



HEART WORK BEYOND HARD WORK: CHALLENGES OF TEACHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the Tagum City Division regarding the challenges they encountered in early childhood teaching and the coping strategies and meaningful practices they employed in managing these experiences. Specifically, the study aimed to describe the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers, identify their coping strategies and meaningful practices, and propose an intervention program based on the findings. The study employed a phenomenological research design to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in public elementary schools. Purposive sampling was used in selecting fifteen participants, wherein ten participated in in-depth interviews and five participated in a focus group discussion. Data were gathered through semi-structured interview guides and analyzed using Colaizzi's thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed that kindergarten teachers experienced emotional, developmental, instructional, and structural challenges in early childhood teaching. Three major themes emerged: Emotional and Developmental Challenges, Physical and Instructional Constraints, and Daily Teaching Realities and Emotional-Physical Demands. Teachers encountered learners' adjustment difficulties, diverse developmental readiness, large class sizes, limited instructional resources, workload pressures, and emotional fatigue. Three major themes also emerged regarding coping strategies and meaningful practices: Emotional Regulation in Early Childhood Teaching, Meaningful Instructional Practices for Student Engagement, and Professional and Social Resources Supporting Teaching Practice. Teachers managed challenges through emotional regulation, peer collaboration, self-care, play-based instruction, classroom structuring, and support from school leaders, families, and communities. Based on the findings, the STRIVE-K intervention program was proposed to strengthen teachers' emotional resilience, instructional practices, and support systems in kindergarten education.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, Hard Work, Heart Work, Early Childhood, Teachers, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in early childhood education is widely viewed as both a profession and a calling that requires patience, dedication, and genuine care for young learners. Kindergarten teachers are responsible not only for teaching academic skills but also for guiding children's emotional, social, and moral development during their formative years. However, teachers often face challenges such as heavy workloads, limited instructional resources, large class sizes, and emotional pressures in the classroom. These difficulties may lead to stress, exhaustion, and reduced motivation, affecting both teacher well-being and the quality of early childhood education. Despite these challenges, many kindergarten teachers remain committed to their profession, raising important questions about how they sustain their passion and sense of purpose in early childhood teaching.

Internationally, the challenges experienced by kindergarten teachers have been widely documented across early childhood education systems. In China, kindergarten teachers experience high levels of stress due to heavy workloads, strict monitoring systems, and increasing instructional demands, which affect their well-being and job satisfaction (Li et al., 2021). In India, early childhood teachers face overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching resources, and pressure to meet academic targets despite insufficient institutional support (Bautista et al., 2021). In Indonesia, kindergarten teachers encounter difficulties related to inadequate training, challenges in assessing child development, and limited support in integrating technology into classroom instruction (Rahmat et al., 2021; Jannah et al., 2025). These conditions show that the challenges of early childhood teachers are common across different countries and reflect broader systemic issues in education.

Moreover, international studies also highlight the emotional and professional demands placed on kindergarten teachers beyond classroom instruction. In China, teachers face difficulties in implementing play-based and innovative teaching approaches due to limited resources and unequal professional development opportunities (Sun & Saleh, 2024). In Indonesia, teachers also struggle to maintain effective learning delivery under changing and resource-limited conditions (Pramana et al., 2024). Across these countries, kindergarten teachers are expected to manage academic instruction, emotional care, classroom management, and parental expectations at the same time. This highlights that the challenges in early childhood teaching are not isolated but are part of broader global concerns in the education sector.



In the Philippine setting, the implementation of Republic Act No. 10157 or the Kindergarten Education Act of 2012 has strengthened access to early childhood education by making kindergarten a mandatory part of basic education. However, while this policy expanded enrollment and emphasized the importance of early learning, many teachers still face challenges in its actual implementation. Studies show that kindergarten teachers in public schools often manage overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional materials, which hinder the effective delivery of play-based and child-centered learning approaches (Cervantes, 2020). In addition, the lack of adequate learning resources and support systems continues to affect the quality of instruction and teacher workload (Gonzales & Padilla, 2021).

In addition, kindergarten teachers in the Philippines are also burdened with increasing administrative responsibilities, performance-related expectations, and strong parental demands, which contribute to stress and emotional fatigue. These pressures are further intensified by the need to meet curriculum standards while ensuring that young learners receive individualized attention and care (Balaba, 2022). Similarly, studies highlight that excessive paperwork, and role expectations often reduce teachers' time for actual classroom instruction, which add to their work-related stress and exhaustion (Reyes, 2023). Despite these challenges, many teachers continue to demonstrate resilience and dedication in their work.

