



Research Article

Navigating Complexity: Kindergarten Teachers' Lived Experiences in Supporting Learner Development in Public Schools

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Abstract. Learner development in Kindergarten occurs within complex educational environments in which teachers respond to diverse learner needs, classroom demands, and available support systems. Although recent Philippine studies have examined Kindergarten teachers' instructional practices and the challenges they encounter, less is known about how teachers experience and make meaning of adapting their practices to learner diversity and contextual demands in public school settings. This study explored the lived experiences of public school Kindergarten teachers in supporting learner development in Samar, Philippines. An interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach was employed, with data generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eleven public school Kindergarten teachers. The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis within a hermeneutic interpretive lens. Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) experiential and adaptive nature of Kindergarten teaching; (2) play-based, interactive, and differentiated teaching practices; (3) learner diversity, readiness, and developmental variation; (4) contextual challenges and support systems; and (5) professional realities, caregiving, and adaptive practice. The findings indicate that teachers develop and adapt their practices through sustained classroom experience while responding to differences in learner readiness, developmental trajectories, and prior learning exposure. They also reveal that large class sizes, behavioral challenges, varying access to resources, parental involvement, and school-level support shape teachers' capacity to respond to learner needs. The study highlights that supporting learner development in Kindergarten involves an ongoing interaction among teacher adaptability, learner variability, and the conditions surrounding classroom practice. The findings underscore the need for responsive pedagogy, sustained professional learning, supportive working conditions, and coordinated family and school support in public school Kindergarten settings.

Keywords: *Early childhood education; Learner development; Phenomenology; Philippines; Teacher experiences.*

Early childhood education is a foundational stage of human development because experiences during the early years influence children's cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical development. The quality of early learning environments depends not only on curriculum and learning materials but also on teachers' capacity to understand learners and respond to developmental differences. Research on early childhood



education emphasizes the importance of developmentally appropriate, responsive, and play-oriented learning experiences (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; NAEYC, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In the Philippines, Kindergarten is part of the formal basic education system through the Kindergarten Education Act (Republic Act No. 10157, 2012). The Department of Education's Kindergarten policies emphasize developmentally appropriate learning experiences and recognize the importance of learner-centered approaches in the early years (Department of Education, 2016). Within this setting, Kindergarten teachers work with learners who may enter school with different levels of readiness, prior learning exposure, language experiences, social participation, and developmental needs.

These differences make Kindergarten teaching a complex professional experience. Teachers are required to translate curriculum expectations into classroom experiences while responding to individual learners and to the conditions in which teaching takes place. Recent Philippine studies have documented challenges Kindergarten teachers face, including difficulties in inclusive education, play-based teaching, changing educational demands, and the need for contextualized support (Almeron, 2025; Botea *et al.*, 2025; Ancheta, 2026; Ngalob, 2026). Other studies have examined play-based strategies and the relationship of play, teacher experiences, and family engagement with kindergarten learning (Natividad & Capinpin, 2024; Sta. Ana, 2024; Mantawil & Opina, 2025).

Teacher adaptability is particularly important in this context. Teachers do not simply apply predetermined strategies; they draw from classroom encounters, reflect on what happens, and modify their practices in response to learners and circumstances. This process can be understood through Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, in which learning develops through the interaction of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. For Kindergarten teachers, everyday classroom experiences can therefore become sources of professional learning as they adjust activities, interactions, and support based on what they observe in their learners. Play-based and learner-centered practices also give teachers ways to respond to developmental variation. Play allows children to participate actively, interact with others, explore ideas, and demonstrate learning through different forms of expression (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009; Zosh *et al.*, 2018).

Learner development, however, does not occur in isolation. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective highlights the interaction between children and the different environments surrounding them. Family experiences, school conditions, relationships, resources, and wider social contexts can shape children's opportunities for learning and development. Studies of early childhood education similarly emphasize the importance of family engagement, teacher support, professional learning, and working conditions in shaping educational practice (Epstein, 2018; OECD, 2017, 2019, 2020).

In this study, learner development refers to teachers' observed and described perceptions of children's developing capacities in areas such as emerging literacy and numeracy, communication, participation, social-emotional development, motor skills, self-help, and readiness to engage in classroom learning, including school-readiness capacities. The term is used cautiously because the study did not directly assess learners; rather, it examined how teachers experienced and interpreted learner development in their everyday classroom practice. Including readiness reflects its relevance to early learning and later educational development (Duncan *et al.*, 2007).

