

# Lived Experiences of Teachers in Handling Separation Anxiety Among Preschoolers

Amethyst Kerstine A. Bihag, Analyn S. Clarin

Misamis University

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## ABSTRACT

Separation anxiety is a developmental condition in which young children experience distress when separated from parents or primary caregivers, often affecting classroom adjustment and participation. This study explored the teachers' lived experiences in managing separation anxiety among preschoolers through Van Manen's lifeworld existential: lived body, lived space, lived time, lived other, and lived things. This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design and is conducted in private schools in Iligan City during the 2025–2026 school year. The participants are ten preschool teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and interpreted using Van Manen's phenomenological approach. The findings reveal five themes: Embodying Calm in Emotional Strain, Creating Safe and Calming Spaces, Time Distortion in Caregiving Moments, Trust as a Path to Emotional Safety, and Material Ports for Comfort and Regulation. These imply that managing separation anxiety requires emotional regulation, supportive spaces, trusting relationships, and purposeful use of classroom materials. It is recommended that school heads strengthen teacher support programs, teachers and assistant teachers practice responsive caregiving, and parents collaborate closely with schools during children's transition.

**Keywords:** emotional regulation, hermeneutic phenomenology, lived experiences, preschool classroom, preschool teachers, separation anxiety

## INTRODUCTION

Building a strong foundation, early childhood education is essential to pupils' success. As a result, teachers play a very important role in a child's development (Quileste & Pagara, 2022). Early childhood education initiatives in the Philippines aim to address the SDG 4 Education goals for inclusive and equitable quality education for all children. The government has robust legislative frameworks for providing early learning programs, namely, the "Early Years Act of 2013" and the "Kindergarten Act." Early childhood care and education are mandated for all children ages 0–8, with mandatory early childhood education beginning in Kindergarten for all 5-year-olds (Bustos-Orosa, 2024).

Preschool teachers and caregivers viewed themselves as equally responsible within the team. Specifically, preschool teachers upgraded the competence and position of caregivers while downgrading their own professional competence and position (Lundqvist, 2023). Teachers must be able to work in constant change, be able to manage the educational process, which requires modern didactic knowledge, to solve complex educational situations arising from children's differences and the diversity of their educational needs, to perfectly manage information technology without which a modern educational process is not possible and have other important competences that are necessary in the diversity of the activities of the teacher of the 21st century (Malinauskiene, 2021).

Preschool teachers have sufficient knowledge to create an effective learning environment (Karlidag, 2021). Despite the critical role of early childhood education and the unique challenges faced by kindergarten teachers, there exists a noticeable need for more specific professional development needs and competencies required for effective teaching (Bacus & Macalisang, 2024). It shaped teachers' subjectivities by creating new norms and

boundaries for how teachers were to be and act as pre-K professionals, which they took up or resisted in ways (Wilinski, 2021).

When responsibility for teaching is more clearly addressed, feelings of pressure and uncertainty are expressed, as well as the need for more support (Catucci, 2021). Challenging student behaviors and adverse outcomes for both teachers and students are well established; less is known about teachers' mental representations and perceptions of these behaviors (Jamil et al., 2022). Preschool teachers make sense of their emotional labor, or the deliberate expression or suppression of emotions to achieve organizational goals, in the context of three professional interactions (Levine Brown et al., 2023). In initial teacher training and continuing professional development, teachers should be provided with support and strategies to help them manage their mental health and children's well-being (Narea et al., 2022).

Separation anxiety varies widely between children. Some babies become hysterical when you are out of sight for a very short time. Other children seem to show ongoing anxiety at separations during infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool (Swanson, 2021). Upon preschool enrollment, the child-teacher relationship becomes important for the child's continued development. It is suggested that parents may be essential in supporting the establishment of such relationships from the first weeks of the child's preschool enrollment, the so-called "introduction process". (Andersson et al., 2025). One central goal of emotional socialization is to help children acquire reflective regulation of their emotions, leading to socially acceptable, age-appropriate experiences and behaviors (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). Separation anxiety disorder is one of the issues and problems that lead to academic failure and huge losses for the parents and society (Behmanesh et al., 2023). Separation anxiety disorder is considered the most common anxiety disorder in childhood. Failure to treat this disorder at an early age can be converted into a risk factor for childhood and adolescent psychiatric disorders (Zeighami et al., 2022).

Anxiety is a prevalent factor associated with school refusal, whereas school refusal is directly and closely related to state and trait anxiety, social anxiety, school anxiety, and separation anxiety (Tekin & Aydın, 2022). Social and emotional skills are crucial to be promoted at a young age. These soft skills lay the foundation for resilience, a protective factor for healthy child development (Khayankij, 2024). Past meta-analyses show that both child-mother and child-father attachment insecurity are independently and jointly associated with more externalizing behaviors in children (Deneault et al., 2022). Preschool environmental education holds immense promise in fostering environmental awareness and sustainable behaviors among young learners (Sanginova, 2024).

Preschool teachers frequently report that separation anxiety in young learners can escalate quickly into what they describe as "uncontrollable" behavior like tantrums, aggressive outbursts, intense clinging, and sudden flight responses, especially during drop-off and the first weeks of school (Prino et al., 2023; Alcon et al., 2024). Teachers describe these behavioral manifestations as not only distressing for the child but also disruptive for class routines; Simionescu et al. (2024) found that anxiety and stress in young populations are associated with higher rates of both internalizing and externalizing behaviors under extreme contexts, a pattern echoed in early-childhood mental-health reviews that highlight links between anxiety and problem behaviors (Fisak et al., 2023). Collectively, these recent findings corroborate preschool teachers' lived reports that separation anxiety can present as acute, sometimes hard-to-manage behavior in the classroom, requiring both immediate de-escalation skills and longer-term supports.

In their day-to-day practice, preschool teachers rely on a mix of individualized routines, environmental adjustments, and relationship strategies to manage uncontrollable behavior stemming from separation anxiety. Qualitative work with preschool practitioners shows that teachers use predictable rituals, transitional objects, graduated separation, and brief, consistent goodbye routines to reduce arousal (Jucoy, 2022; Scimatic, 2024). Empirical intervention research and reviews suggest these classroom-level approaches align with the kinds of early interventions that are effective for young children's anxiety and behavior problems (Hudson et al., 2023; Fisak et al., 2023): behavioral and CBT-informed strategies, teacher-led scaffolded exposures (short separations), and structured emotion-coaching produce measurable reductions in anxiety and externalizing episodes when implemented with fidelity. Simionescu et al. (2024) also note that coping strategies taught at the system level (for teachers and caregivers) help buffer children against performance or task-related stressors, supporting teachers' reports that coordinated teacher-parent strategies yield the best outcomes for children who initially present with severe separation-driven behaviors.

Despite teachers' resourcefulness, many report feeling under-prepared and emotionally taxed by recurrent episodes of uncontrollable behavior, and they identify a need for more training, school supports, and coordinated mental-health pathways. Surveys and field studies of preschool teachers indicate that while many teachers adapt successfully using personal strategies, they also call for formal professional development, better school protocols, and access to specialist consultations to manage complex or persistent cases (Jucoy, 2022; Prino et al., 2023). Review evidence and meta-analytic syntheses emphasize that early intervention programs and teacher training significantly improve teacher confidence and child outcomes, but that implementation barriers (time, training, workforce shortages) limit uptake (Hudson et al., 2023; Fisak et al., 2023). Simionescu et al. (2024) further highlight that systemic supports (community- and school-level) and attention to teacher well-being are crucial, as teacher stress and limited coping resources reduce the effectiveness of classroom management strategies. Taken together, the literature validates preschool teachers' lived experiences with uncontrollable separation-related behavior. It points to concrete levers (training, evidence-based interventions, and systemic supports) that would help teachers manage these challenging situations more effectively.

While research may exist on separation anxiety among young learners, studies on preschool teachers' actual lived experiences in handling separation anxiety remain limited. While separation anxiety has been widely studied in psychology, there is still limited knowledge on pedagogical and classroom management strategies that teachers specifically use. To fill this knowledge gap, this study investigated preschool teachers' lived experiences in managing separation anxiety among young learners.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand preschool teachers' lived experiences in managing separation anxiety among young learners, with particular attention to children who exhibit uncontrollable behaviors during separation. While separation anxiety is a common developmental challenge, the intensity of behaviors such as crying, tantrums, withdrawal, or aggression often places teachers in demanding situations that require both emotional sensitivity and practical management strategies. This study sought to uncover the challenges they encounter, the coping and teaching strategies they employ, and the support mechanisms they find effective in addressing young learners' needs. Ultimately, the study aimed to provide valuable perspectives that can inform teacher training programs, strengthen school-based support systems, and enhance early childhood education practices to foster smoother transitions and more positive classroom experiences for both teachers and young learners.

