

# School Gates are Re-Opened: The Lived Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers in the Post-Pandemic Era

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**Abstract-** *The reopening of schools after the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a transformative phase in education. This study explores the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers during the school years, 2022 - 2024, in Silang, Cavite, using a transcendental phenomenology approach. Using Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis Framework, the study examined the teachers navigating shifts in pedagogy, technology integration, and their relationships with pupils, parents, and colleagues during an educational era in the aftermath of the worldwide pandemic. Supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, Community of Inquiry, and the Technology Integration Matrix, the study highlights the challenges and adaptations faced by teachers, including psychosomatic stress, technological innovation, and the rebuilding of social connections in a post-pandemic context. The findings provide valuable insights for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to enhance pedagogical practices, support networks, and resilience in early childhood education (ECE).*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education (ECE), Kindergarten teachers, Post-pandemic era, Re-opening of schools*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The research aimed to explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers after the postpandemic era. The study focused on the school years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) *What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers during the post-pandemic era?* (2) *What are the contexts of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers during the post-pandemic era?* The reopening of schools after the COVID-19 pandemic marked the beginning of a new chapter driven by the changes that have transpired during this significant period in the educational timeline. Rather than simply being the return to traditional classroom settings, it set forth a shift in the pedagogical practices of educators among different levels in the postpandemic era, which Moorhouse, Wong, and Li (2023) described as "a time of technological normalization". This is then characterized by educators utilizing advanced technologies to enhance the learning experience, both in-person and virtually (Ratten, 2023). Schools increasingly provide hybrid

learning, which combines online and in-person instruction, in place of traditional face-to-face instruction.

The post-pandemic era introduced several changes in teaching practices, with a greater emphasis on health and safety issues (UNICEF Georgia, 2020). A key area of focus was the increase of technology use in education. Sari & Yoni (2021) observed a noteworthy surge in the utilization of technology and internet literacy, reflected in the rise of downloading, uploading, and attending webinars, workshops, and online competitions through various online learning applications. These changes resulted from diverse responses by educators of different levels.

Some teachers experienced this shift through the use of a variety of digital tools to maintain content delivery and encourage engagement, along with the improvement of their knowledge of assessment and course design, and the development of empathy for student circumstances (Gonzalez, Ponce, Fernandez, 2023). However, Lin et al. (2022) noted that technological advancement also brought enduring health and safety issues, requiring a balance between fostering an enhanced learning environment and ensuring the safety of staff and children amid ongoing uncertainty. These adjustments, combined with the existing demands of teaching and caring for students, posed significant challenges for educators (Kim, Oxley, and Asbury, 2021).

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As schools reopen, teachers have become central to these transitions, facing mental health pressures alongside pedagogical modifications (Swindle, 2023). According to Li (2022), being the school's primary undertaker affects the educator's development, teaching effectiveness, and productivity. This highlights the need to reevaluate support structures and self-care methods, considering the specific challenges of hybrid teaching, regulating emotional affect, and reorganizing time use (Jones, Camburn, Kelcey, Quintero, 2022). The shift back to face-to-face modality is not a return to the same classroom environment as before the pandemic. Al-Ansi (2022) presented post-COVID classrooms as "Social Innovative Learning Environments," or SILE for short. This was supported by studies that discovered that social innovative learning environments, which are based on multiple social media platforms, integrate technology, are visually appealing, and are superior to traditional classrooms as a teaching tool (Dovey & Fisher, 2014; Garad & Al-Ansi, 2021; Al-Ansi & Al-Ansi, 2023).

The literature on the matters concerning post-pandemic education revealed both knowledge and population gaps (Miles, 2017). Research on the characteristics of distance learning during the pandemic has been conducted, but not enough has been done to examine the possible long-term impacts of the modifications made to education during the pandemic on education after it has ended (Zhang & Gillespie, 2023). Though there are present studies that give insight into what the post-pandemic era was like for educators, most resources cover the perspectives of those in higher levels of education. The viewpoints of management educators (Ratten, 2023), junior high science school teachers (Nemalyne, et al., 2023), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers (Al-Nofaie, 2023) were all covered in current research studies. In the Philippine setting, Boholano and Jamon (2021) encompassed the resiliency of Filipino public school teachers to teaching and learning in the new normal. For higher education, Del Castillo (2023) presented the insights of students on hybrid flexible learning. However, based on the available resources on post-pandemic education, there seems to be a need for more in the arena

of kindergarten education, especially in the Philippine setting in Silang, Cavite, a gap this study aims to bridge.

