**Lived Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers in Davao de Oro**

**Abstract**

**Nature:** This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Davao de Oro, Philippines, emphasizing how they navigate personal and professional challenges within the socio-cultural and economic context of a rural province. It addresses the limited scholarly attention given to early childhood educators in such settings, despite their pivotal role in child development.

**Objective:** It delved into how these educators navigate their daily responsibilities, cope with challenges, and derive meaning from their profession, this research hopes to provide insights that can inform more responsive policies and interventions.

**Method:** Guided by a phenomenological approach, the research gathered in-depth narratives from ten purposively selected kindergarten teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and subjected to thematic analysis to distill shared meanings and essential themes.

**Findings:** The study uncovered four primary themes: (1) intrinsic joy and passion in nurturing young learners, (2) multi-layered burdens marked by low salaries, large class sizes, and resource shortages, (3) adaptive resilience through community ties and personal coping strategies, and (4) hopes for systemic reforms that could better support their vocation. These themes illustrate the intricate balance between personal dedication and structural limitations.

**Implications:** Findings highlight the need for targeted policies and programs that address compensation, workload, and psychosocial support for kindergarten teachers. By centering their voices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of early education in rural Philippine contexts and underscores the urgency of interventions that sustain teacher motivation and improve educational outcomes.

**Introduction**

Early childhood education is globally recognized as a critical period that lays the foundation for lifelong learning, socialization, and holistic development (UNESCO, 2015). Kindergarten, being the formal entry point into the education system for most children, plays an indispensable role in nurturing basic cognitive, emotional, and social competencies (Pianta et al., 2009). In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 10157, or the Kindergarten Education Act of 2012, institutionalized kindergarten as part of compulsory and free basic education, underscoring the government's commitment to early learning (Department of Education, 2012).

Despite this legislative support, kindergarten education across the country faces numerous implementation challenges, particularly in rural provinces such as Davao de Oro. Studies highlight persistent issues such as insufficient learning resources, large class sizes, and infrastructural inadequacies in many Philippine public schools (Mateo & Gochuico, 2021; Oracion, 2018). These systemic problems inevitably influence the teaching and learning environment, affecting both educators and young learners.

Kindergarten teachers are at the frontline of these realities. They not only deliver foundational instruction but also often serve as surrogate caregivers, emotional anchors, and advocates for their pupils' welfare (Estacio & De Guzman, 2020). However, their voices remain underrepresented in research, especially those teaching in marginalized or less urbanized settings. Existing investigations predominantly focus on primary and secondary education teachers, leaving a gap in understanding the specific lived experiences of kindergarten educators (Lomibao & Bacolod, 2022).

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Davao de Oro. By delving into how these educators navigate their daily responsibilities, cope with challenges, and derive meaning from their profession, this research hopes to provide insights that can inform more responsive policies and interventions. Such understanding is crucial not only for safeguarding teachers’ well-being but also for enhancing the quality of early childhood education in rural Philippine contexts.

Literature Review

The literature on early childhood education underscores its pivotal role in shaping future academic success and socio-emotional competencies. Heckman (2006) argued that investments in early learning yield significant long-term returns, particularly for disadvantaged children. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education’s push for universal kindergarten reflects this global consensus, yet local studies reveal a disconnect between policy intentions and ground realities (Ferrer & Ellamil, 2021; Sevilla et al., 2019).

Teachers' experiences are critical in understanding how educational policies translate into classroom practices. Research from various settings highlights that kindergarten teachers often find intrinsic joy and fulfillment in witnessing children’s developmental milestones, fostering creativity, and nurturing basic literacy and numeracy (Birbili & Tafa, 2019; Flores & Dayagbil, 2020). However, these positive experiences are frequently accompanied by stressors such as inadequate instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, low remuneration, and administrative burdens (Ng & Yeo, 2022; Zinsser et al., 2016).

In the Philippines, Ramos and Alon (2020) documented that many kindergarten teachers, especially in public schools, regularly spend personal funds to augment classroom supplies and create engaging learning environments. This practice, while reflective of dedication, also signals systemic underfunding. Similarly, Medina and Salazar (2021) found that teachers in Mindanao grapple with additional challenges related to geographic isolation, intermittent parental support, and cultural diversity, which demand tailored pedagogical approaches and heightened emotional labor.

Phenomenological studies focusing on educators provide rich accounts of how teachers interpret and give meaning to their professional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through exploring lived experiences, such inquiries illuminate not only external working conditions but also internal processes of coping, resilience, and purpose (van Manen, 1990; Morales, 2022). However, few such studies specifically spotlight kindergarten teachers in rural Philippine provinces. Addressing this gap is essential, as these educators' narratives can shed light on localized educational challenges and resilience strategies that broader quantitative studies may overlook.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**
This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to deeply explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Davao de Oro. This approach was chosen for its strength in uncovering personal meanings, subjective realities, and the essence of participants’ day-to-day encounters within their specific socio-cultural context.

