

Exploring Academic Freedom: Insights from the Experiences of Teachers in the Primary Grades

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Abstract — This study explored the experiences of primary grade teachers regarding academic freedom in their classrooms, focusing on the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and the insights they have gained. A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was employed. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather rich descriptions of their lived experiences. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and generate key themes. Findings revealed five major challenges: strict curriculum guidelines, pressure to prioritize test preparation, administrative oversight, lack of resources, and fear of parental or community judgment. Teachers coped by adapting lessons within curriculum limits, balancing test preparation with creativity, complying while integrating personal styles, maximizing available resources, and framing lessons to align with community expectations. Insights highlighted the importance of flexibility, supportive leadership, collaboration, balancing accountability and autonomy, and the positive impact of teacher agency on student engagement. The study implies a need for more supportive policies that balance standardization with teacher autonomy. It recommends fostering leadership practices that empower teachers, encouraging collaboration, and creating flexible teaching frameworks that promote academic freedom while maintaining accountability in primary education.

Keywords — *academic freedom, primary grade teachers, teacher autonomy, accountability, qualitative research, thematic analysis.*

I. Introduction

Academic freedom in primary education refers to the ability of teachers to make professional decisions about their teaching methods, materials, and assessments to meet the needs of their students. However, in many settings, this freedom is often constrained by standardized curricula, strict policies, and administrative oversight. These limitations can impact teachers' ability to innovate and adapt their approaches, shaping their classroom experiences and professional autonomy. Understanding how academic freedom operates within the structured environment of primary education highlights the complexities and challenges faced by educators in balancing autonomy with institutional expectations.

The concept of academic freedom in primary education is shaped by a range of political, cultural, and institutional factors. In many countries, the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and accountability has placed significant constraints on teachers' autonomy in the classroom. For example, in the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its successor, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have created high-stakes environments where

teachers' instructional practices are often driven by the need to meet standardized test benchmarks rather than by pedagogical creativity or responsiveness to student needs (Smith & Kovacs, 2020). This has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and limited teachers' ability to exercise academic freedom, particularly in lower grades where foundational skills are prioritized.

The degree of academic freedom for teachers varies significantly across countries. For example, in Finland, teachers enjoy a high degree of autonomy, allowing them to choose their teaching methods and customize content to fit their students' needs, which has been linked to positive educational outcomes (Sahlberg, 2019). Conversely, countries like the United Kingdom and the United States implement more rigid frameworks, such as the National Curriculum in the UK, which prescribes specific content and learning outcomes that teachers must follow. This limits teachers' flexibility in adapting lessons to meet diverse student needs and often restricts innovation in teaching approaches (Berger & Girardet, 2021).

In Asia, academic freedom at the primary level is often even more restricted due to highly centralized education systems. In countries like China and South Korea, strict national curricula and frequent high-stakes assessments limit teachers' instructional autonomy (Han & Paine, 2021). Such environments can stifle teacher creativity, reduce engagement, and ultimately affect student learning outcomes. While there is a growing recognition of the need for more flexible pedagogical approaches, change remains slow due to deep-rooted educational traditions and government regulations.

In the Philippines, the issue of academic freedom in primary education is compounded by a centralized education system and the rigid implementation of the K-12 curriculum. The Department of Education (DepEd) prescribes specific learning competencies that teachers are expected to achieve, leaving limited room for adapting lesson plans to local needs or student interests (Quijano, 2019). While the curriculum provides some flexibility in teaching strategies, the emphasis on covering all competencies often results in a more prescriptive approach to teaching. This situation can lead to a disconnect between the curriculum and the actual needs of students in diverse settings across the country.

Moreover, the pressure to perform well in national assessments, such as the National Achievement Test (NAT), further constrains academic freedom in primary grades. Teachers often feel compelled to focus heavily on test preparation rather than on fostering critical thinking and creativity among their students (David, 2020). This test-centric approach can undermine the holistic development of students and limit teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogical strategies that may be more effective in enhancing student learning.

In Davao City, the challenges to academic freedom in primary education are shaped by local socio-economic factors and the unique administrative practices of individual schools. While some schools strive to provide teachers with the autonomy to develop their curriculum, the reality

is often shaped by limited resources, varying levels of administrative support, and community expectations.

In the local setting, teachers in Davao City have reported difficulties in balancing the demands of a standardized curriculum with the need to address the specific needs of their students, especially in schools serving marginalized communities (Garcia & Santos, 2021). Additionally, there is a tendency for school heads to prioritize adherence to DepEd guidelines over teacher innovation, further limiting academic freedom.

Understanding academic freedom in primary education, where teachers must balance professional decision-making with the constraints of standardized curricula and policies, is essential for supporting both teacher autonomy and student learning. The structured nature of primary education often limits teachers' ability to innovate and adapt, underscoring the need for policies that acknowledge these challenges while fostering flexibility. Through exploring the unique experiences of primary grade teachers within their institutional contexts, it becomes possible to develop more responsive and context-specific approaches that empower educators and enhance the learning environment for students.