In the local setting of Tagum City Division, kindergarten teachers continue to encounter several challenges in the implementation of early childhood education programs. Studies reveal that teachers experience heavy workload pressures, limited instructional resources, and classroom management difficulties, particularly in handling diverse learner needs and maintaining play-based instruction in large classes (Tabanao, 2025). In addition, teachers in the division also report work-related stress linked to administrative tasks, time constraints, and insufficient support systems, which affect their instructional efficiency and well-being (Lagrama & Pedrina, 2025). Similarly, findings indicate that teachers in Davao Region, including Tagum City, struggle with balancing curriculum demands and learner-centered approaches due to limited materials and professional support, which further contributes to instructional strain and reduced teaching effectiveness (Almasa, 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on the challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in the Philippines, several research gaps remain evident. Substantially, most studies have concentrated on general concerns such as workload, classroom resources, and administrative demands, with limited exploration of how these challenges directly influence teachers' lived experiences, instructional practices, and the quality of early childhood learning outcomes. Methodologically, many existing studies are descriptive in nature and rely heavily on quantitative surveys, with fewer qualitative or phenomenological approaches that could provide deeper insights into teachers' personal experiences and coping mechanisms. Contextually, there is still a lack of localized studies situated in specific divisions such as Tagum City Division, where unique institutional conditions, community dynamics, and resource allocation practices may shape the realities of kindergarten teaching differently from broader regional or national findings.

There is an urgent need to conduct this study due to the continuing challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in implementing Republic Act No. 10157, particularly in terms of workload, limited instructional resources, and administrative demands that affect the quality of early childhood education. Examining these issues in Tagum City Division is important to generate evidence that can guide policy improvement and strengthen teacher support systems. The findings will be disseminated through graduate school research forums, submission to DepEd Tagum City Division for possible policy enhancement, publication in educational journals, and sharing during INSET sessions and professional learning communities to help improve classroom practice and decision-making.

THE STUDY'S OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the Tagum City Division in relation to early childhood education. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Describe the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in early childhood teaching;
2. Identify the coping strategies and meaningful practices they employ in navigating the demands of early childhood education; and
3. Develop a proposed intervention program based on the findings of the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in early childhood education using a qualitative phenomenological approach. It focused particularly on the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in teaching young learners in public elementary schools. The research process was guided by key methodological components, including the research design, participants, data sources, data-gathering instrument, sampling technique, data collection procedure, data analysis, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness of the study.



Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions of this study are grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, particularly constructivism and interpretivism, which are appropriate in exploring the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in early childhood education in the Tagum City Division. These assumptions recognize that teachers' experiences are complex, context-dependent, and socially constructed within their classroom and school environments. In this study, the focus is on understanding the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers and how they navigate these through coping strategies and meaningful practices.

Ontology. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what exists in the context of the study (Blakely, 2023). In this research, reality is viewed as multiple and subjective, meaning that the challenges experienced by kindergarten teachers are not uniform but vary depending on classroom conditions, workload demands, availability of instructional resources, leadership support, and learner characteristics. Some teachers may experience challenges primarily in classroom management, while others may struggle more with administrative tasks or limited instructional materials. Likewise, coping experiences also differ, as teachers develop unique ways of managing stress and sustaining their instructional responsibilities. Thus, the study recognizes that there is no single reality of teaching challenges, but multiple lived realities expressed through teachers' narratives.

Epistemology. Epistemology explains how knowledge is created and the relationship between the researcher and participants (Sol & Heng, 2022). In this study, knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and kindergarten teachers during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Understanding of teaching challenges and coping strategies is not derived from measurement alone but from the meanings teachers assign to their lived experiences in early childhood classrooms. Through their narratives, teachers provide insights into how they manage workload demands, emotional labor, classroom difficulties, and resource limitations. The researcher, as the primary instrument, interprets these meanings while ensuring that the findings remain grounded in participants' actual experiences.

Axiology. Axiology focuses on values, ethics, and the role of the researcher in shaping the inquiry (Deane, 2018). In this study, the researcher acknowledges that personal values such as empathy toward teachers' working conditions may influence interpretation. However, ethical considerations and reflexivity are strictly observed to ensure fairness, respect, and authenticity in representing participants' voices. The experiences of kindergarten teachers in Tagum City Division are treated as meaningful and valuable contributions to understanding the realities of early childhood education. Their narratives of challenges, coping strategies, and professional commitment are presented with integrity and sensitivity.

Methodological Assumption. The methodological assumption of this study aligns with qualitative phenomenology, which focuses on understanding lived experiences from the perspective of participants (Moroi, 2020). In this study, phenomenology is used to explore how kindergarten teachers describe their challenges in early childhood teaching and how they respond through coping strategies and meaningful practices. Instead of measuring these experiences quantitatively, the study seeks to capture rich descriptions of classroom realities such as workload pressures, emotional demands, classroom management difficulties, and resource limitations. This approach allows themes to emerge that reflect the authentic experiences of kindergarten teachers in Tagum City Division.

Rhetorical Assumption. The rhetorical assumption refers to how findings are presented through language and narrative style (Damamisau et al., 2020). In this study, results are presented using a descriptive and thematic narrative approach supported by direct quotations from kindergarten teachers. This ensures that their lived experiences are clearly and authentically represented rather than reduced to numerical summaries. The use of narrative writing allows readers to deeply understand the challenges teachers face in early childhood education and the coping strategies they employ in managing these demands.

