

Beyond Storytelling: Kindergarten Teachers' Lived Experiences in Using Read-Aloud to Develop Higher Order Thinking Skills

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in the use of read-aloud in promoting Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) among their learners, delving into their practices and problems in implementing this strategy. Data was gathered through interviews and observations conducted with 15 public school teachers in a province in the Philippines. Both interview and observation data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed to minimize researcher bias. Analysis revealed common practices in the selection of stories, choice of read-aloud format, use of illustrations and print features, utilization of language and voice modulation, implementation of structured read-aloud procedures, and use of HOTS-oriented activities. Several challenges were also obtained, including limited availability of read-aloud materials, absence of intentional HOTS integration, pupils' short attention span, and inadequate parental reinforcement. The findings suggest the need for contextualized read-aloud materials, strengthened curriculum alignment of read-alouds, and purposeful implementation of HOTS-based read-aloud practices.

Keywords: Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), Read-Aloud, Kindergarten Teachers, Lived Experiences

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights a paradigm shift in education in all parts of the world, underscoring the change of educational focus from learners' mere acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills to the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). As emphasized in SDG 4 (Quality Education), there is a pressing need to ensure that learners develop their creative and critical thinking and collaborative skills to enable them to adapt and thrive in a world where knowledge creation and technological expertise are the most marketable commodity (UNESCO, 2015).

Defined as an in-depth thinking process encompassing critical thinking abilities in making comparisons, analyses, and evaluations; innovative and creative thinking skills in applying problem-solving strategies and creating new solutions or products; collaborative skills in working with others and building networks to solve problems efficiently; and communication skills in conveying ideas effectively (Sutama et al., 2021), HOTS ultimately enable learners to succeed in school, in their day-to-day lives, and in their future workplace; thus, it is imperative that they are taught in all levels of education (Armala et al., 2022; Mayor, 2024; Nurmaharaeni et al., 2022; Rahmadani et al., 2023; Samad et al., 2021). In line with this, UNESCO (2015) stresses the importance of starting young in teaching HOTS, encouraging the provision of at least one year of free, mandatory, and quality kindergarten education where learners are given opportunities to engage in meaning-making of themselves and the world.

Read-aloud, which is defined as a pedagogical practice generally involving reading of a purposefully selected text to a group of learners by a teacher or a parent while integrating volume, pitch, and tone of voice for an

engaging delivery and planned comments or questions for meaningful interaction (Bintz, 2023; Zelaya, 2022), can be an effective strategy in developing HOTS among kindergarten pupils. Researchers claim that use of read-aloud motivates pupils to explore and learn beyond their classroom and engages them in activities where they problem-solve, communicate, and collaborate with their peers (Bintz, 2023; McCallum, 2024; Senawati et al., 2021; South Dakota State Library, 2024).

The benefits of read-aloud as an educational tool are well-documented. For one, it develops a broad range of language skills among young learners. According to Batini et al. (2020), it significantly enhances receptive and expressive and scientific and mathematical vocabulary, phonological awareness, narrative competence, and richer verbal interactions with adults. For another, it promotes literacy skills such as noting details, making inferences, connecting texts to personal experiences, and even creative thinking and moral reasoning which indicate deeper understanding than simple recall of information (Mohd Asraf & Abd Halim, 2024). Summarily, it enhances comprehension and overall reading ability and academic performance (Ligmon, 2024; McCallum, 2024; Rahayu & Mustadi, 2022).

Moreover, read-aloud supports the affective domain of learning, increasing motivation (Zelaya, 2022), confidence, and engagement (Sofyan et al., 2021). As Mohd Asraf and Abd Halim (2024) observed, initially shy preschoolers displayed increased participation over time, responding actively to literary elements used such as expressive voices, gestures, and repeated lines and chants, as well as demonstrating emotional responses like laughter, excitement, and fear. This shows that read-aloud is an effective and enjoyable strategy in literacy development, enhancing literacy outcomes (Ligmon, 2024; Moberg, 2024; Requilme, 2024) and fostering long-term love of reading by evoking empathy and a sense of belonging among pupils (McCallum, 2024).

While the effectiveness of read-aloud as an instructional strategy is widely recognized, teachers need to be mindful of potential drawbacks. Gatcho (2020) claimed that read-aloud may promote pseudo-reading wherein pupils focus only on oral performance without fully comprehending the text. Pupils may also experience boredom in view of their short attention spans. In addition, over-reliance on teacher-led reading may also increase the risk of producing dependent readers. These imply that although proven to be an effective pedagogical method, read-aloud is complex and multifaceted, and that, careful planning and consideration of various factors are required for its successful implementation.

Challenges have also been observed in the use of read-aloud in relation to the teaching of HOTS. Håland et al. (2021) maintained that teachers mainly employ read-aloud as a strategy for classroom management and student engagement rather than as a formal instructional practice, underutilizing its benefits. The lack of planning and intentionality also leads teachers to use read-aloud only for defining words which is classified as Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), consequently limiting learners' opportunities for literacy and literacy development tasks that require HOTS.

