On the Dimension of Care in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Research

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Abstract

Kindergarten teachers' narratives regarding the provision of care in early childhood education serve to enlighten and engender empathy towards their experiential realities. This study aims to articulate personal care encounters but may lack comparative analysis or exploration of cultural, institutional, or socioeconomic factors, limiting broader relevance. Hence, this study examined the firsthand caring experiences of kindergarten teachers in Tomas Oppus District, Southern Leyte. It aimed to articulate their personal care encounters and identify emerging themes. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study was conducted in five DepEd-managed elementary schools within the district: Tomas Oppus Central School, San Isidro Elementary School, San Antonio Elementary School, Cambite Elementary School, and Hinapo Elementary School. The research employed purposive sampling techniques with specific inclusion criteria, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis as the data analysis procedure. Data were collected through semi-structured guide questions, employing data triangulation by sequentially conducting interviews and discussions with each group. The findings highlighted the personal care experiences of kindergarten teachers, categorized into grounded dare, nurturing care, pedagogical care, and enduring care. The conclusion emphasized the need for teachers to embrace responsibility, adopt multifaceted roles, and devote themselves to tailored caring activities to enhance the well-being of learners. It was strongly believed that through this study, kindergarten teachers' experiences enrich their understanding of early childhood education, emphasizing commitment to nurturing relationships and student well-being. Recommendations include organizing seminars or workshops to disseminate findings and provide continuous in-service training for teachers, aiming to strengthen competencies in various dimensions of care, including pedagogical care.

Keywords: Kindergarten Teachers, Nurturing Care, Pedagogical Care, Personal Care, Riffling Effect

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development involves both education and caring, with the latter recognized as a crucial component in promoting effective early childhood development practices. Scholars such as Burk et al. (2020), Sorrells and Madrid Akpovo (2022), and Herrero-Arias, Lee, and Hollekim (2020) have pointed out a perceived contradiction between care and education. Care is seen as essential for children's well-being and development, while education primarily focuses on facilitating children's learning. This contradiction is often framed as a dichotomy between care versus learning and daycare/preschool versus school. The historical evolution of early childhood care and education services, as noted by Sedgwick and Jensen (2021) and Bowen (2018), has been shaped by two distinct traditions: care, which initially developed as a social welfare measure, and education, which emerged in the form of kindergarten or

pre-primary programs aimed at providing children with enriched activities before formal schooling. Despite these distinctions, Baxter (2022) and Singer and Wong (2021) argue that society often misunderstands child care and early learning as separate entities. However, the perspective of child development suggests that care should not be viewed independently from education and development; rather, they are co-essential and inseparable (Tuppal et al., 2019; Fernandes, 2022). This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of caring and educational practices in promoting optimal outcomes for children's holistic development.

In the Philippines, there is a traditional perception regarding the primary purpose of early childhood programs (Roman-Tamesis & Villaceran, 2023; Bustos-Orosa, 2021). Day Care Centers are commonly seen as places where daycare workers engage in household chores while simultaneously caring for and educating children. On the other hand, Kindergartens, nursery schools, and preparatory classes are often viewed as "school preparatory programs." Kindergarten has been integrated into basic education in the Philippines, aiming to provide adequate and proper stimulation across all domains to prepare five-year-old children for formal elementary schooling. Despite this formalization, personal experiences, such as those shared by Bustos-Orosa (2021), Lin (2020), and Mehan (2022), suggest that care remains embedded in teaching practices within kindergarten settings. Educators commonly observe that caring for children due to their developmental characteristics and needs has become an essential aspect of their daily tasks (Bustos-Orosa, 2021; Lin, 2020; Mehan, 2022). This observation aligns with the assumptions of Opiela (2020) and Merrick (2020), who argue that caring is a fundamental responsibility of early childhood educators. These observations highlight the significant role of care in early childhood education and support the notion that it is an inherent aspect of the educator's role in nurturing young learners.

