

Original Article

In the Spotlight: Success Stories of Award-Winning Elementary School Paper Advisers

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how award-winning elementary school paper advisers guide student journalists in the Panabo South District. Through in-depth interviews with purposively selected public-school educators, the research utilized thematic analysis to uncover the realities of their mentoring experiences. The findings highlight best practices centered on cultivating journalistic curiosity, balancing guidance with creative autonomy, and embedding ethical thinking. Advisers derived meaning from a strong mentoring purpose, recognizing student growth, and experiencing professional fulfillment. Furthermore, they identified enhancing student ownership, providing authentic journalistic exposure, and ensuring continuous mentorship as priorities for improving school programs. Ultimately, successful advising emerges not merely as a technical function but as pedagogical leadership that integrates literacy development, ethical formation, and student voice, emphasizing the adviser's role as a mentor and steward of responsible expression.

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1. Introduction

Campus journalism in the Philippines occupies a distinctive place in basic education because it links literacy, citizenship, critical inquiry, and student voice. Republic Act No. 7079, or the Campus Journalism Act of 1991, affirms that campus journalism should strengthen ethical values, encourage critical and creative thinking,

and develop the moral character and discipline of Filipino youth. Within this policy environment, the school paper is not merely an extracurricular outlet. It is also a pedagogical site where learners practice research, interviewing, writing, editing, collaboration, and public communication under the guidance of school paper advisers.

The work of the school paper adviser is therefore consequential. Advisers shape the climate in which young writers learn how to notice issues, verify information, and communicate for a real audience. In elementary settings, this role becomes even more important because pupils are still forming habits of language use, confidence, responsibility, and collaborative work. When advisers are effective, student journalism can function as an early apprenticeship in disciplined expression. When support is weak, however, school papers may become episodic, compliance-driven, or competition-centered, with limited developmental value for learners.

Recent scholarship continues to show that journalism education can create meaningful spaces for inquiry and civic reasoning when learners are encouraged to examine their environments, ask consequential questions, and communicate grounded interpretations of public issues. Itten-Gee and Francom (2025) argued that journalism learning can prompt students to interrogate assumptions and develop civic reasoning through writing and reporting. In a related vein, Moreno-Romero et al. (2024) showed that educational settings that deliberately facilitate student voice help learners participate more actively in shared meaning-making. These perspectives are relevant to elementary school publications because the school paper often becomes one of the earliest structured platforms where learners experience authorship, voice, and accountability.

At the same time, the adviser's work is not reducible to encouraging expression alone. Effective guidance requires structure, feedback, and gradual release. Research on autonomy support suggests that students respond positively when teachers provide direction while still honoring learner agency. Wu and Dong (2024) found that autonomy-supportive educational interactions are associated with positive student outcomes and healthier learning relationships. For school paper advisers, this balance is especially delicate: too much control can suppress initiative and ownership, yet too little guidance can weaken quality, coherence, and ethical judgment. This tension makes the adviser role a rich site for qualitative inquiry.

Creative pedagogy further illuminates why advising matters. Cremin and Chappell (2021) synthesized evidence showing that creative pedagogies thrive when teachers create dialogic spaces, invite initiative, and support learner decision-making while retaining purposeful structure. In student journalism, such pedagogy appears in decisions about topic selection, angle development, collaborative editing, and layout design. Advisers do not only teach writing conventions. They also create conditions under which pupils can test ideas, revise drafts, negotiate perspectives, and see themselves as capable contributors to a publication community.

Ethics adds another layer of complexity. Journalism asks writers to work with truth claims, fairness, representation, and public consequence. Even if elementary school publications operate at a modest scale, the ethical habits formed there matter.

Sánchez Laws and Utne (2019) emphasized that journalism education must prepare learners to confront ethical questions alongside technical production. In school paper work, this means that advisers must guide students to check facts, attribute sources, consider possible harm, and reflect on the social implications of publication. Advisers who teach ethics in practice help move student writing from mere performance toward responsible communication.

Mentorship theory also offers a useful frame for understanding success among advisers. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory underscores the formative role of modeling, observation, and guided participation, all of which are central to adviser-student interactions. Kram's (1985) work on mentoring likewise highlights developmental support, sponsorship, encouragement, and psychosocial guidance. More recent mentoring scholarship continues to show that structured and reflective mentorship sharpens learning and professional growth (Goldshaft, 2024). In the context of school journalism, the adviser often serves simultaneously as instructor, editor, coach, critic, and encourager.

