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KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN IMPLEMENTING PROJECT KIND-ER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Project KIND-ER is a Department of Education early literacy initiative designed to support kindergarten learners through structured, developmentally appropriate, and scaffolded instruction. This study explored kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in implementing Project KIND-ER in the Division of Oroquieta City. The study utilized the phenomenological research design. Ten kindergarten teachers from public schools participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method. The findings revealed themes namely,; gradual mastery and growing confidence: teachers' experiences of project KIND-ER through time; structured and supportive classroom environment enhances learning engagement; experiencing growth: physical and emotional responses of teachers and students during project KIND-ER implementation; collaborative and supportive relationships enhance teacher experience; and adaptive use of materials enhances student learning in project KIND-ER. Project KIND-ER promotes effective early literacy implementation by supporting teachers' professional growth and fostering engaging and supportive classroom environments. Schools and administrators can enhance Project KIND-ER implementation by providing continuous professional development, supportive classroom environments, emotional and peer support, collaborative opportunities, access to adaptable instructional materials, and exploring additional resources to meet diverse student needs and sustain effective early literacy practices.

Keywords: *adaptive materials, kindergarten teachers, literacy, project KIND-ER, teacher collaboration*

Introduction

Early childhood education is the foundational phase for both academic and social growth (Elfert & Rubenson, 2023; Murray, 2023). Early childhood is the critical time when children acquire basic skills in literacy, numeracy, social interaction, and emotional regulation. Effective early learning methods are crucial for laying the foundation for subsequent academic achievement and positive social attitudes (Berner, 2024; Stevenson & Milner, 2023). Consequently, teachers and decision-makers continually seek out new, developmentally sound approaches to ensure early learning results, promoting best practices in instruction aligned with the heterogeneous needs of young children and a strong disposition to learn from the beginning.

In the Philippines, the significance of early childhood education is further complemented by Republic Act No. 10157, or the Kindergarten Education Act of 2012. According to this legislation, kindergarten education became mandatory for all Filipino children before entering Grade 1, focusing on the overall development of children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive abilities as the basis of lifelong learning. The law also guarantees that kindergarten education in public schools is free and accessible, promoting educational equity and inclusivity. With the institutionalization of kindergarten, the Philippines recognizes early childhood education as a crucial stage for ensuring future academic attainment and responsible citizenship.

Despite this awareness, most kindergarteners in the Philippines experience difficulty learning basic literacy skills, i.e., letter recognition, phoneme awareness, and the development of a reading habit (Kilag et al., 2023; Padilla-Lambonao, 2023). The prevailing curriculum, which is proficiency-based rather than mastery-based, often leads to shallow learning, which can hinder deeper literacy development. The transition to distance and hybrid learning models, particularly following the pandemic, has also restricted children's access to experiential learning, further constraining literacy acquisition (Al-Qashouti, 2024; Park & Cho, 2024; Tomei et al., 2024). These conditions underscore the importance of developmentally sound, targeted interventions that can establish a firm foundation in literacy among young children.

Studies have shown that active and multisensory learning strategies are effective in developing early literacy in children (Busari et al., 2025; Solichah & Fardana, 2024; Wulandari & Pujaningsih, 2025). Strategies like hands-on exercises, such as letter puzzles, sandpaper writing, and multisensory activities, capture children's interest while promoting letter-sound correspondence and recognition (Antao, 2024; Lange, 2023). In addition, practices such as scaffolded instruction and spaced repetition have been shown to improve mastery and retention of literacy skills (Breneman-Smith, 2024; Narkhede et al., 2024; Saksittanupab, 2024). Most curriculum programs, however, overwhelm children by requiring them to learn multiple letters simultaneously, thereby reducing their chances of comprehending each one in detail (Ricaplanca et al., 2024). Thus, more targeted and stimulating teaching designs, especially those that address the developmental needs of kindergarten children, are called for.

Project Kind-ER (Kindergarten Early Reading) is an intervention program designed to address these challenges through a sequential process of learning one letter at a time. According to Ricaplanca et al. (2024), the program is focused on active learning, phonological awareness, and a multisensory approach to master and retain literacy skills. The program's five-day activity plan includes scaffolded instruction and repetition to reduce cognitive overload while enhancing students' motivation and engagement. This strategy is designed to facilitate the development of solid, lasting early reading competencies in young children, putting them in a better position to overcome future academic obstacles.