Scholarly perspectives characterize care not only as a responsibility but also as engrossment, commitment, and a motivational shift (Moriggi et al., 2020; Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023; Quaye et al., 2019). This includes actions such as offering gentle smiles, and warm hugs, providing supervision and guardianship, and fostering strong student-teacher relationships both in and out of the classroom. Such practices contribute to a sense of belonging, enable teachers to get to know students personally, support their academic success and attend to their physiological needs (Frydenberg et al., 2019; Whitmer, 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Jackie, 2022). Recognizing the profound impact of care on students, Noddings advocated for placing care at the heart of the educational system. Teachers who adopt this approach often witness positive outcomes across various student variables, including success, achievement, academic engagement, grades, behavior, classroom interactions, and motivation (Hietajärvi et al., 2019; Tang and Zhu, 2024; Zheng et al., 2024). Some studies have even expanded this scope to include students' overall well-being. While previous research has confirmed certain understandings regarding teachers' demonstration of care and its impact on students and teacher-student relationships, there is still room for further exploration. Future research should focus on introducing emerging ideas and concepts to enhance the care literature. Mueller et al. (2024) and Howard (2019) highlight the need for studies examining how early childhood teachers conceptualize caring relationships in their practices. Continued research on teacher-caring behaviors is crucial due to its significance in students' behavior and achievement. Viewed as an abstract teaching phenomenon, caring underscores the importance of the cared-for individual in describing their care experiences (Chang, 2019; Akane Zusho et al., 2023; Frenzel et al., 2021). Further exploration should involve considering the lived experiences of students who are direct recipients of care. Future investigations should also focus on developing responsiveness to students' needs and gaining their perspectives. One recommendation is to elicit verbal responses from students as a means for schools to effectively meet all their needs (Rajaram, 2021; Evans et al., 2020).

Kindergarten teachers are acknowledged for their pivotal role in fostering the holistic development and care of young children during their formative years (Carless, 2019; Wentzel, 2022; De Beer, 2019; Ghasemi, 2021). However, despite their significant influence, scholarly attention toward understanding the firsthand caring experiences of kindergarten teachers remains relatively limited. While existing literature underscores the importance of educators in early childhood education, most studies tend to concentrate on measurable educational outcomes or instructional methodologies, neglecting the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of caregiving within the kindergarten setting. This emphasis on educational outcomes inadvertently overlooks the intricate dynamics of care that unfold in the daily interactions between kindergarten teachers and their young charges, leaving a

conspicuous gap in our understanding of the multifaceted nature of kindergarten teachers' experiences, particularly about their role as caregivers. Furthermore, although some research has examined the general challenges and rewards of teaching in early childhood settings, including kindergarten, there is a dearth of studies specifically dedicated to unraveling the complexities of caring for very young children within the context of formal education. The unique blend of challenges and rewards inherent in nurturing and educating young children in an institutional setting may present novel dimensions of caregiving that have not been thoroughly investigated. Thus, the current state of the literature suggests a critical need for research that goes beyond surface-level analyses and delves deeply into the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers as caregivers. By addressing this gap, researchers can offer valuable insights into the emotional labor, relational dynamics, and professional growth opportunities inherent in the role of kindergarten teachers, ultimately enriching our understanding of early childhood education and informing best practices in teacher preparation and support. This study diverges from existing research by employing a phenomenological approach to delve into the nuanced dimensions of care within kindergarten settings, offering a holistic understanding that transcends conventional methodologies and explores the lived experiences of both educators and children. Hence, the study aimed to explore the firsthand caring experiences of kindergarten teachers within the Tomas Oppus District of Southern Leyte, with its primary objective being to uncover and illuminate their personal care encounters, focusing on identifying emerging patterns or themes.

METHODS

1. Participants

The study comprised five kindergarten teachers, each associated with six kindergarten children (three boys and three girls) and six parents per teacher, or until data saturation was attained. Scholars emphasize data saturation as a pivotal consideration in qualitative research sample size determination, indicating its achievement when no new data emerges, or further data collection fails to enrich the core theoretical categories. Purposive sampling techniques guided respondent selection, delineated by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria for teachers encompassed qualifications such as a Bachelor's degree in Elementary or Secondary Education or related fields, supplemented by a diploma in early childhood education or equivalent coursework. Additionally, teachers with a minimum of three years' experience in kindergarten teaching were included. Child participants and their parents for focus group discussions were selected based on teacher referrals obtained during in-depth interviews, focusing on those who had experienced caregiving firsthand.

2. Instruments

In qualitative research, researchers function as the primary instrument for data collection, particularly within the interpretive paradigm. Acting as active participants, researchers engage with participants through interviews and focus group discussions to elicit personal caring experiences from teachers. Through these interactions, significant themes emerge, providing valuable insights for interpreting and generating research findings. The researcher's role as an active facilitator in this process is crucial for fostering rich and meaningful exchanges that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

3. Data collection procedures

Before conducting interviews, interview guides underwent a field test to ensure their effectiveness. In qualitative studies using interview questions, statistical validity and reliability testing aren't feasible, hence a field test was conducted. This involved three to five experts providing feedback on question appropriateness, phrasing, and alignment with study objectives. Expert input refined interview questions to avoid bias, and repetition, and ensure authenticity. Once finalized, interviews were scheduled with kindergarten teachers and parents to discuss the study's nature, and objectives, and

obtain consent. Data triangulation involved in-depth teacher interviews, followed by focus group discussions with parents and kindergarten learners. Interviews were conducted with the researcher presence, starting with rapport building and clarifications. Focus group discussions involved warm-up questions, followed by topic exploration and confirmation checks. Separate focus group discussions were held with learners, using visual prompts. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was ensured through data triangulation, consent forms, confirmation checks, debriefing sessions, and prolonged engagement. Transferability was addressed by providing contextual information, emphasizing rich descriptions, and ensuring dependability and confirmability through detailed discussions on research design, data collection, and analysis procedures.