Kindergarten teachers are the first official teachers of first-time schoolers in the formal education setting. They, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979), are a part of the mesosystem of the child because of the direct interaction they have with children. As McCallum (2021) stated, "Teachers are the most important in-school factor contributing to student success, satisfaction, and achievement". These educators are in charge of facilitating learning experiences for young children whose developmental skills are still emerging. As suggested by Vygotsky (1978) in his socio-cultural theory of development (Zone of Proximal Development), proper guidance from adults or the "more knowledgeable other" assists in enabling children to achieve the next milestone of their development (Gauvain, 2020), where the teacher's role will come in.

### III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research Design.** The study utilized a qualitative research approach, specifically the transcendental phenomenological method. The transcendental phenomenological approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of the essence of kindergarten teachers' experiences during the post-pandemic era while "bracketing" our own prior experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Rather than interpreting, we concentrated on describing the experience without allowing our personal biases to influence the study's findings. This way, kindergarten teachers' lived experiences were perceived "as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p.34).

**Participants and Sampling Procedure.** The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, specifically the snowball sampling technique, a criterion-based selection (Mukherji & Albon, 2018) as described by Christensen (2012). This approach allowed the study to collect information from individuals who represent people who have experienced a certain phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria for participants included being kindergarten teachers who had at least five (5) years of consecutive teaching experience at the kindergarten level, including the current school year when the data gathering was conducted. This required the teacher participants to have experience teaching in the kindergarten before, during, and after the pandemic. The initial number of participants was fifteen (15). However, due to time constraints, it had to be reduced to eight (8) kindergarten teachers in total, which was still within the sample size proposed by Creswell (2013) for phenomenological research. Each of the participants was asked for recommendations for a prospective research participant. Follow-up interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were also conducted to gather more information from the teachers (members checking) until the point of data saturation was reached.

**Data Gathering Tools.** The sample interview framework proposed by Moustakas (1994, p. 116) was utilized in the study. The data-gathering tool was adjusted to make it appropriate for the context of being a kindergarten teacher and followed a semi-structured format. To ensure the instrumentation's validity and reliability, the questions underwent expert validation

(construction & ECE field). The framework consisted of phenomenological interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and artifacts.

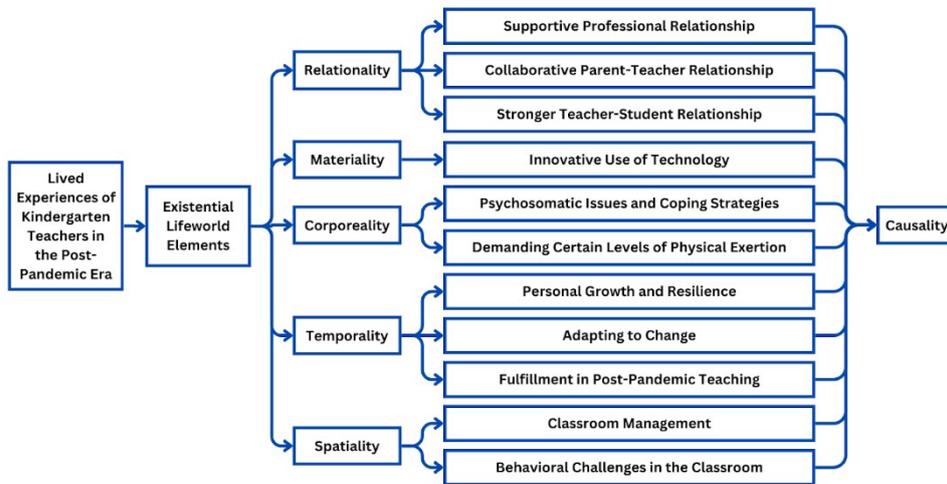
**Data Gathering Procedures.** Before collecting any data, the researchers sent letters of intent to the prospective elementary schools selected for data gathering provided by the College of Education (COE) Council. These letters were addressed to the district supervisor and school heads to formally communicate the intent to conduct the study within their institutions, along with the terms and conditions of the schools' participation. After school administrators were briefed on the study, informed consent letters were given to the selected kindergarten teachers. They were made fully aware of the study's purpose and procedures and informed of their right to voluntary participation, ensuring that their involvement was entirely based on their own decision.

The research process strictly adhered to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were assured that their identities and personal data would be protected. To maintain this, teachers were assigned pseudonyms for use in all discussions and documentation of the data. The information shared remained confidential and was not disclosed beyond what was outlined in the consent letter. Once the purposive sampling method identified the participants, they were briefed about their roles in the study. Eight teachers engaged in in-depth interviews, and three participated in a focus group discussion that included member checking. Observations were scheduled based on teacher availability and included reviewing lesson plans and monitoring class and non-class periods. Participants were recommended based on predefined criteria, and their permission and willingness were essential. The process continued until data saturation was achieved. To enrich the research, video/audio recordings and photos were used, offering additional visual and auditory dimensions to the collected data.

