



BALANCING CARE AND CHALLENGES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN HANDLING LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: BASES FOR PROGRAM RECOMMENDATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how kindergarten teachers balance care and challenges when handling learners with special needs, providing a basis for program recommendations. Teachers offer balanced care through psychosocial support, progress monitoring, and collaboration with parents or guardians. The challenges faced by kindergarten teachers include managing learners' behavioral concerns, limited attention spans, large class sizes, lack of training and resources, and maintaining close collaboration with parents. Teachers manage these challenges by implementing a structured and supportive classroom environment, using differentiated and individualized instruction, providing emotional responsiveness and positive discipline, and fostering collaboration, all while engaging in reflective teaching practices. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with kindergarten teachers and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that effectively supporting learners with special needs requires a deliberate balance between emotional care and instructional support.

Keywords: *Balancing Care, Challenges, Kindergarten Teachers, Learners with Special Needs*

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of modern teaching practices, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional differences (UNESCO, 2020). In the early years of education, particularly in kindergarten, the implementation of inclusive classrooms presents unique challenges and opportunities (Ngadni et al., 2023). Kindergarten teachers are not only expected to deliver academic instruction but also to nurture the holistic development of young learners some of whom require specialized support due to disabilities or developmental delays (Hasanah et al., 2024).

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusion, there remains a gap in research focused specifically on the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers navigating these demands. Understanding their perspectives is vital in shaping policies, training programs, and classroom practices that truly support inclusive education. Recent empirical studies underscore that despite strong policy rhetoric, inclusive education practices in many settings face persistent challenges. Moreover, poor learning environment, lack of instructional materials, inadequate facilities, minimal stakeholder support were recurrent issues (Balik & Ozgun, 2024).

Kindergarten teachers face special demands. Young children are often less able to articulate their needs, have shorter attention spans, and require more hands-on care. Supporting learners with special needs at this stage involves not only academic readiness but also socialization, emotional regulation, and play-based learning. A 2023 study by Daniels & Pyle on kindergarten teachers' approaches toward inclusion in play-based learning for children

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with developmental disabilities where children access at different developmental levels, and foster community acceptance among peers.

However, as much as inclusive education embodies progressive ideals, its implementation particularly in early childhood settings presents complex challenges, especially for the educators responsible for executing it on the ground. While inclusive education promotes social integration and equal opportunities, it also places significant demands on teachers, particularly those in the early childhood sector who may lack adequate training, resources, or institutional support (Ngadni et al., 2023).

Teachers are expected not only to adapt their instructional strategies to cater wide range of abilities but also to manage classroom dynamics, collaborate with specialists, engage with families, and foster and inclusive culture all maintaining the emotional warmth and care essential in kindergarten settings. The emotional labor, professional strain, and systematic challenges that come with these expectations often lead to internal conflicts, burnout, and a sense of professional inadequacy among teachers (Mangalcal, 2024).

Due to these observations, the researcher would like to determine the balancing care and challenges of kindergarten teachers in handling learners with special needs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research method, design, participants, data-gathering procedures, research instrument, and data analysis employed in the study. The objective of

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this research is to examine the balancing of care and the challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in supporting learners with special needs in an inclusive classroom during the 2025-2026 school year.

Research Method

The research method employed in this study was qualitative research, utilizing in-depth interviews. According to Kapur (2021), the descriptive method involves the description, recording, analysis, and interpretation of the current nature, composition, or processes of phenomena, with the main goal of presenting a comprehensive and factual understanding of the subject under investigation.

During the interview, the interviewer and interviewee sat at a comfortable distance, allowing time for reflection on the series of questions related to a specific issue. The objective was to gather key perspectives and insights from the participants regarding the issue at hand, within a social context, through their responses to the questions.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in inclusive classrooms. Phenomenological method is appropriate for understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and professional experiences.

The goal of phenomenology is to understand how individuals perceive the world and how their perspectives may differ from commonly held beliefs by focusing on their subjective interpretations of their experiences. Phenomenology is conducted through interviews to

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gather the participants' impressions and is commonly used in fields such as psychology, sociology, and social work.

Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of understanding experience as it is lived and felt by individuals, exploring the subjective aspects of experience, including emotions, sensations, and perceptions (Moran, 2022).

The central structure of an experience is its intentionality — its direction toward something—because every experience is about or directed toward an object. This direction is shaped by the content or meaning of the experience, which represents the object, along with the appropriate enabling conditions.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this qualitative study consisted of seven (7) purposively selected kindergarten teachers from a private school offering kindergarten in Iloilo City. Each teacher had at least one year of experience teaching and working with learners with special needs during the 2025–2026 school year.

