

Understanding the Dimensions of Kindergarten Teachers' Burnout: Scoping the Factors and Its Strategic Preventions

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Article History: Received on 20 March 2024, Revised on 1 June 2024,

Published on 5 July 2024

Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select 10 kindergarten teachers from Carmen District, Mangalcal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich and detailed accounts of the participants' experiences. The thematic analysis revealed three major challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers: physical tiredness, difficulty dealing with toddlers, and managing undisciplined learners. Additionally, three predominant coping mechanisms emerged: taking short vacations, seeking assistance from co-workers, and developing a supportive environment. Furthermore, teachers' insights and realizations in connection with feeling tired and burned out were categorized into themes of learning to set boundaries and focusing on the day's work. This study contributes to the understanding of the challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in a specific geographical context and provides insights into their coping mechanisms and reflections on burnout.

Keyword: Burnout, Kindergarten Teachers, Strategic Prevention, Stress

A. Introduction

Kindergarten teachers face a unique set of challenges that can contribute to significant levels of stress and burnout. Kindergarten teachers often have heavy workloads that include not only teaching but also administrative tasks, parent communications, and additional responsibilities outside of the classroom. This extensive workload can lead to chronic stress and feelings of being overwhelmed (Jeon, Buettner, & Snyder, 2014). Also, managing a classroom of young children can be particularly challenging due to their developmental stage. Toddlers and young children have shorter attention spans, are more prone to emotional outbursts, and require constant supervision and engagement (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). These demands can contribute to significant stress for teachers.

Moreover, kindergarten teachers in the Philippines often face heavy workloads, including teaching multiple subjects, preparing lesson plans, assessing student progress, and managing administrative tasks. This extensive workload can lead to feelings of overwhelm and burnout (Yulianto, 2019). Additionally, they are often expected to meet high academic standards while also addressing socio-emotional needs and values education. Balancing these expectations can be demanding and may contribute to feelings of pressure and inadequacy (Ong, 2018). By addressing the root causes of stress, providing support and resources for teachers, and promoting a culture of well-being and resilience, schools can create environments where kindergarten teachers can thrive and provide quality education for young learners.

Much of the existing research on teacher burnout has focused on primary and secondary school teachers, with comparatively fewer studies specifically examining burnout among kindergarten teachers (Milfont, Denny, & Ameratunga, 2008). This study could contribute to filling this gap by providing insights into the unique stressors and challenges faced by kindergarten teachers. Also, research on teacher burnout often overlooks the influence of cultural and contextual factors on teachers' experiences of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Conducting the study within the context of the Philippines allows for an exploration of cultural norms, societal expectations, and institutional practices that may contribute to burnout among kindergarten teachers in this specific context.

The study tried to describe the experiences of kindergarten teachers in their workplaces. Specifically, the study tried to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in working?
2. How do kindergarten teachers cope with the challenges they encountered in stressful situations in kindergarten?
3. What are the kindergarten teachers' insights and realizations in connection with the experiences of feeling tired and burned out?

B. Methods

This study used a qualitative design following a phenomenological study. According to Williams (2021), qualitative research design explored the essence of phenomena as they were perceived by participants, aiming to uncover the underlying structures and processes that shaped their subjective realities. Phenomenology aims to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of participants. It seeks to understand the essence of their experiences, including the emotions, thoughts, and meanings they attach to those experiences. This depth of understanding is crucial for comprehending the complex and multifaceted nature of burnout among kindergarten teachers. Also, burnout is a deeply

personal experience that varies significantly among individuals. A phenomenological approach allows researchers to capture the nuanced insights and individual variations in how teachers experience and cope with burnout.

In this study, 10 kindergarten teachers from Carmen District, Mangalcal, Carmen, Davao Del Norte. In selecting the participants, the researcher made use of purposive sampling technique with the following inclusion criteria: kindergarten teachers currently employed in Carmen District, Mangalcal, Carmen, Davao Del Norte; with at least one year of teaching experience in kindergarten; and teachers who are willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

In gathering data, the researcher utilized a semi-structured interview questionnaire. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with kindergarten teachers to gather rich and detailed information. Following the completion of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with kindergarten teachers, all datasets from in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were integrated into a single dataset for analysis.

C. Results and Discussion

RQ#1: What are the challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in working?

