their teachers, I need not only to be good in teaching by being creative with my visual aids, but also to become loving teacher. There are learners who really need love and care. For me, it is one of my roles.
 Target	P4: Target means having a clear objective. I learned that regardless of situation when teaching Math to primary grade learners, I need to focus on the main goal and make every efforts to bring them into the achievement of this goal.

Sun 	P5: Sun symbolizes joy and fun. Despite of a very challenging experience in teaching Math to primary graders, teachers need to stay joyful and bring fun moments in the teaching and learning process.
Light Bulb 	P6: For me bulb is the best object which symbolizes the essence of my experience being a primary grade teachers. This object means discipline. Handling primary entails good discipline ability or management. Therefore, being a disciplined school leader; every learner should be placed in a group which could be easily or uniformly handled by the teacher. I mean...learners with special needs should be in a group of learner like them and should be handled also by teachers with expertise in this manner.
Anchor 	P7: Being a primary grade teacher is really challenging, but leading them into what you want them to have or to be would be helpful which is best symbolized by an anchor.
Wedding Ring 	P8: Wedding ring represents commitment and dedication. In teaching Math to primary grade learners, it really requires commitment and dedication. A commitment to model the best characteristics that you want them to become will lead them to that. A dedication to do your tasks as their teacher will bring them to deeper learning.

 Flower	P9: Like flower, I consider teaching primary learners to be very enjoyable, full of colorful moments beside every experience of learners. No matter how hard it is to handle them, being happy of what you're doing will help you not to become burned out.
 Ice Cube	P10: Ice cubes are widely used to cool beverages and/or to preserve food. Like ice, I learned that even if you are impatient, you need to be patient if you will handle primary grade learners, especially if your subject is Math. You need to always calm down regardless of their attitudes and learning abilities or status.

DISCUSSION

Based on the testimonies showing the lived experiences and the drawn objects symbolizing or illustrating the overall essence of the experiences of the participants in teaching primary grade learners; the following themes were developed:

THEME 1: PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

This theme was inspired by the statements and symbolisms shared by the student-teacher participants that in teaching Math to primary grade learners, teachers need to have a very long patience. Participant 1 considered fish to be symbolizing patience. Aside from being patient in eating this as you need to take off its scales and bones, Buddha Stones (2025) considered that fish meaning teaches patience in pursuing goals. Specifically, Koi fish don't rush their growth - they develop slowly and steadily; and this lesson encourages us to maintain consistent effort rather than seeking instant gratification. In teaching mathematics, a teacher needs a lot of patience; and it was mentioned by the following participants:

P1: Teaching these sweet and loving kids requires a lot of patience.

P3: You need to have a very very long patience, especially to learners having hyperactive behaviors.

P5: Yes (minsan, talagang mauubos pasensiya mo lalo ka kapag yung itinituro mo di nila nagagawa) sometimes, you will really lose patience especially when they cannot put into practice what you are teaching to them.

P8: Be giver for them to become giver, talk with respect for them to become respectful, be calm for them to become calm, be patient for them to become patient, be disciplined ones for them to become disciplined individual...I need to show them all the characteristics that I want to build among them.

P10: A primary grade school teachers need to be patient, fun and joyful, and very creative; the opposite of my characters.

Patience is a crucial attribute for primary school teachers, fostering a positive learning environment and facilitating student success. A patient teacher can effectively manage diverse learning styles, provide individualized support, and encourage students to persevere through challenges, ultimately promoting academic growth and emotional well-being. Based on Schwab (2021), there are several characteristics that all good teachers have in common. They are patience; concern for their students; willingness to adapt, and; knowledge of the subject being taught. If these characteristics are lacking, a teacher cannot be an effective educator. She added that patience may be the most important characteristic of all for teachers of subjects in

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mathematics. Some students can comprehend this subject material with minimal effort, while others may require more extensive explanations that may have to be repeated a number of times. This especially happens in the primary level which calls more of the patience of the primary teachers.

THEME 2: SACRIFICE TO TASTE THE PRICE

This was inspired by the lived experiences of the student teachers as they sacrifice their own money and extra time for teaching the primary grade learners. It was manifested by the following statements of the participants:

P2: Even if there are no resources in the school, I need to extend efforts in preparing instructional materials that I think will bring these learners into an interesting learning process. I need to be resourceful to the extent that I need to spend my own money for my visual aids

P4: Reading is one of the most important basic skills that learners should have in this level, so I make sure that in my time; I got to help them. This is the only way I could help my cooperating teacher for the lives of primary graders under her supervision.