The research conducted by Ricaplanca et al. (2024) showed that, compared with multiple letters per week, emphasizing one letter per week was associated with enhanced literacy attainment. In their research, 30 of 35 struggling kindergarten children learned successfully all twenty-eight letters' sounds, names, and symbols. Although the outcome of this intervention is positive, the study primarily examined macro-level impacts of the curricular change, omitting insights into fine-grained teachers' experiences and challenges in introducing the program.

This research aimed to bridge a knowledge gap by exploring kindergarten teachers' everyday experiences in implementing Project Kind-ER. Although prior research has shown that the program is effective from a student-outcome perspective, little is known about the everyday struggles and adjustments involved in implementing such

an intervention. This study seeks to investigate how teachers perceive the program's usefulness, the challenges they encounter, and the measures they take to adapt it to their students' needs. By analyzing these rich teacher experiences, the research study will better understand how to assist teachers in delivering literacy interventions effectively.

This research aims to explore kindergarten teachers' experiences while working with the Project Kind-ER literacy intervention, which was designed upon Ricaplanca et al. (2024) findings. This study will particularly examine teachers' views on the program's effectiveness, the issues they encounter in implementing it, and how they adapt the intervention to ensure it is responsive to young children's developmental needs. By exploring these, this study hopes to provide valuable insights into how such interventions can be better adapted and customized to enhance early literacy achievement in kindergarten classrooms.

This research is vital for several stakeholders in early childhood education. It will be important for kindergarten teachers first, as it will give them a more complex appreciation of the challenges and accomplishments involved with teaching literacy interventions. Observations from this research can inform their teaching practices, enabling them to better adapt their strategies to address their students' needs. In addition, education policymakers will stand to gain from the research, as the central research will identify the actual challenges and achievements of early literacy interventions, which can inform the design of future curriculum structures and policies that facilitate teachers in developing robust reading abilities in children. Lastly, the research findings will help educational researchers by adding to the literature on early literacy interventions, specifically multisensory and scaffolded learning methods, providing evidence-based guidelines for program development and further research in this context.

Methods

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of ten public school kindergarten teachers in implementing Project Kind-ER in selected schools within the Division of Oroquieta City, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the program and willingness to share their experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews that examined instructional strategies, challenges encountered, perceived program effectiveness, and professional growth. Ethical approval and informed consent were secured, with strict measures implemented to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data privacy in compliance with institutional guidelines and the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, involving bracketing, horizontalization, thematic clustering, textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis to capture the essence of teachers' experiences. NVivo software supported systematic coding and analysis, enabling a rigorous and holistic understanding of how Project Kind-ER was experienced and enacted within authentic kindergarten classroom contexts.

Results and Discussions

The results focuses on the emerging themes of the study namely: gradual mastery and growing confidence: teachers' experiences of project KIND-ER through time; structured and supportive classroom environment enhances learning engagement; experiencing growth: physical and emotional responses of teachers and students during project KIND-ER implementation; collaborative and supportive relationships enhance teacher experience; and adaptive use of materials enhances student learning in project KIND-ER.

Theme 1: Gradual Mastery and Growing Confidence Through Time

Teachers' experiences in implementing Project KIND-ER revealed a process of gradual mastery and growing confidence, reflecting the iterative nature of professional learning and early literacy instruction. Initially characterized by experimentation and adjustment, teachers refined their instructional strategies through repeated practice, reflection, and observation of student progress, which strengthened their instructional competence and self-efficacy (Cook et al., 2019; Murray, 2024). The letter-by-letter approach, gradual pacing, and structured routines allowed both teachers and students to internalize skills incrementally, reinforcing confidence as mastery became visible (Castles et al., 2023; Wanzek et al., 2022). Sustained, job-embedded supports such as

collaboration and reflective practice further enabled teachers to transform early challenges into effective classroom practices, creating a reinforcing cycle where competence fostered confidence and motivated continued high-fidelity implementation of Project KIND-ER (Blazar, 2021; Weiland, 2024; Jerrim, 2023; Jerrim, 2025).