4. Data analysis

This qualitative inquiry focused on exploring the personal caring experiences of kindergarten teachers within their natural educational environment. Employing an inductive logic of inquiry, data collection involved in-depth interviews with kindergarten teachers and focus group discussions with both learners and their parents. Textual data were subjected to interpretive phenomenological analysis, facilitating the identification of thematic categories and their interconnectedness. These interconnections were contextualized within a theoretical framework, yielding an emergent theory of care in kindergarten settings. Following the methodological guidelines outlined by Love, Vetere, and Davis (2020), the interpretative phenomenological analysis encompassed several steps: (1) identifying themes within the initial case, annotating noteworthy aspects in the transcript; (2) connecting emergent themes by examining their relationships; (3) expanding the analysis to incorporate interviews with diverse participants; and (4) articulating final themes and elucidating the inherent meanings derived from participants' experiences.

5. Ethical Considerations

The present phenomenological inquiry underscored the primacy of ethical considerations. Methodological safeguards were implemented, encompassing the acquisition of approval from the pertinent review board, the facilitation of transparent dialogues with participants elucidating the study's objectives and methodologies, and the steadfast commitment to preserving anonymity and safeguarding data confidentiality. Ensuring the participation of minors adhered to ethical imperatives, necessitating informed consent from parents or legal guardians, which was meticulously obtained to ensure comprehension and authorization. Supplementary consent documentation was furnished to educators and parents, articulating the voluntary nature of participation and delineating respective rights and obligations. These rigorous procedural measures not only upheld ethical norms but also fostered a principled research milieu conducive to ethical practice.

RESULTS

This section explores the motivational factors that drive kindergarten teachers to establish caring relationships with their students. It encompasses three subthemes: (a) Love, A Rippling Effect; (b) My Responsibility, My Accountability; and (c) Forecasting the Outcomes of Care. Love emerged as the essence of the teacher-student relationship, with teachers emphasizing its significance in their caring interactions. Parents also viewed caring for students as an integral part of the teaching profession. The study identified that teachers' caring and non-caring behaviors have various outcomes for teachers, students, and their relationships. Teachers, seen as loco parentes or substitute parents, demonstrated nurturing care by addressing students' physical, security, safety, and guidance needs. This included responding to physical needs, ensuring security and safety, managing behavior, and communicating with parents. Teachers shared different caring situations, and both teachers and parents highlighted the importance of building positive relationships to foster a sense of security in the classroom during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

This research provides valuable insights for educators by exploring the firsthand caring experiences of kindergarten teachers. It offers a deeper understanding of caregiver roles, aiding in the development of effective nurturing strategies. By identifying emerging patterns, educators can enhance support for children's holistic development. Moreover, insights from this research can inform educators in similar settings, allowing for tailored approaches to meet local needs. Ultimately, this research empowers educators with knowledge to improve practice, enhance outcomes for children, and advance early childhood education. Finally, the findings highlight the profound impact of teachers' actions on students' development and emphasize the importance of empathy, responsibility, and effective communication in nurturing young learners. Table 1 shows the "Personal Care" experiences of kindergarten teachers, Table 2 explores "Grounded Care" and Table 3 focuses on "Nurturing Care."

