



STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY SCHOOL HEADS TO SUPPORT TEACHERS IN HANDLING SEPARATION ANXIETY AMONG KINDERGARTEN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Many kindergarten learners experience separation anxiety when they start schooling in a formal school. This study examined the support provided by school heads to kindergarten teachers, the teachers' competence and resilience, and how secure parent-child attachment helps manage separation anxiety among kindergarten learners. The study used an explanatory correlational design employing mediation analysis. The total population of 31 School Heads and 31 kindergarten teachers was included as respondents. The data were analyzed to examine the relationships among school support, parent-child attachment, and the reduction of separation anxiety. The results showed that teachers had a high level of competence, confidence, and self-efficacy. They also demonstrated strong resilience, especially in commitment and professional growth. Parent-child attachment security was generally high, particularly in emotional closeness and parental responsiveness. Teachers received strong support from school heads in instructional, emotional, capacity-building, and policy areas. The 'Med-Mod Analysis' highlighted that parent-child attachment security significantly moderates the relationship between school-based support strategies and the reduction of separation anxiety. The interaction effect was statistically significant, indicating that the quality of the parent-child bond heavily influences the effectiveness of school support, teacher competence, and classroom strategies. The study concludes that reducing separation anxiety among kindergarten learners cannot be achieved solely by the school. It requires a strong, coordinated partnership between parents and teachers, supported by proactive leadership from school heads. Strengthening parent-child attachment security, improving consistency of care at home, and maintaining high levels of support are all essentials. When home and school work together with aligned strategies and shared goals, kindergarten learners are more likely to experience smoother transitions, reduce anxiety, and have better emotional adjustment to school life.

KEYWORDS: Separation anxiety, kindergarten learners, parent-child attachment, teacher competence, school head support.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning kindergarten is a major milestone in a child's development, as it is often their first step into formal education. However, kindergarten learners often experience serious emotional challenges during this time, especially with the concept of separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is the feeling of distress that kindergarten learners experience when they must separate themselves from their caregivers, specifically during their drop-offs to school in the mornings. Such feelings can include crying, clinging to their parents' legs, tantrums, withdrawing from others and activities at school, or feeling worried about something else altogether. While separation anxiety is a completely normal feeling for the child during this time, in some cases, it can get in the way of the kindergarten learner's adaptation to school and their educational experiences.

Recent studies have investigated the emotional and contextual factors that contribute to separation anxiety among kindergarten learners (Estrada & Rabara, 2024). These studies, which performed observations in Pangasinan, Philippines, with kindergarten learners between the ages of five and six years old, revealed that separation anxiety is associated with a child's need for safety, a feeling of belonging to a group of peers, a feeling of self-esteem, and the desire to interact with others socially. Furthermore, kindergarten learners with higher levels of separation anxiety were also identified to have difficulties in adapting to school. In addition to the study in Pangasinan, other studies have examined kindergarten teachers' and parents' experiences with separation anxiety. For instance, Guantia (2023) found that kindergarten learners often experience crying, clinginess to their parents, shyness around others at school, and silence when attempting to interact with others. Strategies that have been proven successful in reducing these feelings include allowing the kindergarten learner to experience their feelings, allowing them to express themselves through speaking and crying, and encouraging the child to become accustomed to separation from their caretakers. Similar studies have been performed in other countries, as well. For instance, a study in Turkey of kindergarten learners found results similar to those in Pangasinan, Philippines, regarding separation anxiety and the factors that contribute to it (Nakib & Cetin, 2025). Additionally, another study conducted in Jordan with 300 kindergarten learners revealed that the socialization styles of the parents of kindergarten learners are directly related to their feelings of separation anxiety. Specifically, parents who exhibit overprotective feelings towards their children result in kindergarten learners who exhibit more separation anxiety than those with parents with more supportive and positive socialization styles towards their children (Al-Zaydani, 2025).

In addition to the contextual and emotional factors related to separation anxiety, studies also indicate that kindergarten learners who have stronger skills of self-regulation and executive functions, such as the ability to exhibit inhibitory control or cognitive flexibility, have lower feelings of separation anxiety than kindergarten learners who do not exhibit these executive skills (Celik et al., 2025).



Furthermore, kindergarten learners whose parents are overprotective and anxious exhibit greater separation anxiety than those whose parents have more supportive socialization styles (Jreisat, 2023). Additionally, kindergarten learners from higher-income, higher-education families exhibit fewer feelings of separation anxiety than those from lower-income, lower-education families (IJNRD, 2025).