This study was significant because it provided valuable insights into how teachers and parents address separation anxiety among preschoolers. The findings benefited the preschool teacher, parents, young learners, and school administrators by providing strategies and techniques, along with an understanding of the reasons and factors behind this behavior. Especially for teachers, it offered insights from fellow teachers' experiences, which may have led to new strategies or to a sense of validation in their practices. Parents had a better understanding of teachers' roles in supporting their children, and they could take strategies home. Furthermore, children indirectly benefited from this, as teachers equipped to address separation anxiety helped them adjust and develop positive relationships as they attended school. Lastly, administrators used this study to address a common problem by developing preschool rules and policies to help learners become independent at a young age.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the following theories: Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory (1995) and Donald Schön's Reflective Practice Theory (1983).

Emotional Intelligence Theory by Goleman (1995) offers deep insights into the vital role of emotional intelligence and its connection to individual well-being and performance (Dihi & Zerrouki, 2025). Emotional intelligence encompasses a spectrum of qualities crucial to leadership success, including self-awareness, emotion management, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills (Al Jaber et al., 2024). Once emotions are understood clearly, personnel may use them to enhance personal and organizational growth (Shafait & Huang, 2024).

Teachers' emotional intelligence can predict their organizational commitment both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of psychological well-being (Li et al., 2024). Emotional education helps develop emotional intelligence and bolsters teachers' overall well-being. Aims: to gauge the effectiveness of the program

designed to enhance the emotional intelligence, life satisfaction, life orientation, and work well-being of teaching staff (Arteaga-Cedeno et al., 2025).

The Emotional Intelligence theory by Goleman is relevant to this study as it helps to explain how teacher manage their own emotions while handling children's distress. Managing separation anxiety among preschoolers requires teachers to be effective at managing both their own emotions and those of their students. Since teachers often face emotionally charged situations during separation moments, they strive to remain calm, empathetic, and supportive. Goleman's theory highlights self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, all of which are essential in understanding and responding to children's distress. Therefore, this theory provides a robust framework for understanding teachers' lived experiences as they navigate the emotional challenges of addressing separation anxiety in preschool settings.

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory has been used in recent empirical work to explain how educators' affective competencies shape both child outcomes and classroom processes. For example, a study revealed a progressive increase in emotional vocabulary, with more complex emotions introduced at advanced levels. The systematic teaching model proposed in the study addresses key EI components such as self-awareness, social skills, and emotional regulation by scaffolding emotional vocabulary instruction across proficiency levels (Lasekan et al., 2025). Other contemporary studies apply Goleman-informed measures to classroom outcomes more broadly. Al Jaber et al. (2024) reported links between teachers' EI and students' satisfaction with academic achievement, while Tarman and Filiz (2023) documented that preschool teachers with higher EI adopt more effective coping and stress-management strategies, which in turn may create a more emotionally stable learning environment for young children. Together, these studies illustrate a convergent pattern: using Goleman's EI constructs to frame educator competencies helps explain variation in children's emotional adjustment (including separation anxiety), teacher stress/coping, and student-centered outcomes, and they point to teacher-focused EI training as a promising intervention in early childhood settings. (Al Jaber et al., 2024; Tarman & Filiz, 2023).

Reflective Practice Theory by Donald Schön (1983) is analyzed for its relevance to continuous professional growth (Hariffin et al., 2025). Schön's (1987) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' provided a major theoretical foundation for this work (Cherry, 2024). Reflective practices in education are widely advocated for and have become important components of professional reviews (Machost & Stains, 2023).

In 1992, philosopher, researcher, and professor Donald Schön built on Dewey's theory and published his version of "reflective practice" rather than "reflective thought." Reflective practice includes three components: "knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflective conversation with the situation". Knowing-in-action refers to the ability to perform activities using implicit knowledge or muscle memory (Sweetman, 2025). Reflective practice has gained recognition as a key component in improving teaching effectiveness and fostering continuous professional growth among educators (Pandey et al., 2025). Donald Schön's reflective practice model was applied, highlighting the tutor's role in facilitating real-time decision-making and adaptive learning (de Sousa et al., 2025).

The Reflective Practice Theory by Donald Schön is essential to this study, as it focuses on teachers' learning and improvement through their lived experiences. Teachers experience emotional and unpredictable circumstances in handling separation anxiety among young children that require them to think critically about their actions and decisions. Reflections from the teachers will help them develop strategies that work and support anxious children in the future.

Recent empirical research in teacher education has continued to draw on Donald Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory, particularly its distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, to understand how educators manage complex emotional and pedagogical challenges. For example, Cole, Hinchcliff, and Carling (2022) used a self-study methodology to explore how in-service teachers' reflective practice helped them make sense of emotionally demanding and surprising moments in teaching, showing how critical reflection catalyzed their professional growth. In early childhood contexts, Chen (2023) studied preschool through grade-3 teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and observed how they engaged in all three types of reflection—for, in, and on action—noting that reflective inquiry intersected with technical, practical, and critical dimensions of their work as they adapted to remote teaching.

In Japan, Matsui (2021) documented how ECEC (early childhood education and care) teachers' reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action during teacher conferences and after listening to children's voices improved their pedagogical decisions, especially in building more empathetic relationships with children. Finally, Anselmann, Gläser-Zikuda, and colleagues (2025) investigated preservice teachers' reflective practices using scaffolded prompts (e.g., critical-incident prompts). They found that structured reflection grounded in Schön's framework enhanced preservice teachers' metacognitive regulation, pedagogical reasoning, and problem-solving capacities. These studies collectively affirm that Schön's reflective-practitioner model remains highly relevant. By facilitating both in-the-moment and retrospective reflection, it supports teachers in navigating emotionally and pedagogically challenging situations, thus enhancing their professional competence and their responsiveness to learners.

## Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework illustrates how teachers' experiences in supporting preschoolers with separation anxiety are revealed in this phenomenological study. Grounded in participants' lived accounts, the framework shows the complex, interconnected nature of teachers' experiences in handling separation anxiety among preschoolers. It illustrates how teachers simultaneously navigate emotional regulation, relational engagement, professional growth, and practical caregiving responsibilities. Each thematic circle represents a dimension of this experience, highlighting not only the strategies teachers employ, such as building trust, sharing care, and maintaining calm, but also the reflective and adaptive processes that support their professional identity. The framework emphasizes that managing separation anxiety is both relational and transformative, requiring teachers to balance the needs of individual children with the classroom's collective dynamics while continuously adjusting their pedagogical approaches. The following themes were presented as follows:

**Embodying Calm in Emotional Strain.** This theme means that teachers experience handling separation anxiety as both emotionally difficult and physically demanding. It shows that teachers use their own bodies, voices, facial expressions, and emotional control as tools to calm and reassure preschoolers. This is related to the study because it explains how teachers physically and emotionally experience managing children with separation anxiety. It directly reflects the lived body's dimension by showing that the teacher's bodily presence becomes part of the child's emotional regulation.

Studies show that innovative methods aimed at enhancing teachers' emotional stability in modern educational environments and their impact on pedagogical effectiveness (Anvarovna, 2025). There was a study on the Emotion Regulation Index for Childrearing (ERIC), a psychological tool designed to assess an individual's capacity to manage emotions effectively in childrearing contexts. It focuses on the crucial role of emotional regulation in caregiving, acknowledging that the ability to control and respond to one's emotions directly influences the quality of care provided and the emotional environment created for children (Mendoza & Rpm, 2025).

The benefits of social and emotional learning in early childhood education have been increasingly highlighted by research as a critical component in shaping teachers' practices and promoting successful student outcomes (Hayag et al., 2025). A study confirmed that effective emotional regulation, particularly through strategies like deep acting, significantly enhances teacher well-being and job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2025). Moreover, these studies reinforce that regulating one's emotions is a gateway to help a child with separation anxiety to feel confident and secure, especially during transition periods.

This captures the adjustments and strategies teachers use to support children with separation anxiety. Teachers intentionally adjust their tone of voice, body language, and calm responses. A study reveals that teacher emotion recognition (TER) significantly impacts student engagement, classroom atmosphere, and teaching quality, making it a research hotspot in the field of smart education (Cai et al., 2025). A study shows that teachers' approach to holding hands as a physical and compassionate form of touch may help navigate emotionally intense experiences (Quinones & Cooper, 2023). A study indicates that emotional labor is an inherent part of the ECE teaching profession, with strategies ranging from surface acting to deep acting to natural acting (Mukhlis, 2025). Overall, it shows the teacher's ability to adjust and compose themselves to lessen the children's separation anxiety.

**Creating Safe and Calming Spaces.** This theme means that the classroom environment plays an important role in helping children feel secure, comforted, and emotionally settled during separation from their parents. It highlights that spaces such as quiet corners, play areas, and well-arranged classrooms can reduce fear and support emotional adjustment. This is related to the study because it describes how teachers perceive and experience the classroom environment while managing separation anxiety. It reflects lived space by showing that the classroom is not only a physical setting but also an emotional space that influences the child's sense of safety.

A study reveals that to support emotionally overwhelmed students in the classroom, school teachers may dedicate a purpose-built "Calm" or "Safe" Space, where students who experience emotional deregulation can have privacy to refocus and reflect (Terneus & Atkinson, 2025). Moreover, a study's findings underscore the importance of considering the classroom climate as a key factor in promoting general well-being and positive social-emotional outcomes among young learners, and the importance of creating a nurturing and supportive classroom environment to foster optimal emotional development in children (García-Peinado, 2023).

