

Adaptation in the New Normal: Middle-Aged Teaching Employees' Experiences in a Philippine State-Funded University

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ABSTRACT

The paper used a phenomenological approach to explore adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of middle-aged teaching employees at a state-funded university in Dapitan City, Philippines. Their experiences were categorized into three themes, the new normal, challenges in the new normal, and adaptation. The new normal is described as the combination of old and new technology; the adoption of new instructional modalities; the limitation of school activities; and a new form of work environment. The employees also faced challenges such as limitation in knowledge and access to educational technology, disengaged students, physical and mental limitations due to age, poor internet connectivity, students' academic dishonesty, travel and institutional restriction, financial incapacity, difficulty and misperformed tasks, and an abrupt transitioning process. Conversely, adaptation is described as technological preparation, extended support, time extension, change of activities, new instructional modalities, course leniency, acceptance of reality, reaching out, and learning. Their experiences revealed that adaptation to the new normal did not come smoothly among middle-aged teaching employees since personal and institutional factors were considered. Though age matters in their adaptation, it did not hinder them from moving forward and becoming active individuals in the teaching-learning process. Further, it is recommended that higher education institutions create a specialized or more age-appropriate training program for middle-aged teaching employees in cases where disruptions occur.

Keywords: new normal, adaptation, teaching employees, middle-aged, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives, which demonstrated that change is inevitable. Economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of people's lives were challenged by the pandemic (Lebni et al., 2021). Because the pandemic brought a new normal, certain conventional approaches to coping with day-to-day tasks could no longer be appropriate. The 2008 financial crisis gave rise to the phrase "new normal," which denotes the profound changes in the economy, culture, and society brought on by precariousness and social unrest that have an impact on people's perceptions of the world and way of life (El-Erian, 2010 as cited in Corpuz, 2021). The requirement for adaptation is essential for survival when numerous facets of human life change.

Reupert (2020) stated that the current crisis and any ensuing ones will come to represent the new normal. People must learn how to adjust to it because change is seen as normal. Additionally, Singh (2020) highlighted the need for innovation and adaptation that will retool environments to meet the demands of the pandemic, in addition to public health and social initiatives done to minimize the transmission of COVID-19, such as in the Southeast Asia Region.

This pandemic specifically affected educational institutions as they switched from traditional face-to-face education to remote learning and other methods of service delivery (Biwer et al., 2021). The kind of services that academic institutions provide is essential to the kind of students they produce in the new normal. As

one of the sources of knowledge and innovation, an academic institution is therefore an important context for research. It is important to investigate how academic employees adapt to their roles. Furthermore, considering adaptation through the eyes of these employees can provide in-depth knowledge for improved innovation and retooling of the institution's plans and procedures in order to meet the demands of the pandemic and beyond for excellent services.

Adaptability is described as a multidimensional composite of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that influence individuals' general capability and proclivity to engage in adaptive performance (Chan, 2000; Ployhart and Bliese, 2006 as cited by Park and Park, 2020) which is the capability of employees to adapt to rapidly changing work situations (Hasketh & Neal, 2019; as cited by Park and Park, 2020). The reality of adaptation to the new normal among teaching employees in a public university in the southern Philippines is another vista to explore and understand the concept, especially if they belong to the middle age group. Individuals in their middle age [generally between ages 40 and 60] show a cognitive decline in executive functions and processing speed (Willis, Martin, & Rocke, 2010; Singh-Manoux et al., 2012; Salthouse, 2009; Zimprich & Mascherek, 2010 as cited in Ferreira et al., 2015). Concerning these changes and limitations, it is interesting to note how they managed to adapt to the new work conditions brought on by the pandemic. Hence, a study on the lived experiences of teaching employees in their middle age at Jose Rizal Memorial State University (JRMSU), Dapitan City, Zamboanga del Norte, is carried out to better understand how the meaning of adaptation is described and unfolded among them as they face the new normal education.