Although recent studies have explored Kindergarten teachers' experiences and challenges in different Philippine settings, contextually grounded accounts of how teachers make meaning of the interconnected demands of learner diversity, instructional adaptation, classroom conditions, family involvement, and professional responsibilities remain needed. For example, Ancheta (2026) and Botea *et al.* (2025) provide phenomenological accounts of teachers' experiences in other contexts. The present study does not assume that such experiences have not been examined. Instead, it contributes an interpretive account situated within public elementary schools in Samar, where teachers share a district context while working under varied classroom conditions and responsibilities.

Guided by an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological orientation, the study sought to understand how Kindergarten teachers experienced, interpreted, and made meaning of supporting learner development. Specifically, it addressed the following questions: (1) How do public school Kindergarten teachers describe their lived experiences in supporting learner development? (2) How do teachers interpret and respond to differences in learners' readiness, developmental trajectories, and prior learning experiences? (3) What challenges and support systems shape teachers' experiences of supporting learner development? (4) How do teachers describe

the ways they adapt, cope, and develop their practices through their experiences?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach to explore how public-school Kindergarten teachers experienced and made meaning of supporting learner development. Phenomenology focuses on understanding lived experience as individuals experience and interpret it (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a public school district under the Schools Division of Samar, Philippines. The participants were assigned to different public elementary schools within the same district. Although they shared a common district and educational context, their classroom conditions, learner characteristics, teaching assignments, and available support varied. Teachers described differences in learner readiness, prior learning exposure, developmental pace, behavior, communication, and emerging literacy. One participant handled two Kindergarten sessions with a combined enrollment of 60 learners and described 30 learners in a single session as challenging to manage. Some participants also handled multigrade or other grade-level assignments and additional school responsibilities. The shared district setting provided a common context for examining lived experiences while allowing variation across classrooms.

Research Participants

Purposive criterion-based sampling was used. Participants were public elementary school teachers with current or recent experience teaching Kindergarten within the district, direct experience addressing learners' learning or developmental needs, and the willingness and ability to articulate reflective accounts of their experiences. Teachers without direct Kindergarten experience or whose experience was too remote to provide relevant accounts were excluded. Variation in teaching experience and additional assignments was considered to capture a range of perspectives within the shared district context.

Eleven teachers participated in the study. Their total teaching experience ranged from 6 to 17 years, while Kindergarten teaching experience ranged from 1 to 15 years. All participants held bachelor's degrees. Three participants had no additional teaching assignment specified in their profiles, while others handled multigrade or other grade-level assignments and ancillary responsibilities.

Table 1. Participant Profile: Demographic and Professional Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Total Teaching Experience (Years)	Kindergarten Experience (Years)	Other Teaching Assignment/Responsibility
P1	17	4	Multigrade Grades 3–6
P2	10	8	Multigrade
P3	9	3	Four ancillary tasks
P4	10	10	Temporary Grade 6 subject assignment
P5	10	10	None specified
P6	6	1	Grades 3–4
P7	6	2	Grades 3–4
P8	15	15	None specified
P9	15	7	Grades 1–3
P10	11	7	Grade 3
P11	11	3	None specified

Note. All participants held bachelor's degrees.

Data Gathering

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the District Head, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The researchers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews online in March 2026, with each interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. The interview guide was reviewed by the research adviser and pilot-tested with a co-teacher who was not among the participants. The review and pilot test focused on the clarity, relevance, sequence, and comprehensibility of the questions. The interview guide covered participants' backgrounds and experiences, instructional practices, contextual challenges and support systems, and reflections on coping, adaptation, and professional learning. Interviews were conducted in Waray-Waray, Filipino, or English, depending on participant preference. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded. The researcher used

Transkriptor for initial transcription, then reviewed the transcripts against the original recordings. The researcher translated transcripts into English where necessary and reviewed the translations against the original Waray-Waray or Filipino responses to preserve intended meaning. No second bilingual reader or back-translation was used; instead, the researcher repeatedly checked the translations against the original responses. Participant identities were protected through codes P1–P11.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical safeguards appropriate to the research context. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes, and identifying information was excluded from the manuscript. The researcher acknowledged her insider position as a teacher within the educational context and used open-ended, nonjudgmental interviews to reduce pressure on participants to provide responses. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely with access limited to the researcher. The study was conducted as an offshoot of a research course and did not undergo a separate formal institutional ethics review or ethics clearance; nevertheless, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, secure data handling, and reflexive safeguards were observed.

