Early Childhood Care and Development from the Lens of Teachers: A Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood care and education emphasizes the child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs for a strong foundation of learning and well-being. The study sought to determine the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers involved in early childhood care and development among their learners in the Schools Division of Ilocos Sur during the COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenology was adopted with purposive sampling used to recruit participants with the following inclusive criteria: (1) kindergarten teachers, (2) involved in early childhood care and development, (3) male or female, (4) living in Ilocos Sur and (5) willing voluntarily to participate. The interview guide was used to gather and was validated by three teacher-experts. Significant findings revealed four major themes: (1) Psychological impact (stress and worries, lack of sleep, and fear for one's life), (2) Personal growth (attending relevant webinars, attending online graduate school classes), (3) Support from Stakeholders (support from fellow teachers, support from local government, and support from community), and (4) Measures to achieve learning continuity (engage with parents, being technologically-competent, developing lessons for learners). Finally, the study recommends that the proposed early childhood care and development program may be considered by the community in partnership with the public school. Likewise, Kindergarten teachers may consider pursuing relevant training on enhancing learning among kindergarten pupils.

KEYWORDS: Kindergarten Pupils, Phenomenology, Major Themes, Thematic Analysis, Early Childhood Care

INTRODUCTION

Because of the global COVID-19 epidemic, schooling has undergone radical transformations. Precautions and measures enacted to stop the spread of the illness have affected the learning experiences of approximately 90% of the world's student population, more than 1.5 billion students in 165 countries, according to UNESCO.

Since there have been no proven occurrences of COVID-19 in children and the mortality rate is very low among those who have been infected, medical research shows that COVID-19 is not a children's illness (Deville & Song, 2022). It is clear, however, that this worldwide epidemic has far-reaching consequences for the early development of young infants. COVID-19 not only stopped children from participating in typical childhood activities like going to school, spending time with relatives and friends, and going on adventures in the great outdoors, but it also halted the positive effects on their social and emotional well-being that come from these kinds of outings.

In the Philippines, the process of child development is unique in every child, but the manner and sequence are predictable, hence early care and education must take into consideration the age of the child and the natural developmental stages of childhood. Early childhood care and education puts emphasis on the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of the child for a strong foundation of learning and well-being all throughout life. Previous studies present evidence that early childhood education affects a child's holistic development into adulthood; therefore, addressing discrepancies between the existing care and education programs and children's level of understanding is important to maximize a child's development potential (Estrada et al., 2019).

Children are innately susceptible because they rely on people to provide their most basic needs, which makes them particularly vulnerable (McGowan, 2022). When those individuals lack the resources to deal with the immediate, urgent, and numerous adaptive demands that a pandemic places on families, and when support services do not exist, fail, or cease to exist, it may result in unmitigated devastation for the most vulnerable children and adolescents.

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Likewise, acute pandemics exacerbate problems for children who are living in poverty, who are chronically ill, who have disabilities, who live in remote areas, who are marginalized by mainstream society (such as indigenous people and migrant workers), who are neglected, or who have been the victims of neglect or abuse. The rapid and obvious implications of Covid-19 exposure in young children are troubling, but nothing is known about the long-term repercussions of this exposure. Education has a particularly important role to play in the health and well-being of children and adolescents, and it has a long-lasting influence on their lives as adults as well (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

With little doubt, the global health pandemic has created unparalleled upheaval in all sectors of human existence as well as in educational institutions around the globe. School closures caused by COVID are estimated to have affected 1.2 billion school children, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Between late March and April 2020, more than 90 percent of all enrolled learners worldwide experienced nationwide school closures and were confined at home. In many respects, adjusting to COVID-19 has evolved into a massive, multinational social experiment that has not only resulted in a loss of learning during the lockdown, but also has the potential to reduce educational chances in the long run, as has been shown.

As a school principal, you must concentrate on the education of children under the age of five, since the COVID-19 epidemic presents a significant problem for them, particularly for kindergarten instructors. The responsibility of a school principal is to guarantee that education is implemented, even among the youngest students; nevertheless, this is a challenging task, which is why the researcher decided to conduct this study in response to this circumstance.

