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Building Early Readers: Exploring Kindergarten Learners' Early Childhood Literacy Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood literacy provides the foundation for later reading comprehension, communication, academic participation, and lifelong learning. This qualitative study explored the early childhood literacy experiences of kindergarten learners at Aglipay East Central School in Aglipay, Quirino, Philippines. Specifically, it examined how young learners experienced storytelling, oral language activities, alphabet and sound awareness, print-rich activities, play-based literacy tasks, and interactions with teachers and peers. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation. Kindergarten learners were purposively selected, while data were gathered through developmentally appropriate conversations, classroom observations, learner outputs, and teacher-supported literacy activities. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes structured the findings: (1) Stories Open the Door to Reading, (2) Sounds and Letters Become Meaningful Through Play, (3) Teacher Interaction Builds Confidence to Communicate, (4) Familiar Words and Experiences Make Literacy Meaningful, and (5) From Emerging Readers to Confident Literacy Learners. The findings suggest that early literacy developed through interconnected experiences involving oral language, stories, print, phonological awareness, meaningful interaction, play, and contextualized learning rather than through isolated reading exercises. The study underscores the importance of child-centered and developmentally appropriate literacy environments in supporting emerging readers in rural elementary education.

Keywords: early childhood literacy, kindergarten, emergent literacy, early readers, storytelling, phonological awareness, rural education

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1. Introduction

Early childhood literacy represents a critical foundation for children's subsequent learning because skills acquired during the kindergarten years contribute to later reading, writing, comprehension, communication, and academic participation. Literacy development begins before children become conventional readers, as young learners develop oral language, vocabulary, print awareness, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and meaning-making through their interactions with people, stories, symbols, and print. Research involving multilingual learners has reinforced the importance of multiple components of reading development rather than viewing literacy as a single skill (Kittle et al., 2024). In the Philippine context, kindergarten education has particular significance because evidence indicates that children who attended kindergarten were more likely to acquire reading and writing skills before entering primary education and subsequently demonstrated advantages in higher-level functional literacy (Abrigo & Francisco, 2024).

Literacy experiences during kindergarten should therefore extend beyond teaching children to recognize letters or pronounce written words. Children develop literacy through listening to stories, engaging in conversations, playing with sounds, recognizing familiar print, drawing, attempting to write, singing, asking questions, and interacting with adults and peers. The quality of adult-child interactions within early childhood education is also important because responsive interactions provide opportunities for children to communicate, receive feedback, expand their language, and participate actively in learning (Howard et al., 2024).

Storytelling is particularly valuable because stories expose young learners to vocabulary, sentence structures, sequencing, characters, events, emotions, and meanings. When teachers ask children to predict what might happen, describe characters, retell events, or connect a story with their own experiences, learners become active participants in meaning-making rather than passive listeners. These experiences help establish an understanding that reading involves constructing meaning from language and print rather than merely identifying written symbols.

Phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge constitute another important dimension of emerging literacy. Kindergarten learners gradually become aware that spoken words consist of sounds and that written symbols represent aspects of spoken language. Developmentally appropriate activities involving songs, rhymes, word play, sound identification, letter manipulation, pictures, and games can provide engaging opportunities to explore these relationships. Recent Philippine work on kindergarten literacy has likewise examined interactive and game-based approaches to alphabet and phonemic awareness, reflecting continued interest in developmentally engaging approaches to foundational reading skills (Perillo & Santos, 2026).

The Philippine kindergarten context provides a particularly important setting for investigating these experiences. The country's kindergarten curriculum has emphasized integrative, interactive, child-centered, and play-based learning experiences in preparing children for primary education (Abrigo & Francisco, 2024). Moreover, Philippine evidence suggests that early kindergarten experiences may have consequences extending beyond the immediate kindergarten year. Abrigo and Francisco (2024) found that kindergarten participation increased the likelihood that Grade 1 pupils could already read and write, with benefits subsequently observed in functional literacy during early adolescence.