In the context of the Philippines, the use of read-aloud in the classroom is also riddled with challenges. Although Republic Act No. 10157 (2012) cited "listening to stories" as one of the primary strategies in teaching kindergarten, there is a dearth of read-aloud materials that consider learners' interests and cultural backgrounds. This forces teachers to use culturally distant materials, which in turn undermines the advantages of read-aloud such as effective meaning-making between the literary text and real-life experiences, as well as taking pleasure and enjoyment in listening to literature (Delgado, 2021; Ness, 2020).

Moreover, the paucity in authentic and culturally relevant read-aloud materials drives teachers to translate pieces of literature into the pupils' mother tongue to make them more relatable and easily comprehensible (Bangsoyao, 2024); however, this strategy creates another set of challenges as linguistic problems may arise because of differences between the source language and the target language. Making adjustments in linguistic and literary elements such as word and sentence structures, rhyming schemes, and wordplay will affect the translation and in effect, the level of approximation to the original meaning of the literary text (Imami et al., 2021).

Furthermore, while literary translation could be one of the ways of bringing literature closer to the learners' context, there could be items that are so deeply rooted or so unique to the source culture that they may not have direct equivalent in the target culture or the target language, creating difficulties in capturing the meaning and the cultural nuances expressed in the original literature (Neshkovska & Kitanovska-Kimovska, 2020). This loss of linguistic and cultural meaning limits learners' opportunities for meaningful interaction with their teachers, their peers, and the instructional materials, create communication barriers, and diminish their feelings of achievement in the learning process (Akintunde & Akuta, 2021; Bahrami et al., 2020; Ekeh, 2020; Ononiwu et al., 2021).

The recognition of HOTS as an important requirement in today's world, together with the effectiveness of read-aloud in developing these skills, emphasizes the need to strengthen the use of read-aloud in promoting HOTS in early childhood classrooms; however, the challenges encountered in its implementation indicate the need for a deeper understanding of how teachers carry out this pedagogical practice. These circumstances provided the impetus for the conduct of this study, which aimed to explore teachers' experiences in using read-aloud, particularly in the teaching of HOTS, in order to gain insights into how its implementation may be further improved and its potential as an instructional strategy optimized.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed qualitative research design, specifically phenomenological approach, in which data is gathered from individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon to develop a composite description of the essence of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology is appropriate to the present study because it seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of teachers in implementing read-aloud as a pedagogical practice for developing HOTS among kindergarten pupils. Through this approach, the study was able to capture the participants' practices, challenges, and insights, leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Participants

Fifteen participants provided data on kindergarten teachers' read-aloud practices and challenges met in its implementation. They were identified through purposive sampling to select participants who could best describe and contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

The 15 participants were taken out of the 23 identified population who met the selection criteria, namely, (1) he/she is presently teaching in public kindergarten; (2) he/she has at least one year of experience in teaching kindergarten; and (3) he/she uses teacher read-aloud in the class. Data saturation was reached after their interviews. As cited by Guest et al. (2006), six to 12 interviews are enough to gather an exhaustive data set and reach saturation.

The participants range from 26 to 46 years of age and have two to nine years of teaching experience, with most of those years spent in teaching kindergarten. All of them graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Elementary Education and three have earned units in master's degree.

Instruments

An interview protocol was primarily used to gather data. It contained semi-structured open-ended questions which were designed for probing for participants' experiences, explanations, elaborations, and insights (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Questions in the interview included participants' considerations in story selection, procedures in conducting read-alouds, materials used, HOTS integration, and challenges encountered among others. In addition, an observational protocol was employed to systematically observe the participants in the actual setting and triangulate data gathered in the interviews. Both instruments were validated by five language and research experts and were also pilot tested for further refinement.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher conducted interviews with the participants to explore their lived experiences in implementing read-alouds in their kindergarten classes. With the participants' permission, all interviews were videotaped to ensure accurate documentation of the data gathered. Classroom observations were likewise carried out among participants who agreed or volunteered to be observed.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed in the data collection process. Permission was sought from concerned Department of Education (DepEd) officials prior to the conduct of the study. Organizational protocols were followed in seeking approval. Informed consent was also obtained from all the participants to ensure their voluntary participation.

In addition, anonymity and confidentiality were upheld all throughout the study by using pseudonyms and controlling access to data. Password-protected drives were also used for data storage for added security.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview and observation data were transcribed verbatim, signifying the start of analysis as the researcher began to familiarize and understand the data. After transcription, the researcher carefully read through all the data to gain a general understanding of the meanings conveyed by the participants. The transcriptions were then coded manually by segmenting data into categories. Chunks of data were labeled by writing names of categories in the margins of the transcriptions (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher developed codes based on the emerging information collected from the participants because their lived experiences and their meanings were yet to be discovered or to emerge from their answers. After data coding, themes and subthemes were developed (Merriam, 2009). The researcher then consulted with a colleague to check the codes and the themes as a form of peer debriefing and sent the themes and their descriptions to the participants for member checking. These measures were important in ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Finally, interpretation of the themes was done, after which another round of member checking was conducted.

