

Teaching Tender Years: Stories of Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract — This research focused on the experiences, coping strategies, and educational insights gained by kindergarten teachers during their instruction in the early years. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved eight kindergarten teachers from Malabog District, Division of Davao City. The observed experiences highlighted were: adapted to diverse needs, instilled a love for learning, and collaborated with the families. Coping mechanisms employed to address challenges included fostering parent-teacher partnership, developing effective time management, and collaborating with colleagues. Additionally, the educational insights derived from teachers' experiences emphasized family and community partnerships are essential, the importance of continuous professional development, and adaptation to new technologies. These identified themes provide valuable insights into the skills cultivated in each role, offering a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by kindergarten teachers. Moreover, exploring teachers' experiences not only contributes to a thorough comprehension of modern teaching demands but also provides valuable insights for both educators and educational institutions, potentially leading to improved classroom management techniques and innovative teaching approaches. The study holds potential for publication in reputable research journals.

Keywords — *Diverse learners, Junior High School Teachers, Davao City, Philippines.*

I. Introduction

Teaching in the tender years represents a profound and delicate undertaking in the realm of education. It encapsulates the crucial stage of early childhood, where the foundations of lifelong learning, social development, and emotional well-being are established. These formative years, typically spanning from infancy to kindergarten, hold unique significance as children embark on their educational journey. Educators and families in this phase play a vital role in nurturing curiosity, fostering essential skills, and cultivating a love for learning. Teaching in the tender years is a dynamic and responsive process that recognizes the diverse needs and potential of each child, aiming to create an environment where exploration, creativity, and social interaction flourish.

Kindergarten teachers around the world employ a variety of approaches to teaching in the tender years, recognizing the unique needs and developmental stages of young children. While specific practices may vary by country and culture, several common principles prevail. Play-based learning is a universal approach that encourages children to explore, create, and learn through hands-on activities and imaginative play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Additionally, fostering socio-emotional skills and character development is a global priority, emphasizing positive peer

interactions, empathy, and emotional regulation (UNESCO, 2016). Furthermore, family engagement is a cornerstone of early childhood education worldwide, with teachers actively involving parents and caregivers in their child's learning journey through open communication and collaborative activities (Sylva et al., 2004).

In Jordan, teaching in the tender years is guided by a commitment to providing young learners with a solid educational foundation. Early childhood education in Jordan is primarily centered around kindergarten settings, where trained educators employ a variety of strategies to support children's development. Teachers in Jordan recognize the significance of play-based learning, drawing inspiration from the international Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (UNESCO, 2019). This approach emphasizes hands-on activities, imaginative play, and interactive experiences that promote cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Kindergarten teachers in Jordan also emphasize the importance of creating a culturally inclusive environment, acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and languages spoken by their young learners (UNESCO, 2019).

In Brazil, kindergarten teachers adopt a child-centered, play-based approach to teaching in the tender years, drawing inspiration from educational frameworks such as the Reggio Emilia approach. They prioritize hands-on activities, art, and imaginative play to foster children's natural curiosity and self-directed exploration. This approach is underpinned by a commitment to creating a culturally inclusive learning environment that reflects the diverse backgrounds of young learners. Language development is also a key focus, with teachers incorporating storytelling, songs, and literacy activities into daily routines. Active engagement with families is highly valued, with regular communication and guidance provided to parents and caregivers, emphasizing a collaborative approach to early childhood education (Lima et al., 2018; Barros et al., 2019; Martins & França, 2020; Brazil Ministry of Education, 2009; Pinto & Barreto, 2017).

In Indonesia, kindergarten teachers embrace a child-centric approach to teaching in the tender years, emphasizing active and experiential learning. Drawing inspiration from the Indonesian Early Childhood Education Curriculum (KI-PAUD), educators prioritize play-based activities, storytelling, and hands-on exploration to stimulate children's curiosity and cognitive development (Kurniati et al., 2020). The learning environment is designed to be inclusive and reflective of the diverse cultural backgrounds of young learners. Furthermore, teachers acknowledge the significance of fostering social and emotional skills, encouraging positive peer interactions and character development. Collaboration with parents and caregivers is highly valued, with regular communication and engagement in a child's educational journey (Kurniati et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018).

In the Philippines, kindergarten teachers employ a holistic and child-centered approach in teaching during the tender years. Early childhood education in the Philippines is guided by the Department of Education's Kindergarten Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes the importance of play-based learning, exploration, and socio-emotional development (DepEd, 2011).

Teachers create engaging and interactive classroom environments where children are encouraged to learn through hands-on activities, storytelling, and collaborative play. There is a strong emphasis on the development of literacy and numeracy skills, with teachers incorporating age-appropriate activities to promote early reading and mathematical understanding (Albacea, 2015).

Moreover, kindergarten teachers in the Philippines recognize the significance of promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in the classroom. They acknowledge and celebrate the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, incorporating multicultural activities and materials into the curriculum (Albacea, 2015). Additionally, teachers maintain open lines of communication with parents and caregivers, valuing the role of families in a child's education (Guzman & Aquino, 2016). Regular parent-teacher meetings and family engagement activities foster a collaborative approach to supporting children's learning and development.

In the local scenario particularly in the schools of Malabog District, Division of Davao City, kindergarten teachers encountered a variety of experiences in teaching in the tender years. Some of the experiences are inspiring, while others negatively affect their teaching profession. It is in this context that this study was conceptualized to collect the experiences of kindergarten teachers as they teach in the tender years. Through this research, we aspire to shed light on the importance of teachers having all the knowhow in teaching in the tender years, offering valuable insights that can form part of the professional teaching journey.

II. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to research, specifically a phenomenological research design. According to Creswell, (2012), phenomenology was an approach to qualitative research that focused on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach was to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon. Typically, interviews were conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation, or experience. Other forms of data such as documents, observations and art were also used. The data were read and reread and were culled for phrases and themes that were grouped into clusters of meanings. Through this process, the researcher was able to construct the universal meaning of the event, situation or experience and arrived at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

The participants of this study were Eight (8) kindergarten teachers from Malabog District, Division of Davao City. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) must be in the service for at least 5 years; (2) elementary school teacher; and (3) experienced in teaching tender years.

The researcher utilized the purposive sampling design since the participants was chosen based on the criteria or purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014). It is also known as judgmental,

selective or subjective sampling. The selection of the participants was purposefully done to ensure that the findings would be authentic (Marshall, 1996).

III. Results and Discussion

Findings of the study on the experiences of kindergarten teachers as they teach in the tender years was revealed as follows: adapted to diverse needs, instilled a love for learning, and collaborated with the families.

In terms of the coping mechanisms of the kindergarten teachers as they teach in the tender years, it was revealed that they cope through fostering parent-teacher partnership, developing effective time management, and collaborating with colleagues.

As to the educational management insights gained from the participants, the teachers emphasized family and community partnerships are essential, the importance of continuous professional development, and adaptation to new technologies.

Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the gathered data. The researcher analyzed the answers of the participants from the conducted interviews with the use of Creswell's Model specifically the identifying of themes approach. According to Creswell (2012) themes in qualitative research are similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database.

Familiarization with the data was common to all forms of qualitative analysis, the researcher immersed herself in, and became intimately familiar with, their data; reading and re-reading the data and noting any initial analytic observations.

Coding was also a common element of many approaches to qualitative analysis, involving generating pithy labels for important features of the data of relevance to the (broad) research question guiding the analysis. Coding was not simply a method of data reduction; it was also an analytic process, so codes capture both a semantic and conceptual reading of the data. The researcher coded every data item and ends this phase by collating all their codes and relevant data extracts.

Searching for themes was a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question. The researcher ended this phase by collating all the coded data relevant to each theme.

Reviewing themes. The researcher reflected on whether the themes tell a convincing and compelling story about the data and began to define the nature of each individual theme, and the relationship between the themes. For these, Thematic Content Analysis was employed by the

researcher. Thematic Content Analysis was a descriptive presentation of qualitative data in which a detailed analysis of each theme was made by identifying the ‘essence’ of each theme and constructing a concise, punchy, and informative name for each theme (Andersen, 2013). In addition, to enhance validity and to create a more in-depth picture of the phenomenon, Environmental Triangulation was also employed by the researcher. It was a technique to analyze the results of the same study using different methods of data collection. The key was identifying which environmental factors, if any, might influence the information that is received during the study.

These environmental factors are changed to see if the findings are the same across the settings (David, 2015). This type of triangulation uses different settings, locations, and other factors such as time, day, season in which the study took place. The idea was to determine which of these factors influence the information received, these factors are then changed to see if the findings are the same. If the findings remain unaltered under varying environmental factors, then validity can be established (Naeem, Saira, 2019). In this study, such triangulation was used considering that the requirements as mentioned was the use of environmental triangulation best suited the environment of the research being conducted.

Writing-up involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data and contextualizing it in relation to existing literature.

Discussion

This part of the research dealt with the research questions and the responses of the participants of the study. The kindergarten teachers disclosed their experiences in teaching, their coping mechanism as well as insights in teaching in the tender years. All these themes were discussed within the chapter.

Experiences of kindergarten teachers in teaching in the tender years

The experiences of kindergarten teachers in teaching in the tender years are a testament to the profound impact they have on the early development of children. These educators navigate a dynamic landscape of nurturing, guiding, and facilitating the growth of young minds during the pivotal phase of early childhood. From fostering curiosity through play-based learning to cultivating essential social and emotional skills, their experiences are a blend of dedication, adaptability, and empathy. These experiences, rooted in the science of early childhood development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), reflect the vital role kindergarten teachers play in laying the foundation for future academic success and personal well-being.

Adapted to Diverse Needs. Adapting to diverse needs is a pivotal experience for kindergarten teachers in teaching in the tender years. This experience involves recognizing the unique learning styles, abilities, and cultural backgrounds of their young learners and tailoring

their teaching strategies accordingly. Kindergarten teachers understand that every child is unique, and they strive to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment where all students can thrive.

One aspect of adapting to diverse needs involves providing differentiated instruction. Educators recognize that children have varying levels of readiness and may excel in different areas. They employ various instructional techniques to meet individual learning needs, such as offering additional support for struggling learners and providing enrichment opportunities for those who are more advanced (Powell et al., 2020).

Moreover, kindergarten teachers are experienced in fostering cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in the classroom. They appreciate the rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds that young children bring with them and incorporate diverse perspectives into their teaching practices (Barros et al., 2019). This not only helps children develop a broader worldview but also creates a sense of belonging for students from various cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, adapting to diverse needs extends to accommodating children with special educational requirements. Kindergarten teachers collaborate with special education professionals and specialists to ensure that children with disabilities or unique learning challenges receive the support they need to participate fully in classroom activities and reach their potential (UNESCO, 2016).

Furthermore, teachers in their tender years have the experience of promoting inclusive education. They work diligently to create a classroom environment where every child feels valued and respected, regardless of their abilities, language proficiency, or background (UNESCO, 2016). This fosters a sense of belonging and positively impacts children's self-esteem and social development.

In conclusion, adapting to diverse needs is an essential experience for kindergarten teachers in teaching in the tender years. Their ability to differentiate instruction, promote cultural sensitivity, support children with special educational requirements, and create an inclusive classroom environment contributes to the holistic development of all young learners, emphasizing the importance of equity and diversity in early childhood education.

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