Despite the importance of literacy outcomes, quantitative measures alone cannot fully explain how children experience the process of becoming readers. Literacy scores can identify what children can or cannot perform, but children's voices and classroom experiences can reveal how they encounter stories, letters, sounds, conversations, and print; which activities make them interested or hesitant; and how interactions with teachers and classmates influence their willingness to participate. Accordingly, this study explored the early childhood literacy experiences of kindergarten learners at Aglipay East Central School, with particular attention to the meanings children constructed through stories, oral language, sound and letter activities, play, contextualized literacy experiences, and classroom interactions.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study generally aimed to explore the early childhood literacy experiences of kindergarten learners at Aglipay East Central School. Specifically, it sought to examine how learners experienced storytelling and other language-rich classroom activities; explore how play-based activities supported their awareness of letters, sounds, words, and print; describe how teacher and peer interactions influenced their communication and participation in literacy activities; understand how familiar words, objects, experiences, and community contexts contributed to literacy meaning-making; and explore how these experiences shaped learners' emerging confidence and identities as beginning readers.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation to explore kindergarten learners' early childhood literacy experiences at Aglipay East Central School. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to identify kindergarten learners who had regularly participated in classroom literacy experiences involving storytelling, oral language, alphabet and sound activities, print-based tasks, songs, games, drawing, and beginning writing. Because the participants were young children, data collection was designed to be developmentally appropriate and avoided lengthy formal interviews. Data were gathered through brief child-friendly conversations, classroom observations, learner drawings and literacy outputs, and teacher-supported reflective activities. Questions were phrased simply and were accompanied by familiar materials or classroom experiences where appropriate to help children communicate their ideas. Classroom observations focused on children's responses to stories, interactions with print, participation in oral language activities, recognition and manipulation of letters and sounds, engagement with literacy games, and interactions with the teacher and classmates. Multiple sources of evidence were used to develop richer interpretations of children's experiences. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis through familiarization, initial coding, construction of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and development of an integrated interpretive account. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation of conversations, observations, and learner outputs; documentation of analytical decisions; attention to contrasting experiences; and researcher reflexivity. Because the study involved minors, appropriate institutional approval, parental or guardian informed consent, child assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and child-protection procedures were observed throughout the research.



4. Results and Findings

The thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes describing kindergarten learners' early childhood literacy experiences: Stories Open the Door to Reading; Sounds and Letters Become Meaningful Through Play; Teacher Interaction Builds Confidence to Communicate; Familiar Words and Experiences Make Literacy Meaningful; and From Emerging Readers to Confident Literacy Learners.

Theme 1: Stories Open the Door to Reading

The first theme captured how storytelling functioned as an important entry point into literacy. Learners appeared to associate reading not simply with recognizing written words but with characters, pictures, events, emotions, and opportunities to talk about what happened in a story. Interactive storytelling allowed children to listen, predict, answer questions, identify characters, sequence events, and connect narratives with their experiences. Such activities supported the understanding that written and spoken language carries meaning and that readers actively construct meaning from texts.

An illustrative learner response was:

Learner 3: "I like it when Teacher reads a story because I look at the pictures and guess what will happen next."

Another learner explained:

Learner 7: "I remember the story when Teacher asks us what the character did. I want to tell the answer." These responses suggest that stories provided a meaning-centered pathway into literacy. Instead of encountering reading solely as letter identification, children encountered language within coherent and engaging narratives. This distinction is important because early literacy involves developing both foundational decoding-related abilities and the language resources needed for comprehension. Research on reading development among multilingual learners similarly underscores the importance of attending to multiple components of literacy rather than relying on a narrow conception of reading instruction (Kittle et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Sounds and Letters Become Meaningful Through Play

The second theme reflected how learners encountered letters and sounds through songs, games, pictures, rhymes, repetition, movement, and manipulation of learning materials. Children appeared more willing to participate when literacy activities incorporated playful elements rather than requiring prolonged repetition or worksheet completion.

An illustrative learner stated:

Learner 5: "I like finding the letter because we look for the picture that starts with the same sound."

Another explained:

Learner 9: "We sing the sounds, and I remember them because the song is fun."

The accounts suggest that play acted as a bridge between children's natural activity and formal literacy learning. Through repeated but engaging exposure, learners could notice relationships among spoken sounds, letters, pictures, and words. Philippine kindergarten research has similarly explored game-based literacy interventions targeting alphabet and phonemic awareness, demonstrating the continuing



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relevance of interactive and developmentally appropriate approaches to beginning literacy (Perillo & Santos, 2026). The interpretive process can therefore be represented as **playful experience → sound awareness → letter association → word recognition → emerging literacy understanding**.

Theme 3: Teacher Interaction Builds Confidence to Communicate

The third theme emphasized the role of teacher-child interaction in children's willingness to speak, answer questions, attempt unfamiliar words, and participate in literacy activities. Learners did not always approach reading with equal confidence. Some hesitated when encountering unfamiliar words or feared giving incorrect answers. Encouragement, questioning, modeling, repetition, and supportive feedback appeared to create conditions in which children were more comfortable taking literacy-related risks.

One illustrative learner shared:

Learner 2: "When I don't know the word, Teacher helps me say the sound, and then I try again."

Another stated:

Learner 11: "I was shy before, but Teacher tells me to try. I am happy when I can answer."