RELATED LITERATURE

The legal basis of early childhood care and development is Republic Act 8980. The law promulgates a comprehensive policy and a national system for Early Childhood Care and Development, providing funds for other purposes. The said law declares that the policy of the State to promote the rights of children to survival, development, and special protection with full recognition of the nature of childhood and its special needs; and to support parents in their roles as primary caregivers and as their children's first teachers. The State shall institutionalize a National System for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) that is comprehensive, integrative, and sustainable, that involves multi-sectoral and inter-agency collaboration at the national and local levels among government; among service providers, families, and communities; and the public and private sectors, non-government organizations, professional associations, and academic institutions, This System shall promote the inclusion of children with special needs and advocate respect for cultural diversity. It shall be anchored on complementary strategies for ECCD that include service delivery for children from conception to age six (6), educating parents and caregivers, encouraging the active involvement of parents and communities in ECCD programs, raising awareness about the importance of ECCD, and promoting community development efforts that improve the quality of life for young children and families.

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) System. This refers to the full range of health, nutrition, early education, and social services programs that provide for the basic holistic needs of young children from birth to age six (6), to promote their optimum growth and development (Andersen, 2019). These programs include (a) Center-based programs, such as the day care service established under Republic Act No. 6972, public and private pre-schools, kindergarten or school-based programs, community or church-based early childhood education programs initiated by non-government organizations or people's organizations, workplace-related childcare and education programs, child-minding centers, health centers and stations; and home-based programs, such as the neighborhood-based play groups, family day care programs, parent education and home visiting programs.

Likewise, Estrada and Marcelo (2017) focused on early care and education in the Philippines and its public health implications. First, this review briefly discussed basic principles and theories of child development and the legal and administrative fundamentals of early childhood care and development in the Philippines. It also provided a discussion on the public health implications of early childcare and education. Finally, it concluded with providing recommendations to parents and the education and health sectors which can contribute to the enhancement of early education in the Philippines.

Moreover, critical to labor market outcomes and quality of life, education is the single most important predictor of individual well-being and societal development. From an individual or societal investment perspective, the returns to education are substantial, estimates for the labor market returns to each additional year of schooling typically vary between 6 and 12%. Education also produces positive societal benefits through improvements in peer interactions, reductions in crime, and reductions in risky behaviors including drug use (Peet & McCoy, 2017).

While a growing literature highlights the importance of early life conditions, understanding the relative contributions of multiple domains of early childhood development (ECD) to educational attainment is still limited. Early life nutritional,

environmental, socio-economic, and other conditions are known to impact early physical development and predict educational attainment, but data measuring both early cognitive development and later-life educational attainment are scarce (Yizengaw & Tessega, 2020).

All these literatures are relevant in the conduct of the study because it provides an insights and background that guides the researcher to pursue the research investigation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Generally, this study sought to determine the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers involved in the early childhood care and development among their pupils in the Schools Division of Ilocos Sur during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions?

1. What are lived experiences of kindergarten teachers involved in the early childhood care and development during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What early childhood care and development program can be proposed to address the findings of the study?

SCOPE AND DELIMITATION

The purpose of this research was to determine the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers involved in early childhood care and development among their pupils in the Schools Division of Ilocos Sur during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the project collected data from kindergarten teachers using an interview guide. It took place in the school year 2021-2022 and will present and analyze data collected from chosen respondents. It included integrated schools in the first district of Ilocos Sur.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present study, phenomenology was adopted, the aim being to examine in more detail the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers involved in the early childhood care and development among their pupils in the Schools Division of Ilocos Sur during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Chen (2017) a phenomenology unlocks the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants.

Sampling. This study was conducted in the public elementary schools of the Schools Division of Ilocos Sur. Specifically, the locale involved integrated school in the first district of Ilocos Sur. Moreover, the researcher employed purposive sampling (Crossman, 2020) with the following inclusive criteria: (1) kindergarten teachers, (2) involved in early childhood care and development, (3) male or female, (4) living in Ilocos Sur and (5) willing voluntarily to participate. In addition, there will be 10 participants, 5 males and 5 females in Integrated Schools in the first district.

Data Gathering Tools. The interview guide was used to gather the needed data. The interview guide was validated by 3 teacher-experts. This was pilot tested to kindergarten teachers but will no longer participate in the study.