Theme 1. *Physically Tired*

Physically tiredness is a prevalent theme among kindergarten teachers, highlighting the demanding nature of their work. This exhaustion stems from various factors such as long hours spent on their feet, constant engagement with energetic young learners, and the physical demands of managing classroom activities and materials. As a fact, a participant shared:

“The challenges I encountered during and after overworking as a teacher included burnout, decreased work-life balance, and potential negative impacts on my physical and mental health.”

As proposed by Zhang et al. (2022), physical tiredness can diminish a teacher’s ability to deliver engaging and effective lessons. Fatigued teachers may struggle with concentration, creativity, and enthusiasm, which are crucial for maintaining student interest and motivation.

Another participant mention of feeling tired and stressed highlights the emotional and mental impact of physical tiredness. Despite these challenges, the teacher demonstrates resilience by actively attempting to manage their fatigue and stress levels, suggesting a commitment to maintaining professional effectiveness despite the difficulties

encountered. She narrated:

“The difficulties I encountered during and after overworking are headache and exhausted. I feel tired and stress, but I always try to manage it.”

According to Čecho et al. (2019), teachers experiencing physical fatigue may take more sick days (absenteeism) or attend work despite feeling unwell (presenteeism), both of which negatively impact teaching quality and student learning.

Similarly, a participant articulates the physical and emotional challenges resulting from overworking. With conviction, a participant shared:

“The difficulties I encountered during and after overworking are headache and exhausted. I feel tired and stress, but I always try to manage it.”

The result corroborates with Bates’ (2018) idea that teachers often work beyond the typical school hours to prepare lessons, grade papers, and participate in school events. This extended workload can lead to insufficient rest and recovery time.

Theme 2. Difficulty Dealing with Toddlers

Kindergarten teachers often encounter challenges in managing the behavior and needs of toddlers in the classroom. Toddlers can exhibit unpredictable behaviors, such as tantrums, defiance, or difficulty following instructions, which can create stress and frustration for teachers. During in-depth interview (IDI), a participant narrated:

“When I am overworked, I feel like so tired to the point that I can’t think and plan enough on the effective activities I can give to my pupils.”

The idea of Li and Zhang (2019) showed that the morale of both the teacher and the other students can be significantly lowered by ongoing disciplinary issues. Other students might feel neglected or unsafe, and the learning environment becomes less conducive to engagement and participation.

Another participant mention. She narrated:

“As a kindergarten teacher, one of the most challenging tasks during work is classroom management. It is indeed exhausting to tame kids’ behavior of different personalities and backgrounds.”

This statement reflects the demanding nature of managing a classroom filled with toddlers, each with unique personalities and backgrounds. The teacher expresses the

difficulty of maintaining control over behaviors while simultaneously attending to the diverse needs of the children. This supports the idea of Steyer et al. (2023) that toddlers can be unpredictable and require constant supervision and attention. Teachers may experience heightened stress levels due to the demands of managing a classroom full of energetic and curious young children.

Also, a participant shared her thoughts:

"It was hard for us to adjust and stay with the child when you also have other learners to be cared for inside the classroom."

This statement underscores the challenge of providing individualized attention and support to toddlers while also meeting the needs of other students in the classroom. The teacher acknowledges the struggle of balancing the care and guidance required for one child with the responsibilities of overseeing the entire class. According to Koulierakis et al. (2023), toddlers have short attention spans and may quickly lose interest in activities. Teachers may need to constantly engage and redirect their attention, which can be mentally and physically exhausting over time.

Theme 3. Dealing with Undisciplined Learners

Teachers often encounter the challenge of managing undisciplined behavior among kindergarten learners, which can significantly impact the classroom environment and hinder the learning process. This theme reflects the difficulties teachers face in maintaining order and fostering a conducive learning atmosphere when dealing with disruptive or unruly behavior from some students. For instance, a participant narrated:

"Handling learners with extreme behavioral disorder which destruct the whole class and I am frustrated by the kind of disciplinary action does a parent do to address it."

According to Sottimano et al. (2018), teachers dealing with undisciplined students often face high levels of stress and anxiety, which can erode their enthusiasm for teaching. This constant stress can make it difficult for teachers to prepare and deliver effective lessons, impacting the overall quality of education.

In addition, a participant also stated:

"When I am overworked, I feel like so tired to the point that I can't think and plan enough on the effective activities I can give to my pupils."

The statement reflects how the challenge of dealing with undisciplined learners can

exacerbate feelings of exhaustion and cognitive overload for kindergarten teachers. When teachers are overworked, their ability to think critically and plan effectively for engaging activities in the classroom is compromised. As noted by Ansari et al. (2022), teachers may feel that their efforts are futile if they spend more time managing behavior than teaching, which can diminish their sense of accomplishment and fulfillment from their job.