Qualitative Assumption. Qualitative research in this study is used to deeply explore the complex realities of kindergarten teachers in early childhood education in Tagum City Division. Rather than focusing on numerical data, this approach emphasizes meaning-making by understanding how teachers experience challenges such as workload demands, emotional labor, classroom management difficulties, and limited instructional resources. It also explores how teachers respond through coping strategies such as emotional regulation, time management, peer collaboration, adaptation, and self-care. Through this approach, the study captures not only the difficulties but also the resilience and meaningful practices that sustain teachers in their profession.

Furthermore, phenomenology is specifically applied to capture the essence of kindergarten teachers' lived experiences. This approach allows participants to describe their real-life challenges in teaching young learners and how they navigate these through various coping mechanisms. It provides deeper insight into how teachers sustain their commitment despite constraints in classroom conditions, instructional resources, and administrative responsibilities. Through their narratives, the study reveals how resilience is developed and maintained in early childhood education settings.

To highlight, the qualitative phenomenological approach provides a meaningful framework for understanding kindergarten teachers' experiences not as isolated events but as interconnected and ongoing realities shaped by classroom, institutional,



and contextual factors. It highlights both the challenges and adaptive strategies of teachers, which contribute valuable insights into improving support systems and strengthening early childhood education in the Tagum City Division.

Design and Procedure

This study employed a qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the Tagum City Division in relation to their challenges and coping strategies in early childhood education. Among the qualitative inquiry traditions, phenomenology was selected because it focuses on understanding how individuals experience a phenomenon and how they ascribe meaning to those experiences (Chang & Wang, 2021). In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the day-to-day teaching experiences of kindergarten teachers, particularly the challenges they encounter in early childhood instruction and the coping strategies and meaningful practices they employ to address these difficulties.

Phenomenology is concerned with lived human experience as perceived and interpreted by individuals within their natural context. It seeks to describe what teachers experience in terms of classroom challenges such as workload demands, emotional labor, classroom management difficulties, limited instructional resources, and administrative responsibilities, as well as how they respond to these through various coping mechanisms. As emphasized by Gordon (2024), phenomenological inquiry allows researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences. In this sense, the approach provides a deeper understanding of kindergarten teachers' subjective realities rather than reducing their experiences into numerical data.

In the context of this study, the phenomenological design was used to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in public elementary schools in Tagum City Division as they navigate challenges in early childhood education. The study specifically explored their encountered difficulties, coping strategies, and the insights they derived from their professional experiences. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to understand not only the nature of these challenges but also how teachers respond to them and sustain their commitment to teaching young learners despite various constraints.

In terms of procedure, the study followed a systematic qualitative research process to ensure rigor, ethical compliance, and credibility of findings. First, permission and ethical clearance were secured from the appropriate authorities, including the Schools Division Office and school principals of selected public elementary schools in Tagum City Division. Upon approval, participants were identified through purposive sampling, selecting kindergarten teachers who had experienced significant challenges in early childhood teaching and were willing to share their lived experiences.

Second, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the research process. Third, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing participants to freely narrate their experiences regarding teaching challenges and coping strategies. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting to encourage openness and honesty. With participants' permission, responses were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to capture contextual and non-verbal cues.

Fourth, the collected data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. This process involved repeated reading of transcripts, coding significant statements, clustering similar ideas, and identifying emerging themes that reflect the shared experiences of kindergarten teachers. Through this systematic analysis, patterns related to teaching challenges and coping strategies were generated. Finally, the findings were interpreted using the phenomenological lens to identify the essential structure of teachers' lived experiences. This allowed the researcher to present a rich and meaningful description of how kindergarten teachers in Tagum City Division experience challenges and navigate them through various coping strategies and meaningful practices. Overall, the design and procedure enabled a comprehensive exploration of teachers' lived realities, ensuring that their voices were authentically represented and that the findings contributed meaningful insights into early childhood education practice.

Research Participants

The sources of data in this study were kindergarten teachers in public elementary schools in the Tagum City Division who served as the primary participants. These teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in early childhood education and their lived experiences in handling instructional demands, classroom challenges, and professional responsibilities. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), which allowed participants to provide rich and detailed narratives of their experiences, particularly on the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in managing classroom realities across different school contexts.

A total of participants from fifteen (15) public elementary schools were included in the study, ensuring a wide representation of experiences in early childhood teaching. The data collected focused solely on the participants' responses, without the use of secondary data sources, in order to maintain the authenticity and directness of their lived experiences. This approach



allowed the study to capture first-hand accounts of kindergarten teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms in their actual school environments.

Data Gathering Instrument

Qualitative data collection was achieved through various approaches, including in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. In line with these methods, this study utilized in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) as the primary data-gathering techniques to explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the Tagum City Division. These methods generated rich, contextually grounded narratives from participants, focusing on their challenges and coping strategies in early childhood education (Lim, 2024). Participants responded to carefully designed open-ended questions, which allowed them to share detailed accounts of their experiences and supported the identification of emerging themes. In-depth interviews served as the core qualitative method for obtaining firsthand information from participants. This technique is effective in exploring teachers' experiences, perceptions, values, and professional practices in depth. Guided by the research objectives, the interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on the study's core concerns (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Participants were regarded as experts of their own lived experiences, while the researcher acted as an active listener who encouraged open and reflective responses.