RESULTS

Practices in Conducting Read-Alouds

The thematic analysis of the lived experiences of the participants revealed common practices in conducting read-alouds in terms of selection of stories, choice of read-aloud format, use of illustration and print features, utilization of language and voice modulation, implementation of structured read-aloud procedures, and use of HOTS-based activities. Table 1 presents a summary of these themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

Table 1 Summary of Common Practices in Conducting Read-Alouds

Themes	Sub-themes
Selection of stories	Elements of the story (relatable characters and setting, simple, not too long plots)
	Content (thematic, pupil-centered, localized and contextualized, value-laden)
	Focus (language and literacy skills)
Choice of read-aloud format	Use of ICT (Microsoft PowerPoint)
	Use of big books

Use of illustrations and print features	Content (does not cause teasing or bullying, localized and contextualized)
	Style (Cartoonish but realistic illustrations)
	Size and color (big and colorful illustrations and letters)
Utilization of language and voice modulation	Use of mother tongue
	Use of pitch, tone, tempo, and volume of voice to convey emotions, mood, tone
Implementation of structured read-aloud procedures	Learning environment-related considerations
	Before-, during-, and after-read-aloud procedures
Use of HOTS-oriented activities	Activities conducted to develop HOTS

The participants recognize the importance of carefully selected stories in making read-alouds effective and meaningful. To ensure that the stories they have selected enhance pupils' motivation and learning, they considered narrative elements, content, and focus of the read-aloud stories.

As regards story elements, the participants chose characters who are familiar and relatable to the pupils. For instance, Participant 3 preferred children as characters as pupils share similar characteristics and experiences with them, bringing the story closer to the pupils' context. Similarly, the participants emphasized use of relatable setting by situating stories in the pupils' communities or choosing places that children frequently visit. Participant 12 fittingly summarized these in her statement:

Kinahanglan maka-relate ang mga bata sa story; example, kung ang setting sa story nga gamiton ang community kung asa sila nagpuyo, ug ang mga character naa pud makita sa ilang lugar.

(The children need to be able to relate to the story; example, if the setting in the story to be used is the community where they live, and the character can also be seen in their place.)

As for the plot of the story, the participants used stories with straightforward plots. This means that plots were free from convoluted turns of events or "simple" as described by Participant 2. Moreover, the participants stressed that they chose plots which were not "too long" to be easily understood by the pupils. They also supported understanding by using pictures to illustrate the events in the story as mentioned by Participant 9.

For the content of the stories, the participants used thematic approach by selecting read-aloud stories based on the topics indicated in the kindergarten curriculum guide. Based on the example given by Participant 9, if the topic for the week is community, then they use stories that are related to people and places in the community and other similar content. The participants explained that use of thematic approach in choosing the content of the stories clarified focus and enhanced cohesion of topics of read-alouds.

In addition to this, the content of the stories that the participants selected is pupil-centered by considering the nature and level of the pupils. They also considered pupils' interest. As Participant 10 stressed, the stories should be interesting enough for pupils' attention to be focused on them from the very start of the read-aloud.

Moreover, the participants ensured that the content of the stories is contextualized and localized by selecting topics that are applicable to pupils' day-to-day lives. This entailed selection of literature that depicts events or activities, objects, and other sociocultural elements that pupils typically experience in their respective homes, communities, and even in school. Participant 8 elucidated:

Sa amoa diri (gestured indicating her school), [ang story] kanang localized bitaw, kanang kung mag-story kanang makita nila ba ing-ani ang palibot, ang nahitabo sa among palibot, kanang dali ra sila ma-karelate.

(Here in our school, stories are localized; that is, when reading aloud, they see this is what the surroundings looks like, this is what happened in their surroundings, they can easily relate.)

Furthermore, the participants chose stories that teach values which are significant to the pupils, specifically those that enable them to acquire good attitude and distinguish what is right and what is wrong. Participant 1 underscored “no cruelty” as the number one value they teach as she has observed that pupils are quick to criticize or bully their classmates. Other values identified by the participants include kindness and respect especially to the elderly, saving money and time, independence, and caring for oneself such as maintaining proper hygiene.

The participants claimed that the passage of the law prohibiting violence against women and children (VAWC) limited to some degree their freedom in imposing discipline in their class. They had reservations in reprimanding misbehaving pupils as they fear the ramifications of violating the law. In view of this, the participants stressed the importance of integrating values during the read-alouds as this is one of the avenues that teachers could teach good manners and right conduct (GMRC). Participant 6 emphasized:

End of the story naa jud siya values. Lisod na ang mga bata tudloan tungod sa mga balaod. Naa tay balaod na [Bantay Bata] 163, naa tay balaod VAWC. Kabalo ang bata na dili na ta pwede sa corporal punishment... Maningkamot ka makamao, di pud ka makabadlong og maayo kay mahadlok ka kay basin... Lagatan pa gani nimo, criminal na. In which ang story telling naa jud values mas nindot.

(There should be values at the end of the story. It is difficult to teach children now because of the laws. We have a law on [Bantay Bata] 163, we have a law on VAWC. The children know we can no longer impose corporal punishment. You try hard that they learn but you cannot tell them off because you are afraid that you might... Just looking at them fiercely, you're a criminal already. Hence, it is better if there are values in storytelling.)