P6: I spend more time in dealing with them which sometimes resulted to less time teaching the majority of the learners inside my classroom.

P7: I need to exert more efforts in preparing instructional materials...(minsang bawal matulog) sometimes, sleeping is prohibited!

P9: (Madalas gumagastos talaga ako ng sarili kong pera sa mga materials kaya ang ginagawa ko nirerecycle ko na lang yung mga materials para sa mga susunod na lesson) I usually spend my own money for these materials and so, sometimes I recycle these materials for the next lesson. (Maliban dito, may mga bata talaga na mahina o mahirap turuan dahil hindi pa marunong magbasa) Aside from this, there are learners who are having difficulties to learn because they cannot read. (Kaya hindi ka lang gagastos ng sarili mong pera, magbibigay ka din ng extra time para turuan ang mga batang ito para hindi sila maiiwan) So, aside from spending my own money, I also need to spend extra time teaching these learners for them not to be left behind.

Teaching really requires sacrifice. It is not only applicable to primary learners, but in all levels of learning. Sacrifice is a cornerstone of character development as it instills values like selflessness, perseverance, empathy, and commitment, which are essential to becoming the teachers that primary grade learners need (Congressional Medal of Honor Society, 2024). To show love as symbolized by the heart, to guide students as symbolized by the anchor, to be creative as symbolized by scissors, to lead the learners to the goal as symbolized by the target, to be patient as symbolized by a fish, to be calm as symbolized by ice, to be enjoyable in teaching as symbolized by sun and flowers, to instill discipline as symbolized by bulb; sacrifice is needed. Therefore, to teach primary graders; teachers need to instill in their mind a sacrificial character. Sacrifice in teaching is crucial because it fosters empathy, builds character, prepares students for future challenges, and inspires leadership. Teachers often make significant personal sacrifices, including time, energy, and sometimes even their own well-being, to support their students' growth and success. These sacrifices are essential for creating a positive learning environment and shaping students into well-rounded individuals.

THEME 3: COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION FOR MOTIVATION

Commitment and dedication are crucial for primary teachers as they significantly impact student learning, classroom environment, and the overall teaching profession. A committed teacher invests time and energy in their students' success, fostering a positive learning environment and inspiring a love for learning. These characteristics were manifested by the following responses of the participants:

P1: It is not only the teaching strategy that will bring them to learning; but a loving heart despite of their naughtiness and misbehaviors. It really needs commitment and dedication.

P2: There are limitations in school, but as a teacher, I believe that I can surpass these limitations through efforts and diligence.

P3: My job extends beyond teaching, so if you don't love what you're doing; you will really have the feeling of giving up. But for me, it's just normal in this level.

P8: I should be a good role model of values and morality because this is the time where they used to imitate everything they see.

P10: The experiences I had made me realized that being a primary teacher is mission greater than other teaching. Like math, it requires calculations of your own characteristics to fit the needs of the learners.

Aside from these statements, drawn illustrations such as fish for patience, scissors for creativity, heart for love, sun for fun and joy in teaching, bulb for discipline, flower for happiness in teaching, ice for being calm in teaching, and the wedding ring which exactly represents commitment and dedication; were considered to be directly and indirectly related to the commitment and dedication. Based on Teachers of Tomorrow (2025), the enthusiasm and dedication teachers bring to their classrooms inspire a love for learning and personal growth. While according to Hariri & Sumintono (2020), committed teachers are characterized by four qualities: having a desire to be good teachers, being more fact purveyors and sources, recognizing and accepting individual

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worth, and meeting professional responsibilities; and thus, committed teachers need to be prepared, to maintain their commitment, and to improve their performance. These characteristics were manifested by the student teacher-participants; therefore, showing their readiness for face the reality of teaching the primary grade learners.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the foregoing findings obtained from the targeted participants, the researcher therefore concluded that teaching math to primary grade learners were challenging yet enjoyable and fun. The student teacher-respondents were ready enough to face the true challenges of teaching these learners by being committed, dedicated, compassionate, creative, disciplined, skilled, and a heart full of sacrifice. With these, cooperating teachers are recommended to show still all the positive ways in handling disciplinary issues of primary grade learners which could be practiced by the student teachers in the real world of teaching. Student teachers need to maintain the positive characteristics in handling these kinds of learners. Lastly, Occidental Mindoro State University administrators, specifically in the College of Education need to expose the student teachers into trainings which could address issues on inclusive education. Doing this will make teachers more ready to inclusive education.

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