AI-Assisted Transcription and Data Privacy

Transkriptor was used only for initial transcription of the recorded interviews. ChatGPT was used as an auxiliary tool to review and organize the transcription output. The researcher reviewed the transcripts generated against the original recordings and corrected transcription errors. AI was not used to determine codes or themes, interpret participant meanings, or make analytic decisions. Any AI-assisted language refinement was limited to clarity and presentation. The researcher remained responsible for coding, theme development, interpretation, and final decisions. Participant codes were used, and unnecessary identifying information was excluded during transcription and preparation. The researcher stored audio files and transcripts securely, with access limited to the researcher.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis within an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological orientation. The analysis was iterative rather than based on simple word counts or response frequency. The researcher first became familiar with the transcripts and recordings through repeated reading and listening. Significant statements relevant to the research questions were identified and assigned initial codes. The researcher compared codes and organized them into patterns of meaning, which were developed into candidate themes. The themes were reviewed against the supporting extracts and the full transcripts, then refined, defined, and named.

Interpretation involved movement between individual statements, developing themes, and the broader account of the participants' lived experiences, consistent with a hermeneutic movement between parts and whole. The resulting themes were interpreted in relation to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective. Eleven participants provided information-rich accounts within a shared district context, while variation in teaching experience and assignments contributed contextual breadth. Member checking was not conducted.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the interview data, repeated transcript review, review of audio recordings, and careful checking of translated material. The research adviser's review of the interview guide and its pilot testing with a co-teacher also supported clarity and relevance of the data-gathering process. Dependability was addressed through systematic documentation of interviews, transcription, translation, coding, and theme development, with repeated revisiting of earlier analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling and examination of the data to distinguish participant accounts from researcher interpretation. Transferability was supported by providing contextual information about the participants, their teaching experiences, classroom conditions, and district setting. Because member checking was not conducted, credibility relied instead on repeated review of recordings and transcripts, translation verification, reflexive engagement, and close attention to participant words and meanings.

Results and Discussion

Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Experiential and Adaptive Nature of Kindergarten Teaching; (2) Play-Based, Interactive, and Differentiated Teaching Practices; (3) Learner Diversity, Readiness, and Developmental Variation; (4) Contextual Challenges and Support Systems; and (5) Professional Realities, Caregiving, and Adaptive Practice. Table 2 summarizes the themes and their constituent sub-themes. Rather than representing separate stages of teaching, the themes are interrelated and reflect how teachers experienced, interpreted, and responded to learner and contextual demands.

Table 2. Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from the Lived Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Experiential and Adaptive Nature of Kindergarten Teaching	Limited formal preparation and initial struggle; Learning through classroom experience; Developing familiarity through practice; Adapting instruction to learner level
Theme 2: Play-Based, Interactive, and Differentiated Teaching Practices	Concrete and manipulative learning; Play-based learning; Interactive and engaging activities; Scaffolding and guided participation; Differentiated and individualized support; Group and collaborative learning
Theme 3: Learner Diversity, Readiness, and Developmental Variation	Differences in learning pace and readiness; Variation across developmental domains; Prior learning exposure and Kindergarten readiness; Individual and additional learning needs; Language, communication, and participation differences; Learner differences as a basis for instructional adjustment
Theme 4: Contextual Challenges and Support Systems	Class size and classroom management; Learner behavior and emotional demands; Physical and classroom conditions; Family involvement and home follow-up; School and collegial support
Theme 5: Professional Realities, Caregiving, and Adaptive Practice	Caregiving and relational responsibility; Teacher as facilitator and guide; Patience and emotional responsiveness; Flexibility and creativity in practice; Sustaining motivation and professional commitment

Note. Themes represent interrelated patterns of meaning rather than independent stages or categories.