Ethical Issues. The research employed ethical considerations. The researcher provided complete information to the participants such as the purposes of the study, its benefits and significance for them to make an intelligent decision before they participate (autonomy). Likewise, the researcher promoted comfort and ensure only the best for the respondents (beneficence) and prevent any form of harm and injury (non-maleficence). In conducting the data, the respondents will be treated equally (justice). Likewise, the identity of the respondents will be kept secret (anonymity) and that their answers will not be divulged in any circumstance (confidentiality). Likewise, the participants accorded courtesy and politeness (respect). All information will always be kept secret (privacy). Only the good outcomes will be carried out to the participants (teleology). The researcher performed her duty (deontology) to ensure all things are in order.

The research protocols that were included in the data gathering with the selected respondents involve the basic health protocols. This involved the use of face mask/face shield when collecting data. Likewise, the researcher likewise, will stay at least 2-4 meters away from the respondents to maintain social distancing. It was also imperative to use alcohol for both researcher and respondents to maintain proper hygiene. If it is possible, a temperature check was done to ensure that none of the two are suffering from fever. This will be done throughout the data gathering.

Plan for Data Analysis. The narrations of the participants were scrutinized using thematic analysis. Likewise, the study navigated the Colaizzi's seven-step process, as cited by Morrow, Rodriguez, and King (2015). In the analysis of data, the recounts of the participants will be perused countless times. In addition, the compelling statements were recognized from the narrations. Consequently, the essence arose from deep reflections whereby these will metamorphose into sub-themes. Eventually, the sub-themes were uniquely clustered into major themes. However, the repetitive findings will be expunged from the entire structure. Lastly, to authenticate the findings, the researchers reached out to the participants and will confer the results with them.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the basic research presents the results and discussion from the data gathered from the participants

Lived Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers on Early Childhood Care and Development

The study conducted interviews to ten kindergarten teachers in the Schools Division Office of Ilocos Sur. The central question was, "What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing early childhood development during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the narrations of the participants, four major themes emerged: Psychological impact (stress and worries, lack of sleep and fear for one's life) Personal growth (attending relevant webinars, attending online graduate school classes), Support from Stakeholders (support from fellow teachers, support from local government, and support from community), Measures to achieve learning continuity (engage with parents, being technologically competent, developing lessons for learners).

In Table 1, it presents the excerpts of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the implementation of quality learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Excerpts from the first Major Themes "Psychological Impact"

Subthemes	Participant Code	Sample Quotations
Stress	P2	➢ Ang hirap ng ganito, nakaka-stress dahil ang hirap turuan ang mga kindergarten pupils, gusto ko man magturo ng tama, di naman kami nagkikita, modules na lang ginagamit naming.
	P4	➢ Kung ako tatanungin, nakaka-stress ang isang teacher na nagtuturo sa mga kindergarten dahil sa hindi kami nagkikita kita.
	P9	➢ Mahirap magturo, gagawa ng lecture, tapos kausap ko sila using modules, tapos hindi nila maintindihan, tapos magulang nag-aanswer, very stressful.
Lack of Sleep	P1	➢ Sa paggawa ng mga lessons, na hirap gawin, nahihirapan ako matulog, kulang ako sa tulog araw-araw.
	P3	➢ Ikaw ba naman, mahihirapan kang matulog sa hirap magturo sa mga bata na hindi kayo nagkikita, modules lang.
	P5	➢ Kulang ako sa tulog sa kakaisaip kung paano ako magturo sa mga kindergarten pupils
Fear for One's Life	P5	➢ Natatakot ako sa buhay ko, baka magkasakit ako sa COVID
	P7	➢ Sa mga nangyayari, sa mga napapanood ko sa TV, takot ako sa mangyayari sa akin due to the pandemic
	P10	➢ Mahirap lumabas, kasi baka mahawaan ng COVID, kaya natatakot ako para sa buhay ko.

Subtheme Number 1 – Stress. The first subtheme that supports the major theme is stress. With the COVID-19 pandemic, stress is experienced by the kindergarten teachers which was reflected in their narrations. Educators show a high risk of developing anxiety, stress, and burnout because of being exposed to a wide range of work stressors in their daily activities, such as with their exposure to COVID-19 (Rubilar & Oros, 2021). Furthermore, there are demands of being a teacher which include behavior problems and student absences, administrative demands, a shortage of teaching materials, and so on. Among the resources, the availability and help of school support personnel, administrative support, community support and specialized training were assessed.