Despite the recognized value of campus journalism, the specific success stories of award-winning elementary school paper advisers remain underexamined, especially in localized Philippine basic education contexts. Much of the available discourse emphasizes legal mandates, competition structures, or broad educational benefits, while fewer studies look closely at how advisers actually guide pupils toward sustained quality, how they interpret the meaning of that work, and what insights they derive for improving the process. This gap is important because adviser effectiveness is likely shaped not only by formal rules but also by tacit pedagogical judgment, adaptive mentoring, and experience-based practice.

The present study addressed this gap by examining award-winning public elementary school paper advisers in Panabo South District, Division of Panabo City. Focusing on advisers with demonstrated success allowed the study to document practice from a strengths-based angle rather than from a deficit frame. Instead of asking why school journalism falters, the study asked what successful advisers do, how they understand their role, and what they believe should be improved. Such an approach is valuable for both scholarship and practice because it surfaces actionable knowledge rooted in lived experience rather than abstract prescription alone.

Specifically, the study pursued three questions: What best practices do award-winning school paper advisers employ in guiding student writers; how do these advisers make sense of their experiences in guiding student writers; and what insights do they share for improving the process of guidance? By answering these questions, the study sought to contribute a practice-near account of effective advising in elementary campus journalism. It also aimed to offer evidence that school leaders, teacher educators, and policy actors can use when designing support systems for school paper advisers and student publication programs.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the success stories of award-winning elementary school paper advisers and to describe how they understood and enacted effective guidance in student journalism. A phenomenological orientation was appropriate because the inquiry centered on participants' lived meanings, recurring practices, and reflective interpretations of their work rather than on measurement of predetermined variables. At the same time, the manuscript was written in a practice-near manner consistent with qualitative description, which values clear presentation of experience in everyday terms while retaining interpretive discipline (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Sandelowski, 2000).

The study was conducted in Panabo South District, Division of Panabo City, and involved 10 public elementary school paper advisers selected through purposive sampling. Participants were chosen because they had direct and current involvement in elementary school publications and had established records of distinction in school journalism. Eligible advisers had at least two participations in the National Schools Press Conference and had received awards for their school publications. Advisers without this level of recognized participation or those working outside the elementary public school setting were excluded. This sampling logic aligned the participant pool with the central analytic goal of documenting informed, experience-based accounts of successful advising.

Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives about adviser practices, mentor-student interaction, challenges, meaning-making, and recommendations for improvement. The interview guide was organized around the three research questions and included probes on content development, collaboration, journalistic standards, student engagement, leadership, mentorship, school support, and program improvement. Interviews were arranged in advance and conducted face-to-face in quiet settings selected to minimize interruption and support reflective conversation. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded to preserve accuracy, and the researchers also maintained notes on contextual features and salient interactional cues that could support later interpretation.

Ethical safeguards were embedded throughout the study. Institutional approval was secured before fieldwork, and participants were provided with written informed consent materials that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to decline any question, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Audio files, transcripts, and related materials were stored securely, and participant identities were protected through coding. Because some interviews involved the use of English and local language forms, the researchers also attended carefully to translation and interpretation so that the meaning of participant statements would be preserved as faithfully as possible during transcription and analysis.

Analysis followed a thematic procedure grounded in repeated engagement with the interview corpus. After transcription, the researchers reviewed the full set of

responses, noted significant statements relevant to the three research questions, and organized meaning units into broader thematic groupings. The analytic process moved from close reading of individual accounts to comparison across participants in order to identify both shared and distinct patterns in adviser experience. The researchers described developing textural and structural understandings of the phenomenon and then integrating them into a composite account of what advisers experienced and how those experiences unfolded within the work of school journalism. In manuscript form, these patterns were retained and reorganized into a journal-ready presentation under the three research aims.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through several strategies. Credibility was supported through prolonged attention to the interview material, the use of a coding structure, field-note documentation, and member checking of transcripts or meanings with participants. Transferability was addressed by preserving contextual detail about the setting, participant qualifications, and the conduct of interviews so that readers can judge the relevance of the findings to similar educational environments. Dependability was reinforced through documentation of procedures and through review by the research adviser and qualified readers of the analytic process. Confirmability was pursued through reflexive attention to researchers assumptions, maintenance of an audit trail, and triangulation with relevant literature and contextual materials. Taken together, these procedures positioned the analysis to represent the participants' accounts with rigor, transparency, and practical clarity.