METHODS

Guided by Hycner's descriptive phenomenological method, this study explored the experiences of Jose Rizal Memorial State University teaching employees in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique in selecting the first six participants until reaching data saturation. Purposive sampling was appropriate in this method of research since the participants were selected according to the following set of inclusion criteria: (1) they must be in their middle age (40–60 years old); (2) they must have been teaching any subjects with a minimum of 21 units of teaching load at Jose Rizal Memorial State University before the COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) they must have been teaching as regular and full-time faculty. Full-time faculty or teaching employees were selected in this study as they were more exposed to teaching where a new mode of instructional delivery was adopted.

A semi-structured interview guide was the primary tool for data gathering and focused on the participants' illustration of the terms "new normal", description of work before and during the pandemic, changes and challenges they experienced during the pandemic [concerning their work], and the meaning of their experiences of adapting and dealing with those changes and challenges. Follow-up questions were given when questions were not answered clearly during the interview. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was extended depending on the discussion among the participants. The responses of the participants, with their consent, were audio-recorded, and their identities were kept confidential. Further, during the data presentation, their real names were changed to pseudonyms for confidentiality.

After the interview, close observation of the data was done by transcribing and reading the participants' responses for clarity. The transcripts underwent the coding process and clustering of meaning to create themes. Specifically, the processes for data analysis followed the step-by-step guidelines by Hycner (1985), namely: (1) transcription; (2) bracketing and the phenomenological reduction; (3) listening to the interview for a sense of the whole; (4) delineating units of general meaning; (5) delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question; (6) training independent judges to verify the units of relevant meaning; (7) eliminating redundancies; (8) clustering units of relevant meaning; (9) determining themes from clusters of meaning; (10) writing a summary for each interview; (11) return to the participant with the summary and

themes; (12) modifying themes and summary; (13) identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews; (14) contextualization of themes; and (15) composite summary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Eight participants were involved in the study and were in their middle age ranging from 40 to 59 years old. These participants were the teaching employees at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Dapitan Campus, who have been teaching for more than 15 years. They were able to experience a shift or change in the teaching modalities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. From their experiences, there are three superordinate themes presented in the study: the new normal, challenges in the new normal, and adaptation in the new normal. The table below presents these superordinate themes and subthemes.

Table 1. Superordinate themes and subthemes emerged from the experiences of the participants

Subthemes	Superordinate Themes
Combination of old and new technology	New Normal
Adoption of new instructional modalities	
Limitation of school activities	
New form of work environment	
Abrupt transitioning process	Challenges in the New Normal
Difficulty and misperformed tasks	
Disengaged students	
Financial incapacity	
Limitation in knowledge and access to educational technology	
Physical and mental limitations due to age	
Poor internet connectivity	
Students' academic dishonesty	
Travel and institutional restriction	Adaptation
Technological preparation	
Extended support	
Time extension	
Change of activities	
New instructional modalities	
Course leniency	
Acceptance of reality	
Reaching out	
Learning	

New Normal. The new normal brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of teaching employees at a government university yielded a different scenario. For participants, the new normal is described as a combination of old and new technology, the adoption of new instructional modalities, limitations in school activities, and a new work environment. The new normal is a **combination of old and new technology**, as evident in the words of Ace who said, “*Meaning a combination of traditional and new*

technology which is new that you should know, that is new normal.” The **adoption of new instructional modalities** also defines the new normal. Ann related when asked about the new normal: *“Adaptation or adoption of new trends and modalities which we did not practice in the past.”* Further, Izz expressed,

“so in education this is a new trend which is outside the usual and new normal. So, when we talk about the educational system, this is a new way of adapting the teaching-learning process and for all of us of course this is something that we to fully understand and absorb so that we can effectively and efficiently conduct teaching and expect to have a good learning in the side of the students.”

The new normal also brought **limitations to school activities**. Pet pointed out, *“limitation in our movement then limitation regarding our work. Cyclical, students cannot come in school 100%.”* Similarly, Carl uttered, *“For me new normal is the let us say for example a **new form of a work environment.**”*

Challenges in the New Normal. Nine themes emerged from the experiences of the participants as to the challenges they met in the new normal as teaching employees, such as the abrupt transitioning process, difficulty and misperformance of tasks, disengaged students, financial incapacity, limitation in knowledge and access to educational technology, physical and mental limitations due to age, poor internet connectivity, students’ academic dishonesty and travel, and institutional restriction.

