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UTILIZING STRATEGIES IN MINIMIZING LEARNERS' SEPARATION ANXIETY

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Abstract — This study examined the extent to which Kindergarten teachers utilize strategies to minimize learners' separation anxiety. Using a descriptive-correlational design, data were collected from 30 teachers in the Cuyapo West and Nampicuan Districts, Division of Nueva Ecija, Philippines. A validated questionnaire measured the use of four key strategies: emotional connection and trust-building, child-friendly classroom environment, gradual separation with parent involvement, and play-based learning approaches. Results revealed that all strategies were utilized to a "very extensive" degree, with play-based learning ranked highest (OWM = 4.100). No significant differences were found across most demographic variables, except civil status. Findings highlight the importance of emotionally responsive teaching practices and recommend continuous professional development through structured training programs.

Keywords: Separation anxiety, early childhood education, teacher strategies, play-based learning, emotional development

I. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is recognized worldwide as a critical stage for children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Entering preschool or Kindergarten is a major transition for young learners, often causing separation anxiety due to being away from parents or caregivers. This anxiety may appear through crying, clinginess, withdrawal, emotional distress, and refusal to participate in school activities.

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The study is supported by several theories. Bowlby's Attachment Theory explains that children form strong emotional bonds with caregivers, and separation from them may threaten a child's sense of security. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory emphasizes that preschool children need emotional support and reassurance to develop confidence and independence. Social Learning Theory further explains that children learn behaviors and coping mechanisms through observation and interaction with adults and peers.

International and local studies show that separation anxiety affects children's classroom participation, emotional regulation, and social adjustment. Research highlights the importance of emotionally supportive and play-based strategies in helping children cope with school transitions. Teachers are considered important transitional attachment figures who provide reassurance, structure, and emotional safety within the classroom.

In the Philippines, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 and the MATATAG Curriculum emphasize holistic child development, learner well-being, and emotionally responsive teaching practices. Teachers are encouraged to use child-centered approaches such as play-based learning, storytelling, music and movement activities, positive reinforcement, and consistent routines to help learners feel safe and secure.

Local classroom observations reveal that preschool teachers commonly use strategies like guided play, peer interaction, reassurance, and welcoming classroom environments to reduce separation anxiety. However, many of these practices rely mainly on teachers' personal experiences rather than formal training or evidence-based methods. Collaboration between teachers and parents also varies across schools.

The literature further emphasizes that teacher competence includes emotional intelligence, classroom management, and understanding child development. Professional development and training in emotionally responsive teaching can strengthen teachers' ability to identify and manage learners' anxiety effectively.

Despite numerous studies on separation anxiety, most focus on parental involvement or therapeutic interventions, leaving limited research on classroom-based teacher strategies.

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Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the strategies preschool teachers use to minimize learners' separation anxiety during the transition to school.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays an important role in supporting children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. One of the common challenges faced by preschool learners during school entry is separation anxiety. Separation anxiety refers to the fear, worry, or distress children experience when separated from their parents or caregivers. This emotional response may affect children's classroom participation, social interaction, and overall adjustment to school.

Studies show that separation anxiety is common among preschool children, especially during the first weeks of school. According to Pepito and Montalbo (2019), young learners often display crying, clinginess, refusal to participate, and withdrawal from classroom activities when experiencing anxiety. These behaviors may interfere with learning and social development if not properly addressed.

Research also emphasizes the importance of emotionally supportive teaching strategies in helping children adjust to school. Dousti et al. (2018) found that play-based activities, storytelling, and supportive teacher interactions help reduce children's feelings of fear and insecurity. Play allows children to express emotions freely while developing confidence and social skills in a safe environment.

Teachers play a vital role in minimizing separation anxiety because they become temporary attachment figures inside the classroom. Liu et al. (2025) explained that learners' adjustment is influenced by both family and school environments. Teachers who provide reassurance, consistent routines, and positive interactions help children feel secure and accepted.

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The MATATAG Curriculum of the Department of Education also supports child-centered and emotionally responsive teaching practices. It encourages the use of play-based learning, positive reinforcement, and nurturing classroom environments to promote learners' emotional well-being and successful school adjustment.