The first day kindergarten learners attend kindergarten is often an emotionally charged day for those learners and their caregivers. These kindergarten learners may cry, cling to their caregivers, or have tantrums when they are dropped off at kindergarten. These behaviors have been documented in various studies including those performed in the Philippines (Estrade & Rabara, 2024), Canada (Fabrea & Iñigo, 2025) and Italy (Degli & Cigala, 2025). These behaviors are often considered normal for kindergarten learners on the first day of kindergarten.

School heads, teachers, and parents all play important roles in managing the feelings of kindergarten learners regarding separation anxiety. Each of these groups can play a crucial role in providing emotional support, communication, and the development of routines that will help kindergarten learners feel secure and adapt to their schools and educational experiences (Vorkapic, 2025; Guantia, 2023). Despite the efforts of teachers and school heads to manage these feelings, teachers often continue to struggle with cases of separation anxiety for kindergarten learners. For instance, Jucoy (2022) conducted a study of teachers within a school in the Philippines. Through questioning these teachers, the results indicated that despite professional development programs being provided to these teachers, they are still struggling with these types of cases of separation anxiety from their kindergarten learners.

Despite insights into the causes and impacts of separation anxiety among kindergarten learners, little research has examined how school leaders' strategies to support their teachers enable those teachers to manage separation anxiety among their kindergarten learners successfully.

This study aims to determine the extent to which school heads employ strategies to support kindergarten teachers in handling separation anxiety; the extent to which the kindergarten teachers receive support from school heads in those parameters; the level of teachers' self-application and resilience in handling separation anxiety; the level of parent-child attachment security; and the level of teacher competence and confidence in managing separation anxiety in terms of self-efficacy, diagnostic confidence, and peer recognition. Also, the study identifies the relationship between the strategies school heads employ and the support they provide teachers in managing separation anxiety among kindergarten learners.

Moreover, this study highlights the mediating effect of parent-child attachment security on school heads' support strategies and the reduction of separation anxiety among kindergarten learners, which, in turn, lays the foundation for an evidence-based management program to enhance the effective handling of separation anxiety among kindergarten learners.

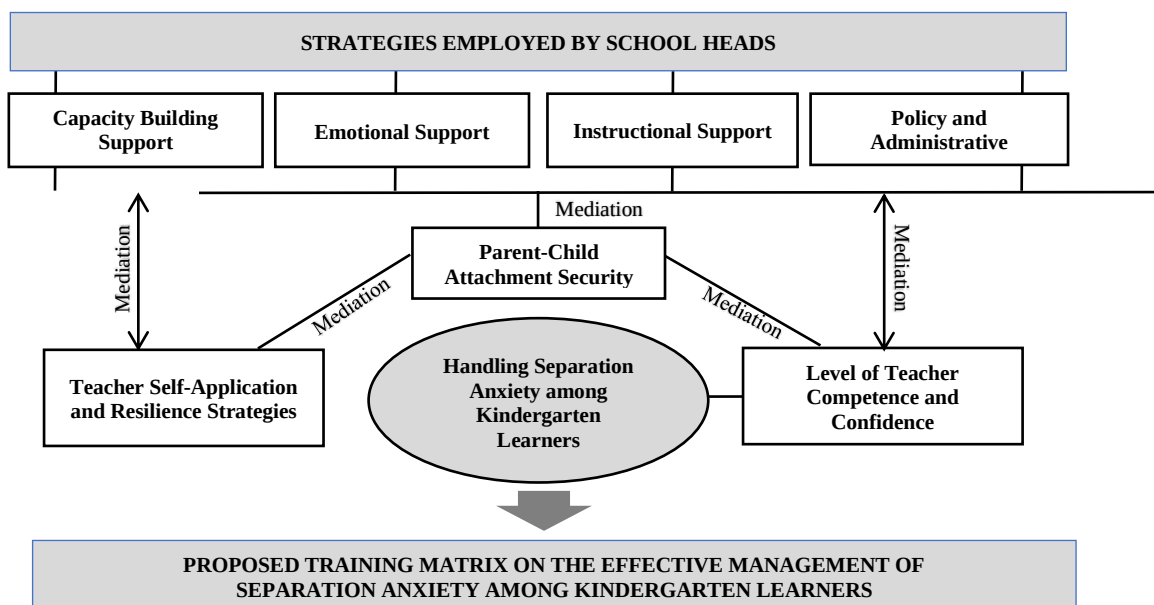


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized an explanatory correlational design employing mediation analysis. The respondents in the study were identified using the purposive sampling technique. The study used an explanatory correlational design employing mediation analysis. The total population of 31 School Heads and 31 kindergarten teachers was included as respondents. Using the entire population rather than a subset increases the accuracy and completeness of the findings, especially in descriptive-correlational research (Memon et al.,



2025). Two researcher-developed questionnaires were used as the primary tools to collect data on the support strategies school heads employ to help kindergarten teachers manage separation anxiety. The first set consisted of four (4) areas: Instructional Support, Emotional Support, Capacity Building, and Policy Support. The second set comprised 3 parameters: self-application and resilience strategies, level of teacher competence and confidence, and observed parent-child attachment security. Each indicator was measured on a five-point Likert scale. The validity and reliability tests yielded Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.994 and 0.989, indicating extremely high internal consistency. The data were analyzed using 'Med-Mod Analysis.'