Abrupt Transitioning Process. Most of the participants experienced an abrupt transitioning process during the training and module development in times of pandemic. Pet said that in the training, they need to shorten their modules, which is difficult on their part as they need to put in as much content as they can. He felt frustrated during the training, especially since it was done abruptly. Carl also experienced similar things; he said,

“There was no clear transitioning of the process. The reason nga (that) I felt trying to resist all those directives that if it was put it should have put in place then probably everyone will be happy no, doing what is to be prepared for the students... I was struggling, no, I was really struggling because I was not taught how to do like preparing programs that will align with course objectives that would align to the course programs, the course programs parallel to the objectives, vision, mission of the university... Preparing the modules, and then directing us to prepare the modules following this format but we were not taught properly how to do the preparation, meaning to say doing the preparation was too short and we have also to understand that everybody was cramming during that time.”

Further, Ace supported their experiences, she uttered, *“The number 1 is the construction of module which is at very short time. We created one, then it was returned for revision, when it was revised, that’s it.”* This scenario is worsened by their experience of having no enough references in making their modules. Likewise, Pet was unsatisfied that the training they received was not suitable for their program. He pronounced, *“ that was it Ma’am that the training must coincide in the department since education [as a major] is really different.”* The long process of checking each student’s outputs has caused a clamor among the participants as part of the transition since before the pandemic; these outputs can be checked at once during class schedules.

Difficulty and Misperformance of Tasks. Half of the participants expressed their worries that course tasks may be difficult for students, especially since some of these students misperformed the tasks. For instance, Carl said, *“I could not imagine how much students learned where they do only at their own pace. No one is helping to them so that’s it and I could not imagine also how they learned mathematically.”* Even Far uttered, *“maybe the delivery of my lesson is not effective because not all students are clarified with their problems because only those who are asking are the one I answered.”* On the other hand, Pet claimed:

“That is why Sir when we had our face-to-face because before we just gave the module and they did video

recording, we found out that when we check the rubric, it is really different. Then they would say that it was indicated in the module... There was a class but after the module was given, they just read then when they submitted the video, they already applied the wrong principle. It was really different."

Besides, Carl commented:

"In Mathematics no, as a mathematics teachers, many of my students, ah, found it difficult to ah, to conceptualize the lesson during the face to face classes. How much more during the pandemic wherein students were only given the opportunity the students doing, ah, their own study, no, and then answering the activities, no body helped them, no teachers, ah presented to them the examples, how the concepts, ah were explained."

Disengaged Students. Aside from students who experienced difficulty and misperformed some of the course activities, they were also disengaged in the learning process through modular instruction. This challenge is experienced by Pet, Ace and Carl. All of them mentioned that their students would not read the module or submit activities and were unresponsive when being communicated with. This is the reason why Pet said, *"No matter how you contact, call the barangay, coordinate with the traffic enforcer who has a family who knows the person you are contacting, still they will not respond sir, it's hard, students will even complain for grade."* In addition, Carl uttered, *"as to attendance we could not see how serious students are attending and participating in the class because they are invisible, so you cannot really examine if the students are reading the materials."* Ace added, *"You can sometimes say that for the task you have given, some students will not really do the task."*

Financial Incapacity. Among the participants, Izz and Ann expressed a financial challenge for them and the students during the pandemic. She said, *"My computer is even not good, what can we do, this is it. It is already helpful so... financially."* Moreover, she mentioned:

"But still it's modular students find it hard because we, instructors and professors would also like to reach with our students, but sometimes it was very hard since students don't have the loads, they cannot reach us also but there are many questions, questions that the students would like to ask especially when they do not understand the lesson given in our module."