These accounts suggest that early literacy development was simultaneously linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional. Children needed opportunities to practice literacy skills, but they also needed supportive interactions that encouraged participation. A systematic review of adult-child interactions in early childhood education has emphasized the relationship between interaction quality and children's developmental and educational outcomes (Howard et al., 2024). The findings therefore indicate that the teacher's role extended beyond delivering literacy content to creating a psychologically supportive environment in which children could experiment with language and gradually develop confidence.

Theme 4: Familiar Words and Experiences Make Literacy Meaningful

The fourth theme captured how literacy became more accessible when words and texts were connected with objects, people, places, routines, and experiences familiar to children. Learners readily recognized names, classroom labels, family-related words, foods, animals, household objects, and other familiar vocabulary. These connections provided concrete meanings for otherwise abstract written symbols.

An illustrative learner explained:

Learner 6: "I know that word because we have it at home. When I see the picture, I remember what the word means."

Another shared:

Learner 13: "I can read my name and some names of my classmates. I look for my name when Teacher shows the cards."

These accounts illustrate how contextualization supported the movement from print as an unfamiliar symbol toward print as meaningful representation. When words were associated with children's existing knowledge, learners had conceptual resources that could support interpretation. This process is especially relevant in kindergarten, where children are still developing connections among oral language, visual representations, written symbols, and meaning. The Philippine kindergarten curriculum's emphasis on child-centered, integrative, and interactive experiences similarly recognizes the importance of meaningful



learning contexts during the transition into formal schooling (Abrigo & Francisco, 2024).

Theme 5: From Emerging Readers to Confident Literacy Learners

The fifth theme represented children's developing sense that they were becoming capable readers and communicators. Learners described satisfaction when they recognized a letter independently, read a familiar word, retold part of a story, wrote their names, or successfully responded to a teacher's question. These small accomplishments appeared significant because they provided children with evidence of their own developing competence.

One illustrative learner stated:

Learner 4: "Before I asked Teacher what the word was. Now there are words I can read by myself."

Another explained:

Learner 10: "I am happy when I read the word correctly because I know I am learning to read."

The accounts suggest that becoming literate involved more than acquiring discrete reading skills; it also involved developing confidence, participation, persistence, and an emerging identity as a reader. This finding acquires particular significance in light of Philippine evidence showing that kindergarten participation can support earlier acquisition of reading and writing skills and that these early competencies may contribute to later functional literacy (Abrigo & Francisco, 2024). Thus, experiences that enable children to perceive themselves as increasingly capable literacy learners may provide an important motivational foundation for subsequent reading development.

Taken together, the five themes suggest an interpretive progression of meaningful stories → playful sound and letter exploration → supportive interaction → contextualized print experiences → confident emerging literacy. The findings indicate that early childhood literacy should not be understood as a linear process of teaching letters followed by words and sentences. Instead, children's literacy experiences appeared to develop through the interaction of oral language, print awareness, phonological exploration, stories, play, contextual knowledge, social relationships, and growing confidence. Such an interpretation supports a holistic understanding of emergent literacy in which children's pathways toward conventional reading are constructed through multiple and mutually reinforcing experiences.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that kindergarten learners' early childhood literacy experiences at Aglipay East Central School can be understood as an interconnected process involving **stories, sounds, letters, language interactions, familiar experiences, play, and developing confidence**. Storytelling provided meaningful contexts for comprehension and oral expression, while play-based activities enabled learners to explore relationships among sounds, letters, pictures, and words. Teacher-child interaction played an important role in encouraging children to communicate and persist when they encountered difficulty, while familiar words and experiences enabled them to connect print with existing knowledge. Collectively, these experiences contributed not only to emerging literacy competencies but also to children's developing confidence as readers. The findings reinforce the importance of viewing kindergarten literacy as a developmentally appropriate meaning-making process rather than reducing early reading instruction to isolated drills or mechanical recognition of symbols.



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6. Implications

The findings have implications for kindergarten literacy instruction, teacher practice, and school-based early reading programs. Kindergarten teachers may strengthen early literacy by providing frequent interactive read-alouds, oral language activities, songs, rhymes, phonological games, alphabet exploration, print-rich classroom environments, drawing and emergent writing activities, and opportunities for children to discuss personally meaningful experiences. Literacy instruction should balance explicit attention to foundational skills with opportunities for children to understand and enjoy language and texts. Teacher professional development may likewise emphasize responsive questioning, modeling, scaffolding, and feedback because high-quality adult-child interactions can support children's participation and development (Howard et al., 2024). For Aglipay East Central School, literacy materials may also incorporate familiar community experiences, locally recognizable objects, children's names, family routines, and culturally relevant stories so that emerging readers can connect print with meaningful experiences. Philippine evidence concerning the longer-term benefits of kindergarten further reinforces the importance of ensuring that early literacy experiences establish strong foundations before children transition to primary education (Abrigo & Francisco, 2024).

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