Theme 2: Structured and Supportive Classroom Environment Enhances Learning Engagement

A structured and supportive classroom environment emerged as a critical factor in enhancing student engagement and effective learning during Project KIND-ER implementation. Teachers emphasized that organized classroom layouts, clearly defined learning areas, minimal clutter, and designated quiet spaces reduced distractions and supported focused participation, allowing learners to progress at a manageable pace (Barrett et al., 2022; Jensen et al., 2020). Smaller groupings further enabled individualized attention, timely feedback, and differentiated instruction, fostering confidence and sustained engagement among learners (Vangrieken et al., 2021; Castles et al., 2023). These findings align with research showing that well-structured physical environments and clear routines promote concentration, reduce cognitive overload, and support foundational literacy development in early childhood settings (Wanzek et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Experiencing Growth—Physical and Emotional Responses of Teachers and Students

Experiencing growth, both physically and emotionally, was a prominent dimension of Project KIND-ER implementation for teachers and students. Teachers observed visible physical indicators of student engagement and confidence, such as improved posture, brightened expressions, and increased enthusiasm as learners mastered letters and sounds, reflecting the embodied nature of learning (Castles et al., 2023; Wanzek et al., 2022). These student successes also generated emotional fulfillment, pride, and motivation among teachers, reinforcing their professional efficacy despite the physical and mental demands of instruction (Collie et al., 2020; Aldrup et al., 2020). Consistent with research, this reciprocal relationship between student progress and teacher well-being strengthened instructional commitment and sustained engagement, highlighting the vital role of emotional rewards in effective early literacy teaching (Blazar, 2021; Weiland, 2024; Jerrim, 2023).

Theme 4: Collaborative and Supportive Relationships Enhance Teacher Experience

Collaborative and supportive relationships among teachers significantly enhanced professional experience and instructional effectiveness during Project KIND-ER implementation. Participants highlighted that collegial support, shared problem-solving, and regular exchange of strategies fostered confidence, motivation, and resilience, particularly when navigating instructional challenges (Vangrieken et al., 2021; Blazar, 2021). These professional networks functioned as social capital, providing both emotional encouragement and practical guidance that strengthened teachers' capacity to refine instructional practices and sustain program implementation (Collie et al., 2020; Aldrup et al., 2020). Research supports that such collaborative environments improve pedagogical competence, reduce professional isolation, and positively influence student outcomes by promoting reflective and adaptive teaching practices (Cook et al., 2019; Weiland, 2024).

Theme 5: Adaptive Use of Materials Enhances Student Learning in Project KIND-ER

The adaptive use of instructional materials emerged as a key strategy in enhancing student learning and addressing diverse needs in Project KIND-ER. Teachers consistently reported modifying and supplementing provided resources with tactile tools, visual aids, and additional practice activities to better align instruction with students' developmental levels and learning styles (Castles et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2020). While the available materials provided a sound foundation, the limited variety required teachers to be creative and flexible to ensure equitable engagement and mastery of literacy skills (Barrett et al., 2022; Vangrieken et al., 2021). Supported by sociocultural perspectives, these adaptive practices functioned as scaffolding within learners' Zones of Proximal Development, enabling more profound understanding, sustained engagement, and more inclusive early literacy instruction (Wanzek et al., 2022; Tilak et al., 2024; Wibowo et al., 2025).

Conclusions

Project KIND-ER emerges as a comprehensive instructional approach that supports teachers' professional growth through gradual mastery, reflective practice, and increased confidence over time, while simultaneously enhancing instructional effectiveness. Its successful implementation is reinforced by a well-organized, calm, and supportive classroom environment that sustains learner engagement and maximizes learning outcomes. Beyond literacy development, Project KIND-ER positively influences the physical and emotional well-being of both teachers and learners by fostering confidence, motivation, and a sense of accomplishment. Strong professional relationships and collaborative practices further strengthen teachers' effectiveness, satisfaction, and resilience, while the adaptive and thoughtful use of instructional materials enables responsive teaching and improved student learning.

Recommendations

To strengthen Project KIND-ER implementation, Schools Division Offices and school administrators may prioritize continuous professional development through regular coaching, peer mentoring, and collaborative learning to sustain effective teaching practices. Supportive administrative actions, such as ensuring flexible classroom layouts, adequate learning spaces, manageable class sizes, and sufficient resources, can further enhance learner engagement and instructional effectiveness. Ongoing emotional and professional support, including structured opportunities for reflection and collaboration, is essential in promoting teacher well-being, resilience, and sustained program implementation. Providing a wider range of adaptable instructional materials and training teachers to modify these resources can ensure more inclusive and responsive learning experiences. At the same time, future research may further examine the development and effectiveness of adaptive materials to address diverse learning needs in early literacy programs like Project KIND-ER.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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