Likewise, Ann said, *"my first [laptop] malfunctioned... I got a laptop loan in the coop to bus this [laptop] because I nothing is provided for. You really need to look for remedy to provide it [laptop]."*

Limitation in Knowledge and Access to Educational Technology. This challenge is experienced by both the participants and their students. Some of them do not have access to educational technology, and if they do, their knowledge of how to use it is limited. Izz mentioned, *"To have a good laptop, okay, right? For the most part, it was difficult because I hadn't prepared a laptop."* Further, she said about his knowledge of technology, *"Oh, yes to the new demand, I'm still learning... So I'm not there yet, so I know that everyone is still learning and coping."* For Ace, the sophistication of available gadgets is a challenge, she said: *"Yes, because the sound of the, because we don't have sophisticated [gadgets] as them. So sometimes it is blurry, [the video is] blurry then the students are less audible. Oh, that's how it is."*

For Far, she expressed her limited knowledge of educational technology:

"In teaching sometimes I can't go online and if there are students who want to ask we have to answer them one by one because I don't know how to conduct that Zoom. I don't know because unlike those young ones who are skilled, so I, I don't either, we don't have that in our curriculum so I don't know how to adopt that Google Classroom so I can connect with them."

Even Ann considered herself not yet an expert in the use of technology. She mentioned, *"So, I don't*

consider myself an expert as to searching. Comparing it to the others, which for them is easy, I'm only a Grade 1." In a similar situation, students also experienced a problem on access to devices which in turn became a challenge to the participants. Carl expressed:

"But the problem is on my students, who have a device problem. They do not own the technology that could help them download and upload, download the activities then upload the responses so, there is the problem but in my case there is none."

Physical and Mental Limitation Due to Age. Physical limitations and the ability to keep upbeat and persevere with the demands of the new normal became additional challenges that the participants tried to cope with. The physical limitations were clearly explained by Ann and Far. Ann noted, *"I cannot persevere, my eyes hurt."* Moreover, she said, *"Now I even think I'm tired of carrying this [laptop]."* Likewise, Far said, *"When it comes to health... in my health what deteriorates is my sight because looking into [the outputs] through the use of eyeglasses with my facemask with my face shield, my eyeglass becomes cloudy."*

Mental limitations in terms of learning retention were also expressed by Ann and Izz. Ann experienced forgetting about the training that was just conducted in the first semester. She uttered, *"Even when we started the first semester, I already forgot it in the second semester."* In the case of Izz, she mentioned about difficulty absorbing the training, *"Even in absorbing, it's hard to absorb. But we cannot say no, yes we can do it why not?"*

Poor Internet Connectivity. This challenge is also raised by half the participants together with their students. Izz, Pet, Carl, and Ann mentioned the challenge of internet connectivity for them and their students. Izz related, *"Internet connection really, and of course we even have a problem how much more our students."* It was also supported by Pet, who said, *"you can interact with students, face to face, but now when you say to go online, someone can't access"* while Carl also emphasized it *"internet connectivity is one of the challenges underscored during the pandemic."* On the other hand, Ann in her side related, *"Our connection is not stable. Just like here we have unexpected brownout."*

Students' Academic Dishonesty. Despite efforts of the participants to provide the best instructional modalities they can offer, some students resorted to dishonesty in their submitted outputs, which makes it difficult to determine whether they acquired the expected competencies in the course. This challenge is described by Carl, Izz, Ann, and Pet. Carl said,

"then the submission of the students could not also be verified if whether they are legit no, done by the students with faith but commonly answers are copied from one and shared to the other so you cannot really measure if these students achieved the kind of competencies that we are supposed to serve to them."

Izz added to this saying, *"we cannot really assure, no, if the answers to our modules by the students are the ones really coming from their minds no, maybe some were copied, no. We cannot judge as teachers."* Even Ann can relate to this experience when she uttered,

"I'll print it Ma'am for proof... duh, copy paste, it is just what's missing is the original name of that [classmate]. Just like the views of artists, then I will let them analyze, I almost caught that what was submitted in Block A was in Block B. They are copying, we just don't know."