Theme 1: Experiential and Adaptive Nature of Kindergarten Teaching

Participants described Kindergarten teaching as a practice that develops through direct classroom experience and continued adjustment. One participant, P4, recalled limited formal preparation and an initial struggle: “I did not have trainings or seminars...” and “I struggled because I did not have experience” (P4, Lines 14–19). P4 also described becoming more familiar with the work overtime, noting that “Because of time... I became okay with it” and that it “became basic for me” (P4, Lines 18–24). These accounts suggest that familiarity with kindergarten teaching developed through repeated classroom encounters rather than through formal preparation alone. P11 similarly emphasized that activities should be “suited to their level” (P11, Lines 90–94), showing that experience was accompanied by attention to learner needs. P4 provided the most detailed account of this experiential transition, while P11’s account further illustrated the need to adjust activities according to learner level.

These experiences are consistent with Kolb’s (1984) view of learning through experience, reflection, and active adjustment. The accounts do not suggest that formal preparation is unnecessary; rather, they show how classroom experience becomes an important source of professional learning when teachers encounter situations that require adaptation. This finding also resonates with Philippine studies describing the challenges and continuing adjustments required of kindergarten teachers (Almeron, 2025; Botea *et al.*, 2025; Ngalob, 2026).

Theme 2: Play-Based, Interactive, and Differentiated Teaching Practices

Teachers described using play-based, concrete, interactive, and differentiated approaches to support learners with different needs. P1 described using manipulative toys, real objects, and counters when a learner had difficulty identifying numbers and connected this with “learning by enjoying and learning by doing” (P1, Lines 237–246). Other participants similarly described play-based, inquiry-based, collaborative, storytelling, role-playing, songs, movement, tracing, and coloring activities (P5, P7, P10). Differentiation was also evident in accounts of providing an easier or more suitable activity when a learner could not manage the original task (P11, Lines 234–242).

These practices can be understood through Vygotsky’s (1978) emphasis on social interaction and guided participation. Modeling, repetition, concrete materials, encouragement, and graduated support give teachers ways to respond to learners as they participate in classroom activities. Philippine studies also document the use and perceived value of play-based approaches in kindergarten instruction (Natividad & Capinpin, 2024; Sta. Ana, 2024), while research on play-based teaching also identifies practical difficulties teachers must navigate (Lim &

Tepacia, 2025).

Theme 3: Learner Diversity, Readiness, and Developmental Variation

Participants consistently described learners as differing in readiness, learning pace, developmental strengths, communication, participation, and support needs. P1 observed that one learner could understand an activity immediately while another could not, illustrating differences in learning pace and readiness (P1, Lines 150–154). P6 described learners as developing at their own pace and noted variation across areas such as health and well-being, motor and self-help skills, and cognitive or literacy-related development (P6, Lines 113–130; P6, Lines 406–423). P7 described a hesitant learner who required simpler tasks and encouragement (P7, Lines 185–186), while P10 and P11 also described learners who needed particular or differentiated support (P10, Lines 307–309; P11, Lines 234–242). These findings align with literature emphasizing developmental variation and context in early learning (Almeron, 2025; Botea *et al.*, 2025). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective also highlights how learner development is connected to experiences beyond the immediate classroom.

Theme 4: Contextual Challenges and Support Systems

Teachers worked in varied classroom conditions and with varying levels of available support. Class size, learner behavior, physical conditions, family involvement, and school-based support shaped teachers' experiences. Participants described crying, tantrums, separation anxiety, and the need to comfort young learners (P11, Lines 139–152). Class size was also experienced as a practical classroom-management concern. One participant described two Kindergarten sessions with a combined enrollment of 60 learners and indicated that managing 30 learners in a single session was challenging (P11, Lines 275–295). Other participants described classes of 12 to 28 learners and expressed a preference for more manageable class conditions (P2, Lines 55–56; P8, Lines 44–48; P9, Lines 51–55).

Family involvement was described as important for home follow-up, while school heads, colleagues, materials, supplies, and training were identified as supports (P1, P5, P6). These findings align with the ecological view that classroom practice is embedded within interacting systems of family, school, and wider institutional conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Philippine studies similarly identify resource, workload, support, parental involvement, and contextual issues affecting early childhood and Kindergarten teachers (Alvarez & Galman, 2025; Almeron, 2025; Botea *et al.*, 2025; Ngalob, 2026).