Research Questions

To gain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, this research focuses on the challenges teachers face in maintaining their academic freedom, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the insights they can provide on enhancing academic freedom in primary education. The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What challenges do primary grade teachers face in exercising academic freedom in their classrooms?
2. What coping mechanisms do primary grade teachers use to address the constraints on their academic freedom in their classrooms?
3. What insights can primary grade teachers offer to improve academic freedom in their classrooms?

II. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and procedures employed to explore the perceptions and experiences of primary grade teachers regarding academic freedom.

This study follows an interpretivist epistemological approach, which emphasizes understanding the meanings and interpretations that individuals ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through qualitative methods such as interviews, the research aims to

gain deep insights into the personal and professional experiences of primary grade teachers regarding academic freedom.

Recognizing that research is inherently value-laden, this study adopts a reflexive stance where the researcher's values, beliefs, and biases are acknowledged and critically examined throughout the research process (Mertens, 2019). This commitment to transparency and ethical integrity is essential in exploring a topic as nuanced and context-dependent as academic freedom.

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to understand the lived experiences of primary grade teachers regarding academic freedom (van Manen, 2016). A qualitative methodology is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their natural settings.

These references provided a foundation for understanding the philosophical assumptions and their relevance to qualitative research in education.

This study is based on a constructivist assumption, where knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants through dialogue and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the context of exploring academic freedom in primary grades, this assumption means that the study recognizes the unique perspectives and lived experiences of primary grade teachers as they navigate their autonomy and constraints within different educational settings. By adopting a qualitative approach, I assumed that insights into academic freedom can be achieved by engaging directly with teachers' narratives and interpreting these experiences within their specific contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research participants for this study were 10 primary grade teachers from Cluster 13 in Davao City, specifically focusing on those teaching at Kiman-Anao Integrated School, where I am currently affiliated. The population of teachers is 57, and 10 teachers were selected to participate in the study to ensure a range of perspectives and experiences regarding academic freedom in primary grades. This sample size is justified as it aligns with the qualitative research approach, which prioritizes depth over breadth to capture rich, detailed insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on a smaller group, the study can facilitate in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences, allowing for nuanced understanding and thematic analysis. Selecting participants with diverse backgrounds and teaching contexts within the population ensures that the findings reflect varied perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive exploration of academic freedom in primary education (Patton, 2015). The sampling procedure followed a purposive sampling strategy, which is commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who have specific knowledge, experience, and insights relevant to the research topic (Patton, 2015).

The research instrument for this study was an interview guide designed to facilitate interviews with participants. The interview guide contained open-ended questions to explore the experiences and perceptions of primary grade teachers regarding academic freedom in their classrooms. The interview guide delved on key areas such as challenges faced, coping

mechanisms, and insights into improving academic freedom, ensuring that all relevant aspects of the topic are covered while allowing participants to share their experiences freely.

I conducted a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The process began with familiarization, during which I closely read and re-read the interview transcripts to fully immerse in the data, gaining a deep understanding of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings, I employed triangulation, incorporating data from multiple sources such as interviews, field notes, and relevant documents to cross-verify and validate the patterns that emerge (Patton, 2015).

III. Results and Discussion

Figure 3 presents the challenges identified imply a need for educational policymakers and school administrators to revisit and refine curriculum policies that overly restrict teacher autonomy. Strict curriculum guidelines, administrative micromanagement, and pressure to prioritize testing risk undermining teachers' professional judgment and creativity. Addressing these challenges requires creating more flexible frameworks that allow teachers to adapt lessons to their students' needs while still meeting learning standards. There is also a need for dialogue with parents and communities to build understanding and trust in teachers' instructional decisions, reducing fear of judgment and fostering a more supportive teaching environment.