During the interview process, participants were given the opportunity to express their experiences in their own words. Follow-up questions and probing techniques were used to clarify responses and deepen discussion when necessary. The researcher ensured neutrality throughout the process by avoiding leading questions and minimizing verbal or non-verbal cues that could influence responses. This approach strengthened the authenticity and credibility of the data collected and supported a more accurate representation of participants' lived experiences.

Focus group discussions were also conducted to gather collective insights on the challenges and coping strategies of kindergarten teachers. As emphasized by Morgan (2024), FGD allows participants to interact, clarify, and expand on shared experiences, making it a valuable method for triangulating qualitative data. In this study, FGDs provided an interactive environment where teachers reflected on their classroom experiences, compared perspectives, and discussed common challenges in early childhood education. This interaction enriched the data and contributed to deeper thematic understanding.

Data collection was conducted in safe, accessible, and comfortable locations for participants, including their respective school settings when appropriate. The study involved ten (10) in-depth interviews and five (5) focus group discussions, ensuring a broad and diverse range of perspectives from kindergarten teachers across different public elementary schools in the Tagum City Division. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supported by field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, the interview guide and FGD questions underwent expert validation. Three (3) experts in early childhood education and qualitative research reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, coherence, and alignment with the research questions. Their feedback was carefully considered, and necessary revisions were incorporated to improve the quality of the instrument. This validation process ensured that the questions were appropriate for eliciting meaningful and accurate responses from participants. Furthermore, the finalized data-gathering instrument is presented in Appendix A, while the results of the validation of the research instrument, including expert comments and ratings, are included in Appendix B. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study.

Sampling Technique

This phenomenological study involved fifteen (15) kindergarten teachers from public elementary schools in the Tagum City Division. Of these, ten (10) participated in in-depth interviews (IDI), while five (5) took part in a focus group discussion (FGD). The sample size was deemed appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, which typically includes a small number of participants to allow for rich and in-depth exploration of lived experiences, as supported by Creswell and Poth (2023).

The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability technique used to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. This approach ensured that only kindergarten teachers with direct experience in early childhood teaching and relevant classroom challenges were included in the study, thereby providing meaningful and information-rich data for analysis (Nikolopoulou, 2023).

Data Collection

The collection of research data followed a systematic qualitative process to ensure rigor, transparency, and ethical compliance. As noted by Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative data are commonly gathered through interviews and focus group discussions, which are appropriate for capturing rich and in-depth accounts of participants' lived experiences.



Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the Ethics Committee on November 22, 2025, to ensure that all procedures adhered to established ethical standards. The Ethics Compliance Certificate is presented in Appendix B. This was followed by the endorsement from the Dean of the Graduate School of Rizal Memorial Colleges (RMC), also granted on November 22, 2025, which formally approved the conduct of the study and is shown in Appendix C. Subsequently, approval was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS) of Tagum City on January 27, 2026, ensuring institutional authorization within the education division, as documented in Appendix D. Furthermore, permission from the selected school heads was secured on February 9, 10, 17, 18, and 22, 2026, allowing the study to be conducted in their respective schools, as reflected in Appendix E.

After securing all necessary permissions, an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was developed and validated by experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. This instrument served as the primary guide for both in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), ensuring consistency in data collection while allowing flexibility for participants to freely express their experiences.

Before the actual data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Only those who provided written consent participated in the study, ensuring respect for autonomy and ethical integrity. Data collection was conducted through IDIs and FGDs with selected kindergarten teachers in a private and comfortable setting within their school environments. This arrangement encouraged openness and honest sharing of experiences related to early childhood teaching. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Following data collection, all recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and fidelity to participants' responses. When necessary, responses in the local language were translated into English to facilitate analysis. The data were then examined using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework, allowing for the identification of significant patterns and themes related to teachers' challenges and coping strategies.

To ensure credibility and accuracy of findings, the analyzed data were reviewed by a qualified expert for validation. Feedback and suggested revisions were incorporated before finalizing the results. Throughout the entire process, strict confidentiality and data protection measures were observed. All recordings and transcripts were securely stored, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all information was used strictly for academic purposes. After completion of the study, data were properly managed and safeguarded in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

According to Dye (2025), the analysis of qualitative data involves several key steps, including data logging, anecdotes, vignettes, data coding, and thematic analysis. In this study, the focus centred on the processes of data coding and thematic analysis.

Data coding is a method of organizing information that condenses extensive raw data into smaller, meaningful segments directly related to the research questions. This process allows the data to be divided into manageable portions, from which recurring patterns and insights can be identified. As Dawadi (2020) highlighted, codes that appear repeatedly across the dataset are more likely to evolve into significant themes. In this study, the researcher will use highlighters and colored pens to mark notable and recurring ideas within the transcripts. Segments marked with the same color will be grouped together and labeled with concise words or phrases that reflect the emerging themes.

Thematic analysis, on the other hand, involves identifying recurring ideas as themes and distinguishing distinct content as categories during data interpretation. The analyst determines which segments constitute themes or categories before proceeding to higher levels of analysis, allowing for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the data (Ozden, 2024).