Theme 5: Professional Realities, Caregiving, and Adaptive Practice

Participants described Kindergarten teaching as relational work that extends beyond delivering lessons. P1 described the teacher role as being “a mother” and “friend,” reflecting everyday caregiving responsibilities (P1, Lines 88–97). P6 and P10 similarly described the teacher as a “second mother,” particularly in supporting children's emotional and social development (P6, Lines 168–171; P10, Lines 233–234). At the same time, P11 described the teacher's role as facilitation: “I think my role is just to facilitate,” while allowing children to develop independence in simple classroom routines (P11, Lines 31–40). These accounts resonate with literature on teachers' emotional and professional experiences (Gu & Day, 2007; Hargreaves, 2000) and with recent phenomenological studies of kindergarten teachers that highlight caring and adaptive dimensions of the role (Goda *et al.*, 2024; Botea *et al.*, 2025; Ancheta, 2026).

Synthesis of the Five Themes

Across the five themes, supporting learner development emerged as an ongoing process of becoming, adjusting, and relating. Teachers did not experience Kindergarten teaching as a fixed set of instructional tasks. Their accounts show a continuing movement between what they encountered, how they understood learners, how they adjusted practice, and how they negotiated the conditions surrounding the classroom.

Theme 1 connects experience with the development of adaptive practice. Theme 2 shows how play, interaction, concrete materials, scaffolding, and differentiation became practical responses to learner needs. Theme 3 shows why such responses were necessary, as learners differed in readiness, pace, developmental strengths, and support needs. Theme 4 demonstrates that these differences were encountered within classroom and family contexts. Theme 5 brings these elements together in the relational and professional work of caregiving, facilitation, patience, flexibility, creativity, and continued adaptation.

Taken together, the findings can be interpreted through the complementary lenses of Kolb (1984), Vygotsky (1978), and Bronfenbrenner (1979). From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the meaning of the experience becomes clearer through the relationship among these parts and the whole. The lived experience was therefore not simply delivering a curriculum, but continually reading the child, adjusting practice, and negotiating the conditions around the child.

Limitations

The study involved eleven Kindergarten teachers from public elementary schools within one district in Samar, which limits the findings' transferability to other settings. The findings were based primarily on teachers' self-reported experiences and therefore reflect participants' perceptions rather than direct observations or formal assessments of learners. The researcher's insider position may also have influenced the research process, although reflexive practices and open-ended, nonjudgmental interviewing were used to reduce this influence. The interviews were conducted in Waray-Waray, Filipino, or English, and translation into English was performed by the researcher where necessary. No second bilingual reader or back-translation was used. Member checking was also not conducted. Finally, the study was an offshoot of a research course and did not undergo a separate formal institutional ethics review or ethics clearance. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of eleven public school Kindergarten teachers within a shared district context in Samar, Philippines. The findings indicate that supporting learner development was a dynamic, adaptive practice. Teachers drew on classroom experience, used play-based and differentiated approaches, and adjusted instruction in response to differences in learner readiness, developmental trajectories, prior learning exposure, and participation. The findings also show that teachers' experiences were shaped by contextual conditions, including class size, learner behavior, physical classroom conditions, family involvement, and school-based support. Beyond instructional responsibilities, participants described caregiving, emotional responsiveness, facilitation, patience, flexibility, creativity, and professional commitment as integral to kindergarten teaching.

For the Department of Education and Schools Division, the findings point to the value of sustained Kindergarten-specific professional learning focused on responsive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, play-based learning, learner development, and practical classroom management. Resource allocation and workload decisions may also consider varied classroom conditions and the additional assignments teachers experience. For school heads, the findings highlight the importance of providing access to appropriate learning materials, mentoring, collegial support, and professional learning opportunities. School-level planning may also consider class-size and workload conditions when assigning additional responsibilities to kindergarten teachers. For Kindergarten teachers, the findings support reflective and adaptive practice. Teachers may continue to use classroom observation, assessment information, learner participation, and reflective experience to adjust activities and provide differentiated support while promoting learner independence. For parents and families, the findings emphasize the importance of communication and consistent home follow-up, particularly when learners require additional practice or support. Strengthening school-family collaboration can help connect classroom learning with children's experiences at home. For teacher education institutions, the findings suggest strengthening practice-based preparation for kindergarten teaching, including classroom diversity, play-based and differentiated approaches, family engagement, and the relational and caregiving dimensions of early childhood teaching. For future researchers, multi-site studies across districts or divisions may provide broader contextual variation. Future studies may also combine teacher interviews with classroom observation, learner assessment, and parent perspectives to examine how teacher experiences relate to observable learner development.

Contributions of Authors

The author solely contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation and revision of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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