Finally, the participants selected stories that tackle a language focus. Mostly this language focus revolves around a vocabulary lesson. For example, Participant 2 chose stories that contain words beginning with the letter that she was trying to teach. The participants also focused on listening skills by asking comprehension questions after their read-alouds.

In terms of read-aloud format, the participants preferred using ICT, specifically Microsoft PowerPoint (PPT), in presenting read-aloud stories. They maintained that use of this program enhanced their usual practice as they have access to nicer pictures and animations. With this, they are able to elicit pupils' attention more effectively, especially that their pupils equate PPT presentations with watching movies. However, unlike watching movies or videos, using PPT enabled the participants to read the story themselves. This provides them opportunities for class interaction without the disruption caused by pausing the video every time they would like to emphasize details or ask questions. Participant 6 described her pupils' reaction whenever she used PPT in her read-alouds:

Mas nindot jud ang PowerPoint kay sa karon na panahon dili na man usually mohikap ang mga bata og libro...Pag mag-libro ka, ang attention nila dili kaayo. [Kung mogamit ko og PowerPoint], magplastar ra gani ko, wala pa ka nagbutang sa screen, nagsaksak na ka og projector, mangingkod na sila, “Oy! magsalida si Ma'am!”

(PowerPoint is nicer because these days children do not usually touch books anymore. If you use books, their attention is lesser. [If I use PowerPoint], even when I am only setting up the equipment, I have not put up the screen, I have just plugged in the projector, they already sit down and say, “Oy! Ma'am will show a movie!”)

The participants also utilized the traditional big books in their read-alouds. They claimed that big books are appropriate for pupils because they could pick them up and read them anytime they like. If the teacher read-aloud is done well, it will motivate pupils to read the book on their own volition, until eventually they find out for themselves that they actually enjoy reading and share that enjoyment with their classmates. Summarily, use of printed materials gives pupils easy access to stories, developing their long-term love of reading.

In terms of illustrations and print features, the participants were careful in using child-friendly illustrations that do not in any way cause teasing or bullying among pupils. For instance, they avoided using drawings or pictures that have identifiable resemblance to a particular pupil. They preferred those that are more generic or do not have distinguishing features like moles or exaggerated facial marks or body parts.

In relation to localization and contextualization of content of read-aloud stories, the participants emphasized use of illustrations that teach values that are significant to the pupils, carefully avoiding those that portray undesirable behavior that pupils might emulate. They also used drawings and images that show objects, people, animals, and other elements that are familiar and relatable to the pupils. Participant 5 gave this example for emphasis:

Dapat familiar pud sa ila kay ila nailhan kana ra mang kabayo, kanang iring, kanang pato, so kanang mga lion, mga zebra, mga cheetah, wala na sila. Dili na sila makaila. Ingon dayon sila ug kanding. So kibali kung unsa ila nakita sa ila environment.

(They should be familiar to them [pupils] because they only know horse, cat, duck, so lions, zebras, cheetahs, they do not know them. They will not recognize them. They will say “goat” instead. So, what they see in their environment.)

As for the style of the illustrations, although the participants favored actual pictures of real objects, they admitted that it could get difficult when creating read-aloud materials especially when capturing events in the stories. In line with this, they used drawings or pictures that are cartoonish but still appear realistic.

The participants clarified why illustrations should have these two apparently contradictory characteristics by explaining that cartoonish style makes the illustrations seem “happy,” enhancing their attractiveness to the pupils. On the other hand, being realistic makes the illustrations easily recognizable, enabling pupils to correctly identify what is depicted in them. For instance, a drawing of a dog should be identifiable as a dog at one glance and would not be mistaken for another animal that has a similar appearance.

For illustrations to be realistic, attention to detail is paramount as pupils are very keen observers. As what the participants emphasized, they should reflect what pupils commonly see in real life. One example that Participant 4 gave is that if a person in an illustration has one eye bigger than the other, pupils would react negatively because this is not what they usually see. With this, she suggested three-dimensional drawings to make them more realistic as she claimed today’s generation to be more “choosy” than the past generations:

Sa una malipay man ta nga naa lang color. Karon, mas gusto sila specific ug mas ma-enjoy sila sa kanang 3D.

(Before, we were already happy that there was color. Now, they prefer more specific [drawings] and enjoy them more in 3D.)

With regards to size and color of illustrations, the participants used drawings or images that are big and colorful. Participant 11 stressed that illustrations should be big enough for pupils to see them even at a distance, while Participant 2 emphasized that they should be colorful enough for pupils to say “wow” when they see them. Participant 10 aptly summarized these in this statement:

Dagko and colorful ang mga pictures nga gamiton para attractive kay para makuha gyud ang attention sa mga bata kay ganahan baya gyud na sila magtan-aw-tan-aw sa mga drawing. Kay naa gani mag-ukab sila og libro or mga story books, ang drawing or pictures gyud na ila tan-awon.

(Big and colorful pictures should be used to be attractive in order to elicit the attention of the pupils because they really like looking at the drawings. When they open books or story books, they look at the drawings or pictures.)