Table 1 Personal care experiences of kindergarten teachers

Theme	Sample Verbatim responses	Codes	Description of Themes
Personal Care Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers	*For me, it's all about love, responsibility, and genuinely caring for their well-being. My approach goes beyond just teaching lessons; it's about providing a caring environment. I make sure to cover the basics - food, safety, and security, you know, the physiological needs. I want them to feel secure and nurtured*	Teacher A & B	Teacher A's caring relationship with learners stems from love, responsibility, and nurturing. They provide physiological needs, ensure safety, and communicate with parents. Teacher B extends pedagogical care, teaching not just knowledge but values and skills. Despite challenges, Teacher B persists, going above and beyond for their learners.
	It's all about love, responsibility, and genuinely caring for their well-being. My approach goes beyond just teaching lessons; it's about creating a caring environment. I make sure to cover the basics - food, safety, and security, you know, their physiological needs. I want them to feel secure and nurtured	Teacher A	Teacher B's caring relationships mirror those of Teacher A, rooted in love, responsibility, and nurturing. They attend to physical and physiological needs, such as providing medical care and ensuring a safe environment. Despite obstacles, Teacher B persists in addressing diverse needs, showing enduring care.
	I prioritize acceptance for every child. My caring actions reflect a blend of intentions—nurturing, pedagogical, and enduring support. For instance, I've personally handled toileting accidents, assisted with tasks like tying shoelaces, and tailored learning with differentiated activities, one-on-one guidance, and proximity control. It's about ensuring every child feels seen, valued, and supported.	Teacher C	Teacher C's caring relationship with learners mirrors Teachers A and B, emphasizing love as essential for acceptance. Their caring behaviors encompass nurturing, pedagogical, and enduring care, including personal assistance and tailored learning support. Like Teachers A and B, Teacher C recognizes the simultaneous roles of caring and teaching in kindergarten.
	Nurturing care is visible in my response to children's illnesses and choking accidents. I'm hands-on, supervising preventive measures to ensure their safety. Working collaboratively with parents, we address concerns together. Beyond teaching, my pedagogical approach focuses on	Teacher D	Teacher D's caring relationship with learners is rooted in acceptance, responsibility, and concern for their well-being. Their nurturing care includes responding to illnesses and accidents, ensuring safety, and collaborating with parents. Pedagogical efforts focus on

	developing behaviors, and values, fostering abilities, and using suitable strategies for effective learning. It's about holistic growth.		developing behaviors, values, and talents, alongside teaching knowledge. They employ age-appropriate strategies to promote learning. Like other kindergarten teachers, Teacher D shares inspiring stories of overcoming challenges in teaching and caring for children simultaneously.
	I've implemented befriending schemes and engaging conversations. To address lacking resources, like educational supplies and slippers, I covered the expenses. My pedagogical care involves fulfilling my teaching duties, employing effective instructional strategies, and striving to balance caring and teaching. Despite challenges, I overcome them through personal and strategic approaches.	Teacher E	Teacher E's caring experiences align with those of other kindergarten teachers. They provide nurturing care for children's physical and emotional needs, including attending to illnesses and bruises. Measures like befriending schemes ensure children's security while providing necessities at their own expense demonstrates enduring care. Pedagogically, Teacher E fulfills teaching responsibilities and employs effective instructional strategies. Despite challenges, they prioritize balancing care and teaching, finding personal and strategic solutions to overcome obstacles.

Table 2 Grounded Care

Theme 1: Grounded Care			This theme featured the different motivational factors that induced teachers to establish a caring relationship with their learners. Its three subthemes included (a) Love, A Rippling Effect; (b) My Responsibility, My Accountability; and (c) Forecasting the Outcomes of Care.
• Subtheme 1: Love, A Rippling Effect	*"First, you had a love for children. That should come first. You would not care unless you felt for them. You had love for your students." Teacher B*	Teacher B	Love was the core of the caring relationship between kindergarten teachers and their learners. When asked, "What does care mean based on your experiences as a kindergarten teacher?" teachers spoke of a caring relationship between teachers and learners governed by love. According to them, caring for children requires love. As explicitly said by one kindergarten teacher, she believed that a teacher who loved children cared for them.
• Subtheme 2: A Responsibility, A Liability	*"We are accountable because we're considered second parents". Teacher " or "He or She was the second parent so he*	Parent 2b	Parents perceived caring for the learners as part of the teaching profession. This was exemplified in their responses to the question,

	or she did everything he or she could."(Parent 2b).		"Is it necessary for him or her to care for his or her learners in school?"
• Subtheme 3: Forecasting the Outcomes of Caring and Non-Caring Behavior	*"They were motivated to learn because they knew that their learning made their teacher happy." Teacher A*	Teacher A	Several different outcomes for the teacher, learner, and their relationship were identified as an offshoot of teachers' caring and non-caring behaviors. This was revealed in their answers to the question, "Is it necessary to care for the learners? Why?" Notably, a teacher informant recalled that a teacher's character was most likely to be remembered by his or her learners.

Table 3 Nurturing Care

Theme 2: Nurturing Care			Equating teachers as loco parentes or substitute parents, nurturing care characterized teachers' dynamic efforts in addressing and meeting the learners' distinct needs for physical, security, safety, and guidance. It was generated from the four subthemes (a) respond to learners' physical needs; (b) ensure the learners' security and safety; (c) manage the learners' behavior (c) communicate with the learners' parents.
• Subtheme 1: Respond to learners' physical needs	*"I rub liniments since I have it with me. As time passed by, they would ask me, "Ma'am rub me with liniments." Teacher A]* *"Yes, there was one who was wounded and treated with Benzalkonium chloride." Parent 3e* *He or she was provided with medicine." Learner A*	Teacher A Parent 3e Learner A	When it came to physical care, various caring behaviors were demonstrated by the kindergarten teachers. The following were the caring situations shared by teachers when they were asked to recall an experience wherein they provided care for their learners' holistic development.
• Subtheme 2:	*"I would also hug them." Teacher A* *"Especially if you touched their hair and played with them, they felt that you loved them." Teacher B*	Teacher A Teacher B	Ensuring children's security and safety was also perceived by parents and teachers as caring behavior in preschool. These were revealed when both were asked during the in-depth interview or focus group discussion to narrate their caring experiences. Several things were observed by the teachers to promote a sense of security in the classroom. Building a positive relationship with the children was one.