Sampling Design

A purposive sampling design was used in this study. According to Nikolopoulou (2023), purposive sampling refers to a set of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they possess characteristics needed for the study. In other words, participants are chosen "on purpose" for their relevance to the research. Also known as judgmental sampling, this method relies on the researcher's judgment to identify and select

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individuals, cases, or events that can provide the most valuable information to meet the study's objectives.

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative and mixed methods research, especially when the goal is to identify information-rich cases or make the most efficient use of limited resources. However, it carries the risk of research biases, such as observer bias.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in the study was a researcher-made interview schedule. The interview schedule consisted of three questions aligned with the study's objectives. Voice and video recorders were employed for data collection and documentation, subject to the participants' permission.

Validity of the Research Instrument

Before determining the validity of the researcher-made interview schedule, the adviser, the Dean of the Graduate School, and a panel of experts in research, testing and assessment, and English were asked to review and validate each question for potential revisions.

Validity refers to the accuracy and reliability of a research instrument, specifically how well it measures what it is intended to measure. In terms of content validity, it ensures that the test or measurement method fully encompasses all relevant aspects of the concept being studied. This guarantees that each question or item in the research instrument is pertinent, representative, and consistent with the study's goals (Bhandari, 2022). The feedback, corrections, and suggestions from the validation panel regarding the interview schedule were taken into account, using the appropriate format outlined by Good and Scates (Appendix A).

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Data Gathering Procedures

Permits were obtained from the adviser, the Dean of the Graduate School, the Office of the Schools Division Superintendent, the Office of the District Supervisors, the School Administrators of the Private School, and the individual participants to allow the researcher to carry out the study. The researcher personally visited the school locations at times convenient for the participants to conduct the interviews. A semi-structured interview approach was used, enabling participants to share detailed narratives while guiding the conversation to align with the research questions. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

The interview data were audio-recorded, and notes were transcribed. The data were then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and strategies. After conducting the series of interviews, the researcher consolidated all the collected data for further analysis.

Data Analyses

The information gathered was analyzed using a thematic approach. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), the primary goal of thematic analysis is to capture key aspects of the data in relation to the research question and to organize and describe the data in rich detail. This approach enabled the researcher to uncover recurring patterns and themes that provided insights into the participants' lived experiences.

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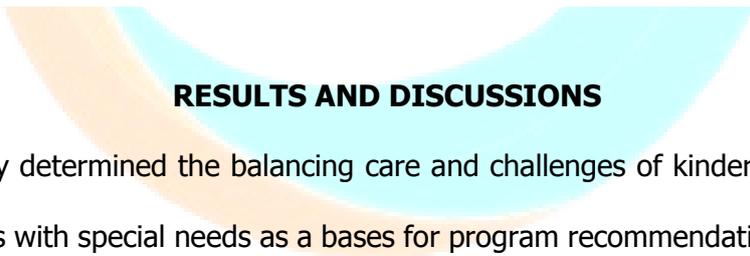
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The data analysis followed a systematic process. All interview transcripts and recorded responses were carefully transcribed and reviewed to ensure accuracy and completeness. The researcher then familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, making initial notes and observations.

Coding was conducted by labeling significant statements, phrases, or sections of text that were relevant to the research objectives. These codes were then examined and grouped to identify potential patterns and relationships. Similar codes were clustered into broader categories, which were refined and organized into key themes that reflected the essence of the participants' experiences.

Finally, the identified themes were reviewed and validated to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The themes were then clearly defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the research questions and study objectives. This rigorous process ensured that the findings were credible, meaningful, and deeply rooted in the actual experiences of the participants.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study determined the balancing care and challenges of kindergarten teachers in handling learners with special needs as a bases for program recommendation in Panay Island particularly in a private school offering kindergarten in Iloilo City during the School Year 2025-2026.

The research method utilized in the study was qualitative method using in-depth interview.

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The research design was the narrative approach with Thematic Analysis.

The participants of the study were the seven (7) purposely selected kindergarten teachers with at least one year of experience teaching learners with special needs in a private school offering kindergarten in Iloilo City.

The researcher made research questionnaires was used and validated by the experts. The interview was scheduled during the teachers' vacant time. Formal letter was delivered personally to the school heads, of whom, would approve and assign the participants for the said interview.

The researcher personally went to the school and conducted the in-depth interview. Voice recorder and notes were used for data gathering and photo documentation upon the permission of the participants.

The researcher consolidated all collected data after series of interviews. The narratives were gathered, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic approach.

The following are the findings of the study:

The following are the findings of the study:

Based on the responses from the in-depth interview, the teachers in a private school offering kindergarten have different ways in providing balancing care, different challenges encountered in handling learners with special needs, and ways to manage challenges that can be contribute as bases for program recommendation which could help foster effective and relevant educational program for the teachers in handling learners with special needs.