**Time Distortion in Caregiving Moments.** This theme means that teachers experience time differently when a child is having an episode of separation anxiety, as a few minutes can feel much longer and more intense. It shows that caregiving moments disrupt the normal classroom routine and make teachers feel the passing of time in a stretched or slowed way. This is related to the study because it explains how teachers experience time while comforting preschoolers with separation anxiety. It reflects lived time by showing that time is not only measured by the clock but also by the emotional intensity of the teacher's caregiving experience.

The teacher's experience during episodes depends on the child's emotional state, with some moments feeling overwhelmingly fast and others feeling slow. This altered sense of time reflects the intensity of their engagement and the emotional labor involved in caregiving. Understanding this temporal elasticity helps explain how separation anxiety impacts not just the child, but also the teacher's professional and emotional experience. A study reveals the importance of emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions in promoting children's emotional well-being in everyday classroom contexts. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting emotional support as a key contextual factor in early childhood education and by providing ethically sound evidence on the psychological significance of emotionally responsive teaching practices (Wang et al., 2025).

**Trust as a Path to Emotional Safety.** This theme means that trust and rapport between teacher and child are essential in helping preschoolers feel safe, secure, and ready to adjust to the classroom. It highlights that consistent, patient, and caring relationships reduce anxiety and help children become more comfortable in school. This is related to the study because it explains how teachers describe their relationships with preschoolers experiencing separation anxiety. It reflects lived other (relationality) by showing that emotional safety is built through meaningful human connection and supportive relationships.

The teacher's communicative and socio-emotional skills, adherence to professional ethical principles, and inclination toward continuous self-improvement are among the key factors that ensure both the psychological safety and the developmental character of the educational environment. A study indicates that a high level of competence enhances the quality of education in preschool institutions, positively affects children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, and contributes to a more humanistic educational environment (Imanova & Ilyasov, 2026). Overall, the teacher's preparation and reflection show how they develop their skills and professional identity by intentionally planning and thoughtfully reviewing their practice. In supporting children with separation anxiety, preparation enables teachers to anticipate challenges, plan strategies, create a safe environment for each child, and reflect on each child's needs.

Studies contribute to theory by combining attachment theory with motivational constructs to better understand the factors that influence students' engagement and persistence. The findings have implications for educators, which could be used to foster close relationships with students, provide useful instructional support, and emphasize the applicability of course material (Liu et al., 2025).

**Material Ports for Comfort and Regulation.** This theme means that classroom materials such as toys, comfort objects, visual aids, and play stations help children manage emotions and redirect their attention during separation anxiety. It shows that these materials serve as sources of comfort, familiarity, and regulation for

preschoolers in distress. This is related to the study because it explains the role of classroom materials in teachers’ management of separation anxiety. It reflects lived experience by showing that classroom objects are not merely learning materials but also important supports for emotional comfort and adjustment.

A study makes a valuable and timely contribution to the field of early years by discussing therapeutic approaches in early childhood, specifically Transitional Objects (Norman, 2025). A study explores how primary school teachers use transitional objects and rituals that help children adapt to school and feel secure (Komzáková & Koželuhová, 2025). The study’s design criteria indicate that playful interaction should employ a range of techniques, including metaphors, sensory regulation strategies, parent involvement, and physical objects (Iskanderani, 2023).

One of the most important tasks for supporting the development of emotions and social relationships is to build a toy system appropriate for children and suited to the conditions in each school. Children learn to express themselves and listen to others through group activities such as building, playing with dolls, and role-playing games (Nhung, 2024).

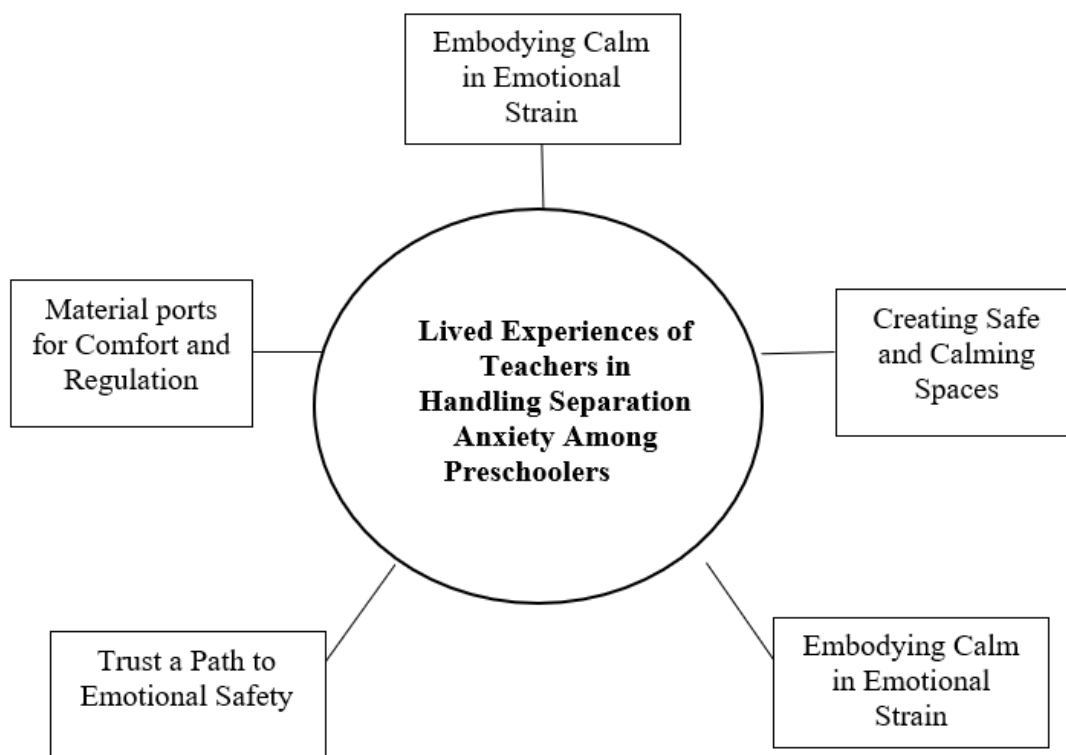


Fig. 1. Schematic Diagram of the Study

**Statement of the Problem**

This study explored the experiences of preschool teachers in handling separation anxiety among young learners. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

How do teachers physically and emotionally experience managing preschoolers with separation anxiety?

How do teachers perceive and experience the classroom environment when managing children with separation anxiety?

How do teachers experience time while handling episodes of separation anxiety among preschoolers?

How do teachers describe their relationships with preschoolers experiencing separation anxiety?

What role do classroom materials (e.g., toys, comfort objects, visual aids) play in in teachers' management of separation anxiety?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design. Hermeneutic phenomenology reflects the foundational philosophies of both hermeneutics (the art and science of interpretation and meaning) and phenomenology (the study of experience as it is lived and structured through consciousness). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a research methodology, aims to produce rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that can connect with the collective experience of others (Godden & Kutsyuruba, 2023). This design is relevant and appropriate to the study, as it describes and seeks to understand preschool teachers' experiences with separation anxiety among young learners. Through this approach, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and respond to the phenomenon in their teaching life.

### Settings

This study was conducted in the selected private schools in Iligan City, Philippines. A highly urbanized city known for its diverse private schools that serve students from various backgrounds, which offer early childhood programs. The city has a wide variety of private schools, ranging from small to large and catering to young learners. There are 14 private schools in Iligan City with preschool recognition granted by the Department of Education. With these settings, the study captured how preschool teachers manage separation anxiety while fostering a nurturing and supportive learning environment for their pupils.

### Participants

The participants of the study are the 10 preschool teachers from different private schools who are purposively chosen. Data saturation served as the basis for determining the actual number of participants. The criteria in choosing the participants included: 1) preschool teachers who are teaching in private schools; 2) teachers with at least 1 year of experience in teaching preschool; 3) teachers who gave their full consent to serve as participants of the study.

### Instrument

The researcher used an Interview Guide for the personal interviews. The questions were formulated based on the variables in this study. To enhance its reliability and validity, the research instrument underwent expert review to ensure clarity, consistency, and relevance. This study used semi-structured interview questions carefully developed to explore preschool teachers lived experiences in managing separation anxiety among young learners. The questions are closely aligned with the research objectives and are guided by Van Manen's four existential: lived body, lived space, lived time, lived relation, and lived essence. The instrument aims to elicit comprehensive and meaningful insights into how preschool teachers perceive, respond to, and manage children's emotional and behavioral reactions during moments of separation. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to articulate their experiences in depth, offering rich, authentic descriptions of their daily encounters with separation anxiety in the classroom.

The interview protocol began with general questions intended to establish rapport and create a comfortable atmosphere for discussion. This initial phase helped participants feel at ease in sharing their experiences. As the interview progresses, the questions will become increasingly specific, focusing on the physical manifestations of separation anxiety, the influence of the classroom environment, teachers' perceptions of time during separation episodes, and their interpersonal relationships with children, parents, and colleagues. The interview concluded with reflective questions that aimed to capture the overall meaning and essence of the teachers' lived experiences.