Subtheme Number 2 – Lack of Sleep. On the other hand, lack of sleep was shown to be experienced by the kindergarten teachers. This stems from societal changes caused by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the potential staggering of school schedules to decrease the number of students in classes, flexible parental work schedules, and fewer extracurricular activities, afford a unique opportunity to overcome previous barriers that limited our ability to better align school start times with the delayed circadian biology of learners (Gruber & Saha, 2020).

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Subtheme Number 3 – Fear for One's Life. The last subtheme that emerged from the narrations of the participants is fear for one's life. Their exposure to COVID may have caused the kindergarten teachers to fear for their life. This phenomenon was experienced by the teachers due to the devastating effects of the virus (Boira & Palomino, 2020).

Likewise, the health system gradually collapsed due to the tremendous increase in number of COVID-19 cases, and hospital infrastructures were not able to transfer/manage patients with respiratory conditions. This led to the need to increase the numbers of short stay units, hospitalization beds, general supplies, ventilators, and protective and safety equipment (PPE). This shortage was particularly marked in the provision of biosafe protective clothing and equipment among health professionals. The percentage of COVID-19-positive health workers was estimated to be close to 20.4% (44,000 infected professionals) by the first week of May, and increasing with a rapid growing rate

Furthermore, in Table 2, it presents the excerpts of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers with the emerged theme, "Personal Growth"

Table 2. Excerpts from the first Major Themes "Personal Growth"

Subthemes	Participant Code	Sample Quotations
Attending relevant webinars	P2	➤ Ang hirap ng ganito, nakaka-stress dahil ang hirap turuan ang mga kindergarten pupils, gusto ko man magturo ng tama, di naman kami nagkikita, modules na lang ginagamit naming.
	P7	➤ Ako ay may mga webinars para ma-improve ako sa teaching and learning process.
	P9	➤ Magandang mag-attend sa mga webinar kasi, it can improve my skills in teaching.
Online graduate school classes	P6	➤ Ako ay nag-enroll sa graduate school na online ang method of teaching, gusto ko naman kasi may natutunan naman ako
	P8	➤ I enrolled in the graduate school, master's program so that I am trained and provided with new wisdom and knowledge
	P10	➤ I like this, I can finish my graduate school so that I can improve myself professionally.

Subtheme Number 1 – Attending Relevant Webinars. The first subtheme that emerged from the narrations of the participants is fear for one's life. This is supported by the narrations of the participants. With the presence of the pandemic, there are still avenues for the teachers to be involved in professional development. Webinars are accessible and comfortable methods of learning, which allows the teachers to gain new knowledge at the comforts of their homes. They only need an internet access to avail of this opportunity.

Subtheme Number 2 – Online Graduate School Classes. On the other hand, the second subtheme that was derived from the narrations of the participants is attending online graduate school classes. Distance learning have been introduced in the past, so the participants are using it to improve their skills by enrolling in online classes to pursue their graduate degrees.

Furthermore, in Table 3, it presents the excerpts of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers with the emerged theme, "Support from Stakeholders"

Table 3. Excerpts from the first Major Themes "Support from Stakeholders"

Subthemes	Participant Code	Sample Quotations
Support from fellow teachers	P2	➤ Ang hirap ng ganito, nakaka-stress dahil ang hirap turuan ang mga kindergarten pupils, gusto ko man magturo ng tama, di naman kami nagkikita, modules na lang ginagamit naming.
	P3	➤ Madaming suporta sa mga kasamahan kung teachers, kaya maganda ang pagsasamahan.
	P6	➤ Wala ako masabi kasi madami akong natatanggap na suporta sa mga teachers din sa school namin

Support from local government	P1	➢ Malaki pong tulong ang binigay ng local government sa pagbigay ng ayuda, mga kagamitan sa schoon para sa aking trabaho as guro sa mga kindergarten pupils
	P7	➢ Ang tulong ng local na gobyerno ay nagbigay ng magandang ehemplo para sa pagtuturo sa mga kindergarten mam.
	P10	➢ There is a big help from the local government towards the education of the pupils
Support from community	P2	➢ Malaki ang tulong ng aming komunidad sa mga pagbigay ng mg modules sa mga mag-aaral.
	P5	➢ The community leaders helped me in providing for the learning atmosphere of the learners.
	P8	➢ The community is very helpful in the education of the learners in the school.

Subtheme Number 1 – Support from fellow teachers. It was reported by the participants the support that they experienced from fellow teachers. This is an important finding as it shows that teachers care for each other, and they collaborate to ensure that there is learning continuity. There are narrations that proved the presence of support from each other in the school.