In this study, thematic analysis followed the coding process, with participants' responses organized and examined from broad concepts to more specific ideas. Responses sharing similar meanings were clustered to form comprehensive themes, and each theme required at least three core ideas to ensure its validity and representativeness.

The analytical framework developed by Colaizzi (1978), as referenced in Praveena and Sasikumar (2021), provided a systematic method for analyzing qualitative data, focusing on identifying the core elements of participants' lived experiences. This approach consists of several stages, including a detailed review of interview transcripts, extraction of significant statements, interpretation of meanings, and grouping of related themes. Colaizzi's method emphasized maintaining the authenticity of participants' accounts while exploring the depth and complexity of their experiences. It was especially useful in phenomenological research, offering a structured way to derive meaningful insights and develop a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.



In this study, Colaizzi's analytical framework was employed to carefully examine the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with kindergarten teachers. This approach facilitated the identification of rich and detailed insights from the qualitative data. By following Colaizzi's structured steps, the analysis remained grounded in the teachers' own narratives, capturing the essence of their lived experiences while maintaining methodological rigor and credibility.

Analyzing the Interviews. The first phase of Colaizzi's analytical framework involved an in-depth exploration of the interview data. In this study, the process started with a meticulous review of the interview transcripts, engaging closely with the participants' accounts to gain a deep understanding of their lived experiences. Each transcript was read several times to develop thorough familiarity with the content and to form an initial grasp of the overall context. This careful examination captured the complexity and subtlety of each participant's perspective, providing a strong foundation for the following stages of analysis. Emphasizing the richness of the data ensures that all meaningful insights were identified and incorporated into the study.

Identifying Key Phrases. Once the interviews had been analyzed, key phrases and significant statements were identified from the data. These excerpts reflected the core experiences and perspectives of kindergarten teachers regarding early childhood teaching. Particular attention was given to statements that highlighted the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used in their teaching practices. Selecting these essential statements enabled the study to capture the most relevant and meaningful portions of the data that addressed the research questions.

Identifying Meanings and Coding. After identifying the key phrases, their meanings were interpreted and codes were assigned to each relevant segment. These codes functioned as labels that represented the underlying concepts and emerging themes within the data. This step was crucial for organizing and categorizing the information, facilitating a more systematic analysis. Coding also enabled the identification of patterns and recurring ideas across the interviews, supporting a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences.

Organizing Codes into Groups. Once the data had been coded, the codes were organized into clusters based on their similarities and relationships. This grouping process helped to identify overarching themes that represented various aspects of the participants' experiences. Organizing the codes in this way provided structure to the analysis and emphasized the main factors influencing the transition process. This method ensured that all significant elements of the data were considered, offering a comprehensive and coherent portrayal of the participants' perspectives.

Describing the Phenomenon. At this stage, the objective was to present a thorough account of the phenomenon as lived by the kindergarten teachers. The themes and key insights identified in the earlier steps were combined to create a comprehensive narrative. This description emphasized both the challenges faced by the teachers and the strategies they utilized to address difficulties in early childhood teaching. Constructing this detailed account enabled a holistic understanding of the teachers' experiences and perspectives.

Identifying the Fundamental Structure. In this phase, the focus was on identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon, concentrating on the core elements that characterized how kindergarten teachers carried out early childhood teaching. The themes that emerged from the analysis were carefully reviewed, with particular attention to the most influential factors affecting the transition process. This process allowed for conclusions to be drawn regarding the key aspects of the teachers' experiences. Determining the fundamental structure offered a clear understanding of the elements shaping their teaching experience and highlighted the factors most crucial for successful adaptation in the school setting.

Validating the Findings. In the final phase, the findings were validated through feedback from both the participants and field experts. The identified themes and narratives were presented to the kindergarten teachers to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflect their lived experiences. Additionally, a panel of experts or colleagues examined the analysis to evaluate its accuracy, validity, and methodological rigor. This validation process enhanced the credibility of the findings and ensured they were firmly rooted in the participants' actual experiences. Undertaking this step strengthened the reliability of the results and confirmed that the study's conclusions were well-supported by the data. Following Colaizzi's framework, the interview data were systematically analyzed to reveal meaningful insights and construct a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of kindergarten teachers in the Tagum City Division.

Figure 1 shows the processes of Colaizzi's thematic analysis which are applied in analyzing the data of the study. This highlights each phase, from reviewing interview transcripts and identifying significant statements to formulating meanings, clustering themes, and constructing a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. By visually representing these steps, Figure 1 clarifies how the analytical framework organizes and structures the data analysis process. It serves as a reference for understanding how the study captures the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers while ensuring methodological rigor, transparency, and consistency throughout the analysis.



Ethical Consideration

This study placed strong emphasis on ethical considerations to ensure that the research was conducted with integrity while protecting the rights, dignity, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Since the study explored the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in early childhood teaching, ethical principles were carefully observed throughout all stages of the research process. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Rizal Memorial Colleges Ethics Review Committee to ensure responsible and respectful engagement with participants.