DISCUSSION

1.   Personal Care Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers

The foundation of these relationships is built on love, responsibility, and a genuine concern for the well-being of the learners. Each teacher demonstrated a multifaceted approach to care, incorporating nurturing, pedagogical, and enduring aspects. Nurturing care, a significant dimension, is evident in the teachers' commitment to meeting their students' physiological needs, such as providing food, ensuring safety, and addressing health issues (O'Hara, 2020; Gregersen & Mercer, 2021). This demonstrates a holistic understanding of the students' well-being beyond academics. Pedagogical care, another essential dimension, goes beyond traditional teaching roles. The teachers not only imparted knowledge but also aimed to instill good values and skills in their students. This approach aligns with the broader goal of developing well-rounded individuals who excel academically and possess essential life skills and values. Enduring care is exemplified by the teachers' perseverance despite challenges (Cheong et al., 2021; Sarbaitinil et al., 2023). They remained dedicated to their students, reflecting a long-term commitment to their well-being and development. This aspect highlights the resilience and steadfastness of these educators in their roles. All teachers consistently prioritized the well-being of their learners, actively engaging with parents to address concerns and exceeding expectations in their caregiving roles. This collaborative approach ensures a supportive environment for the students, involving both educators and parents in the child's overall development. The dimensions of care also extend to the physical well-being of the students (Journell, 2023; Mahmoud & Rothenberger, 2019). These unique experiences explore the varied caring relationships of five kindergarten teachers (A-E), showcasing their diverse strategies rooted in love and responsibility and emphasizing their dedication to fostering student well-being in a supportive environment.

2.   Theme 1: Grounded Care

a.   Subtheme 1: Love, a Rippling Effect

According to Heriansyah (2019) and Gregersen & Mercer (2021), love is identified as the core of the caring relationship between kindergarten teachers and their learners. Teachers, when asked about their experiences, describe a caring relationship governed by love. They emphasize that a teacher who cares invests their time and effort for the well-being of their learners. The incorporation of love into the teacher-student dynamic has advantages, as highlighted by Lovat (2019) and Virat (2020), including the fostering of a positive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers need to understand the delicate balance between expressing love and maintaining professional boundaries to refine their teaching practices. The infusion of love into the teacher-student relationship has profound implications, as noted by Parrott (2021) and Dietrich et al. (2020). It offers advantages such as the creation of an inclusive environment. However, the integration of love into educational settings is complex and presents potential challenges that require nuanced exploration in future research.

b.   Subtheme 2: A Responsibility, a Liability

According to Sethi and Scales (2020) and Plyushteva and Schwanen (2018), parents believe that caring for learners is an integral part of the teaching profession. This belief is evident in their responses to the question of whether teachers must care for their learners in school. Caring, within the context of teaching, is understood as relatedness, mothering, and parenting. Teachers are viewed as loco parentes in school, with expectations for them to perform parental roles, particularly that of the mother. In the Philippines, teachers are not considered substitutes for parents, but they are given special parental authority over the students under their supervision, instruction, or custody, as highlighted by Razer (2018) and Tarrayo (2021). This recognition of authority aligns with the provisions of the Family Code in the Philippines. The emphasis on care as vital to teaching enhances education by defining the roles of parents and teachers in nurturing students. Furthermore, exploring the "loco parentes" role of teachers, clarifying authority within the Philippine context, and promoting collaboration for student

success are important insights that inform discussions and guide educational improvements for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

c.   Subtheme 3: Forecasting the Outcomes of Caring and Non-Caring Behaviors

According to Gronostay (2018) and Wiltshire (2022), the behaviors of teachers, whether caring or non-caring, have various outcomes for the teacher, learner, and their relationship. The importance of caring for learners was emphasized by participants in their responses to why it is necessary to care for learners. One teacher informant mentioned that learners are likely to remember a teacher's character the most. Caring for learners also has positive effects on their well-being, motivation, happiness, and learning. The study identified the outcomes of caring and non-caring behaviors, as noted by Hendry (2022) and Fisher (2021), which have significant implications for the overall educational experience. The character of the teacher, particularly in terms of caring, holds lasting significance in the memories of learners and shapes their perceptions of the educational environment, as highlighted by Main (2020) and Finn (2020).