Furthermore, Bandura's Social Learning Theory highlights that children learn behaviors by observing teachers and peers. When teachers model calmness, friendliness, and confidence, learners are more likely to imitate these positive behaviors and develop coping skills. Peer interaction and cooperative play also help anxious children participate more comfortably in classroom activities.

Overall, existing literature shows that teacher strategies such as play-based learning, emotional support, structured routines, and positive social interaction are effective in reducing separation anxiety among preschool learners. However, there is still limited research focusing specifically on the actual classroom strategies used by preschool teachers, which makes this study relevant and necessary.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive-correlational research design to determine the strategies used by Kindergarten teachers in minimizing learners' separation anxiety. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire checklist divided into two parts: the respondents' demographic profile and the extent of utilizing strategies addressing separation anxiety among Kindergarten pupils.

The respondents of the study were Kindergarten teachers from the Northern Districts of the Division of Nueva Ecija, particularly in the Cuyapo and Nampicuan school districts during the School Year 2025–2026. The study used complete enumeration to include all Kindergarten teachers in the target schools. The research design was also supported by an ex post facto one-shot case study approach, which allowed the researcher to observe and describe existing classroom practices without manipulating the natural teaching environment.

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To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted among Kindergarten teachers who were not part of the actual respondents. Ambiguous items were revised, and Cronbach's alpha was used to measure internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert evaluation in early childhood education to ensure that the questionnaire aligned with the study objectives.

Data gathering was conducted through both printed and online questionnaires. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through coded responses and secure handling of data.

After collecting the data, responses were checked, organized, and encoded using Excel spreadsheets. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, weighted mean, overall weighted mean, grand overall weighted mean, t-test, ANOVA, and Pearson r correlation were used to analyze and interpret the data.

The study also observed ethical standards by securing approval from the Schools Division Office and school heads. The research ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality, truthful reporting of results, and minimal disruption to school activities.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

The results show that most Kindergarten teachers are aged 31–35 years old (40%). The rest are distributed among 26–30 years old (13.3%), 36–40 years old (23.3%), and 41 years old and above (23.3%).

All respondents are female (100%), indicating that Kindergarten teaching in the study area is fully dominated by female educators. In terms of civil status, most are married (96.7%), while only one is single.

For educational attainment, most teachers (93.3%) hold a Bachelor's degree with MA units, while only 6.7% have completed a Master's degree.

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In terms of teaching experience, half of the respondents (50%) have 7–10 years of experience in Kindergarten teaching, while 36.7% have 11 years and above. Only a small number have 1–6 years of experience.

Regarding in-service training, 46.7% have attended 3 or fewer trainings, another 46.7% attended 4–6 trainings, and only 6.7% attended 7 or more trainings.

These results suggest that the respondents are experienced teachers with moderate exposure to professional development programs.

Extent of Utilization of Strategies

Emotional Connection and Trust-Building

The overall weighted mean (OWM = 3.967) shows that teachers always and very extensively use emotional connection and trust-building strategies.

Teachers consistently greet children warmly, listen to their concerns, provide comfort, and show patience. The highest-rated practice was listening attentively to children's feelings (WM = 4.133). The lowest was using positive reinforcement, although it still received a high rating.

This means that emotional support is strongly integrated into daily classroom practice.

Child-Friendly and Secure Classroom Environment

This strategy obtained an OWM of 4.053, interpreted as very extensive.

Teachers maintain safe, organized, and predictable classrooms. The highest-rated item was keeping the classroom safe and organized (WM = 4.233), while arranging a comfort corner received the lowest rating (WM = 3.800).

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The results show that classroom environment plays a key role in helping children feel secure and reduce anxiety.

Gradual Separation and Parent Involvement

This strategy obtained an OWM of 3.983, also interpreted as very extensive.

Teachers encourage parental involvement during the first days of school and gradually reduce parental presence. The highest-rated practice was encouraging parents to build children's confidence for school (WM = 4.267), while supporting parents in confidence-building at home was the lowest (WM = 3.733).

This shows that collaboration with parents is an important part of easing children's transition to school.

Play-Based and Interactive Learning Approaches

This strategy obtained the highest OWM of 4.100, interpreted as very extensive.