The questions were designed to cover multiple dimensions of the phenomenon. The researcher sought to understand how teachers recognize and respond to pupils' physical expressions of anxiety, how the classroom environment contributes to or mitigates these behaviors, how teachers perceive changes and adjustments over time, and how relationships within the school community influence their approaches to managing separation anxiety. Through these questions, the instrument intended to uncover both the practical and emotional aspects of teaching young learners who experience difficulty separating from their parents.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

In gathering the data, the researcher asked permission from the Dean of the Graduate School of Misamis University to conduct a study. Then, the researcher asked permission from the selected private schools in Iligan City. Confidentiality and data preservation were maintained; all recordings, transcripts, and notes were kept in the protected folder and accessible only to the researcher. After approval, the researchers prepared a consent letter for the participants, who were informed of the study's importance. The researchers visited the schools and conducted individual face-to-face interviews. The researchers recorded the entire interview process to preserve the participants' responses in their original form and to document their response delays. To enhance credibility, the researcher maintained regular contact with participants and employed methods such as taking notes during and after interviews and carefully observing teachers' behavior and nonverbal cues to better explore the meaning of their experiences. After all participants were interviewed, the researchers transcribed the interviews. The responses were then coded, categorized, and translated into themes. Finally, the themes were analyzed and interpreted. Finally, the researcher presented the findings to the research team during the analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study strictly adhered to the ethical standards set by the Misamis University Research Ethics Board to protect participants and maintain the integrity of the research. Before the data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the Misamis University Research Ethics Board to ensure compliance with institutional and ethical guidelines. The researcher declared no conflicts of interest that could influence the study's outcomes. Additionally, participants' privacy and confidentiality were upheld at every stage of the study. They were fully protected by keeping all information anonymous and securely stored for research purposes only. Before collecting data, the researchers clearly explained the study's purpose and objectives, ensuring participants fully understood their role and how their contributions would be used. Since the study involved preschool teachers and children's behavior, all participants were treated with respect and sensitivity. Participants were respected throughout the process, reassured that all collected data would be presented accurately and fairly, and treated with dignity. The participant is free to withdraw at any time if discomfort arises. The researcher will also emphasize that no information shared during the study will negatively impact their well-being or be used beyond the scope of this research. Participants were respected throughout the process, reassured that all collected data would be presented accurately and fairly, and treated with dignity.

### **Data Analysis**

In the data analysis, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Van Manen (1990). The procedures included 1) turn to the nature of lived experience, 2) investigate experiences as lived, 3) engage in hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, 4) engage in hermeneutic phenomenological writing, 5) maintain a robust and oriented relation, and 6) balance the research while exploring the parts and whole.

Turn to the nature of lived experience. This step implied that the researcher identified and committed to a seriously interesting phenomenon, something that calls for deep reflection and understanding. It indicated that this study focused intently on teachers' lived experiences in addressing separation anxiety among preschoolers, a significant issue in early childhood.

Investigate experiences as lived. Step two involved collecting descriptions of experiences as lived, which involved conducting in-depth interviews and observations to capture participants' real, natural experiences. In this study, this was used to gather detailed accounts of teachers' experiences with separation anxiety and to understand how they responded to and prepared for it.

Engaging in hermeneutic phenomenological reflection. Step three involved analyzing the data to uncover essential themes that reveal what makes the experience unique. These themes expressed the core meanings of the phenomenon. This step helped the researcher reflect on their experiences to identify themes that described their responses across cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects.

Engage in hermeneutic phenomenological writing. In this step, the researcher wrote and rewrote to convey the experience's meaning vividly and truthfully. To ensure the details were authentic, the researcher noted the teacher's experiences.

Maintain a robust and oriented relationship. The fifth step implied that the researcher remained deeply connected to and focused on the phenomenon, avoiding unrelated or superficial interpretations to ensure validity. The researcher focused on separation anxiety, as it is the phenomenon under study.

Balance the research while exploring the parts and whole. The final step ensured that the researcher's interpretation yielded coherent, holistic data. In this study, the researcher incorporated all themes and insights to understand experiences, how teachers interpreted the situation, and strategies for dealing with children's separation anxiety.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents how teachers give meaning to their experiences and responses in supporting preschoolers with separation anxiety. The study was conducted with 10 private school teachers in Iligan City. The participants have been teaching preschool for at least one (1) year. Significant statements were gathered from the participants and carefully examined. Based on their responses, five major themes emerged, which are: (1) embodying calm in emotional strain; (2) creating safe and calming spaces; (3) time distortion in caregiving moments; (4) trust as a path to emotional safety; (5) material ports for comfort and regulation.

### Embodying Calm in Emotional Strain

This theme reflects the physical and emotional experience of the teachers in managing preschoolers with separation anxiety as exhausting, emotionally stirring, and deeply embodied. The participants revealed that managing episodes of distress among preschoolers is not merely a mental or professional task; rather, it is experienced through the body and emotions simultaneously. From a teacher's perspective, worry, nervousness, emotional heaviness, fatigue, and overstimulation are part of their initial encounters with children who cry intensely, cling to adults, or resist classroom separation. Despite the emotional stress, the participants gradually learned to use their bodily presence as a source of reassurance. Their posture, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and physical calm became essential for helping children regulate their fear.

The following are the responses of the participants:

"At first, I remember feeling worried... I would even feel like crying with the child because I did not know what to do." (P2)

"It is draining... it really shakes your emotions and mental state because there is so much noise." (P3)

Participants 2 and 3 described the initial experience of handling separation anxiety as both emotionally and physically challenging. These statements reveal that the teachers' experience is not detached from the child's distress, but rather deeply intertwined with it. Participant 2's response shows how the teacher emotionally absorbs the child's anxiety to the point of almost mirroring the child's sadness and helplessness. This suggests that the teacher's body becomes a site where empathy, uncertainty, and emotional tension are directly felt. Moreover, Participant 3 emphasized the sensory and emotional overload brought about by crying, noise, and classroom disruption. Taking everything into account, their statements show that teachers experience separation anxiety not only as an external classroom concern, but as a bodily and emotional strain that affects their own inner balance. This clearly reflects the lived body, or corporeality, in which emotions are not merely thought about but physically experienced as exhaustion, tension, and emotional heaviness.

There was some evidence suggesting that the association between emotional exhaustion and preschool teachers' classroom interactions depended on their years of education, such that the relation between teachers' education and their interactions with children was reduced when they reported feeling more emotionally exhausted (Ansari et al., 2022). Moreover, years of preschool teaching experience were positively correlated with emotion recognition, improved listening skills, and more deliberate abstract reasoning strategies (Molina-Mateo et al., 2026).

Previous studies suggest that teachers' well-being and practice may be indirectly associated via emotion regulation. However, teachers across contexts exhibit distinct patterns of psychological well-being, emotion regulation, and emotional responsiveness, and the ways these factors relate to one another also vary (Byun & Jeon, 2023). Preschool classrooms are rich with emotions, from a teacher's enthusiastic praise for a child's work to a child's anger at another child who is using wanted materials. A wide variety of teaching behaviors may help children learn about their own and others' emotional states as well as regulation strategies to manage their emotions (Curby et al., 2022).

Despite these emotionally taxing encounters, Participants 4 and 6 reported intentionally adjusting their bodily presence to provide comfort and reassurance to the child. Their responses show that, despite feeling tired and emotionally stretched, teachers choose to present themselves in a calm, composed manner. These are their statements:

"It can really drain my energy, but... I handle it calmly and connect with the child through hugging and comforting." (P4)

"When handling a preschooler with separation anxiety, my body stays calm and composed... staying physically relaxed helps the child feel safe and supported." (P6)

Participant 4 mentioned that hugging and comforting highlight the body as an instrument of care, where touch and physical closeness become important ways of communicating safety and emotional availability. In addition, Participant 6 emphasized a strong awareness that the teacher's bodily state affects the child's emotional response. A calm posture, relaxed movements, and composed presence help regulate the child's fear and create a sense of support. Altogether, these responses illustrate that teachers endure the emotional demands of the situation; at the same time, they also use their own bodies intentionally as tools for emotional regulation.

A study underscores the importance of systemic support to alleviate pressure on teachers and foster their autonomy, competence, and mindfulness, thereby promoting a nurturing educational experience for both teachers and students (Raphaelli-Hirsch et al., 2026). Teachers handling preschoolers with separation anxiety often encounter emotional uncertainty as they respond to children's crying, clinging behavior, and resistance to separating from their parents during the early days of school. In these situations, teachers strive to remain calm and emotionally steady to provide reassurance and stability for children (Zhang et al., 2024). Separation anxiety is also recognized as a common developmental experience during early childhood, particularly when children begin attending school for the first time and must adjust to new social settings and routines (Rabara, 2024). Thus, teachers' ability to maintain emotional composure while addressing children's distress becomes an essential part of supporting preschoolers' transition to school.