In parallel, Pet pronounced, *"When you will send module it is just they are copying for answers."*

Travel and Institutional Restriction. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, travel and institutional restrictions became a challenge to some teaching employees as they needed to follow protocols that sometimes became hassles in certain transactions. This challenge is well pronounced in the experience of Far, who said,

“Another challenge that I had experienced is that going from home to my work is traveling from home to work since there are few vehicles available so I need to wait for a long time waiting for the vehicle in order to reach the school...” Added to this she mentioned, *“And another when I already on the vehicle I feel conscious because I have to wear my facemask maybe I can infect my co-passenger.”*

Adaptation to the New Normal. Adaptation has been one of the necessary human characteristics since time immemorial, enabling them to survive despite changes in the social and physical environment. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes in various processes in educational institutions, and for employees to survive, they needed to adapt to these changes to remain in control of their situations. There are challenges, as presented above, that should be managed for educational institutions to better serve their clients. Hence, teaching employees, in particular, are required to adapt to these challenges in the new normal. In the experiences of the participants, nine themes emerged that gave and described the meaning of adaptation to the new normal. Adaptation to the new normal means technological preparation, extended support, time extension, change of activities, new instructional modalities, course leniency, acceptance of reality, reaching out, and learning.

Technological Preparation. Working in the new normal necessitates technological knowledge, resources, and access to course references as preparation. This new normal brought high demand for technology, especially since the new instructional modalities are delivered outside the school. The experiences of Carl, Ann, and Ace described this theme.

Carl talked about technological preparation:

“I have my personal gadgets. In school and at home ahm, I put up even personal internet connection just to ensure that I am continuously connected with my students, no. So, that one great preparation as a teacher that technologically I prepared, no, with enough, devices, available, I made sure that devices are made available for my students, for the digitized modules, problem during the uploading because the gadgets are available.”

In addition, Ace mentioned: *“I have grown especially technology-wise I feel like I’ve improved a little bit. We, I’m already 50 years old, I can say that I, I did try to learn that it looks like I’ve adapted to what’s new normal.”*

Carl also mentioned having access to course materials or references that helped him face the demands of the new normal. He expressed:

“It was an advantage to me during the pandemic, because I already have accessed these materials. In fact, I have available CDs prior to the pandemic where I shared to the students the softcopy from the CD so it is a good experience.”

Similarly, Ann said:

“she [a colleague] has an invitation to attend a webinar, she has excerpts from the webinars which I made something. Then good to know because UP provided us with books that we have just received. So I already have physical [references] which I I’m going to read. Then I also took those topics that I also introduced to. It was for my major... in content.”

Extended Support. Since the challenge of the new normal is not only felt by the participants, there is also a need to extend support to students. To continue the teaching-learning process, the participants need to adapt to new processes. For instance, Izz uttered:

“In fact I did that, I used LBC, I sent modules, the whole pack of modules for students the one in Plaridel and the one in like that... (for those who cannot access the internet), through LBC and I pay for it.”

She added,

“But just a little. So that they have no reason they can't have module. I went to that extent I sent it through LBC or JRS, very difficult. So I ask them if you cannot submit them through online send someone especially that they are underage, they can ask someone their parents or their relatives to come in JRMSU, I can meet them outside the gate.”

Izz also gave many options for her to be reached by the students in any form of communication via mobile phone, Facebook, and email. For the same purpose, Pet also extended support to students by giving them various means of communicating with him. He said, *“Ah, if they have problems regarding the module, they can contact me like our line is open to explain to them instead of giving them answer immediately.”*

Conversely, Carl expressed:

“I used my resources to provide me those materials needed for the preparation of the toolkit, the modules so that in the end my students access them simply and then they can study and can understand if the teacher is preparing complicated materials normally the students will also feel complications.”

Time extension. It came to the point where one of the participants extended her working time at home just to meet the demands of work as a way to adapt to the new normal. This is true for Ann who said, *“Those weekends I checked. I'll do my task again, I'll turn to the module.”*

Change of Activities. There were challenges that participants experienced as to the difficulty students have in using the module due to inappropriate content based on their needs and level of understanding. Hence, to adapt to the demands of time, there is a need to change or adjust the module activities. Carl well described it in his words:

“I will not be spending most of my time checking the outputs because I also need to prepare activities for them to be done preparing the lessons although modules were already made available there are really modules whose activities will not fit to the students so I need to change the learning activities and the assessment to fit no the activities to the kind of students that I have.”