Lastly, in conjunction with the size and the color of the illustrations, the participants also emphasized using prints or letters which are big and colorful. Participant 12 stated:

Ang letter sa story dapat dagko, colored aron makuha ang attention sa mga bata.

(The letters in the story should be big, colored in order to catch the attention of the children.)

In terms of language used in the read-alouds, the participants used mother tongue, specifically Sinugbuanong Binisaya. Use of mother tongue enabled pupils to comprehend the stories easily and effectively and eliminated constant disruption in the form of clarifications due to language barrier. The participants claimed that even when the story is written in Filipino, they needed to translate the story to Sinugbuanong Binisaya to deliver the read-aloud smoothly. Participant 11 summarized this as she stated:

Dapat ang gamiton nga linggwahe kay Sinugbuanong Binisaya aron dili na mag-translate ang maestra ngadto sa mga estudyante. Aron pud diretso-diretso na ang pag-story sa maestra.

(The language that should be used is Sinugbuanong Binisaya so that the teacher does not have to translate to the students. Also for the read-aloud of the teacher to be smooth-sailing.)

As for use of voice in the read-alouds, the participants highlighted the importance of familiarizing the sequence of the events in the story before conducting the read-aloud to enable them to incorporate pitch, tone, tempo, and volume of voice. The participants maintained that changing their voice according to the characters and the mood of the story helps them convey feelings or emotions, making the story more relatable and consequently, comprehensible. Participant 12 summed these up in saying:

Sa pagbasa sa maong estorya, kinahanglan ang expression ug ang tono sa boses i-base sa unsa nga character ang naa sa story para ang mga bata ganahan maminaw, then maiwasan pud ang dull moment. Ug kinahanglan dili paspas ang pagbasa nako para masabtan nila ang content sa story. Kinahanglan i-encourage nako ang mga bata nga mo-participate sa maong story nga gibasa.

(In reading the story, the expression and the tone of the voice should be based on what character is in the story so that children will like listening to it, then, dull moment is also avoided. And my reading should not be fast so that they will understand the content of the story. I need to encourage the children to participate in the story being read.)

In terms of read-aloud procedures, the participants implemented measures related to managing the learning environment, one of which is the time when read-alouds are conducted. The participants regarded read-alouds as a chance for them to bond with their pupils, hence conduct of read-alouds should be a quiet and relaxing time. In view of this, they claimed that the most opportune time for read-alouds is after recess as pupils are sated and ready to listen. Additionally, they considered classroom setup and seating arrangement by putting a mat on the floor for pupils to sit on and preparing a stand for a big book or an LCD projector for PPT presentation. While all of the participants emphasized that they ensured that they are the center of the pupils' attention, some of them preferred to stay in front of the class whereas others huddled close to their pupils.

Moreover, the participants followed procedures that could be classified into three parts: (1) before read-aloud, (2) during read-aloud, and (3) after read-aloud. Generally speaking, the first part pertains to the activities conducted by the participants prior to reading the story while the second part is the reading of the story itself, as well as other considerations made by the participants while reading. The last part consists of the activities after the read-aloud, which are usually intended for language and literacy skill development

Before read-aloud, the participants ensure pupils' readiness by setting rules to be followed during the reading of the story. The participants referred to this part as "setting of standards." After this, the participants introduce the story to the pupils by telling them the title of the story, the author, the illustrator, and the parts of the book like the cover. Moreover, the participants establish connection between the story and the pupils' lives by asking about their experiences related to the content of the story. This is to make the story relatable and relevant to the pupils, motivating them to listen. To cap this part, the participants lead the class in defining difficult vocabulary to help them understand the story more easily. Participant 13 does this by using pictures as gleaned from this statement:

Sa dili pa magsugod, mag-unlock og mga pulong na lisod masabtan sa mga bata gamit ang pictures o hulagway.

(Before starting, unlock words which are difficult for pupils to understand by using pictures or illustrations.)

During the read-aloud, the participants did not simply read the story but employed different techniques to give life to it such as reading with feelings and using appropriate facial expressions and gestures to sustain pupils' attention and motivation to participate. Another technique they used is to involve the pupils and let them act as the characters. Participant 14 summarized these in her statement:

...ako tagaan og kinabuhi ang pagbasa sa estorya sama sa paghimo og aksyon niini. Unya ako pud gina-involve ako mga bata. Sila kunohay ang mo-act as character sa story.

(...I give life to the reading of the story like creating actions about this. Then, I also involve the children. They act as the characters in the story.)

To make sure that their pupils are paying attention to the story, the participants asked questions from time to time. They claimed that there are questions especially designed to be asked while the read-aloud is ongoing. For instance, questions that enable pupils to predict results or consequences of actions and possible ending can be asked during the read-aloud.

After read-aloud, the participants asked pupils another set of questions about the story. These questions are generally about the characters, the setting, the sequence of events, and the main idea of the story. Additionally, they asked questions that enable pupils to relate the story to their real-life experiences. Some of the participants use graphic organizers to answer guide questions.