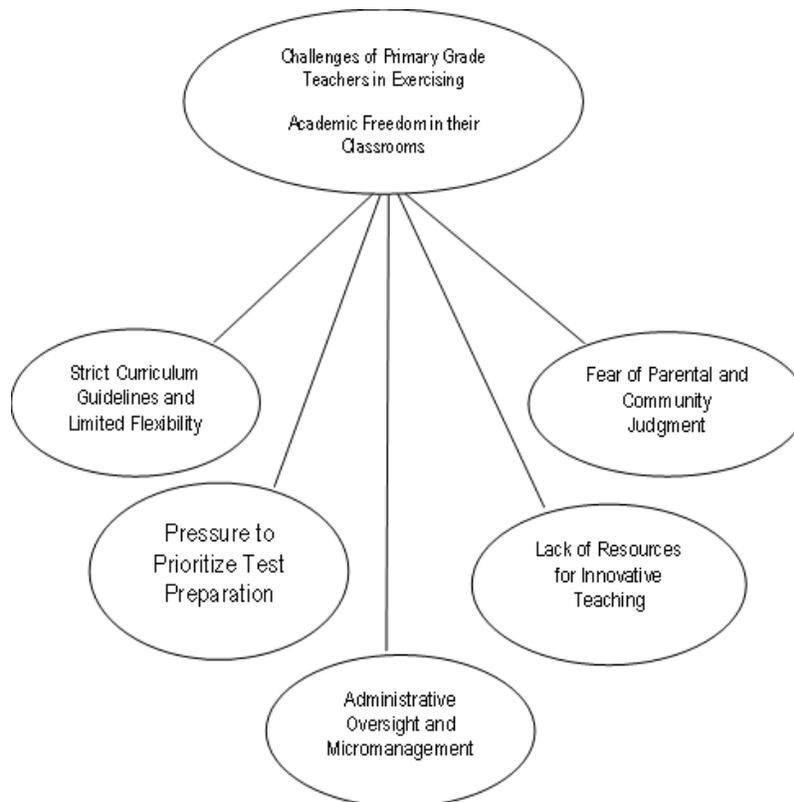


Figure 3. Challenges of Primary Grade Teachers in Exercising Academic Freedom in their Classrooms

Figure 4 the coping mechanisms employed by teachers suggest that despite institutional constraints, teachers actively seek ways to balance compliance with professional creativity. This highlights the importance of providing resources, professional development, and collaborative opportunities that support teacher agency. School leaders may recognize and build on these coping strategies by encouraging innovation within safe parameters and reducing bureaucratic barriers that hinder instructional flexibility. Supporting teachers' initiatives to create low-cost materials and contextualized lessons can improve engagement and promote a more meaningful learning experience for students.

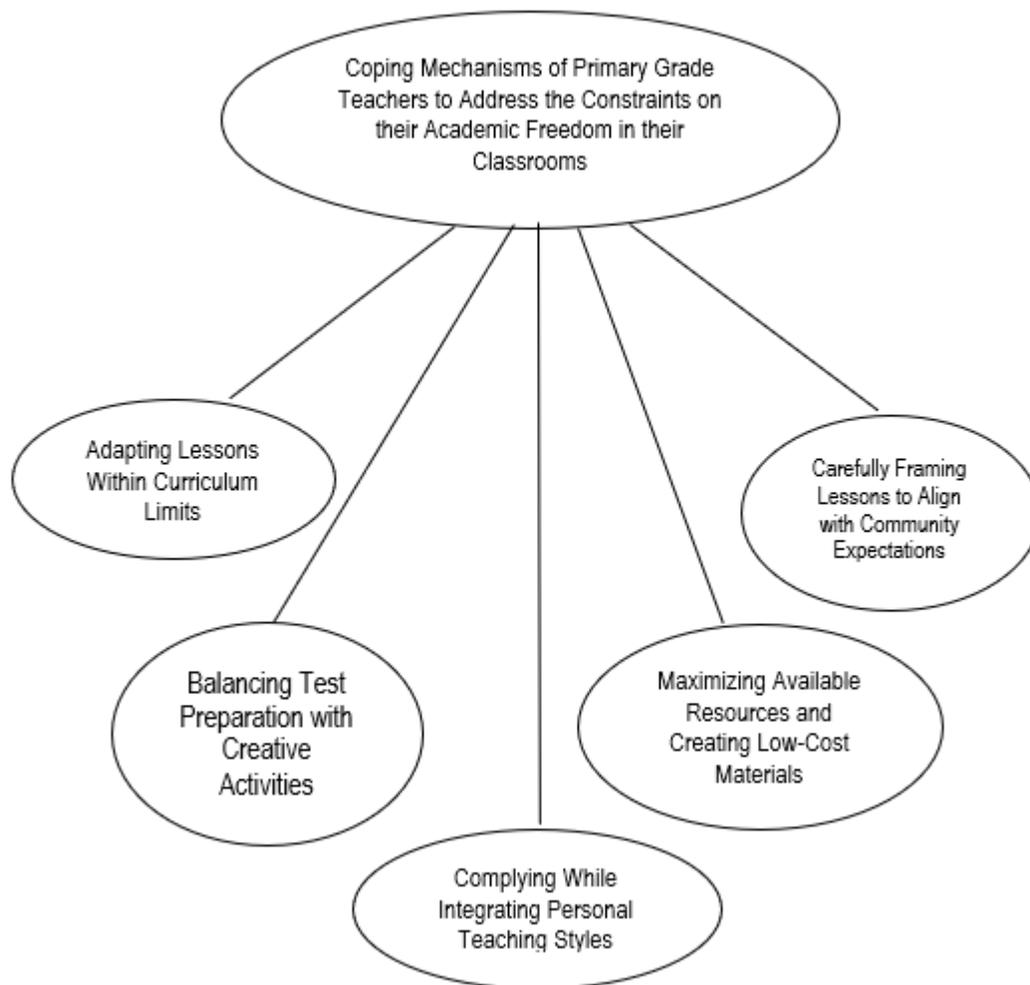


Figure 4. Coping Mechanisms of Primary Grade Teachers to Address the Constraints on their Academic Freedom in their Classrooms