These are added by the statements of the following participants during the interview:

"At first, I really felt nervous... but I learned to keep my facial expression calm and use comforting gestures to help the child." (P7)

"My energy shifts... I stay relaxed and intentionally soften my voice and expression so the child feels safe." (P8)

These statements from participants 7 and 8 reflect the teachers' growing self-awareness of how they manage their internal feelings and how they present themselves physically and emotionally to the child. Participant 7 suggests that nervousness may initially be present, but with experience, the teacher learns to manage visible

expressions to avoid transferring anxiety to the child. Similarly, Participant 8 emphasized the deliberate adjustment of voice, facial expression, and overall energy in response to the child's distress. These responses indicate that calmness is not simply a natural reaction but an intentional, practiced form of emotional labor. Teachers consciously shape their bodily expressions to serve as sources of safety, stability, and reassurance. Thus, their lived body becomes a medium through which care, patience, and emotional support are communicated.

Student misbehavior in the classroom is a challenge for many teachers (Hasanov & Brandišauskienė, 2025). As teachers navigate emotionally challenging moments, they develop strategies to remain steady amid uncertainty. Studies highlight that warm teacher-child interactions and structured classroom routines significantly reduce children's anxiety and facilitate smoother emotional adjustment in early childhood settings (Scrivens, 2025). Furthermore, teachers' emotional regulation and reflective practices allow them to cope with the pressures of managing children's distress while maintaining a nurturing classroom atmosphere (Oğuz, 2025). In this way, teachers transform emotionally uncertain situations into meaningful opportunities to guide children toward emotional resilience and independence.

These statements suggest that teachers' experiences of handling separation anxiety are deeply corporeal. They feel the emotional burden physically, yet they also rely on bodily strategies to manage and transform these moments. The teacher's body becomes both a receiver of strain and a giver of comfort. In this way, lived body-corporeality is central to understanding how teachers experience and navigate separation anxiety among preschoolers.

This finding is consistent with the literature emphasizing the emotional labor of teaching, especially in early childhood settings. Teaching young children often requires not only instructional competence but also emotional attunement, patience, and self-regulation. Teachers are expected to remain calm, nurturing, and emotionally available even in personally exhausting situations. Studies on emotional labor in education suggest that teachers often manage their own feelings to display emotions that are professionally and relationally appropriate for children. In the case of separation anxiety, this emotional labor is intensified because the teacher must serve as a temporary emotional anchor during the child's distress. Thus, the findings reveal that handling separation anxiety is not simply a pedagogical challenge, but a lived bodily experience of care, strain, and regulation.

### **Creating Safe and Calming Spaces**

This theme reflects teachers' perceptions and the classroom environment's role in managing separation anxiety among preschoolers. Based on the participants' narratives, the classroom is not simply a physical location where children spend several hours of the day. Rather, it is experienced as an emotional environment that can either lessen or intensify a child's distress during separation from parents or guardians. For teachers, the classroom's arrangement, atmosphere, and design play a meaningful role in how preschoolers transition into school, settle into routines, and gradually feel secure in the absence of familiar caregivers. In this sense, the classroom becomes more than an instructional setting; it becomes a lived space where comfort, security, and emotional adjustment are either supported or hindered.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects lived space, or spatiality, referring to how human beings experience places not only in their physical dimensions but also in their emotional meanings. For preschoolers experiencing separation anxiety, the classroom is beyond the four walls, chairs, toys, and learning materials. It may initially feel unfamiliar, overwhelming, or threatening because it represents distance from home and temporary loss of parental presence. However, the teachers' accounts reveal that the same space can be transformed into one that feels safe, warm, soothing, and emotionally supportive. Through intentional classroom design, organization, and the creation of calming areas, teachers make the classroom a place where children can begin to regulate their emotions and gradually adjust to the school environment.

The following are the responses of the participants:

“Our classroom is designed... so our classroom environment really helps in comforting children who experience separation anxiety.” (P1)

“The classroom has a big influence... the environment can ease their separation anxiety.” (P2)

“Space is really important... the child should have a specific space where they can stay while you help them regulate.” (P3)

Participants 1, 2, and 3 all emphasized that the classroom environment has a direct influence on how children with separation anxiety feel and respond during the school day. Taken together, these responses show that teachers see the classroom as a passive backdrop to children’s behavior and an active and meaningful part of emotional support. Participant 1 mentioned that the classroom’s design itself has been intentionally arranged in a way that helps comfort distressed children. The use of the phrase really helps in comforting implies that emotional soothing does not only come from the teacher’s words or actions, but also from the environment the child enters. This means that for teachers, classroom space has a therapeutic and reassuring function, especially during moments when a child feels vulnerable or fearful.

Participant 2 highlighted this insight by emphasizing that the classroom has a big influence on the child’s emotional state. This shows the teacher’s awareness that the environment shapes behavior and feeling. A well-arranged and emotionally supportive classroom may reduce stress and promote calmness, while a poorly organized or overstimulating environment may increase discomfort and difficulty in adjustment. The participant’s statement that the environment can ease separation anxiety suggests that space has the power to soften the intensity of the child’s distress.

Teachers experience a shift in their perception of classroom space and time while supporting preschoolers with separation anxiety. Moments that involve comforting distressed children often require teachers to slow down routines, adjust classroom activities, and provide individualized attention, making time feel extended and flexible. Studies in early childhood education emphasize that responsive classroom environments and flexible routines are essential in addressing young children’s emotional needs, particularly during transitional experiences such as separation from parents (Hamre et al., 2022). Furthermore, emotionally responsive teaching practices allow teachers to transform the classroom into a supportive environment where children gradually develop a sense of belonging and security, which is crucial for their emotional adjustment and participation in learning activities (Thomason & La Paro, 2023).

Participant 3 mention another important dimension by focusing on the need for a specific space where the child can stay while being helped to regulate emotions. This statement points to the value of having designated areas within the classroom that can serve as calming or comforting zones for children in distress. For a preschooler experiencing overwhelming emotions, being given a stable place within the classroom may help reduce feelings of chaos or uncertainty. It creates a sense that there is somewhere to go, somewhere to settle, and somewhere to be emotionally held while the teacher provides reassurance. In this sense, spatiality is not only about the classroom as a whole, but also about smaller, intentional environments within it that support emotional regulation.

Children's physical and mental health development is closely related to their living and learning environment, which has an important impact on children's psychological development and character building in the process of growth (Li, 2023). Moreover, a study covers three major foundations of design: the physical, ambient, and aesthetic elements in a school setting (Lea & Berger, 2026).

The participants revealed that teachers experience classroom space as something that can be deliberately structured to comfort anxious children. Their statements imply that emotional adjustment in preschool is influenced not just by time or relational trust, but also by how the child experiences the physical setting around them. A child entering a room that feels calm, organized, gentle, and predictable may be more likely to settle than a child entering one that feels overstimulating, crowded, or emotionally cold. Thus, lived space becomes central to the teacher’s experience because the environment itself becomes part of the process of care. These are also supported by these statements of the participants:

“Make sure to have a well-designed classroom that welcomes calmness and supports the child’s emotional security.” (P4)

“The physical space of the classroom helps me respond calmly and effectively... it provides comfort and reassurance.” (P6)

“The classroom setup really matters... it is better to have play stations and things that make the room feel safe and warm.” (P8)

Participants 4, 6, and 8 further reinforce the significance of lived space by describing how a well-prepared classroom supports both the child’s emotional security and the teacher’s own ability to respond effectively. These statements collectively show that the classroom environment is meaningful not only to children but also to teachers, influencing their caregiving and classroom management practices.

Participant 4 emphasized that a well-designed classroom suggests that spatial arrangement should be intentional rather than accidental. The phrase *welcomes calmness* is especially meaningful because it gives the classroom an almost human quality, as if the room itself invites children into a state of peace and emotional safety. This reflects a phenomenological understanding of space as something lived and felt, rather than occupied.

The statement of participant 6 highlighted the importance of how lived space affects the teacher as well. By saying that the physical space helps her respond calmly and effectively, the participant indicates that a supportive environment contributes to her own emotional regulation and professional responsiveness. This suggests that spatiality is relational: the classroom shapes not only the child’s emotional state, but also the teacher’s experience of confidence, calmness, and ability to act. If the environment is arranged in a way that feels soothing and functional, the teacher may find it easier to guide the child, maintain composure, and provide reassurance.

Participant 8 mentioned adding a more concrete description of what such a classroom might contain: play stations and things that make the room feel safe and warm. This statement underscores the importance of child-friendly, engaging features in the classroom environment. Play stations do more than provide entertainment; they offer opportunities for distraction, redirection, exploration, and emotional release. For children with separation anxiety, having inviting areas for play can ease tension by shifting attention away from the pain of parting and toward meaningful engagement with the classroom. The words *safe* and *warm* are also significant because they describe the emotional atmosphere of the room rather than just its physical arrangement.

To support emotionally overwhelmed students in the classroom, school teachers may designate a purpose-built “Calm” or “Safe” Space where students who experience emotional deregulation can have privacy to refocus and reflect (Terneus & Atkinson, 2025). Moreover, a study’s findings underscore the importance of considering the classroom climate as a key factor in promoting general well-being and positive social-emotional outcomes among young learners, and the importance of creating a nurturing and supportive classroom environment to foster optimal emotional development in children (García-Peinado, 2023).