3. Results

3.1 Best Practices

Theme 1: Cultivating Journalistic Curiosity

Advisers consistently described curiosity as the starting point of school journalism work. They encouraged pupils to ask questions, investigate school and community concerns, and look beyond surface descriptions when developing stories. They mentioned:

"I always encourage my writers to ask 'why' and 'how' before writing anything. Curiosity is the start of every good story." (P1)

"I let them interview teachers and classmates about issues they notice in school. It helps them think critically about their surroundings." (P5)

"I really encouraged them to ask questions and search for truthful information for their stories, not only within the classroom." (P8)

"I regularly taught them to ask about the details of the news so they could better understand the situation they were writing about." (P10)

Theme 2: Balancing Guidance with Creative Autonomy

Advisers described a mentoring stance that combined structure with learner freedom. They set expectations, timelines, and quality checks, but they also allowed students to make decisions about style, layout, and story presentation. They stated:

"I give them deadlines and guidance, but I let them decide how to present their story. I want their voice to come out." (P2)

"Sometimes I just review their drafts and suggest improvements, but I never rewrite their work. They must feel ownership of their articles." (P4)

"I give them tips and feedback, but I allow them to create their own approach to the layout and content." (P6)

"I teach them how to present their story, but I still let them decide on the style and content." (P7)

Theme 3: Embedding Ethical and Critical Thinking in Student Work

Advisers also framed successful guidance as an ethical practice. They taught students to check facts, cite sources, examine consequences, and judge whether a story was fair, accurate, and responsible before publication. They verbalized:

"I always remind them to check facts and cite sources. A story is only good if it is true and fair." (P3)

"Before publishing, I ask them, 'Is this ethical? Will it harm anyone?' It teaches responsibility." (P7)

"I guide them to think about the effect of their story and not just write for the sake of writing." (P8)

"I always tell them to look for truthful and correct information in their news so they do not make mistakes." (P9)

3.2 Sense-Making of Experiences in Guiding Student-Writers

Theme 1: Developing a Sense of Purpose in Mentorship

Advisers interpreted their work as a purposeful form of teaching rather than as a peripheral assignment. They linked advising to helping children find voice, build confidence, and grow into thoughtful communicators. They mentioned:

"Advising students isn't just about producing a paper; it's about helping them find their voice and confidence." (P1)

"I feel my work matters when I see students learning to think critically and communicate clearly through their writing." (P3)

"My purpose in advising the school paper is to help students develop their own voice and writing ability." (P4)

"I can see that I help in their growth by guiding their journalism skills." (P8)

Theme 2: Recognizing Student Growth and Potential

Advisers repeatedly located meaning in observing visible student development. Progress in confidence, reporting, writing, editing, and teamwork served as evidence that their guidance mattered. They verbalized:

"When a shy student starts confidently presenting their article, I know the guidance is making a difference." (P3)

"Seeing students improve in research and editorial skills reminds me why I love this role." (P5)

"I can see that the student who used to be shy is now confident with the article. That gives me joy." (P6)

"Seeing their progress in writing and editing inspires me to continue guiding them." (P7)

Theme 3: Reflecting on Personal and Professional Fulfillment

Advisers further described the role as personally rewarding and professionally formative. Their accounts emphasized patience, pride, creativity, accomplishment, and satisfaction in seeing students achieve. They stated:

"Advising the school paper has taught me patience, creativity, and the joy of seeing young minds grow." (P1)

"I feel fulfilled knowing that my mentoring helps students achieve awards and develop lifelong skills." (P2)

"I feel happiness and pride in my work on the school paper because I helped students grow." (P5)

"Guiding students in journalism gives me a sense of accomplishment and professional satisfaction." (P9)

3.3 Insights

Theme 1: Strengthening Student Engagement and Ownership

Advisers recommended deeper student involvement in planning, topic selection, and editorial decision-making. They viewed ownership as a condition that increases motivation, accountability, and pride in publication work. They mentioned:

"I encourage students to take part in planning the articles and choosing topics; they perform better when they feel responsible." (P1)