Social Value. The social value of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the realities experienced by kindergarten teachers in public elementary schools in the Tagum City Division. By exploring their classroom challenges, instructional demands, emotional experiences, and coping mechanisms, the study generated meaningful insights that may help school heads, educational leaders, and policymakers strengthen support systems for teachers in early childhood education. The findings may also contribute to the development of programs and interventions that promote teacher well-being, instructional effectiveness, and improved learning experiences among kindergarten learners.

Informed Consent Form. Before the conduct of the in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, objectives, procedures, and scope. The informed consent form clearly explained that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were also informed that the information they shared regarding their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies in early childhood teaching would be treated confidentially and used strictly for academic purposes. Sufficient time was given for participants to read, understand, and ask questions regarding the consent form before signing it.

Vulnerability of Research Participants. The researcher carefully considered the emotional and professional vulnerability of kindergarten teachers who participated in the study. Since the discussions involved personal experiences related to workload, classroom management difficulties, emotional stress, and instructional challenges, interviews and discussions were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner. Participants were never forced to answer questions that caused discomfort, and they were free to stop the interview at any point if they felt uneasy. To further protect their identities, pseudonyms and coded labels were used throughout the study. Codes such as T1 to T10 were assigned to participants in the in-depth interviews, while FGD1 to FGD5 were used for participants in the focus group discussions.

Benefits, Risks, and Safety. The researcher ensured that the possible benefits and risks of participation were clearly communicated to all participants. The study may benefit kindergarten teachers by providing a platform where they can express their experiences and challenges in early childhood teaching. Likewise, the findings may support the development of teacher support programs and intervention strategies within schools. However, possible risks included emotional discomfort while recalling stressful classroom experiences or professional difficulties. To minimize these risks, the researcher maintained a supportive, non-threatening, and respectful environment throughout the interviews and discussions. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any stage.

Privacy and Confidentiality of Information. Strict confidentiality measures were implemented throughout the study to protect participants' privacy. Personal identifiers were removed from all transcripts, reports, and records to prevent recognition of participants and their respective schools. Audio recordings, transcripts, and digital files were stored securely using password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Information shared during the IDIs and FGDs regarding classroom experiences, school environments, and coping practices was treated with utmost confidentiality and used solely for research purposes.

Justice. The principle of justice was observed by ensuring fairness and equality in the selection and treatment of participants. Kindergarten teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria directly aligned with the objectives of the study, particularly their experiences in early childhood teaching within public elementary schools in the Tagum City Division. No participant was favored or discriminated against during the research process. All participants were treated with equal respect and were provided with the same opportunities to share their lived experiences and perspectives.

Transparency. Transparency was maintained by clearly explaining the purpose, objectives, and procedures of the study to participants and school authorities. The researcher openly discussed how data would be gathered, analyzed, interpreted, and presented in the study. Participants were informed that the findings would focus on understanding kindergarten teachers' lived experiences related to challenges and coping strategies in early childhood teaching. This openness encouraged trust, cooperation, and honest sharing of experiences throughout the conduct of the research.

Conflict of Interest. The researcher maintained neutrality and objectivity throughout the conduct of the study to avoid conflicts of interest. The collection, analysis, and interpretation of data were guided solely by the objectives of the research.



and not influenced by personal relationships, institutional affiliations, or personal opinions. The researcher ensured that the participants' narratives regarding their experiences in kindergarten teaching were represented accurately and fairly without distortion or bias.

Qualification of the Researcher. The researcher possessed the necessary academic preparation and research training relevant to qualitative phenomenological inquiry and early childhood education. Knowledge and training in conducting interviews, handling qualitative data, and applying thematic analysis enabled the researcher to gather and interpret participants' lived experiences systematically and ethically. Continuous consultation with research advisers and adherence to institutional research standards further strengthened the rigor and credibility of the study.

Adequacy of Facilities. The researcher ensured that adequate facilities and resources were prepared to support the effective conduct of the study. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in quiet, safe, and comfortable locations within the school environment to encourage open communication and minimize distractions. Recording devices, interview guides, notebooks, and secure storage systems were prepared in advance to facilitate accurate data collection and proper management of participants' responses. These preparations ensured a smooth research process while protecting participants' comfort, privacy, and confidentiality.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the three research questions: the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers, their coping strategies and meaningful practices, and the proposed intervention program developed from the findings. The results were organized into major themes and sub-themes derived from the responses of the participants.

Challenges Encountered by Kindergarten Teachers in Early Childhood Teaching

The findings revealed that kindergarten teachers experience multiple challenges in early childhood teaching. These challenges were grouped into three major themes: **emotional and developmental challenges, physical and instructional constraints, and daily teaching realities and emotional-physical demands.**

First, teachers encountered emotional and developmental challenges related to learners' separation anxiety, tantrums, adjustment difficulties, and varying levels of readiness. Many learners were still developing emotional regulation, attention span, self-control, and classroom behavior. Teachers also reported that limited home support made school adjustment more difficult for some children. These findings suggest that kindergarten teaching requires not only instructional skills but also patience, emotional support, and continuous guidance.