New Instructional Modalities. Due to health reasons and security concerns from the pandemic, educational institutions have not conducted full face-to-face classes for more than three semesters already. Thus, the initiation of new instructional modalities is one of the options to continue the educational services. Far, Ace, and Pet made mention of this in their experiences. In the case of Far, she related, *“That's it, I formed a google classroom, in the exam I used google form. That is why in their score I don't need to count one by one.”* For Ace, she said, *“There it is, that is the additional thing we did. I do it once a month, if I'm busy it's one and a half. There is a time a semester that I see to it that there are students online.”* Further, she said, *“With technology, that's we already used blended. We have once every month to go online, but not everyone can join sir because due to internet connectivity of others, so only a few can join, which is that.”*

Course leniency. Despite the modifications and initiatives taken by the participants among their students, there were still many students who were not able to cope with the demands of the new normal. Consequently, there were adjustments made by the participants, such as being lenient as to the standards of the course. Three of the participants explicitly manifested it, like those mentioned by Carl, Pet. and Earl.

Carl expressed leniency in course expectations:

“So checking outputs is really a challenge and I made several adjustments to that and strategize how to check knowing the fact that submissions are commonly copied and then if you check one output that is true to everybody perhaps checking one, and grade one then that can be shared to everyone.”

“We don’t account the number of tardiness and absences no, so that the new scheme adopted in the new normal.”

“I don’t think so I have achieved and attained more than 50% of the competencies. Because we were directed to offer leniency to our students. And then the term leniency encompasses several connotations, whether giving favor to the students even if they submitted the wrong activities no, ah, for as long as they did their part and then they have extended efforts. Meaning to say the giving of activities to students were also reduced during the pandemic because of our limitation also to check the outputs of the students.”

Likewise, Pet, mentioned, *“It looks like it happened to us all. Sir, it looks like we just bent for the student. That’s why, leniency was really our term at that time of the pandemic.”* Earl also became lenient among his students. He raised, *“Students cannot really [do it], they have a hard time. That’s why I adjusted, we will also adjust to our situation.”* Also, he said,

“I’m not very strict in terms of students’ accomplishments at least they have participation. What is important is to be able to have hands-on [activities] with me. They cannot follow no matter what.” Additionally, he mentioned, *“I just told them that it’s okay for me, I just won’t give them a strict [grade] because it’s hard to disappoint the students.”*

Acceptance of Reality. In the experiences of the participants, accepting the reality of the new normal is a crucial step. Izz said, *“I always see the challenges a new learning experience every challenge, that is why I rarely say no to challenges.”* Moreover, she expressed,

“We don’t need to oppose it because if we think negatively then the more you will be bothered mentally, emotionally, physically, so that is why adaptation, go with the flow dancing with the music.” Earl also manifested his positive acceptance of reality when talking to his students, *“Don’t worry time will come that we shall have a face-to-face [classes] for us to cope-up with our problems.”*

For Pet, he accepted the reality that he does not know everything and preferred to ask for help from those who have enough knowledge in educational technology. He said, *“Just try to ask, Sir. Don’t feel down at your age, I did not think I’ll reach 59, Ma’am. We will just admit that we don’t know and ask help those who have the knowledge.”*

Reaching Out. Though there were challenges experienced by the participants, they admitted that reaching out for assistance from colleagues or family members can help them adapt to the new normal. Pet asked for assistance from his colleagues for technical knowledge in computers. He said:

“They, it is them Ma’am R that we always [ask], Ma’am R how is this. When it was made into a module we made the content and the activities but in formatting Ma’am, we would ask assistance from those who have knowledge in computer, the fast one.”

Izz has also a similar way of adapting, she mentioned, *“I cannot easily get, no, for example, several times here I call our friends here the younger colleagues here. Please help us because we do not know, so age really matters in terms of the use of technology.”* Even Far explicitly revealed:

“At the beginning, I was struggling, and after a long time, I was able to adapt. I learned how to adjust, I learned that I could learn through the help of that as said that ‘no man is an island’. That when you ask a

question someone will answer and the problem will be solved.”

“I will ask help from knowledgeable one. My daughter was one of those I bothered just to comply with my work because why, she’s knowledgeable of this, internet that camera how to focus when I can I can get in on.”