Subtheme Number 2 – Support from local government. In addition, the participants also reported of the support they received from the local government. In this time of health crisis, there is always the role of the government in providing social services to their constituencies. This is an important finding as it reflects that the government is actively involved in the education of the young.

Subtheme Number 3 – Support from community. Moreover, the community is never left behind. In fact, the participants narrated that community people, and its leaders actively participate in the continuity of learning through many means. One participant reported that the community people helped in distributing the modules, which is important because there were no face-to-face teaching and learning. There is also retrieval of said modules and to be submitted to the school for their teachers to receive it.

Furthermore, in Table 4, it presents the excerpts of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers with the emerged theme, "Measures to Achieve Learning Continuity"

Table 4. Excerpts from the first Major Themes "Measures to Achieve Learning Continuity"

Subthemes	Participant Code	Sample Quotations
Engage with parents	P4	➢ Nakikipag-usap ako sa mga magulang para malaman kung ano pa ang kailangan kung gawin para matuto ang mga bat a na hawak ko.
	P6	➢ Madami akong ginawa noong, isa ito ang pakikipag-ugnayan sa mga magulang ng mga mag-aaral ko para kumustahin sila at magbigay ng konting suporta sa pag-aaral nila at malaman na din mga problema nila.
	P9	➢ Sa mga magulang aking nakikipag-ugnayan para sila at magkaroon ng ideya sa kanilang mga anak at performance nila.
Being technologically competent	P1	➢ Kailangan kung matuto ng computer at ako ay nag-aral sa bahay para malaman ko anong mga kailangan kung gawin.
	P8	➢ May konting kaalaman ako sa ICT, pero hindi siya enough, kaya nag-aral pa ako at nagging maganda naman ang resulta.
	P10	➢ Nag-aral po ako ng ICT para naman makisabay ako sa mga karanasan ng mga bagong mga teachers sa pagtuturo.

Developing lessons for learners	P2	➢ Gumawa po ako ng mga lessons na iba sa mga binigay ng Central Office sa amin.
	P9	➢ Maganda po kasi kahit nasa bahay ako, gumawa ako ng mga lessons para sa aking mga mag-aaral, para maging maganda ang studies nila.
	P10	➢ May video lessons ako na ginawa para sa mga mag-aaral ko.

Subtheme Number 1 – Engage with parents. It was reported by the participants the support that they experienced from fellow teachers. In this subtheme, it was found out that the participants communicate and engage with the parents of the learners to determine issues and problems that may affect the studies of the learners. Parental involvement is important because they also share in the role of education for their children.

Subtheme Number 2 – Being technologically competent. During the pandemic, the teachers themselves identified their weakness and reported that they improved their skills in ICT to serve well their learners. This finding implies that the teachers have the initiative to improve themselves and make themselves better. They reported that they improved their ICT competencies and work well to make them better.

Subtheme Number 3 – Developing lessons for learners. Finally, the participants reported of their role in developing new lessons that are relevant to their learners. As kindergarten teachers, it is difficult to teach them in a condition such as the use of modular distance learning. This is important as teachers design lessons that is tailored to the needs of the learners.

Proposed Early Childhood Care and Development Program

From the data gathered from the study, this proposed Early Childhood Care and Development program is a period when children start to learn basic skills, social and emotional skills, develop their interests, and form a relationship between their parents, peers, and teachers. It is their foundation and groundwork for their future development.

A. Contextualized Home-based programs, such as the neighborhood-based play groups, family day care programs, parent education and home visiting programs.
B. Barangay Learning Center – to provide relevant educational support program for toddlers and young children.
C. Parent Effectiveness Program – to involve parents to the early childhood care and education to their young children.

CONCLUSIONS

From the data gathered from the participants, the study generated four major themes: (1) Psychological impact (stress and worries, lack of sleep and fear for one's life), (2) Personal growth (attending relevant webinars, attending online graduate school classes), (3) Support from Stakeholders (support from fellow teachers, support from local government, and support from community), and (4) Measures to achieve learning continuity (engage with parents, being technologically-competent, developing lessons for learners).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations of the study:

1. The proposed early childhood care and development program may be considered by the community in partnership with the public school.
2. Kindergarten teachers may consider pursuing relevant training on enhancing learning among kindergarten learners.

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