Taken together, the responses of Participants 4, 6, and 8 show that teachers perceive classroom space as an essential emotional support system. The arrangement of the environment, the presence of play areas, and the overall atmosphere of calmness and warmth all contribute to helping children feel less threatened by separation. At the same time, these features support teachers in performing their caregiving role with greater calm and confidence. Lived space, therefore, is not something external to the teaching experience; it is deeply woven into how teachers manage distress, create reassurance, and foster adjustment among preschoolers.

This theme reveals that teachers experience the classroom as a powerful emotional environment in managing separation anxiety. It is felt, interpreted, and responded to as a space that may either heighten fear or encourage security. When intentionally designed, the classroom becomes a place that softens the child’s emotional distress, supports regulation, promotes comfort, and gradually nurtures a sense of belonging.

### **Time Distortion in Caregiving Moments**

This theme reflects the experienced time while handling episodes of separation anxiety among preschoolers of the teachers. Based on the participants’ statements, time in the classroom is not always experienced as fixed, objective, or measured only by the clock. Rather, it is lived and felt differently depending on the emotional

intensity of the moment. In ordinary classroom routines, time may move in a predictable and manageable way, shaped by schedules, lesson plans, transitions, and daily activities. However, when a child experiences separation anxiety, teachers described a disruption in this usual rhythm. Moments that may last only a few minutes in actual clock time are experienced as much longer, heavier, and more consuming. In this way, the handling of separation anxiety changes not only what teachers do, but also how they experience the passage of time itself. These are revealed in their answers:

“When a child experiences separation anxiety, I must comfort them without knowing how long it will take, which disrupts the flow of the class.” (P1)

“During episodes of separation anxiety, time feels slow, making it difficult to follow the planned routine and continue the lesson.” (P2)

Participants 1 and 2 both emphasized how separation anxiety disrupts the normal flow of classroom time and creates a sense of uncertainty and delay. Taken together, these responses reveal that teachers experience such moments as temporally unpredictable and professionally disruptive. Participant 1’s narrative highlights the uncertainty that accompanies caregiving in these situations. The phrase, without knowing how long it will take, suggests that the teacher enters a moment of emotional care with no clear endpoint.

The analysis demonstrates that despite significant shifts in terminology and emphasis, Heidegger’s thinking remains faithful to the insight that freedom is not a human possession but the event of openness within which human existence first becomes possible (Souri, 2026). This supports the participants’ statement because it shows that human experience is shaped by one’s lived openness to the situation, helping explain why emotionally intense caregiving moments can strongly affect how teachers experience time and classroom flow. This theme reflects lived time, or temporality, the subjective way time is experienced in the flow of human life. Time is not simply something counted through minutes and hours; it is also something felt through interruption, waiting, urgency, uncertainty, and emotional involvement.

The current factor structure helps us understand the multidimensional nature of classroom management attitudes and supports the design of effective professional development for teachers. Next research studies need to validate this factor structure across different groups and examine how it can be effectively used in school education settings (Saleem et al., 2025). I spell out two theses, one shared by Kant and Heidegger, the other Kant’s alone: (1) there is a difference between “within-time-ness” (Innerzeitigkeit) and original or pure time (the temporal difference); (2) the temporal difference is articulated by a self-conscious act not bound by time. While each agrees that the “time-less” original or pure time has limits within which particular (Ellis, 2024). This supports the statement because it explains that time is not only measured by the clock, but is also personally experienced, so stressful classroom moments can feel longer than they really are.

This unpredictability is central to the experience of lived time. For the teacher, the episode is not only about comforting a child; it is also about entering a stretch of time that feels open-ended and uncertain. The disruption of the class flow mentioned by Participant 1 suggests that temporality in the classroom is normally structured around routine, sequence, and continuity. When separation anxiety occurs, that structured movement is interrupted. The teacher is pulled out of the expected rhythm and into an emotionally demanding moment that resists scheduling. This makes time feel less orderly and more difficult to manage.

Participant 2’s statement deepens this understanding by directly describing time as feeling slow during these episodes. The participant explained that this slowing of time makes it difficult to follow the planned routine and continue the lesson. This suggests that the emotional weight of the moment alters the teacher’s perception of duration. The same few minutes that might pass quickly during normal instruction suddenly feel extended when one child is crying, clinging, or refusing to settle down.

This shows that when separation anxiety occurs, time is no longer experienced as neutral classroom time. Instead, it becomes fragile, uncertain, and emotionally burdened. Teachers are placed in a situation where they must momentarily suspend the expected rhythm of instruction and give themselves fully to the needs of the distressed child, all while feeling the pressure of the lesson routine that has been interrupted. In this way, the handling of

separation anxiety transforms time into something deeply lived and emotionally charged. In addition, the participants also stated that:

“Although time usually moves quickly in class, it slows down when separation anxiety occurs because the routine is interrupted.” (P3)

“Supporting a child with separation anxiety makes time feel slower as the routine is disrupted and attention is focused on the child.” (P6)

Participants 3 and 6 similarly described the slowing of time during episodes of separation anxiety, particularly in contrast with the usually fast-paced rhythm of preschool teaching. These statements reveal that the participants are highly aware of the contrast between ordinary classroom temporality and the altered experience of time during caregiving moments. In preschool classrooms, teachers often move quickly from one task to another, welcoming children, guiding activities, assisting play, facilitating transitions, and responding to group needs. This creates a sense that time moves fast during the regular flow of the school day. However, when separation anxiety occurs, that momentum is broken.

Immanuel Kant is often portrayed as a Platonic or Newtonian thinker of the temporal, conceiving of time as an absolute, continuous repository in which all objects occur (Stephenson, 2024). This supports the statement because Kant’s view shows that time provides the structure for human experience, so teachers become more aware of how a short disruption during separation anxiety feels longer in their consciousness.

Participant 3 emphasized the meaning by explicitly highlighting this contrast. The statement that time usually moves quickly in class suggests that preschool teaching is normally experienced as dynamic, active, and continuously moving forward. However, this forward flow is interrupted when a child becomes distressed. The teacher’s time is then reoriented around the emotional needs of one child, and what was once a flowing routine becomes a slowed and suspended moment. The participant links this change directly to the interruption of routine, which indicates that the perception of time is closely connected to the structure of classroom life. When routine is maintained, time feels manageable and even fast; when routine is broken, time feels heavier and slower.

Participant 6 reinforces this by saying that time feels slower because attention is focused on the child. This points to another important aspect of lived time: emotional focus changes temporal experience. When the teacher must concentrate intensely on soothing one child, every second becomes more noticeable. The teacher may be speaking gently, waiting for the child to calm down, monitoring their crying, observing body language, and trying different comforting strategies. At the same time, the teacher remains aware that the rest of the class also needs supervision. This divided responsibility stretches time because the teacher is emotionally and mentally pulled in multiple directions at once.

The accounts of Participants 3 and 6 show that the slowing of time is not simply a result of interruption, but also of concentrated emotional care. Time feels slower because the teacher’s attention narrows and deepens during the moment of distress. The child’s emotional needs become urgent, yet the teacher cannot fully set aside the broader temporal demands of the classroom. This creates a tension between staying in the moment with the child and moving the class forward according to routine. Such tension reveals the phenomenological quality of lived time: it is shaped by attention, care, interruption, and emotional significance, not just by the clock.

Participants 8 and 9 added another dimension to this theme by emphasizing how even very brief episodes of separation anxiety can feel much longer in the teacher’s lived experience. These responses reveal how the subjective experience of time expands during emotionally intense caregiving moments. What is brief in measurable terms becomes prolonged in felt experience because of the weight of responsibility, emotional strain, and divided attention involved. These are their statements:

“Even a few minutes of crying can feel much longer, as if time is stretched during the moment.” (P8)

“Although the episode may only last a few minutes, it feels longer because I am balancing comforting the child and managing the class.” (P9)

Participant 8's statement captures the essence of time distortion very clearly. The phrase "as if time is stretched" suggests that the teacher is not simply observing time pass, but is actually experiencing it differently because of the emotional state of the moment, and crying, especially when persistent and intense, can make each moment feel prolonged as the teacher waits, hopes, and works for the child to settle. The emotional desire for the child's distress to end may itself heighten awareness of every passing second. Thus, time becomes stretched not because the episode is objectively long, but because it is emotionally consuming.

Participant 9's response builds on this by explaining why the episode feels longer: because the teacher is simultaneously comforting the child and managing the class. This highlights the layered burden of the teacher's role. The participant is not experiencing time slowly in isolation, but in the midst of multiple, overlapping responsibilities. The teacher must divide attention among one distressed child, the rest of the learners, and between care and instruction, as well as between emotional support and classroom management. This balancing act intensifies the experience of time because the teacher is acutely aware of everything happening and everything being delayed. Even a brief episode can feel filled with pressure and responsibility, making it seem much longer than it actually is.