Further, Far mentioned that she asked for help from her young colleagues, such as in setting up Google Classrooms. Similarly, Ann uttered, *“Sir, I called those in the MIS, sometimes K sometimes these connections [internet], those about alignment of [texts], it’s B. Those inaccurate prints like that, I would run/ask help from IT.”*

Learning. It cannot be denied that age among middle-aged teaching employees matters in their retention and speed of understanding related to technological knowledge. Hence, Ann made some measures to mitigate it. She said, *“I’ll start doing it. Then I really note down, I have a notebook. Those Keys to this and that, I am like that so I would say I am a grade 1. But did endure.*

DISCUSSIONS

Just like any other aspect of the new normal brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching employees at JRMSU looked at the new normal as the adoption of new trends in education combining old and new educational technologies. The restrictions of the new normal resulted in various challenges among the teaching employees. During the pandemic, people live with socioeconomic restrictions such as restricted social and economic activities as they avoid social gatherings (Dungog & Jacinto, 2023). Since their interaction with students was limited, they employed new instructional modalities such as a combination of modules and online synchronous teaching. However, this was not easy, as most of them struggled to use the technologies introduced by the school due to limitations in their knowledge and accessibility problems. This is in response to the Commission on Higher Education’s suggestion of strengthening online platforms and blended learning using “Google Classroom, Messenger, Zoom, Edmodo, Facebook, and YouTube (CHED, 2020, as cited in Tria, 2020, p. 4). The capability of some employees to purchase appropriate gadgets posed an additional challenge, especially since these gadgets prompted them to avail themselves of loans just to purchase them. Moreover, the status of internet connectivity is a challenge among these employees, which worsens on the part of the students, as they mentioned. This is expected as the Philippines ranked 77th with the slowest and least stable internet connection in the world, which posed a problem among students with limited access to the internet and no gadgets (Vitales, *et al.*, 2021; Tria, 2020). Further, Vitales, *et al.*, (2021) found out that students at various levels in government and private schools in the Philippines were not psychologically, emotionally, and financially prepared in terms of virtual classroom learning. In a neighboring country, administrators and students in higher education in Indonesia faced the challenges of internet costs and access (Sparrow, *et al.*, 2020).

The pressure experienced by the school just to deliver and continue the education of its students affected the plight of employees as they experienced an abrupt transitioning process through training and seminars. This training was conducted over a short period of time with the objective of making the employees produce learning modules regardless of the number of their preparations. The transition became a struggle among the middle-aged teaching employees as they managed their physical and mental limitations. With abrupt transitions, some modules were not of good quality, which resulted in confusion and misperformance among students. Even the assessment activities were said to be inappropriate to measure the expected course outcomes. This is a similar challenge among the students in the study of Vitales *et al.* (2021), who revealed having problems with teacher, curriculum, and resource factors. Aside from this, the employees strategized their activities to lessen dishonesty among their students in answering the modules. The pandemic really tested the employees’ ability to adapt and continue to deliver services to their students. The middle-aged

employees have to deal with external demands and internal limitations as they adapt to the new normal. So, there is a mismatch between what the school demands in the new normal and what employees are capable of doing. It was not easy for employees, as they sometimes filled in the gaps of the school with their resources.

The presence of challenges, both external and internal, requires the employees to be adaptive to change in order to become productive in their profession. Despite the limitations they experienced, all of them accepted reality and faced it positively. This is crucial on their part, as it motivates them to make work adjustments and persevere in the midst of challenges. Though they took the new normal as an opportunity to learn new educational technologies, failure to have a positive realization of the situation or be optimistic about the situation can create friction and a setback in their services as they can be consumed by their weaknesses. Carver et al. (2010) described dispositional optimism as the tendency of an individual to anticipate life events or conditions that are positive (as cited in Taylor et al., 2012). Even poor families in order to survive and face the challenges during the pandemic accepted their existing conditions as they don't have any better choice (Dungog & Jacinto, 2023). The difference in optimism meant differences in how individuals faced and overcame negative circumstances. It was also argued that high optimism enables individuals to adjust to negative events. Optimism is also characterized by positive social networks and physical health (Carver et al., 2010; Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Taylor & Stanton, 2007, as cited in Taylor et al., 2012). Understanding students' situations, the employees became lenient in the courses they handled as some students could not provide the technological requirements of the new instructional modalities and were aware of the content and time issues of course modules.