RQ#2: How do kindergarten teachers cope with the challenges they encountered in stressful situations in kindergarten?

Theme 1. *Taking Short Vacations*

Short vacations provide teachers with an opportunity to rest and recharge away from the demands of their work. Taking time away from the classroom allows teachers to decompress, relax, and engage in activities that bring them joy and rejuvenation. As a fact, a participant shared:

“One thing I know that is effective in coping those challenges is to take a rest and think of any motivational situation like how fulfilling it is when teaching kindergarten pupils.”

This statement highlights the demanding nature of working with toddlers, who require constant stimulation and redirection. According to Aulén et al. (2021), teachers cope with this challenge by incorporating a variety of engaging activities into their lesson plans, such as sensory play, music and movement, and hands-on learning experiences. They also use strategies like frequent transitions, visual aids, and positive reinforcement to maintain toddlers’ attention and manage their behavior.

Another participant narrated:

“Sometimes if given a chance, I tend to go to vacations during weekends whenever possible, also social media is one of the best ways to entertain myself and forget those stressful situations.”

Taking breaks and engaging in leisure activities outside of work is essential for teachers to recharge and manage stress. As noted by OBryan (2019), vacations provide an opportunity to disconnect from work-related stressors and rejuvenate both mentally and physically. Similarly, engaging with social media can serve as a form of relaxation and distraction from stressful situations.

Theme 2. *Seeking assistance from co-workers*

Seeking assistance from co-workers provides valuable opportunities for professional development and growth. During in-depth interview (IDI), a participant narrated:

“There are different challenges in dealing with kindergarten pupils, in kindergarten, coping with stressful situations involves using simple strategies like deep breaths, calming activities, and seeking help from teachers or friends.”

Coping with the challenges of working with kindergarten pupils requires teachers to employ simple yet effective stress management techniques. As proposed by Elomaa et al. (2022), deep breathing exercises and calming activities, such as mindfulness or yoga, can help teachers regulate their emotions and reduce stress levels in the moment.

Another participant mention. She narrated:

“I have my co-teachers turned friends or even family whom I can communicate my feelings. That way, the load in my heart and mind will become lighter.”

Building supportive relationships with colleagues is crucial for teachers to cope with the emotional demands of their work. According to Fallon (2020), trusted co-teachers who have become friends or even family provide a safe space for teachers to express their feelings, share experiences, and seek advice. By confiding in supportive individuals, teachers can alleviate feelings of isolation and stress, and gain perspective on their challenges.

Theme 3. *Developing a supportive environment*

A supportive environment provides teachers with emotional support from colleagues, administrators, and parents. Having a network of individuals who understand and empathize with the challenges of teaching in kindergarten can be invaluable for coping with stress and burnout.

For instance, a participant narrated:

“Remember that coping with stress in a kindergarten, is a stand responsibility among teachers, parents and caregiver, by creating a supportive and empathetic environment, you can help children and adults navigate stressful situation more effectively.”

Coping with stress in a kindergarten setting requires a collaborative effort among teachers, parents, and caregivers. As noted by Reunamo et al. (2019), creating a supportive and empathetic environment is essential for helping both children and adults navigate stressful situations more effectively. Teachers collaborate with parents and caregivers to identify and address stressors affecting children, and to implement strategies for promoting resilience and coping skills.

In addition, a participant also stated:

"To cope with the challenges of stressful situations is to be strong in all ways, and always think that this is just a challenge that you will overcome someday. I even encourage parents to support our classroom activities."

Adopting a positive mindset and maintaining resilience are essential for coping with the challenges of stressful situations in education. De Stasio et al. (2022) noted that teachers cultivate inner strength by reframing challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. They remind themselves that difficulties are temporary and can be overcome with perseverance and determination.

RQ#3: What are the kindergarten teachers' insights and realizations in connection with the experiences of feeling tired and burned out?

Theme 1. *Learn to set Boundaries*

Setting boundaries helps teachers carve out time for themselves outside of work commitments. This personal time is vital for relaxation, pursuing hobbies, spending time with loved ones, and engaging in self-care activities. Without clear boundaries, teachers may find themselves constantly working, leading to exhaustion and burnout. As a fact, a participant shared:

Certainly! Feeling tired and burned out has taught me the importance of self-care, setting boundaries, and managing stress.