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During the conduct of in-depth interview with the participants, it was found out that the balancing care provided by kindergarten teachers in handling learners with special needs were on psychosocial support, monitoring learners progress, and collaboration with parents or guardian.

The challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers in handling learners with special needs based on the results of the in-depth interview were managing learners' behavioral concerns, limited attention span and class size, lack of training and limited resources, and maintaining close collaboration with parents.

Based on the results of the study, the kindergarten teacher's management of challenges in handling learners with special needs were structured and supportive classroom environment, differentiated and individualized instruction, emotional responsiveness and positive discipline, and collaboration and reflective teaching practice.

Based on the findings, the following insights were drawn:

The study reveals that balancing care is a multidimensional practice among kindergarten teachers. Teachers do not focus solely on academic instruction but intentionally integrate psychosocial support, continuous monitoring of learners' progress, and collaboration with parents or guardians. This indicates that teachers recognize learners with special needs as whole individuals whose emotional, social, and developmental needs are as important as their cognitive growth. The emphasis on psychosocial support reflects teachers' awareness

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that emotional security and positive teacher–learner relationships are foundational to effective learning, especially for young learners with special needs.

The findings show that monitoring learners’ progress is a crucial yet demanding responsibility for kindergarten teachers. Teachers actively observe behaviors, learning responses, and developmental changes to adjust their teaching strategies. However, this practice requires time, consistency, and adequate tools, which may be constrained by large class sizes and multiple learner needs. This insight underscores the importance of structured monitoring systems and school-based support mechanisms to help teachers track progress more effectively and reduce instructional overload.

Collaboration with parents emerges as both a key support and a significant challenge. While teachers value parental involvement in reinforcing learning and behavior management, maintaining close collaboration is often difficult due to parents’ limited availability, differing expectations, or lack of acceptance of the child’s condition. This insight suggests that successful inclusive education does not rely solely on teachers’ efforts but requires shared responsibility and strong home–school partnerships supported by clear communication and guidance.

Moreover, the study highlights that teachers face persistent challenges related to behavioral concerns, limited attention span, class size, lack of training, and limited resources. These challenges indicate that while teachers demonstrate commitment and adaptability, they often operate within constraints that affect the quality and sustainability of inclusive practices. This insight points to a gap between teachers’ responsibilities and the institutional support

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provided to them, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development and adequate learning resources.

Lastly, the findings show that kindergarten teachers manage these challenges through structured and supportive classroom environments, differentiated and individualized instruction, emotional responsiveness, positive discipline, and reflective teaching practices. This reflects teachers' professional resilience and creativity in responding to diverse learner needs. The use of reflective teaching practices suggests that teachers continuously assess their own methods and seek improvement, which is a strong foundation for implementing future program recommendations.

Overall, these insights suggest that while kindergarten teachers demonstrate effective balancing care and adaptive strategies in handling learners with special needs, systematic programs focusing on training, resources, parental collaboration, and psychosocial support are essential. The findings strongly support the development of a program recommendation that will enhance teachers' competencies, strengthen support systems, and promote inclusive and sustainable early childhood education practices.

Conclusion

In the light of the findings and insights arrived in this study, the following recommendations are highlighted:

School administrators are encouraged to design and implement a structured support program for kindergarten teachers handling learners with special needs. This program should focus on strengthening psychosocial support strategies, classroom management,

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differentiated instruction, and progress monitoring.

Administrators should also ensure the availability of adequate instructional materials, appropriate class size arrangements, and access to professional support services to help teachers manage diverse learner needs more effectively.

Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to continuously enhance their competencies through professional development activities, such as training, workshops, and peer mentoring, focusing on inclusive education and positive behavior management. Teachers are also encouraged to maintain reflective teaching practices and consistent monitoring of learners' progress to ensure that instructional strategies are responsive to individual learner needs.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to actively participate in school activities and collaborate closely with teachers to support learners with special needs. Open communication, regular consultations, and active involvement in intervention strategies are essential in reinforcing positive behavior and learning development at home and in school. Parent education and orientation programs may help improve awareness and acceptance of learners' needs.

Program developers and education policymakers are encouraged to develop inclusive education programs and policies that address the specific challenges encountered by kindergarten teachers. Emphasis should be placed on providing continuous training, standardized monitoring tools, and psychosocial support frameworks that are developmentally appropriate and contextually relevant to early childhood settings.

Future researchers may consider conducting similar studies using larger samples,

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mixed methods, or different educational settings to validate and expand the findings of this study. Further research may also explore the long-term impact of proposed programs on teachers' effectiveness and learners' academic, social, and emotional development.



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