Figure 5 the insights offered by teachers imply that academic freedom can be strengthened by fostering leadership practices that trust and empower teachers. School heads and administrators play a key role in creating a balance between accountability and autonomy, and their support can directly impact teacher motivation and effectiveness. Encouraging collaboration among teachers and providing spaces for shared decision-making can further enhance their confidence and professional agency. Educational leaders and policymakers may consider integrating these insights into leadership training and school governance to create environments where academic freedom contributes to improved teaching and learning outcomes.

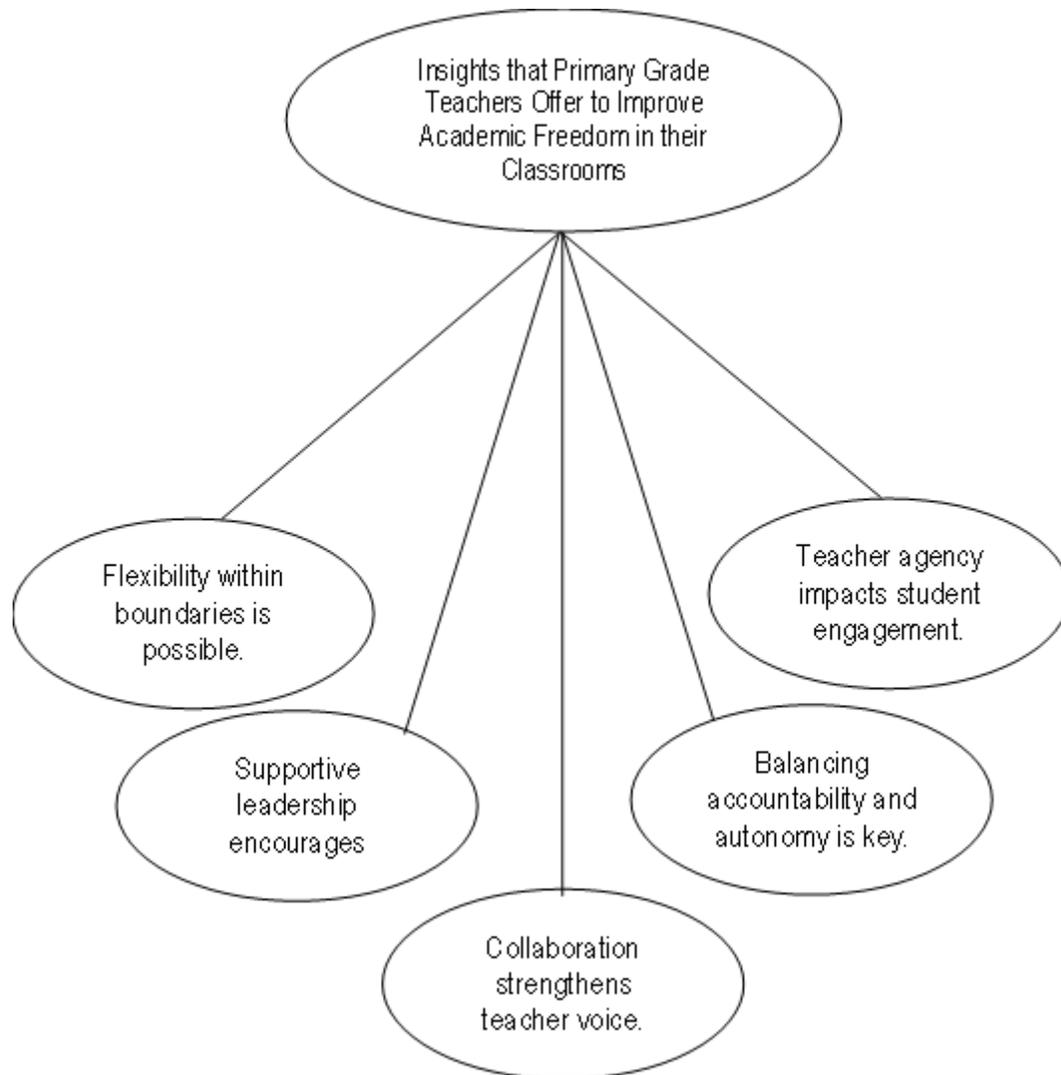


Figure 5. Insights that Primary Grade Teachers Offer to Improve Academic Freedom in their Classrooms

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