Instead of using story maps and other diagrams, Participant 7 has a unique way of guiding pupils answer questions after the read-aloud. As observed, he created a table with three columns. In the first column, he drew what took place in the beginning of the story based on his pupils' answers. His drawing helped his pupils narrate what happened in the middle of the story, which he illustrated again in the second column. He did the same in the third column which corresponded to the ending of the story. Finally, he helped his pupils narrate the story based on the illustrations. His artistic skills kept the pupils riveted on the activity, enabling them to retell the story using their own words as proof that they understood it meaningfully.

In terms of Use of HOTS-oriented activities, the participants used the Socratic method, asking pupils "why," "how," "in what way," and "which character will they emulate and why" to motivate them to engage in critical and creative thinking. They emphasized asking questions that guide pupils in making connections between the story and their lives such as questions on how characters resolve the conflict in the story and what values pupils could learn from them.

To help pupils answer questions, the participants utilized pictures and picture puzzles to help pupils make inferences and draw conclusions. They also used graphic organizers especially in analyzing characters. Participant 13 gave some examples:

Sa estorya, sa characterization, pwede mogamit og graphic organizer na comparing characters or Venn diagram. Pwede pud character chart, story map showing character change.

(In the story, in characterization, graphic organizer comparing characters or Venn diagram can be used. Character chart, story map showing character change can also be used.)

Moreover, the participants used group activities like role plays or dramatizations. Although pupils have disagreements during group tasks, the participants found that they are good in role playing, and that they are actively engaged in this collaborative endeavor; thus, group activities are still worth trying in the kindergarten classroom. They also used debates, allowing for flexibility in the rules to consider pupils' level and

characteristics. As what Participant 4 experienced, pupils were inconsistent with which side they were on. With much amusement, she narrated:

...ma-change man kung ma-feel nila mas nindot ang rason sa ilang classmate. Mobalhin man sila. Na-try na man gud nako pero dili sila consistent.

(...they change if they feel that the argument of their classmate is better. They change sides. I tried that but they were not consistent.)

Lastly, the participants used art activities especially in promoting pupils' creative abilities. Specifically, they made pupils make a collage or draw and create their own story. The participants maintained that art activities do not only develop the level "create" among pupils, but more importantly, they provide enjoyment and enhance learner engagement.

Challenges Encountered in Conducting Read-Alouds

Although read-aloud is a fairly established strategy, the participants experienced several challenges in implementing it in their respective classrooms. These challenges primarily revolve around the limited number of read-aloud materials tailored for kindergarten pupils, which create more problems as a ripple effect. A summary of these challenges is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Challenges Met in Conducting Read-Alouds

Themes	Specific problems
Limited availability of read-aloud materials	- Read-aloud materials are not provided. - There are limited read-aloud materials available in the market. - Read-aloud stories and activities are not aligned with the kindergarten curriculum. - Translation of available literature from English or Filipino to mother tongue is not systematically done.
Absence of intentional HOTS integration	- HOTS are neither addressed systematically nor consciously. - Read-aloud questions only address LOTS, specifically, the level "remember."
Pupils' short attention span	- They have short attention span and they easily get tired. - Their behavior is largely dependent on their mood and interest. - They distract their classmates.
Inadequate parental reinforcement	- Parents do not provide follow-ups at home.

The participants identified the lack of read-aloud materials appropriate for kindergarten as their biggest challenge. They explained that while the curriculum guide provides suggested story topics, the stories themselves, much less printed read-aloud materials, are not provided. In relation to this, although the participants are willing to spend their own money to buy read-aloud materials, even commercially available resources are limited and are often not aligned with the specific topics outlined in the curriculum. They expressed that their stories were usually not anchored on the curriculum guide for kindergarten because they had difficulty finding stories tailored to the themes and competencies stipulated in the guide. This situation becomes even more challenging with the implementation of R.A. No. 10533 (2013) which requires the use of mother tongue (i.e., Sinugbuanong Binisaya) as the language of instruction in kindergarten since most of the

available resources in the market are written either in English or in Filipino. Participant 6 aptly summarized this predicament:

Wala man jud gihatag supply. Mag-story ka, mother tongue pero ang resources English o kaya Filipino. Tsamba na lang kung naay Filipino na story.

(There were no supplies given. You are supposed to tell a story in mother tongue but the resources are in English or in Filipino. You are in luck if there is a story in Filipino.)

The dearth of read-aloud materials is truly problematic on the part of the participants as story reading time is part of their daily classroom routine. The number of read-aloud materials that they have is not enough to cover the entire school year. To address this, some of the participants read the stories again after finishing their stock of big books. Other participants downloaded videos from the internet and used them in place of read-aloud materials; however, they considered this practice less effective because it limits interaction between the teacher and the pupils while the video is playing. They also noted that frequently pausing the video to check pupils' understanding tends to disrupt the flow of the activity and diminishes the learners' interest and engagement.

Moreover, the participants resorted to translating available literature into the mother tongue; however, there was no clear or standardized system for doing this. Many of them narrated the stories directly in the mother tongue without preparing written translations beforehand, thereby undermining one important purpose of teacher read-alouds which is to model proper language use through correct form, syntax, and grammar. Without carefully prepared translations, the participants often used "sagol-sagol" or a mixture of languages during their read-alouds. This practice may lead pupils to acquire inconsistent vocabularies and language structures, which differs from purposeful code-switching, bilingualism, or multilingualism because it lacks a systematic linguistic framework.