Second, teachers experienced physical and instructional constraints, particularly large class sizes, limited resources, curriculum pressure, time constraints, and administrative workload. These conditions affected their ability to provide individualized attention, implement play-based activities, and adjust lessons based on learners' developmental needs. The findings show that structural limitations reduce instructional flexibility and increase the pressure on teachers.

Third, kindergarten teaching was described as busy, fast-paced, joyful, but physically and emotionally demanding. Teachers shared that their daily work requires constant movement, classroom management, preparation of materials, and emotional attention to learners. Although teaching young children is fulfilling, it also causes fatigue and stress. This highlights the dual nature of kindergarten teaching as both meaningful and exhausting.

Overall, the findings indicate that kindergarten teachers face interconnected emotional, instructional, and workload-related challenges. These results support existing literature stating that early childhood teachers often experience emotional labor, classroom management demands, limited resources, and heavy workloads in meeting the needs of young learners.

Coping Strategies and Meaningful Practices of Kindergarten Teachers

The study also found that kindergarten teachers use various coping strategies and meaningful practices to manage the demands of early childhood education. These were grouped into three major themes: **emotional regulation, meaningful instructional practices, and professional and social support resources.**

Under emotional regulation, teachers used patience, self-control, short breaks, relaxation techniques, time management, self-care, and positive thinking to manage stress. Peer support also helped them release emotional pressure, share ideas, and gain reassurance from colleagues. These strategies helped teachers remain calm and resilient despite classroom challenges.

In terms of instructional practices, teachers used play-based and hands-on activities such as storytelling, songs, games, manipulatives, group work, and actual activities to sustain learner engagement. They also used classroom routines and



structured learning approaches to guide children's behavior and improve classroom management. In addition, teachers practiced differentiated instruction by adjusting strategies based on learners' abilities, readiness, and needs.

Professional and social support also helped teachers cope with their responsibilities. Collaboration with colleagues, mentoring, professional development, administrative support, and family-community involvement strengthened their teaching practices. Teachers emphasized that support from school leaders, parents, and the community improves both teacher motivation and learner development.

These findings show that kindergarten teachers do not rely on one strategy alone. Instead, they combine personal coping, instructional adjustment, peer collaboration, and stakeholder support to manage classroom challenges and sustain effective teaching.

Proposed Intervention Program

Based on the findings, the study proposes the **STRIVE-K Program: Strengthening Teaching Resilience, Instruction, Values, and Engagement in Kindergarten Education**. The program aims to enhance kindergarten teachers' emotional well-being, instructional effectiveness, and professional support systems.

The program has three main components. The first component, **Emotional Regulation in Early Childhood Teaching**, focuses on stress management, patience, self-regulation, relaxation, peer support, time management, and self-care. Activities may include stress management seminars, mindfulness exercises, reflective journaling, teacher sharing circles, peer mentoring, and wellness planning.

The second component, **Meaningful Instructional Practices for Student Engagement**, focuses on play-based learning, classroom routines, and differentiated instruction. Activities may include demonstration teaching, workshops on storytelling and games, classroom routine design, behavior management training, learner profiling, and differentiated lesson planning.

The third component, **Professional and Social Resources Supporting Teaching Practice**, focuses on collaboration, leadership support, and family-community engagement. Activities may include Learning Action Cell sessions, peer coaching, best practices sharing, school leadership dialogues, workload review meetings, parent orientation, and community engagement activities.

The program will be implemented through school-based seminars, workshops, LAC sessions, peer collaboration, and stakeholder engagement activities. It will be monitored through attendance records, pre-test and post-test surveys, classroom observations, and feedback from teachers, school heads, and parents. Its effectiveness will be evaluated based on improvements in teacher resilience, instructional practice, stakeholder collaboration, learner engagement, and classroom adjustment.

Overall, the STRIVE-K Program provides a responsive intervention framework that addresses the emotional, instructional, and institutional needs of kindergarten teachers. By strengthening teacher well-being, improving classroom practices, and promoting collaboration among schools, families, and communities, the program is expected to support more effective and sustainable kindergarten teaching.

Summary

This section presents the synthesis of the study's key findings and discusses their implications for educational practice, teacher development, and early childhood education support systems, as well as directions for future research. The study focused on exploring the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in early childhood teaching, their coping strategies and meaningful practices in addressing these challenges, and the development of a proposed intervention program grounded in these findings. By examining the narratives of kindergarten teachers within the research context, the study provides a deeper understanding of how early childhood teaching is experienced in real classroom settings, particularly in relation to emotional demands, instructional constraints, and professional support needs.

A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers and the meanings they attached to their daily teaching challenges and coping practices. This approach allowed the participants to freely share their perceptions, difficulties, and adaptive strategies in managing young learners, delivering instruction, and sustaining their professional commitment. Through systematic thematic analysis, recurring patterns were identified, highlighting challenges such as emotional and developmental difficulties among learners, physical and instructional constraints, and demanding classroom realities, alongside coping strategies such as emotional regulation, meaningful instructional practices, and reliance on professional and social support systems.