"Giving them autonomy in their work increases engagement and pride in what they produce." (P3)

"I give students a chance to decide on the topic and layout of their article so they will be more motivated." (P6)

"I let them join in choosing and editing the content so they can feel responsibility for their work." (P9)

Theme 2: Integrating Practical Journalistic Experiences

Advisers also called for more authentic exposure to journalism practice. They emphasized interviews, field reporting, local events, and press coverage as opportunities for students to connect classroom guidance with real journalistic work. They verbalized:

"I take my students to local events so they can practice interviewing and reporting firsthand." (P2)

"Hands-on experiences make them understand the responsibilities and ethics of being a journalist." (P5)

"I bring students to local events so they can learn real reporting and interview work." (P7)

"So, they can better understand the work of a journalist, I encourage them to join field reporting and press coverage." (P8)

Theme 3: Providing Continuous Mentorship and Support

Advisers highlighted the value of steady feedback and approachable guidance throughout the writing process. They stressed that students improve when mentoring is sustained, specific, and relational rather than occasional and corrective only at the end. They stated:

"I always make time to review their work, offer feedback, and guide them on improving their writing skills." (P1)

"Being approachable and supportive builds trust and motivates students to strive for excellence." (P3)

"I consistently guide them and correct their articles so their abilities can improve." (P6)

"I give them support and advice throughout the writing process so their skills can further develop." (P10)

4. Discussion

The findings position award-winning school paper advising as a form of pedagogical leadership that joins inquiry, authorship, ethics, and mentoring in one sustained practice. The first research aim showed that successful advisers cultivate curiosity, provide structured freedom, and insist on ethical responsibility. This pattern is consistent with recent work that views journalism education as a productive site for civic reasoning rather than a narrow technical exercise. Ilten-Gee and Francom (2025) argued that journalism learning can prompt students to question assumptions and engage their civic environments, while Moreno-Romero et al. (2024) showed that student voice develops more fully when learners are invited into genuine participation. Read against these studies, the advisers in the present study appear to be building not only writing skill but also habits of inquiry and responsible expression.

The theme of cultivating journalistic curiosity is especially important because it frames reporting as an act of disciplined noticing. Rather than treating student writers as passive recipients of editorial assignments, advisers encouraged them to ask why and how, seek multiple perspectives, and investigate issues beyond the classroom. Such practice aligns with the inquiry-centered and dialogic dimensions of creative pedagogy identified by Cremin and Chappell (2021). It also supports the claim that school journalism can become an early literacy space where learners move from description to interpretation. In elementary settings, this shift may be especially valuable because curiosity at this stage is still highly malleable and can be shaped into a durable academic and civic disposition.

The second theme, balancing guidance with creative autonomy, suggests that effective advisers resist two unproductive extremes: rigid editorial control and unguided freedom. Participants offered feedback, deadlines, and standards, yet intentionally preserved the student's voice in the final product. This interpretation resonates with autonomy-support research showing that learners benefit when teachers provide structure without suppressing initiative (Wu & Dong, 2024). It also echoes the broader mentoring literature, which identifies developmental support as most effective when the mentor scaffolds judgment rather than substitutes for it (Goldshaft, 2024). For school paper programs, this means that high-quality outputs are not achieved by adviser dominance alone; they emerge when students are trusted to decide, revise, and own their work within a supportive editorial frame.

The third practice theme, embedding ethical and critical thinking in student work, extends the discussion beyond craft toward responsibility. Advisers in this study required students to verify claims, consider fairness, and think about possible harm before publication. Although Sánchez Laws and Utne (2019) discussed ethics within immersive journalism, their broader point remains relevant here: journalism education must join technical competence with ethical judgment. In the elementary school paper context, ethical guidance is not premature. It is foundational. Students who learn early

to ask whether a story is accurate, fair, and socially responsible are more likely to carry those habits into later academic writing and public communication.

The second research aim revealed that advisers made sense of their work through purpose, recognition of student growth, and personal as well as professional fulfillment. These themes deepen the understanding of advising by showing that success is sustained not only by technique but also by identity. Participants repeatedly described advising as meaningful work that helped children develop voice and confidence. Such accounts fit social learning theory, in which modeling and guided participation create conditions for learner development (Bandura, 1977). They also align with mentorship theory, which frames the mentor role as both developmental and psychosocial (Kram, 1985). In practical terms, advisers appear to remain committed because they see the work as educationally significant and personally worthwhile.