Another challenge met by the participants in their read-aloud implementation is the absence of intentionality in their HOTS integration. As gleaned in their responses, they did not address HOTS consciously or systematically. For instance, when asked about how she structured her questions after the read-aloud, Participant 1 answered:

Ang sa ako, pag mangutana ko, gikan sa...storybook, unya sa kadtong mga characters. Unya pahapyaw ra kibali ang kadtong unsay sunod-sunod.

(For me, when I ask questions, [I ask questions] from the storybook, then about the characters. Then, only cursorily on what is the sequence.)

Apparently, Participant 1 asked questions that only address remember which belongs to LOTS. This experience was similar to that of the other participants who typically asked questions only about the characters and setting after their read-alouds. Their questions also lacked a clear sequence or structure, such as progressing from simple to more complex questions, because they did not plan their post-reading questions in advance and instead relied on whatever came to mind after reading the story.

The participants also found the behavior of kindergarten pupils during read-alouds to be challenging. They observed that some pupils did not listen attentively, as reflected in their inability to answer questions accurately and their tendency to make random guesses. They noted that pupils focused mainly on the pictures and paid little attention to the story itself. They further observed that pupils easily became bored and fatigued during the activity. These behaviors reflect the developmental characteristics of kindergarten learners, particularly their short attention span, which makes it difficult for them to remain focused for extended periods. In view of this, Participant 9 explained that teaching kindergarten is different from teaching in the elementary grades in the sense that teachers generally allow kindergarten pupils to do what they want in light of their very young age. She stated:

Ang bata dili jud siya maka-focus sa reading, di maminaw kay kinder. Kung unsa ang kuan sa bata halimbawa ang uban naminaw, sila nagdula, pasagdan ra siya kung unsa iyang buhaton basta dili lang siya mogawas. Dili lang pugson ang bata kay naa man jud bata na dili interesado sa reading....

(The child could not focus on reading, would not listen because he is in kindergarten. What he [wants to do], for example other pupils listen, while he just plays, we just let him be as long as he does not go out. The child should not be forced because there are really children not interested in reading....)

The participants also observed that some pupils distracted their classmates by making noise, engaging in fights, and refusing to participate in the activities. Participant 13 captured these behaviors in her statement:

Sa story reading, ang natural na ma-encounter na problem sa magtutudlo mao ang mga bata na hyper, dili makapuyo, dili maminaw, saba, ug mangaway panahon sa pag-estorya. Naa poy mga bata dili moapil sa mga aktibidad nga i-apply sa magtutudlo.

(In story reading, the problems naturally encountered by the teacher are children who are hyperactive, cannot stay in place, will not listen, noisy, and fight during the narration. There are also children who do not join the activities applied by the teacher.)

The last challenge encountered by the participants was the inadequate support from parents, particularly in reinforcing learning activities at home. The lack of follow-up activities related to the read-alouds, such as reviewing the stories, discussing moral lessons that can be learned from them, or practicing language and comprehension skills, adversely affects pupils' understanding and dampens their interest in reading. The participants emphasized that consistent parental involvement is important in supporting pupils' language and literacy development, especially in kindergarten where learning is most effective when reinforced both in school and at home.

DISCUSSION

Results of this phenomenological inquiry indicate that kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in using read-aloud to develop HOTS revolve around common practices in conducting read-alouds, particularly in selection of stories, choice of read-aloud format, use of illustrations and print features, utilization of language and voice modulation, implementation of structured read-aloud procedures, and use of HOTS-oriented activities. Additionally, their lived experiences involve limited read-aloud materials, absence of intentional HOTS integration, pupils' short attention span, and inadequate parental reinforcement.

In terms of story selection, the participants chose pupil-centered stories that featured simple plots and relatable characters and settings. They also selected stories which were localized and contextualized through the use of story elements within the pupils' sphere of experience, and were value-laden by teaching values appropriate for young children. These results are aligned with the important considerations in selecting stories consistently emphasized by various reading experts and researchers. For instance, they underlined the importance of choosing books that have timeless topics and universal appeal for children like books on friendships, experiences in growing up, family and community life, languages and cultures, nature, and other children's interests. They also underscored selection of books that contain simple but well-developed plot with clear sequence of events and relatable characters that encourage active and meaningful interactions (Delgado, 2021; Ness, 2020; South Dakota State Library, 2024).

In addition, the participants chose stories that develop language and literacy skills such as vocabulary and comprehension. This is consistent with Batini et al. (2020) who emphasized the importance of incorporating vocabulary lessons, and Ligmon (2024), Rahayu and Mustadi (2022), Senawati et al. (2021), and Sofyan et al. (2021) who highlighted the significance of literacy instruction. This also aligns with the the read-aloud principle of simultaneously developing pupils' skills and ensuring their enjoyment (Haland et al., 2021; Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021; Stang, 2022).