Consequently, the young-old tandem became helpful in the employees' adaptation as they were guided by young colleagues as they learned at their own pace. With this tandem, they equipped themselves with the technical know-how of gadgets and module development while fading their reliance on young colleagues. This tandem between middle-aged and young colleagues emphasized the advantage of having quality social relationships and interactions. The quality of these relationships and interactions was found to be related to well-being and mental health (Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021). Hence, the quality relationship among employees is a critical factor in their ways of adapting to the new normal, especially the technical know-how of educational technologies, which requires the help of those who are mostly exposed, like the young colleagues. With empathy in healthy social connections, people acquire proper moral and humane decisions, which sooner or later could lead to a feeling of belongingness (Lamm & Majdandzic, 2015, as cited in Pandey *et al.*, 2021). In other words, colleagues provided a strong support structure for them to maintain their enthusiasm and passion for educating students in the new normal amidst its demands. Moreover, knowing their retention problem, they initiated activities that reinforced their learning. Since students did not have training on the new instructional modalities, the employees extended their understanding and help. This shows their concern over their students' opportunities to learn by sharing with them the burdens of the new normal, such as sending modules, opening communication lines, sharing reference materials, and extending time support. Similarly, higher education in Indonesia offered financial aid, internet quotas, and flexible lectures and assignments for their students. However, they also saw a decrease in the teaching quality (Sparrow, *et al.*, 2020). Adjustments to the content and assessment activities and the conduct of follow-up activities were part of the employees' adaptation to mitigate the limitations of the new normal and realize the learning outcomes of different courses.

CONCLUSIONS

The new normal challenged the middle-aged teaching employees' capacity to make effective use of old and new educational technologies. Their knowledge, skills, and capability to provide technological gadgets were tested considering their physical limitations and learning retention. The demands of the new normal were hurdles on their part, as they needed to balance the technological challenges they experienced with those of their students, such as internet connectivity, the availability of course references, and access to technologies.

Though they manifested their effort to provide quality learning materials, students were not able to maximize it as some were disengaged and sometimes misperformed the activities due to their challenges. Hence, the quality of education is at stake. Adaptation and not going against the demands of the new normal among middle-aged employees is a positive approach towards better educational services. To cater to the needs of the students, these employees initiated new instructional modalities such as offline and online activities, either synchronous or asynchronous. Positive acceptance of reality among the employees is crucial to their adaptation to the new normal. They positively accepted the reality of the pandemic and the limitations of middle age. With optimism, they tried to look for alternative means of moving forward, like strengthening their social connections with younger and more skilled colleagues and doing reinforcement learning for themselves. However, mismatches between the learning contents of instructional materials and students' capabilities created a gap. Since education requires interaction between teachers and students, these employees made an effort to become lenient in the course expectations and made adjustments in the content of the instructional materials just to realize it. Adaptation among teaching employees is an interactive process of external and internal factors in the employees spanning from having a positive acceptance of reality, extension time and support, initiation, and fitting of new ways of instruction, being technologically equipped, and building connections among colleagues. Nevertheless, personal satisfaction cannot be fully met due to the limitations of middle-aged employees. Knowledge-wise, they are equipped, but the new normal intervened in their capability to offer better learning activities to deepen critical course concepts. As a consequence, dissatisfaction is experienced by the employees. Hence, there is no single way to adapt to the new normal as a teacher. The experiences of the participants proved that, though age matters in their adaptation, it did not hinder them from moving forward and becoming active individuals in the teaching-learning process.

Based on the experiences of the participants, it is recommended that higher education institutions like JRMSU create a specialized or more age-appropriate training program for middle-aged teaching employees in cases where disruptions occur. In particular, the transition process may consider the time element, as not all employees can readily adapt to changes in the work environment. The network of support among colleagues may be strengthened to develop a positive working environment for achieving a common purpose. Technological equipment is a challenge; therefore, the institution can also look into better preparations by providing comprehensive training and strategizing mentoring between middle-aged and young employees.

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