Recognition of student growth emerged as a particularly powerful source of meaning. Advisers interpreted shy pupils becoming more confident, or novice writers becoming stronger editors and reporters, as evidence that their guidance had tangible effects. This theme aligns with recent mentoring scholarship suggesting that mentors sustain effort when they can observe learning progress and respond reflectively to it (Goldshaft, 2024). It also complements Moreno-Romero et al.'s (2024) emphasis on participatory educational spaces, because student growth becomes more visible when learners are given room to contribute meaningfully. The present findings therefore suggest that visible student development is not merely an outcome of effective advising; it is also one of the forces that sustains adviser motivation.

The theme of fulfillment likewise matters because it counters any assumption that school paper advising is only an added burden attached to teaching. Participants instead described the role as a source of pride, creativity, patience, and professional accomplishment. This does not mean that advising is easy or free from constraint. Rather, it indicates that demanding educational work can remain sustainable when teachers experience clear purpose and relational payoff. In this sense, the findings support a developmental view of adviser work in which professional satisfaction grows from meaningful mentorship, not only from awards and competition results.

The third research aim shifted from present practice to improvement, and the advisers' suggestions were notable for their coherence. They called for stronger student ownership, more authentic journalism experiences, and continuous support. These recommendations extend the earlier findings rather than departing from them. If curiosity, autonomy, and ethics are central to current success, then it follows that improved programs would increase student participation in editorial decision-making, expose learners to actual reporting contexts, and protect the time and relational continuity needed for steady mentoring. The recommendation for stronger ownership is particularly consistent with both autonomy-support research and student voice scholarship, which associate meaningful participation with engagement, responsibility, and durable investment in learning (Moreno-Romero et al., 2024; Wu & Dong, 2024).

The call for practical journalistic experiences also deserves emphasis. Advisers wanted students to interview people, attend events, and engage in forms of reporting that feel real rather than simulated. This is consistent with the argument that journalism education becomes more powerful when learners work on consequential tasks for authentic audiences (Ilten-Gee & Francom, 2025; Lindo & Cutad, 2024; Lindo & Panes, 2024). Even at the elementary level, carefully structured real-world reporting may strengthen motivation, sharpen observation, and make ethical considerations concrete. The participants' insistence on authenticity suggests that school paper quality cannot rest on classroom talk alone. It also depends on opportunities to practice journalism as situated work.

Finally, the recommendation for continuous mentorship highlights a systemic concern. Strong advising is relational, iterative, and time-intensive. Students do not become better reporters and writers through one-time workshops or end-stage corrections. They develop through cycles of drafting, feedback, revision, and encouragement. This pattern closely matches the literature on effective mentoring, which emphasizes continuity, feedback quality, and reflective dialogue as central to development (Goldshaft, 2024). For school leaders, the implication is clear: supporting campus journalism requires more than contest preparation. It requires organizational arrangements that make sustained guidance possible.

The study contributes to the literature by showing that successful elementary school paper advising is best understood as an integrated practice. It is instructional because it teaches writing and reporting. It is ethical because it forms habits of truthfulness and fairness. It is developmental because it nurtures confidence, agency, and student voice. And it is relational because its success depends on mentoring ties that allow children to take risks, receive critique, and grow. In the Philippine context, where campus journalism is both legally recognized and educationally valued, these findings underscore the need to treat the school paper adviser not as a peripheral organizer but as a key literacy mentor within the life of the school.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that award-winning elementary school paper advisers succeed through a coherent combination of inquiry-based guidance, learner autonomy, ethical formation, and sustained mentorship. Their best practices centered on cultivating curiosity, preserving student voice within structured support, and teaching fairness and truthfulness as part of journalistic craft. They understood their work as purposeful mentoring, found meaning in visible student growth, and described advising as professionally as well as personally fulfilling. They also identified clear directions for program improvement: deeper student ownership, more authentic reporting experiences, and continuous mentoring support. Taken together, the findings suggest that effective school paper advising is not an incidental add-on to teaching. It is a meaningful literacy practice that can strengthen writing, confidence, responsibility, and civic awareness among elementary learners. Schools that want

stronger student publications should therefore invest not only in competitions and outputs but also in the mentoring conditions that allow advisers and young writers to thrive.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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