Teachers frequently use storytelling, songs, games, and role-playing. The highest-rated indicators were storytelling and role-playing (WM = 4.367). The lowest was adapting play activities to individual emotional needs (WM = 3.733).

This indicates that play-based learning is the most dominant strategy used in managing separation anxiety.

Summary of Strategies

Overall, the grand mean (GOWM = 4.026) shows that Kindergarten teachers very extensively use all strategies to minimize separation anxiety.

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Strategy	OWM	Interpretation
Emotional Connection and Trust-Building	3.967	Very Extensive
Child-Friendly Classroom Environment	4.053	Very Extensive
Gradual Separation and Parent Involvement	3.983	Very Extensive
Play-Based Learning Approaches	4.100	Very Extensive
Overall Mean	4.026	Very Extensive

This means that all strategies are actively practiced and considered effective in supporting learners' emotional adjustment.

Differences Across Profile Variables

The results of ANOVA and t-tests show that there are no significant differences in the use of strategies when grouped according to:

Age

Civil status

Highest educational attainment

Years of teaching Kindergarten

Number of in-service trainings

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This indicates that teachers apply similar strategies regardless of their demographic profile or experience level.

Relationship Between Variables

Most correlations between teacher profile variables and strategy utilization were not significant.

However, civil status showed a significant relationship with gradual separation and parent involvement ($r = 0.387$, $p = 0.035$). The grand total also showed a significant relationship with civil status ($r = 0.493$, $p = 0.006$).

This suggests that civil status may slightly influence how teachers engage parents during the separation process.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study shows that Kindergarten teachers extensively use different strategies to minimize separation anxiety among pupils. These include emotional connection and trust-building, creating child-friendly and secure classrooms, gradual separation with parent involvement, and play-based learning approaches. All strategies were rated as very extensive, which means they are regularly and consistently applied in the classroom.

Among these strategies, play-based and interactive learning was the most commonly used. Teachers often use games, storytelling, songs, and role-playing to help children feel comfortable and express their emotions. This shows that play is an important tool not only for learning but also for emotional adjustment.

Emotional connection and trust-building were also widely practiced. Teachers provide comfort, listen to children's concerns, and show patience to help learners feel safe. This helps children see teachers as supportive figures during the transition from home to school.

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The study also found that teachers maintain child-friendly classrooms by providing safe spaces, predictable routines, and calming environments. These help children feel secure and reduce anxiety. In addition, teachers involve parents through communication and gradual separation practices, which supports children's adjustment to school.

The results further show that teacher profile variables such as age, education, and teaching experience do not significantly affect the use of these strategies. This means that teachers generally apply similar approaches regardless of their background.

However, civil status showed a slight relationship with how teachers use parent involvement strategies. This suggests that personal circumstances may have some influence on classroom practices, especially in engaging parents.

Overall, the study concludes that Kindergarten teachers consistently and effectively use different strategies to reduce separation anxiety. These strategies help children adjust better to school and support their emotional well-being during early learning experiences.

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to continue using play-based and interactive learning strategies since these were found to be the most effective in reducing separation anxiety. Maintaining engaging and child-centered activities can further strengthen pupils' emotional adjustment and classroom participation.

Schools may further enhance child-friendly and secure classroom environments by improving learning spaces, providing more sensory materials, and establishing consistent classroom routines. These practices help create a stable environment where children feel safe and comfortable.

Although emotional connection and trust-building strategies are already extensively used, teachers may still strengthen these by increasing one-on-one interactions with pupils, especially

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during the first weeks of school. This can further reduce anxiety and improve teacher–child relationships.

It is also recommended that schools and districts conduct targeted training programs or Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions focusing on advanced techniques in managing separation anxiety. These sessions should include practical demonstrations, peer sharing, and classroom-based interventions.

Parent involvement should be continuously strengthened. Schools may improve orientation programs and provide more guidance to parents on how to support their children's transition to school, especially during the early days of classes.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies with larger samples or in different settings to further validate the findings. It may also be beneficial to explore the perspectives of parents and pupils to gain a more comprehensive understanding of separation anxiety in early childhood education.

Overall, strengthening collaboration among teachers, parents, and school administrators is essential in sustaining effective strategies that support young learners' emotional development and smooth school adjustment.

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