The researchers also ensured that the respondents were well informed about the study's objectives and that their participation was voluntary. Non-disclosure of any personal information and any other information that, in one way or another, may cause harm to the respondents was assured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that kindergarten teachers possess a high level of competence and confidence in managing separation anxiety, demonstrating strong self-efficacy, turning difficult drop-off moments into positive experiences, and helping anxious learners become more independent over time. Their diagnostic confidence was also high, as they felt capable of identifying whether a child's distress was part of normal adjustment or required additional support. Peer recognition was likewise high, indicating that other teachers valued their approaches and strategies. They exhibit a high level of self-application and resilience, showing strong commitment to supporting children even during challenging moments, remaining flexible in adjusting their strategies to meet individual needs, and actively pursuing professional growth by seeking new knowledge and reflecting on their practices.

Results also show a high level of parent-child attachment security. Teachers observed warm emotional closeness between parents and children, and noted that many parents were responsive to their children's emotional signals during drop-off and pick-up. However, consistency of care received is slightly lower, suggesting that while emotional bonds are strong, some families still need improvement in maintaining predictable routines and steady responses to their children's worries.

On the other hand, the school heads provided extensive support to teachers across multiple areas. Teachers received substantial instructional support through coaching, mentoring, and the provision of intervention resources. Emotional support was evident in guidance on attachment security and coping strategies. Capacity-building, particularly in circle time and consistent goodbye routines, was well-supported. Policy and administrative support, including parents' orientation and clear drop-off rules, was also rated highly. These forms of support helped strengthen teachers' ability to address separation anxiety effectively.

The 'Med-Mod Analysis' highlighted that parent-child attachment security significantly moderates the relationship between school-based support strategies and the reduction of separation anxiety. The interaction effect was statistically significant, indicating that the effectiveness of school support, teacher competence, and classroom strategies is heavily influenced by the quality of the parent-child bond. When children have a secure attachment with their parents, the positive effects of teacher support and school interventions are greatly enhanced. Conversely, when parent-child attachment is insecure, even well-designed school-based strategies become less effective in reducing separation anxiety. The quality of the parent-child relationship plays a critical moderating role in determining the success of school efforts. A secure attachment at home acts as a powerful enabler, strengthening the benefits of teacher competence, school support, and classroom strategies.

Mediation effect of School Heads strategies on teachers' competence through Parent-child attachment security

Mediation Estimates							
Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p		
Indirect	$a \times b$	0.402	0.135	2.99	0.003*		
Direct	c	-0.18	0.153	-1.17	0.24		
Total	$c + a \times b$	0.223	0.102	2.18	0.03*		
Path Estimates		Dependent Variable	Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p
Capacity Building	→	Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	a	0.587	0.075	7.83	<.001*
Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	→	Level of Teacher Competence	b	0.685	0.2122	3.23	0.001*
Capacity Building	→	Level of Teacher Competence	c	-0.18	0.1529	-1.17	0.24
Mediation Estimates							
Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p		
Indirect	$a \times b$	0.25257	0.104	2.4176	0.016*		
Direct	c	0.00286	0.132	0.0216	0.983		
Total	$c + a \times b$	0.25543	0.103	2.4814	0.013*		
Path Estimates			Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p



Emotional Support	→	Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	a	0.52694	0.0929	5.6696	< .001*
Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	→	Level of Teacher Competence	b	0.47931	0.1793	2.6727	0.008*
Emotional Support	→	Level of Teacher Competence	c	0.00286	0.1324	0.0216	0.983
Mediation Estimates							
Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p		
Indirect	a × b	0.2794	0.1118	2.5	0.012*		
Direct	c	-0.0408	0.1351	-0.302	0.763		
Total	c + a × b	0.2387	0.0964	2.476	0.013*		
Path Estimates							
Instructional Support	→	Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	a	0.5299	0.0797	6.648	< .001*
Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	→	Level of Teacher Competence	b	0.5273	0.1954	2.698	0.007*
Instructional Support	→	Level of Teacher Competence	c	-0.0408	0.1351	-0.302	0.763
Mediation Estimates							
Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	Z	p		
Indirect	a × b	0.3538	0.144	2.459	0.014*		
Direct	c	-0.0827	0.166	-0.498	0.618		
Total	c + a × b	0.2711	0.103	2.636	0.008*		
Path Estimates							
Policy and Admin Support	→	Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	a	0.6167	0.0753	8.186	< .001*
Level of Parent Child Attachment Security	→	Level of Teacher Competence	b	0.5737	0.2225	2.578	0.01*
Policy and Admin Support	→	Level of Teacher Competence	c	-0.0827	0.166	-0.498	0.618