The statements of Participants 8 and 9 show that lived time during episodes of separation anxiety is expanded by emotional intensity and relational responsibility. Time stretches because the teacher is not merely waiting for the moment to pass; she is actively carrying the burden of care, order, attention, and instructional continuity all at once. This demonstrates that the teacher's experience of time is deeply relational and situational. It is shaped by the child's distress, by the teacher's role as comforter, and by the continuing needs of the rest of the class.

This theme reveals that teachers experience time differently when handling episodes of separation anxiety among preschoolers. Time, in these moments, is not lived as routine, neutral, or predictable. Instead, it becomes slowed, stretched, uncertain, and emotionally loaded. The usual classroom schedule is interrupted, and the teacher is drawn into a caregiving moment that feels longer and heavier than clock time would suggest. Whether because of uncertainty about how long the child will cry, the disruption of planned routines, the intense focus required to comfort the child, or the challenge of balancing caregiving with class management, teachers experience these moments as temporally altered.

### **Trust as a Path to Emotional Safety**

The theme Trust as a Path to Emotional Safety reflects how teachers experience and describe their relationships with preschoolers who are struggling with separation anxiety. Teachers' narratives reveal that building trust is not a simple or immediate process but rather a dynamic relational journey in which the child gradually learns to feel safe and secure in the classroom. For preschoolers, separation from caregivers can be a profoundly unsettling experience, eliciting fear, crying, and clinging behaviors. Teachers described their role as extending beyond instruction; they must intentionally establish relationships that provide emotional grounding, reassurance, and predictability. In this way, relationality becomes central to their practice. Teachers' actions, words, and presence are not only pedagogical tools but relational instruments that mediate the child's anxiety.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme strongly reflects the lived other, or relationality, which examines how human experiences are shaped through relationships with others. The teachers' accounts demonstrate that handling separation anxiety is deeply relational: it is not just about comforting a child momentarily, but about cultivating trust over time so that the child feels emotionally anchored and able to engage in classroom life. The teacher-child relationship is therefore both a medium and a context for learning, emotional regulation, and social development.

"I really learned that it's better if you gain the child's trust because once you gain their trust, they listen to you and their anxiety melts." (P1)

"I build rapport with the child because the more you build a relationship, the more their separation anxiety disappears." (P3)

Participants 1 and 3 emphasized the immediate importance of trust in mitigating the intensity of separation anxiety. These accounts reveal that teachers perceive trust not as an abstract concept but as an embodied, relational process that has tangible effects on children's emotional states. Participant 1's statement highlights the causal power of trust: the phrase their anxiety melts suggests that once the child experiences confidence in the teacher, fear dissipates naturally. In other words, the teacher's relational investment directly influences the child's affective experience.

Early childhood teachers are grounded in empathy, warmth, and affective balance, forming an essential foundation for emotionally responsive and humanistic teaching practices (Elvira et al., 2025). This study supports the participants' statement by showing that a preschool teacher's moral character serves as a foundation for children's emotional and mental development. Educators who find meaning and purpose in their work are more likely to demonstrate resilience and sustained dedication in addressing the diverse emotional needs of young learners (Toropova et al., 2021). Over time, this process strengthens their sense of purpose in teaching, as they recognize that their guidance plays a vital role in helping children build confidence and emotional independence. Research in early childhood education highlights that teachers' patience and commitment are essential in fostering supportive learning environments where young children feel secure and gradually develop socio-emotional competence (OECD, 2021).

Participant 3 complements this by emphasizing rapport-building as the practical pathway to trust. The repeated emphasis on building relationships indicates that teachers actively engage in ongoing interactions that foster familiarity, predictability, and emotional safety. Through gestures, tone, consistency, and attention, teachers create relational spaces in which children feel secure enough to separate from their caregivers. From a phenomenological standpoint, this reflects how the "other" in the child's lived experience co-constitutes the teacher's relational activity. Teachers do not operate in isolation; their experiences and strategies emerge in response to the child's needs and signals.

Teachers play a vital role in reducing these feelings by establishing consistent routines, offering warmth and reassurance, and demonstrating genuine care for the children's well-being. Studies in early childhood education emphasize that secure teacher-child relationships foster children's emotional security and support their social and academic development (Ansari & Pianta, 2021). Furthermore, when children trust their teachers, they are more likely to feel comfortable exploring the classroom environment and interacting with peers, which promotes smoother emotional adjustment during school transitions (Sabol & Pianta, 2022).

A study introduces the concept of Slow Care, a novel theorizing of care practices that emphasizes the importance of slow, relationally-guided temporalities, serving to contest and counter the growing neoliberal pressures of efficiency and productivity in early childhood policy and practice (Sorrells & Madrid Akpovo, 2024).

Participants 1 and 3 show that relationality is reciprocal: as the child responds to the teacher's consistency and reassurance, the teacher perceives progress and adapts responses accordingly. This iterative process strengthens the bond between teacher and child and serves as the foundation for the child's emotional adjustment in the classroom.

"It builds trust and emotional safety toward the learners, and slowly they feel safe whenever they come to school." (P 4)

"Once they build trust in me, they become okay and more comfortable with my presence." (P7)

Participants 4 and 7 further explore the evolution of trust over time. Participant 4 mentioned that the word slowly underscores that building trust is a process that requires patience, attentiveness, and persistence. Emotional safety is not merely provided at the first encounter but is cultivated over time as children experience the teacher as reliable, predictable, and responsive. Participant 7 emphasizes the tangible effects of relational trust on the child's comfort and presence. The child who becomes okay and more comfortable demonstrates that the teacher's relational work produces observable shifts in emotional state and classroom behavior. These accounts illustrate that relationality is not only about the internal experience of the teacher or child, but also about the observable dynamics of interaction, body language, approach behaviors, willingness to engage in classroom activities, and

reduced clinginess or distress. For the teacher, these changes are confirmation that the relational strategies employed are effective, reinforcing both their professional competence and emotional attunement.

“It focuses on building trust because once the child feels safe with you, their separation anxiety becomes shorter.” (P 8)

“I learned that building trust and being patient helps children adjust and feel comfortable in the classroom.” (P10)

Participants 8 and 10 add a nuanced perspective on patience and intentionality in relational engagement. These narratives highlight that relationality is not passive; it requires conscious effort, deliberate strategy, and emotional labor. Participant 8’s insight links trust to the duration of separation anxiety: the more secure the child feels, the shorter and more manageable the episodes become. This illustrates that teachers experience a sense of relational efficacy, where their ongoing engagement produces measurable changes in the child’s emotional state.

Participant 10 expands on this by emphasizing patience as a critical relational skill. The teacher’s patience allows children the time to adjust at their own pace, reinforcing the idea that relationality is temporally sensitive. Trust cannot be rushed; it is co-created through repeated, consistent, and attuned interactions. For teachers, this requires sustained presence, emotional availability, and responsiveness even when progress appears slow or incremental. The lived experience of relationality thus involves both the teacher’s strategic engagement and their embodied patience, as they navigate the child’s emotional rhythms and vulnerabilities.

It highlights the crucial role of the teacher’s moral character, personal example, and professional responsibility in the education and upbringing of the younger generation. The study emphasizes that pedagogical ethics serves as a fundamental foundation for building trust-based relationships between teachers, students, parents, and the wider educational community (Juraev, B., 2026).

Taken together, the accounts of these six participants demonstrate that teachers perceive their relationships with preschoolers experiencing separation anxiety as foundational to emotional regulation and classroom adjustment. Trust is both the goal and the medium: by fostering trust, teachers enable children to feel safe, reduce distress, and gradually engage in classroom activities. The teacher-child relationship is experienced as co-constitutive: children respond to the teacher’s presence, and teachers adapt their strategies based on the child’s reactions. Lived relationality in this context involves emotional attunement, patience, consistency, and presence, where both teacher and child inhabit the relational space together.

The findings align with literature in early childhood education and developmental psychology, which emphasizes that secure teacher-child relationships are crucial for emotional development and school adjustment. Research suggests that children with separation anxiety benefit from predictable, responsive, and nurturing relationships with teachers, which provide a secondary attachment figure during school hours. For teachers, building trust involves emotional labor, attentiveness, and reflective practice. The study affirms that relationality is a central dimension of teaching young children: the teacher’s presence, responsiveness, and consistency directly shape the child’s sense of safety, comfort, and readiness to engage in learning.

### **Material Ports for Comfort and Regulation**

This theme shows the critical role that classroom materials, toys, comfort objects, and visual aids play in teachers’ management of separation anxiety among preschoolers. Teachers’ narratives reveal that the physical environment and the materials within it are not merely tools for play or instruction; they become relational and regulatory extensions of the teacher’s caregiving. For children experiencing separation anxiety, materials can act as anchors, providing a sense of control, familiarity, and comfort when the teacher or caregiver is physically absent. In this context, lived things objects in the classroom are not inert; they are co-constitutive of the emotional and social environment in which teachers work.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme exemplifies lived things or materiality, which recognizes that objects in the environment participate in human experience. For teachers, classroom materials become mediators

between their care and the child's emotional regulation. They serve as both practical and symbolic instruments, facilitating the child's sense of safety while enabling the teacher to better manage separation anxiety. Materials such as toys, play stations, visual aids, and designated calming spaces are employed intentionally to support emotional transitions, redirect attention, and promote engagement.