**Data Analysis.** For the analysis of data, Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis Framework was utilized, which follows the following procedures: Horizontalization, Clustering, Writing the textural description, Writing the structural description, and Writing the essence. Particularly, the data was analyzed thematically by assigning codes to the participants' statements, categorizing the codes, and grouping the categories into themes. The themes were then refined and grouped into the Lifeworld Elements of Moustakas (1994): Relationality, Materiality, Corporeality, Temporality, and Spatiality. After the themes were identified, the most prominent statements were aligned with each theme they corresponded with.

#### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

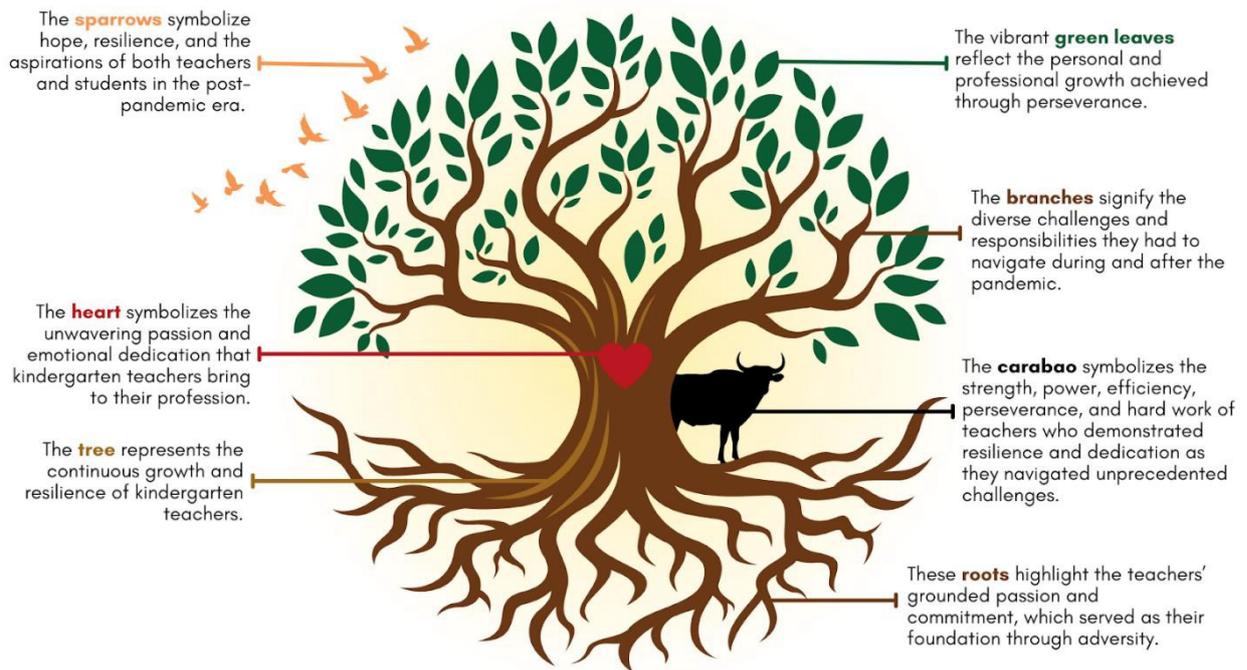
The findings are organized into the five lifeworld elements presented by Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis Framework: Relationality, Materiality, Corporeality, Temporality, and Spatiality (Causality is incorporated in the discussion of each lifeworld element). Each theme highlights the unique experiences of the participants, enriched by direct quotes, observations, and reflective accounts.



**Figure 5.** Results of the study based on the Framework based on Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis

We created an illustration to summarize our findings based on the interviews and themes we discovered. This illustration uses a tree as a metaphor to represent the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the post-pandemic era, highlighting their journey of growth, resilience, and adaptability. The birds symbolize hope, progress, and the aspirations of both teachers and students as they navigate this new chapter. The vibrant green leaves reflect the personal and professional growth achieved through perseverance, while the branches represent teachers' diverse challenges and responsibilities during and after the pandemic. At the tree's heart lies the unwavering passion and emotional dedication teachers bring to their profession, symbolized by a red heart. The carabao at the base of the tree signifies the strength and perseverance of teachers who demonstrated resilience and dedication regardless of unprecedented challenges. Anchoring it all, the roots highlight their grounded passion and commitment, which served as a foundation through adversity. Together, the tree encapsulates the continuous growth and resilience of kindergarten teachers as they rise to meet new challenges and continue to support their students in this post-pandemic era.