As regards choice of read-aloud format and use of illustrations and print features, the participants used bold and colored letters and utilized Microsoft PowerPoint for presentation, similar to the study of Hart (2023) and Mohd Asraf and Abd Halim (2024). They also used cartoonish style in the illustrations to make the characters appear happy, relatable, and endearing to the pupils (Delgado, 2021), but made sure that they still appear realistic (South Dakota State Library, 2024).

As for utilization of language and voice modulation, the participants used mother tongue, which is supported by the studies of Batini et al. (2020), Ligmon (2024), and Trujillo (2020) in which use of the first language in instruction enabled pupils to understand their lessons more effectively, develop their reasoning skills, and interact meaningfully with instructional materials. Additionally, the participants varied the volume and tone of their voice and used facial expressions and body gestures to effectively convey feelings or emotions in the story. These results aligned with the recommendations of Bintz (2023), Haggstrom (2020), Levin and Porath (2023), and Zelaya (2022) to incorporate pitch, tone, volume, and pace for fluent and engaging delivery of read-alouds.

In terms of read-aloud procedures, the participants conducted before-, during- and after-read-aloud activities. This practice is similar to the TEMPLE Read-Aloud Projects (2022) in which read-aloud sessions are conducted based on these three distinct stages. However, the participants' read-aloud implementation only took one session, unlike the TEMPLE Read-Aloud Projects which takes three days.

Lastly, in terms of use of HOTS-oriented activities, the participants employed questioning, pictures and picture puzzles, graphic organizers, art activities, and group tasks. These are similar to the strategies used by the teacher-participants in the studies of Ballakrishnan and Mohamad (2020), Bordin et al. (2022), Heffington and Coady (2023), Munar et al. (2022), and Rusdiana and Hikmat (2020).

For the challenges encountered in the conduct of read-alouds, the participants mainly had problems related to limited read-aloud materials, especially those written in mother tongue and aligned with the curriculum. This is consistent with the results of several research conducted in the Philippines (Gorgonio, 2024; Lusares et al., 2023; Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024; Trujillo, 2020; Villafuerte, 2024). The ensuing challenges relative to translation of available literature to mother tongue such as the use of an admixture of language and the limited modeling of language use are also consistent with the results of the studies of Atong and Ventura-Escote (2023), Bangsoyao (2024), Degu (2022), Gorgonio (2024), and Lusares et al. (2023).

The participants also encountered challenges in HOTS integration as they did not address these skills intentionally or systematically, limiting their focus on LOTS, specifically the level "remember." This supports the findings of Håland et al. (2021) that there is a need for teachers to assess and modify their read-aloud practices to optimize this strategy's potentials in facilitating literacy development, and that teachers have to be mentored on how to plan for read-alouds to address possible problems like difficult content and text features, as well as how to prepare HOTS-based questions instead of relying solely on spontaneous questions.

Moreover, the participants experienced challenges related to pupils' attention span as they easily get tired and displayed behaviors that distract their classmates. This is consistent with Gatcho's (2020) claim that pupils may experience boredom in view of their limited attention spans; hence, careful planning should be done prior to conduct of read-aloud to maximize learner motivation and engagement and ensure successful implementation.

Finally, the participants met challenges regarding inadequate parental reinforcement as parents do not provide follow-ups at home. This highlights the importance of parental involvement in supporting learning among pupils (McGinnity et al., 2022). As Sumi et al. (2021) emphasized, cooperation between parents and stakeholders is vital in addressing gaps in learning outcomes.

Summarily, the results suggest that the participants have a common understanding of effective read-aloud practices and use a range of strategies that make stories meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for kindergarten pupils; however, their experiences also reveal significant challenges that constrain the full potential of read-aloud as a strategy for developing HOTS. These results emphasize the need for access to quality mother tongue resources, professional development on HOTS-oriented read-aloud instruction, and stronger home-school partnerships to maximize the effectiveness of read-aloud in promoting pupils' HOTS.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study indicate that kindergarten teachers' use of read-aloud extends beyond storytelling and serves as a valuable strategy in supporting kindergarten pupils' language and literacy development. The participants employed common practices in selecting developmentally appropriate stories, utilizing engaging delivery techniques, and implementing read-aloud procedures and HOTS-based activities. These reflect their efforts to make read-alouds meaningful and engaging for their pupils.

The results, however, also reveal that the potential of read-aloud to develop HOTS is constrained by several challenges, such as limited availability of mother tongue-based and curriculum-aligned read-aloud materials, the absence of intentional and systematic HOTS integration, pupils' short attention span, and inadequate parental reinforcement. These challenges affect the quality and effectiveness of read-aloud implementation.

In light of these results, it is recommended that educational authorities and school administrators provide teachers with greater access to quality read-aloud materials and provide them with training opportunities on the intentional and systematic integration of HOTS into read-aloud instruction. Schools may also strengthen parental support by implementing initiatives that encourage reading reinforcement at home.

Moreover, future research could be expanded by using larger samples to include kindergarten teachers from different regions and varied educational contexts (e.g. school types, socioeconomic status). Perspectives from parents, stakeholders, and pupils may also be included for a more holistic understanding of factors affecting successful implementation of read-alouds. Incorporating a quantitative research component is also recommended to assess the effect of read-aloud strategies on learning outcomes.

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