The synthesis of findings reveals that kindergarten teaching is a highly complex and demanding profession that requires both emotional resilience and instructional adaptability. While teachers continuously strive to create engaging and



developmentally appropriate learning experiences, their effectiveness is influenced by learner-related challenges, classroom conditions, and institutional support structures. At the same time, their coping strategies and meaningful practices demonstrate their commitment, creativity, and professionalism in handling early childhood education demands. These findings underscore the importance of structured support systems and targeted interventions to strengthen teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness in kindergarten education. Building on these results, the following section presents the implications for educational practice and policy, followed by recommendations for future research.

Implications

The findings of this study on the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in early childhood teaching have important implications for classroom practice, teacher development, school leadership, and educational policy. Overall, the results suggest that kindergarten teaching is a highly demanding profession characterized by emotional, developmental, instructional, and structural challenges that require holistic and sustained support systems to ensure teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness.

First, the theme on emotional and developmental challenges among learners implies that schools and education stakeholders need to strengthen early childhood support systems that address learners' emotional needs, behavioral differences, and readiness levels. The presence of adjustment difficulties, varied developmental readiness, and gaps in home-school emotional support suggests that kindergarten classrooms require more coordinated intervention between teachers, parents, and support personnel. This implies the need for school-based guidance support, structured transition programs for learners, and stronger parent education initiatives to help children adapt more effectively to school routines and expectations.

Second, the findings on physical and instructional constraints imply the need for improved learning conditions that support effective early childhood instruction. Large class sizes, limited instructional materials, curriculum demands, and administrative workload indicate that teachers face structural barriers that affect the quality of instruction. This suggests that school administrators and policymakers should consider reducing class size, providing adequate teaching resources, and rationalizing non-teaching tasks. It also implies that curriculum implementation in kindergarten should remain flexible and developmentally appropriate, allowing teachers to prioritize play-based, experiential, and learner-centered strategies rather than being constrained by rigid instructional demands.

Third, the theme on daily teaching realities and emotional-physical demands implies that kindergarten teaching requires strong emotional resilience and sustained well-being support. The experiences of exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and the fast-paced nature of classroom life suggest that teachers are continuously exposed to high levels of stress. This highlights the need for institutionalized wellness programs, peer support systems, and regular reflective practices within schools. It also implies that school leaders should recognize emotional labor as an integral part of teaching and provide structured opportunities for stress management, collegial support, and recovery.

Fourth, across all themes, the findings imply that teachers' coping strategies such as emotional regulation, peer collaboration, adaptation, improvisation, and self-care should be formally strengthened through structured professional development programs. This supports the implementation of the proposed STRIVE-K intervention program, which focuses on enhancing emotional resilience, improving instructional practices, and strengthening professional and community support systems. It implies that teacher development programs should go beyond technical training and include emotional well-being, reflective practice, and collaborative learning mechanisms.

Finally, the findings suggest that improving kindergarten education requires a holistic and system-level approach that integrates teacher support, instructional improvement, and stakeholder collaboration. Strengthening leadership support, enhancing family involvement, and promoting a culture of collaboration in schools are essential to sustaining effective early childhood education. Overall, the study implies that quality kindergarten education is not only dependent on teacher competence but also on the availability of strong emotional, institutional, and community support systems that enable teachers to perform their roles effectively and sustainably.

Future Directions

Based on the findings of the study, several future directions are recommended to further enhance early childhood education practices and support kindergarten teachers in managing the challenges they encounter in their professional work.

For school heads and educational administrators, the findings suggest the need to strengthen leadership practices that prioritize teacher well-being, instructional support, and the provision of adequate learning resources in kindergarten education. School leaders are encouraged to implement policies that address large class sizes, reduce excessive administrative workload, and ensure the availability of developmentally appropriate instructional materials that support play-based and experiential learning.



In addition, the establishment of structured mentoring systems, regular instructional coaching, and sustained Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions is recommended to support teachers' continuous professional growth and instructional competence. Furthermore, school heads may strengthen home-school collaboration by promoting meaningful parental involvement and community engagement programs that support learners' emotional adjustment, behavior development, and school readiness.

For kindergarten teachers, the findings highlight the importance of continuously strengthening emotional resilience, instructional effectiveness, and collaborative practices. Teachers are encouraged to further develop and sustain emotional regulation strategies, time management skills, and self-care practices to effectively manage classroom stress and workload demands. They should also continue enhancing the use of play-based learning, differentiated instruction, and learner-centered approaches to better address diverse learner needs and promote active engagement. Moreover, active participation in professional development activities, peer mentoring, and collaborative learning opportunities is recommended to continuously improve instructional practices and share effective strategies in managing early childhood classrooms.

For future researchers, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted in other divisions or educational settings to broaden the understanding of kindergarten teachers' lived experiences across different contexts. Future research may also consider using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to examine the relationships among teacher well-being, coping strategies, instructional practices, and learner outcomes. In addition, further studies may explore the effectiveness of intervention programs such as the STRIVE-K program in improving teacher resilience, instructional quality, and classroom management. It is also suggested that future research include the perspectives of school heads, parents, and learners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of early childhood education challenges and support systems.

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