**Figure 6.** Essence of the Lived Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers in the Post-Pandemic Era



### ***Textural Description***

Every morning, I step into my classroom, greeted by tiny hands waving and bright eyes filled with curiosity. In this post-pandemic world, I have felt the children's need to be heard more than ever. Their little voices matter—their fears, their dreams, their laughter. They all matter. Being a teacher, it's not just about standing in front of a class and delivering my lessons. It is about presence. Every day, I ask myself the same question, "How do my students see me?" Am I just another adult giving instructions? Or am I someone they can trust, someone who can see them as more than just pupils?

Each year is a new experience and I have learned that no two children are the same. They come with their own stories and struggles, and I step into these different worlds to meet them where they are. I celebrate every small victory—like when they write their name for the first time, the joy of learning to share, and the courage it takes to speak up. Life isn't just about the big moments; it's the little ones that truly matter and make the journey special.

Yes, there are days of exhaustion. There are times when the weight of responsibilities feels like a heavy backpack, filled to the brim with stones. Each task pulls you down a little more, making it hard to catch your breath. The pressure builds as the clock ticks and the demands around you grow louder, drowning out any sense of calm. But I remind myself—I have been through these difficult times before. The pandemic tested us all, but we endured. We survived.

And so, I keep going, I keep learning, and I keep loving. The weariness of the day melts away when I catch sight of their bright, beaming smiles. The room transforms into a vibrant tapestry of laughter and inquisitive minds, each moment enriched with the joy of discovery. In those instances, I am reminded—"This is why I'm here. This is my true calling."

This study investigated the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in the post-pandemic period, emphasizing how they adjusted to notable shifts in social dynamics, educational methods, and the developmental needs of their pupils. The contextualized results were grouped into relationality, materiality, corporeality, temporality, and spatiality, framed after Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis Framework. The study also highlighted the strategies kindergarten teachers used to help their pupils advance their professional practices while navigating the difficulties of teaching during unprecedented change.

The study revealed several important findings. First, the pandemic boosted teamwork and classroom environments by strengthening professional ties among educators and creating a collaborative culture. Additionally, parent-teacher interactions became more regular and dynamic, strengthening relationships that improved student outcomes. In materialism, the quick uptake of technology, including Google applications, PowerPoint, and interactive platforms, revolutionized administrative effectiveness and the way education was delivered. However, it was also discovered that teachers faced increased physical and psychological stress despite these developments, which showed up as exhaustion and psychosomatic problems. Despite this, they showed tenacity by adopting more innovative teaching techniques, prioritizing self-development, and seeking fulfillment in their pupils' achievement and gratitude. Additionally, teachers faced behavioral issues among pupils, which called for more adaptable and innovative classroom management methods, such as organized reward systems and simplified classroom setups.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes the importance of kindergarten teachers' lived experiences as a continuous journey of adjustment and growth, professionally and personally, in the face of challenges, driven by their passion for teaching. The post-pandemic period has significantly transformed these experiences, requiring teachers to adapt to changes in social dynamics, educational methods, and the developmental needs of their students. While the pandemic fostered collaboration among educators and improved relationships between parents and teachers—positively impacting student outcomes—it also presented challenges, including increased physical and psychological stress for teachers.

Despite these difficulties, teachers showed resilience by adopting innovative teaching practices, prioritizing professional growth, and finding fulfillment in their students' successes. Additionally, behavioral challenges among students required teachers to implement more flexible and creative classroom management strategies to maintain effective learning environments.

Based on the data presented in the study, teachers are recommended to further their professional development to adopt effective and more relevant strategies to enhance their teaching practices. This development covers technology integration and adaptive classroom management. In addition, it is also recommended that pupils' learning experiences be enriched through refined teaching methods and teacher-parent collaborations and efforts, supporting holistic development. Moreover, administrators are encouraged to build resilient schools by aligning policies with practical experiences, providing mental health support, positive workload management, and establishing crisis-preparedness. To further our understanding of the

problems and solutions facing education worldwide, future researchers should also examine the long-term effects of post-pandemic educational modifications on teacher wellbeing and student achievement.

### **Authors' contributions**

**\*Starlene C. Buitizon, \*Felicity Duane P. Licayan, Arvie I. Bacus** are research students who worked together from the study's conceptualization to the finalization of the research work.

**\*Cecilia F. Ronia**, served as the research adviser who closely guided and provided critical feedback throughout the whole duration of the study beginning from its conceptualization, writing to completion.

Mary Grace L. De Guzman served as the research course facilitator who guided and provided insightful feedback to improve the study.

Rowena Imelda A. Ramos served as the research methodologist ensuring that the study follows ethical procedures aligned with the research design.

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