Experiencing burnout highlights the critical importance of prioritizing self-care. As proposed by Lavy (2022), teachers realize that they cannot effectively serve their students or themselves if they neglect their own well-being. Setting boundaries around workload, personal time, and responsibilities becomes essential for maintaining balance and preventing burnout.

Another participant narrated:

"You just have to let yourself rest in a while and think of the best way to overcome those difficulties."

Teachers recognize the necessity of rest and reflection in overcoming feelings of exhaustion and burnout. According to Eva (2022), taking breaks allows them to recharge mentally and emotionally, gaining perspective on challenges and identifying effective solutions. Embracing moments of rest and introspection enables teachers to approach difficulties with clarity and renewed energy, fostering resilience and well-being in the face of adversity.

Another participant narrated:

“Don’t let stress attack you. We must think positively how to avoid stress that will lead us to negative effect if mishandled. Tell stress to go away.”

Teachers acknowledge the detrimental impact of stress on their health and performance, and the importance of proactive strategies for managing stress. Mielke (2019) noted that adopting a positive mindset empowers them to confront stressors with resilience and determination, rather than succumbing to negative emotions or self-doubt.

Theme 2. *Focus On the Days Work*

Focusing on the day’s work encourages teachers to stay present and engaged in the tasks at hand. By directing their attention to the immediate needs of the classroom and lesson plans, teachers can avoid becoming overwhelmed by thinking about past challenges or future obligations.

During in-depth interview (IDI), a participant narrated:

“We should manage our own time so we can control the coming of possible stress. Do some normal routine that lead you think and work positively.”

Recognizing the role of time management in mitigating stress, teachers prioritize organization and routine as strategies for maintaining balance and productivity. According to O’Toole (2018), establishing consistent daily habits and schedules enables them to effectively allocate time for work, rest, and personal activities.

Another participant mentioned:

“I have learned that the key to a peaceful class is preparedness. If you are prepared with all the exciting activities, misbehavior would be lessened, and we can’t deny that misbehaving kids makes the day more tiresome.”

Teachers realize the importance of preparedness in fostering a positive classroom environment and minimizing stress. By thoroughly planning engaging and enriching activities, teachers create opportunities for student engagement and reduce the likelihood of disruptive behavior. As noted by Huyghebaert et al. (2018), feeling confident and prepared allows teachers to navigate challenges with greater ease and effectiveness, mitigating feelings of exhaustion and burnout.

Also, a participant shared her thoughts:

"I must organize all stuff needed to be done. Also, I do things that motivates me in working."

Prioritizing organization and motivation is essential for maintaining productivity and well-being in the face of fatigue and burnout. According to Virtanen et al. (2021), teachers recognize the value of structuring their tasks and responsibilities to maximize efficiency and reduce stress. Additionally, engaging in activities that bring joy and inspiration rejuvenates their passion for teaching and fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

D. Conclusions

Kindergarten teachers face various challenges in their work, including physical tiredness, difficulty dealing with toddlers, and managing undisciplined learners. They navigate these challenges with resilience, creativity, and support from their colleagues and communities to provide high-quality education for their students. Also, teachers utilize various coping mechanisms to navigate stressful situations effectively. Taking short vacations allows them to recharge and rejuvenate, promoting well-being and reducing burnout. Seeking assistance from co-workers provides emotional support, fresh perspectives, and collaborative problem-solving, enhancing resilience and reducing stress. Lastly, they recognize the importance of setting boundaries and focusing on the day's work in managing feelings of tiredness and burnout. These insights empower kindergarten teachers to navigate challenges with resilience, foster job satisfaction, and promote overall well-being in their professional lives.

E. Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of this master's thesis.

First and foremost, I am thankful to my adviser for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the research process. Her expertise, constructive feedback, and unwavering dedication have been instrumental in shaping the direction and quality of this thesis.

I am also grateful to the participants who generously shared their insights and experiences, without whom this study would not have been possible. Their willingness to participate and candid responses have enriched the findings and contributed to a deeper understanding of kindergarten teacher burnout.

I extend my appreciation to my family and friends for their understanding, patience, and encouragement during this academic journey. Their unwavering support and belief in my abilities have been a constant source of motivation and inspiration.

Finally, I acknowledge the academic community and research institutions for providing resources, facilities, and opportunities for learning and growth.

Thank you to everyone who has been a part of this journey. Your contributions have been invaluable, and I am truly grateful for your support.

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