"The classroom is designed in a way that what is outside cannot be seen, which helps comfort children during separation." (P1)

"I would try giving toys... and the child preferred the alphabet board, so I used it to prevent crying when separated." (P2)

"The child should have a specific space where they can stay to help them regulate and calm down." (P3)

Participants 1, 2, and 3 highlight how the classroom's physical design and the presence of specific materials contribute to comfort and regulation. These accounts illustrate how the physical environment and its materials function as extensions of the teacher's relational work. Participant 1 focuses on environmental control: by minimizing visual stimuli from outside the classroom, the child is less likely to be distracted or distressed by the presence of parents leaving. The classroom itself, through spatial design, becomes a regulatory agent. Participant 2 emphasizes the relational and individualized use of objects: by offering a preferred toy or learning material, such as an alphabet board, the teacher provides a concrete point of focus, enabling the child to redirect attention from anxiety to engagement. This highlights the phenomenological idea that materials mediate the child's experience of emotional security. Participant 3 adds another layer by specifying a designated space for regulation, demonstrating that both the placement and function of materials are intentional. The teacher recognizes that separation anxiety is not just emotional but spatial: children need defined areas where they can exert a sense of control and feel supported while processing their feelings.

Play therapy has emerged as a culturally and developmentally appropriate intervention for addressing the mental health needs of children in a variety of settings, including schools. The inclusion of a diverse array of toys by play therapists can allow children to explore issues, process emotions, and develop solutions through their play language (Davis et al., 2022). The anxiety gradually subsided after the child engaged in play and felt secure in the classroom (Marzuqi et al., 2025).

"You need to find out what comforts the child, maybe through toys, and adjust strategies depending on what works." (P5)

"It's about making them feel safe in the environment by providing play stations, toys, and a comfortable space." (P8)

"A colorful classroom with toys and play areas helps redirect their attention and makes them feel safe." (P10)

Participants 5, 8, and 10 further elaborate on the strategic and relational use of classroom materials. These narratives demonstrate that the teacher's awareness and intentionality are central to the material's effectiveness. Participant 5 emphasizes the individualized aspect: no single object works for every child. Teachers must engage in observational and responsive practices, identifying which materials evoke calm and using them strategically. This underscores the relational and phenomenological dimensions: objects do not act in isolation but acquire significance through the interaction among the teacher, the child, and the space. Participant 8 situates materials within the broader environmental context: play stations, toys, and a comfortable setting collectively create a secure and welcoming atmosphere, reinforcing emotional safety. Participant 10 highlights the sensory dimension, noting that color and visual design can capture attention and provide a soothing or engaging stimulus, further promoting regulation.

Together, these accounts reveal that classroom materials function as mediators of both emotional and cognitive engagement. They serve multiple purposes: calming children, redirecting attention, reinforcing routines, and fostering independent regulation. For the teacher, the materials provide a practical tool for managing separation anxiety while sustaining the flow of classroom activities. They also reduce emotional labor by providing children

with concrete coping supports, thereby easing the immediacy of distress and allowing teachers to respond more effectively and calmly.

Furthermore, the participants' accounts align with research in early childhood education and developmental psychology, emphasizing the role of environment and materials in supporting emotional regulation. Studies suggest that well-designed classrooms with accessible, meaningful, and engaging materials can reduce anxiety, promote independence, and facilitate social and cognitive development. The findings of this study indicate that preschool teachers perceive materiality as a critical dimension of emotional care, using objects as bridges between pedagogical practice and relational support. By strategically leveraging materials, teachers can better manage separation anxiety while fostering a sense of safety, autonomy, and engagement in children.

In conclusion, the theme Material Ports for Comfort and Regulation illustrates that classroom materials are not peripheral to teaching; they are central to the teacher's lived experience of managing separation anxiety. Teachers experience the materials as tools, mediators, and extensions of their relational and emotional work. Through intentional placement, selection, and adaptation of toys, comfort objects, visual aids, and spatial arrangements, teachers provide children with opportunities to regulate their emotions, redirect attention, and engage in classroom life. Lived materiality, therefore, is inseparable from the relational, corporeal, and temporal dimensions already discussed: materials are actively co-constitutive of the teacher-child dynamic, enabling both care and learning to occur in the preschool classroom.

Transitional Objects remain relevant within contemporary formal day care practice. In developing an understanding of transitional objects, the chapter focuses on children's well-being as a way to enable them to flourish and fulfill their potential (Norman, 2025).

### **A Teacher's Quiet Strength**

In mornings filled with trembling hands and tears that softly fall, A teacher stands in patient calm, Becoming steady through it all. Amid the waves of uncertainty, where young hearts fear goodbye, she offers warmth, a gentle smile, A steady voice nearby She learns to compose her very self, to steady breath and tone, for in her calm, the children find A courage of their own. Holding the one who longs for home While caring for the rest, she balances the many needs with purpose in her chest.

Time stretches wide in tender moments, Space reshapes its form, As comfort turns the classroom Into shelter from the storm. Through preparation and reflection, Her wisdom slowly grows, Each day becoming more prepared For what tomorrow shows. With parents, peers, and helping hands, The work of care is shared, For guiding fragile, growing hearts Is never done alone, but paired. And through the days of patience learned, Her purpose shines anew— For every child who finds their strength Begins because she grew. So in that room of little hairs, where timid mornings start, she meets each cry with gentle grace and a brave, unwavering heart.

Through patient love and steady care, she helps small spirits grow, until the fear of letting go becomes the strength they know.

## **SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary**

This qualitative study explored and described the essence of teachers' lived experiences in managing separation anxiety among preschoolers, guided by Van Manen's lifeworld existential. The study examined the phenomenon through lived body (corporeality) by looking into how teachers physically and emotionally experience managing preschoolers with separation anxiety; lived space (spatiality) by examining how teachers perceive and experience the classroom environment when managing children with separation anxiety; lived time (temporality) by describing how teachers experience time while handling episodes of separation anxiety among preschoolers; lived other (relationality) by exploring how teachers describe their relationships with preschoolers experiencing

separation anxiety; and lived things (materiality) by identifying the role of classroom materials such as toys, comfort objects, and visual aids in teachers' management of separation anxiety.

The study employed a hermeneutic-phenomenological research design. It was conducted during the 2025–2026 school year in selected private schools in Iligan City offering preschool education. Ten (10) teacher participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on established inclusion criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Van Manen's hermeneutic-phenomenological method to uncover the meanings embedded in the teachers' lived experiences.

## Findings

The study yielded the following findings:

**Embodying Calm in Emotional Strain.** Teachers experienced handling preschoolers with separation anxiety as emotionally and physically demanding. Initially, they felt worry, nervousness, and fatigue. However, over time, they learned to regulate their emotions and bodily responses through a calm posture, gentle touch, a soft tone, and controlled expressions.

**Creating Safe and Calming Spaces.** Teachers perceived the classroom environment as integral to managing separation anxiety. Classrooms that incorporated quiet corners, designated calming spaces, and structured play areas helped children feel secure.

**Time Distortion in Caregiving Moments.** Teachers reported altered perceptions of time during episodes of separation anxiety. Moments of intense distress are often felt to be prolonged, disrupting routines and requiring careful balancing of attention between the child experiencing anxiety and the rest of the classroom.

**Trust as a Path to Emotional Safety.** Teachers highlighted that building trusting relationships with children was crucial. Consistent, empathetic, and responsive interactions helped children feel emotionally secure, reducing separation anxiety over time.

**Material Ports for Comfort and Regulation.** Classroom materials such as toys, comfort objects, visual aids, and play stations were actively used by teachers to help children regulate emotions and redirect attention. Teachers reported that these materials were vital tools in supporting emotional adjustment, providing comfort, and fostering a sense of control during challenging moments.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following are the conclusions drawn:

Teachers' emotional and bodily regulation is essential in creating a calm and supportive environment that helps children manage separation anxiety.

The physical classroom environment, including calming spaces and play areas, significantly contributes to children's emotional security and teachers' ability to respond effectively.

Episodes of separation anxiety disrupt temporal flow in the classroom, requiring teachers to practice patience, attentional flexibility, and adaptive management strategies.

Trust and relational rapport between teachers and children are critical for emotional safety, reducing anxiety, and promoting confident participation in classroom routines.

Classroom materials and objects play an active role in supporting emotional regulation, comfort, and engagement, complementing teachers' relational and caregiving strategies.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested:

Private School Heads may provide professional development programs on emotional labor, self-regulation, and social-emotional learning for teachers and staff.

Preschool teachers are encouraged to arrange classroom spaces with quiet corners, designated calming areas, and structured play stations to create a safe and welcoming environment.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt schedules and routines to ensure sufficient attention to children experiencing separation anxiety without disrupting classroom flow.

Parents may actively participate in establishing a trusting relationship with teachers and support the child's adjustment by modeling positive attitudes toward school.

Teachers may strategically use toys, comfort objects, visual aids, and play stations to help children regulate emotions, redirect attention, and feel secure during periods of separation anxiety.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies on specific factors that may cause separation anxiety among preschoolers.

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