**Participants**
Ten kindergarten teachers from various municipalities across Davao de Oro were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in teaching tenure, school setting (central versus barangay schools), and demographic profiles. All participants had a minimum of three years of teaching experience, providing rich insights grounded in sustained professional practice.

**Data Collection**
Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interview questions focused on participants’ daily experiences, primary challenges, sources of fulfillment, coping mechanisms, and aspirations for the future. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of participants’ narratives.

**Data Analysis**
The data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This systematic process ensured a rigorous interpretation of shared patterns and individual nuances.

**Ethical Considerations**
Prior to participation, teachers were thoroughly briefed on the study’s objectives, assured of confidentiality, and informed of their voluntary right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To protect identities, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting.

**Findings**

The thematic analysis of interviews surfaced four major themes that encapsulate the complex lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Davao de Oro: intrinsic passion and joy, multi-faceted burdens, strategies of resilience, and aspirations for change. These themes are interwoven, reflecting the dynamic interplay between personal vocation and structural constraints.

**Theme 1: Intrinsic Passion and Joy**
At the heart of the teachers’ narratives was an unmistakable sense of purpose and emotional investment in their work. Participants consistently described profound gratification in witnessing the intellectual and social growth of their pupils. Simple milestones, recognizing letters, reading syllables, counting objects, or singing songs, were celebrated as extraordinary achievements.

Maria, an eight-year veteran, expressed this poignantly:

“Every small progress is a huge victory for me. When a child finally reads a word or counts without help, I feel an overwhelming joy. That’s why I stay, even if it’s hard.”

This intrinsic joy often outweighed external hardships. Several teachers narrated how students’ spontaneous gestures, a handwritten note, a flower picked on the way to school, or an eager hug, provided emotional rewards that no salary could match. For many, these moments reaffirmed their dedication to teaching despite systemic shortcomings.

**Theme 2: Multi-Faceted Burdens**
Yet beneath these stories of joy lay heavy burdens that teachers shouldered daily. Overcrowded classrooms were a near-universal concern; most participants reported handling more than 40 pupils in spaces ill-suited for early childhood activities. This not only strained their capacity to provide individualized attention but also heightened safety concerns during active play.

Material shortages compounded the difficulty. Teachers frequently had to improvise learning aids or spend their own money on art supplies, printouts, or even snacks. As one teacher, Ana, shared:

“There are days I skip buying something for my own children just so I can buy cartolina and markers for my class.”

Financial strain was a recurring theme, with salaries described as insufficient to meet basic family needs. Adding to these tangible struggles was the invisible weight of emotional labor. Teachers often found themselves stepping into parental roles for students from troubled or impoverished homes, providing comfort, guidance, and sometimes even meals. One participant reflected:

“It’s painful to see a child come to school without breakfast. I sometimes share my own lunch. They need more than lessons; they need love and care.”

**Theme 3: Strategies of Resilience**
Despite these multifaceted burdens, the teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience. Peer solidarity emerged as a critical coping mechanism; participants spoke of informally sharing teaching materials, offering emotional support, and “checking in” on each other during tough times. Group chats and casual after-school conversations became safe spaces to vent frustrations and exchange encouragement.

Personal faith also surfaced as a powerful anchor. Several teachers described praying before classes began, viewing their profession as both a spiritual mission and a community service. Community connections, such as relationships with barangay officials and local parents, often helped secure small donations or logistical support for school events.

Creativity in sustaining morale was evident. Some teachers organized simple classroom celebrations using pooled personal funds, small birthday parties or end-of-week recognitions that brought joy to students and, indirectly, renewed the teachers’ own spirits.

“Seeing the children happy makes us forget for a while that we’re tired or worried about money,” shared Liza, who has been teaching for over a decade.

**Theme 4: Aspirations for Change**
Amid their resilience, teachers articulated clear and urgent hopes for systemic improvement. Foremost were calls for reduced class sizes, which they believed would allow them to better address individual learning needs and ensure safety. Participants also emphasized the need for regular, high-quality training to update their teaching strategies, especially for handling diverse learning paces and behavioral issues.

Improved compensation was another recurring hope, not only to meet personal and familial obligations but also as a recognition of the critical role they play in shaping young lives. Beyond these, teachers expressed a strong desire for more structured parental involvement, believing that partnerships between school and home are vital for holistic child development.

One teacher summarized these aspirations succinctly:

“If we’re given the right support—better pay, smaller classes, proper materials, our children will be the ones to benefit the most. That’s all we really want.

**Interpretative Insight**

Collectively, these findings depict kindergarten teachers as profoundly dedicated professionals who navigate a fragile equilibrium between personal passion and systemic adversity. Their narratives illuminate how intrinsic joy and a steadfast commitment to nurturing young minds coexist with significant personal sacrifices, persistent resource constraints, and subtle yet enduring emotional burdens. Importantly, their expressed hopes transcend individual welfare, articulating a broader vision for an educational landscape where both teachers and learners flourish, underscoring the mutual interdependence of educator well-being and early childhood educational quality.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study reinforce and deepen existing scholarship on the experiences of kindergarten teachers, especially within under-resourced contexts like rural Philippine provinces. Echoing international and local literature, the narratives reveal that teachers’ intrinsic joy and sense of purpose are powerful drivers sustaining their professional engagement, even amid significant structural adversities.