3.   Theme 2: Nurturing Care

Equating teachers as loco parentes or substitute parents, nurturing care characterized teachers' dynamic efforts in addressing and meeting the learners' distinct needs for physical, security, safety, and guidance. It was generated from the four subthemes (a) respond to learners' physical needs; (b) ensure the learners' security and safety; (c) manage the learners' behavior (c) communicate with the learners' parents.

a.   Subtheme 1: Respond to learners' physical needs

Kindergarten teachers demonstrate various caring behaviors, particularly in terms of physical care, as highlighted by Snoek et al. (2019) and Willis (2022). When asked about instances where they provided care for their students' holistic development, teachers shared examples of attending to children's illnesses and accidents. These caring situations were confirmed by parents and students who received personal attention from teachers during times of illness or accidents. Research supports the idea that teachers fulfill multiple roles beyond teaching, including nursing, especially when caring for sick children, as noted by Wang et al. (2022) and Rodriguez et al. (2021). In this study, kindergarten teachers acted as nurses by alleviating pain and preventing further injury to their students. Souto-Manning and Melvin (2021) and Walsh et al. (2020) emphasized the challenges faced by teachers due to the decreased number of nurses in schools, which leads them to respond to a range of health issues, from common colds to serious emergencies. This research expands our understanding of kindergarten teachers' caregiving roles, particularly in terms of physical care, beyond their academic responsibilities. It highlights the diverse caring behaviors of teachers, such as attending to children's illnesses and accidents. Supported by testimonials from parents and students, it underscores the multifaceted responsibilities of teachers, often extending to nursing duties due to limited healthcare resources in schools.

b.   Subtheme 2: Ensure the learners' security and safety

The importance of ensuring children's security and safety in the preschool setting is perceived by both parents and teachers as a caring behavior, as revealed in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (Briggs, 2020; Rolfe, 2020). Teachers observe several factors that promote a sense of security in the classroom, including building positive relationships with the children and showing affection through physical gestures like hugging, holding the child on their lap, and patting on the back. Playful activities such as tickling, dancing, or high-fiving, as well as listening, talking, and comforting children, also contribute to a teacher's display of affection. Creating a child-centered environment that fosters security is essential (Quinones & Cooper, 2022; Lailatu & Komareeyah, 2023). Teachers can achieve an affective dimension of child-adult relationships by encouraging children to choose activities of their interest, supporting their acquisition of new knowledge and skills, responding promptly to their distress, and providing routine structures throughout the day. The attachment formed through constant

interactions between mother and child in the first three years of life plays a role in fostering physical and psychological security (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Rolfe, 2020). Consequently, the teacher in the school becomes a crucial attachment figure, creating an environment where the child feels capable and loved. Ensuring the security and safety of children is a paramount concern in the preschool setting, as highlighted by Briggs (2020) and Rolfe (2020). This research enriches our understanding of preschool caregiving by emphasizing the significance of creating a secure environment for children's holistic development. Parental and teacher testimonies, it reveal various caring behaviors, such as building positive relationships, showing affection, and engaging in playful activities. The study underscores the importance of considering security and safety in preschool settings, supported by scholarly references.

c. Subtheme 3: Manage the learners' behavior

Teachers and parents share the belief that managing learners' behavior through discipline is an expression of care (Frank, 2022; Becker, 2023; Prutzman et al., 2022). Teachers primarily employ non-punitive methods, such as engaging in conversations with children and implementing mild consequences, to guide and correct their behavior when they make mistakes or exhibit challenging behavior. Exploring the variations in perspectives on discipline as a caring behavior in educational settings reveals the complexities associated with it. While teachers and parents agree on the importance of discipline, their differing perceptions and approaches present potential challenges. Recognizing these implications, leveraging the advantages, addressing the disadvantages, and suggesting areas for further research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of discipline as a caring behavior in educational contexts (Seider & Graves, 2020; Osío, 2023; Valladares, 2021). This finding highlights discipline as a caring behavior in education, acknowledged by both teachers and parents. It emphasizes the use of non-punitive approaches, such as conversations and mild consequences, to foster student well-being. The varied perspectives uncovered in this study stimulate discussions aimed at enhancing disciplinary practices for the well-being of students.