The study confirms the Instructional Leadership Theory. The kindergarten teachers reported greater competence, confidence, and resilience as a result of this leadership support. The findings also align with Attachment Theory, which highlights the importance of secure child relationships. Children with strong emotional bonds at home adjusted more easily to school routines, making school head support against separation anxiety more effective. Secure attachment at home and supportive leadership at school work together to reduce children's anxiety and build confidence.

The study concludes that reducing separation anxiety among kindergarten learners cannot be achieved solely by the school. It requires a strong, coordinated partnership between parents and teachers, supported by proactive leadership from school heads. Strengthening parent-child attachment security, improving consistency of care at home, and maintaining high levels of support are all essentials. When home and school work together with aligned strategies and shared goals, kindergarten learners are more likely to experience smoother transitions, reduce anxiety, and have better emotional adjustment to school life.

In consonance, the study recommends (1) strengthening parent-child attachment security through regular implementation of parenting programs that focus on building emotional closeness and improving parental responsiveness; (2) improving consistency of care at home through the conduct of workshops and practical guides for parents to help them provide reliable responses to children's emotional needs; and (3) establishing a strong structured home-school partnership program where parents and teachers can work together using consistent approaches.

Based on the overall findings, the School Heads Relational Model for Managing Separation Anxiety was developed. It shows that school heads' strategies for providing instructional, emotional, capacity-building, and policy support do not directly make teachers more competent. Instead, their impact flows through parent-child attachment security, which acts as the bridge. When families build secure bonds, teachers become more confident and resilient, and learners feel safer in school. In turn, this leads to enhanced teachers' competence and the successful management of separation anxiety among kindergarten learners. The model highlights that strong home-school relationships are key to lasting improvement.

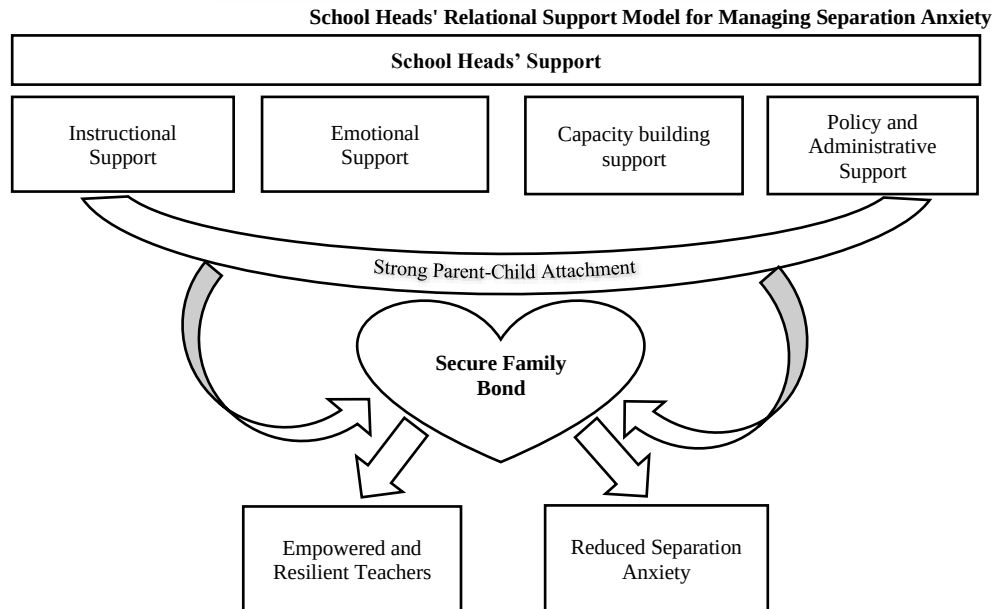


Figure 2: School Heads' Rational Support Model for Managing Separation Anxiety

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AI Declaration

The researchers used Grammarly Pro as an AI-assisted language editing tool during the preparation of this manuscript. Its use was limited to correcting grammatical errors, improving sentence structures, and enhancing readability. The conceptualization of the study, data collection, interpretation of findings, and writing of the substantive content were performed by the researchers. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed before incorporation into the final document.