Consistent with Birbili and Tafa (2019) and Flores and Dayagbil (2020), participants in this study derived profound gratification from witnessing children achieve developmental milestones such as learning to read, count, and express themselves creatively. Maria’s sentiment—“Every small progress is a huge victory for me”—mirrors observations by Zinsser et al. (2016) that early childhood educators often find unique emotional rewards in their work, highlighting how nurturing foundational skills offers deep personal satisfaction.

However, this intrinsic fulfillment coexisted with multi-faceted burdens that complicate their professional lives. Participants’ accounts of overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional resources, and insufficient pay are strongly aligned with previous studies by Ramos and Alon (2020) and Medina and Salazar (2021), which document how Filipino kindergarten teachers, particularly in Mindanao, frequently shoulder financial costs to compensate for systemic shortfalls. Ana’s reflection on sacrificing her own family’s needs to buy classroom supplies vividly illustrates this phenomenon, underscoring how underfunding shifts educational responsibilities onto teachers’ personal resources.

Beyond material constraints, teachers in this study also bore significant emotional labor, often serving as surrogate parents and frontline caregivers—a pattern similarly noted by Ng and Yeo (2022). This additional layer of care, while fulfilling, adds to stress and heightens the risk of burnout, especially given limited institutional support.

In terms of coping, the strategies of resilience observed among participants—leaning on peer solidarity, drawing strength from faith, and leveraging community ties—align with Morales (2022) and van Manen’s (1990) phenomenological insights into how educators navigate complex internal and external demands. The creative acts of pooling resources for classroom celebrations, as described by Liza, further illustrate how collective efforts help sustain morale, benefiting both teachers and learners.

Importantly, the aspirations voiced by teachers in this study transcend individual welfare and point toward systemic needs. Their calls for reduced class sizes, enhanced professional development, and improved compensation echo long-standing educational policy discussions in the Philippines. As Ferrer and Ellamil (2021) argue, while national initiatives like the push for universal kindergarten reflect an understanding of early education’s long-term value (Heckman, 2006), ground-level realities often lag, leading to a disconnect between policy ideals and classroom practice.

This study contributes uniquely to the literature by centering the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in a rural Philippine province—an area relatively underexplored in phenomenological educational research. While Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that phenomenology uncovers how individuals make sense of their worlds, few studies have focused specifically on kindergarten educators outside urban centers. By illuminating how teachers in Davao de Oro negotiate joy, sacrifice, and hope within their specific socio-cultural context, this research not only affirms broader patterns found globally but also highlights localized challenges and adaptive practices that merit targeted policy attention.

Taken together, these insights underscore the mutual interdependence of teacher well-being and early childhood educational quality. As teachers in this study stressed, enhancing their conditions is ultimately an investment in the developmental trajectories of young children—reinforcing the notion advanced by Heckman (2006) and locally contextualized by Sevilla et al. (2019) that robust early education systems rely not just on curriculum but also on the sustained commitment and well-being of educators.

Implications

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**For Kindergarten Teachers**
The findings underscore the remarkable dedication and intrinsic joy that kindergarten teachers derive from nurturing early learners, despite facing systemic constraints. Recognizing their own resilience strategies, such as fostering collegial support networks, engaging community ties, and maintaining personal well-being practices, may further empower teachers to sustain their passion and navigate daily stressors more effectively. Sharing these practices across schools could cultivate a culture of mutual encouragement and practical resourcefulness.

**For the Department of Education**
This study highlights the urgent need for policies that directly address classroom overcrowding, insufficient instructional materials, and low compensation, issues that fundamentally impact teaching quality and educators’ welfare. Strengthening support systems through regular, context-sensitive training, equitable resource allocation, and programs that encourage active parental involvement can help bridge the gap between policy ideals and on-the-ground realities. Prioritizing these areas is not only an investment in teacher satisfaction but also in the holistic development of young learners.

**For Educators and School Leaders**
School administrators and education stakeholders should recognize the heavy emotional labor borne by kindergarten teachers, who often step beyond instructional roles to serve as caregivers and counselors. Establishing formal mechanisms for psychological support, promoting peer mentoring, and celebrating small classroom successes can contribute to healthier, more affirming work environments. Moreover, encouraging collaborative problem-solving may help teachers feel less isolated in addressing challenges such as large class sizes or diverse learner needs.

**For Future Researchers**
This study opens pathways for further exploration into the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers, particularly in varied Philippine contexts beyond Davao de Oro. Future qualitative and mixed-methods research could examine how regional differences, cultural diversity, or specific local interventions shape teacher experiences and resilience. Longitudinal studies might also reveal how sustained exposure to systemic constraints affects teachers’ professional identities, coping capacities, and ultimately, student outcomes.

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