d. Subtheme 4: Communicate with the learners' parents

Communicating with parents is not only seen as a responsibility but also as a caring behavior in kindergarten education (Boit, 2020; Miller, 2022; Hasibuan & Rakhmawati, 2020). Both teachers and parents recognize it as a way for teachers to demonstrate their concern for the best interests of their students. The topics typically discussed with parents include school policies, health, needs, absences, performance, and feedback. While previous research studies did not explicitly mention communication with parents as a caring behavior of teachers, it is an important aspect of kindergarten education. Teachers not only engage in dialogues with children but also with their parents (Boit, 2020; Miller, 2022; Hasibuan & Rakhmawati, 2020). This communication goes beyond being perceived as a mere responsibility; it is a genuine manifestation of a teacher's care for the well-being and academic progress of their students (Amin et al., 2023; Qarooni, 2023; Karaya, 2022). This finding contributes to the understanding of communication with parents as a caring behavior in kindergarten education. It highlights the efforts of teachers to engage parents in dialogue, expressing genuine concern for student well-being and academic progress. This recognition expands on previous studies and emphasizes the importance of teacher-parent communication in fostering a supportive learning environment.

4. Theme 3: Pedagogical Care

Believing that teaching was the primary job of teachers, pedagogical care characterized the facilitative behaviors of teachers resulting in children's acquisition of knowledge and development of their talents and abilities as well (Boit, 2020; Qarooni, 2023). This theme was generated from the three subthemes (a) teach the learners; (b) employ developmentally appropriate instructional strategies to promote the learners' learning; (c) foster their abilities and talents. This result enriches our understanding of education by emphasizing the significance of pedagogical care in teaching. It underscores the facilitative behaviors of teachers that contribute to students' knowledge acquisition and talent development. By recognizing the importance of pedagogical care, educators can create a supportive and nurturing learning environment that promotes student success and well-being.

a.   Subtheme 1: Teach the learners

Teaching encompasses various meanings and roles, described as a process of education, imparting knowledge, instilling values, and facilitating learning (Fayolle et al., 2019; Ammar et al., 2024). It is not only seen as a profession but also as a passion and commitment. Teachers' caring behaviors are evident in their dedication to teaching, as recognized by both teachers and parents in this study. Parents in the study believed that teaching involved not only equipping students with knowledge but also developing desirable behaviors and values, indicating the caring nature of teachers (Fayolle et al., 2019; Ammar et al., 2024). Teaching is considered a primary task of teachers, as emphasized by various authors (Shek et al., 2023; Zhu, 2020). It is seen as an obligation to improve students' intellectual, social, emotional, and moral aspects. Effective teaching goes beyond intellectual development and also contributes to students' social, emotional, and moral growth (Withers, 2019). However, implementing a holistic approach to teaching poses challenges, as educators need to balance multiple dimensions of student development. The potential for overload may hinder the depth of impact in each area. Striking a balance between intellectual, social, emotional, and moral aspects remains a continual challenge for teachers.

b.   Subtheme 2: Employ developmentally appropriate instructional strategies

In early childhood education, a developmentally appropriate practice is founded on a comprehensive understanding of child development, individual children, and their social and cultural backgrounds (Cantor et al., 2018). This knowledge serves as the core elements that guide teachers in making informed decisions. Teachers with a solid and collective knowledge of child development and individual characteristics are able to make appropriate choices in terms of materials, activities, and experiences for children (Cantor et al., 2018). These choices are relevant, interesting, achievable, and respectful to both the participating children and their families. Additionally, teachers who understand the social and cultural context of each child can employ approaches and strategies that are responsive to their individual variations in abilities, strengths, needs, and learning preferences. The use of developmentally appropriate instructional strategies in early childhood education has the potential to create a more effective and inclusive educational environment (Lozada et al., 2021; Boylan et al., 2023). This approach emphasizes the significance of knowledge about child development and individual backgrounds in providing quality education for young children. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education, emphasizing the need for teachers to possess knowledge about child development and individual backgrounds (Cantor et al., 2018).

c.   Subtheme 3: Foster learners' abilities and talents

Caring teachers were reported by teachers and parents to foster children's abilities and talents. They retold stories that teachers used encouragement and rewards to motivate children. Opportunities were also provided for children to show off their talents. Learners confessed that they were indeed personally taught by their teachers to help them develop their skills, abilities, and talents. Employing this non-coercive approach within the context of the child's developmental age and family was likely to promote not only an ethic of caring but a developmental practice as well. According to Ferreira van Leer & Coley, (2023); Hayes (2023); and Herrera (2022), teachers should consider the child's developmental characteristics, his individuality and family, and the cultural background in which he or she lives to make informed decisions about what is developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom. The findings suggest significant implications for the role of caring teachers in fostering children's abilities and talents. Teachers, by considering the individual characteristics and family backgrounds of their students, can tailor their teaching practices to create an environment that not only fosters talents but also aligns with the child's overall development (Frey et al., 2019); Hungo & Casinillo, 2023; Tian, 2023). This finding underscores caring teachers' role in nurturing children's abilities via encouragement and personalized instruction. Considering individual and family backgrounds, teachers foster a supportive environment aligned with holistic development, promoting both caring ethics and effective teaching practices.

5. Theme 4: Enduring Care

This theme depicted the perseverance of teachers in harmonizing the complexity of performing their duties and responsibilities while at the same time caring for the complex needs of their learners at the expense of doing things beyond the realm of their obligations. This was generated from the two subthemes (a) Above and Beyond One's Duty; and (b) Balancing and Juggling Act. The findings regarding the theme of "Enduring Care" carry several implications for the teaching profession. Firstly, there is an implicit recognition of the challenges teachers face in balancing their duties and responsibilities while simultaneously attending to the complex needs of their learners. Despite the complexities, they persist in providing support and care for their students. This perseverance contributes to creating a positive and supportive learning environment, fostering stronger teacher-student relationships (Ajayi, 2023; Wald, 2020). However, a potential disadvantage may arise from the strain and stress teachers may experience due to the constant balancing act. Enduring care might lead to burnout or fatigue, impacting the overall well-being of the educators. Insights gleaned from these findings shed light on the intricate relationship between the subthemes of "Above and Beyond One's Duty" and "Balancing and Juggling Act." It suggests that enduring care is a product of both going beyond prescribed duties and the constant juggling of responsibilities. Teachers, in their efforts to navigate these challenges, exemplify a commitment that transcends the traditional boundaries of their professional obligations (Garriguez, 2020; Fleming & Harley, 2023; Jooss et al., 2020). This insight prompts a reflection on the need for systemic support and recognition for teachers who consistently engage in enduring care to meet the diverse needs of their students.

a. Subtheme 1: Above and Beyond One's Duty

Responses of teachers and parents reflected that teachers' caring behaviors were also characterized by actions that go above and beyond one's duty (Boit, 2020). In their efforts to address the needs of their learners, they also performed more than what was expected of them. Aside from their daily duties, they accomplished a lot of work more than what they were given credit for. One of these revolved around the teachers' personal and strategic ways to ensure that their physical, security, and safety needs were met. Mention, they treated them with food or gifts during special occasions as well as providing snacks, educational supplies, footwear, and fare at their own expense (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; Webber et al., 2024). The findings reveal significant implications for both teachers and parents regarding the nature of teachers' caring behaviors, emphasizing actions that go above and beyond their duty. This implies that teachers are not only fulfilling their prescribed roles but also undertaking additional responsibilities to address the diverse needs of their learners. An advantage highlighted in these findings is the dedication and commitment of teachers who willingly perform tasks beyond what is expected of them. Their efforts extend beyond routine duties, showcasing a level of care and concern that exceeds conventional expectations (Farrugia et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2019).

b. Subtheme 2: Balancing and Juggling Act

Caring for the learners was never easy for teachers. It was a constant balancing and juggling act. Teachers performing work responsibilities around caring tasks was challenging. It was a task that was coupled with another task. Sustaining the teachers' efforts to care for the children against their values, prejudices, and limitations; their learners' diverse characteristics; class size; parents' expectations; and societal issues required more than teachers' passion and commitment. Hence this finding sheds light on the intricate and demanding nature of the role of teachers in caring for their students (Badal & Vandeyar, 2023; Casinillo & Guarte, 2018; Casinillo et al., 2020; Le et al., 2023). This result sheds light on the demanding nature of teachers' caring role, highlighting challenges in balancing tasks and addressing diverse student needs amid societal pressures.

CONCLUSION

The study focuses on the firsthand caring experiences of kindergarten teachers. It highlights the significance of the study and its contribution to the body of knowledge. The key findings emphasize the interplay of elements in establishing and sustaining relational care with kindergarten learners, concluding that the teacher's embrace of relational responsibility, adoption of multifaceted roles, and devotion to caring activities promote learner well-being. The study acknowledges limitations, such as the focus on a specific district, small sample size, reliance on personal accounts, and lack of comparison to other grade levels or educational settings, discussing their potential impact on the generalizability and depth of the findings. Future research prospects include comparative analysis, longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, investigation of the impact on teacher-student relationships and student outcomes, examination of professional development programs, and exploration of policy implications. The study's significance lies in its contribution to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into caring experiences among kindergarten teachers and informing evidence-based practices and policies in early childhood education. The conclusion summarizes the main points discussed and reinforces the importance of the study and its potential impact on the field of early childhood education. Furthermore, future research should focus on refining teaching practices to ensure a harmonious integration of cognitive and character development, leading to optimal educational outcomes.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used and presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding authors. Rest assured that the real names and other personal information of the participants will remain anonymous.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known conflicting interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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