

Pandemic School Frontliners: Experiences of College Teachers in the New Normal Educational Setting

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ABSTRACT

This study described the experiences of college teachers in the new normal educational setting. It employed a phenomenological qualitative research design. A data was obtained through IDI and FGD using a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire. There were 12 participants who came from four Higher Education Institutions in Panabo City, Davao Del Norte and they were identified through purposive sampling. Their responses undergone thematic analysis to come up with themes. The study revealed the challenges they experienced were related to technological issues, learning management issues, and work-related issues. These were often mentioned by most of the participants during the interview conducted. Consequently, based on the identified challenges, the college teachers shared their coping strategies by means of three approaches: communicative, developmental, and responsiveness. These were the coping strategies that corresponded the challenges encountered by most of the participants. Furthermore, they shared the gained experiences in the new normal educational setting as follows: a need to be more technologically equipped, goal-driven, value of patience, possessing positivity, and adaptive capability. Hence, to be more holistically equipped to teach in the new normal educational setting a continuous exposure of College teachers in trainings, seminars, and workshops should be few of the top priorities of the stakeholders. They should also craft an educational emergency plan and preparedness.

Keywords: College teachers, new normal, educational setting, higher education institutions, technological, learning management

INTRODUCTION

The whole educational system from elementary to tertiary level has collapsed during the lockdown period due to novel corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19), not only in the Philippines but the world. It resulted to the difficulties of students, parents and most especially the teachers in adjusting to the new normal set-up of education. Whether it is an online learning or a blended learning instructions, teachers must ensure that the level of learning remains even with the absence of face-to-face experiences, from planning of the lesson to be discussed to the conduct of the classes and the handing out of tasks. In fact, these are just few of the challenges faced by the teachers in the current situation of the educational system.

Recently, many authors have conducted the research to address the problems related to online teaching and learning amidst the advent of the global pandemic, but most of the studies have addressed the problem faced by students and ignoring the problems faced by teachers. Only a few authors have addressed the challenges faced by teachers in online teaching and learning. For instance, the study conducted by Gratz and Looney (2020) explored faculty members' willingness to teach online and their resistance to change in Los Angeles where teachers reported to have lack of skills in teaching online, a lack of time for online course preparation, and their subject or course does not suit to the online teaching. Similarly, Arora and Srinivasan (2020) reported network issues, a lack of training, a lack of awareness, a lack of interest, less attendance, a lack of personal touch and a lack of interaction as major challenges faced by teachers in the online teaching-learning process.

In the Philippines, policies were created to secure the continuity of adherence of the stakeholders, particularly directed to the teachers and the students to the educational and preventive policies such as the provision of alternative delivery modes of education and quarantine requirements (Commission on Higher Education, 2020; Department of Education, 2020). These new normal can posit worries to the teachers since they have not been trained for emergency online teaching. In consequence, the suspension of classes even in higher education coupled with social isolation and home quarantine can cause anxieties to the teachers (Talidong & Toquero, 2020). In the study of Santos (2020) stated that the difficulty to purchase a facilitative learning device to easily tune in to online classes.

Furthermore, the phone interview conducted by Philippine News Agency (2020) to the teacher named Monterde from Davao Region says: “There are a lot of webinars that the region (Department of Education-Region 11) offers and we take these chances because as teachers, we want to constantly improve ourselves to keep up with the changing times. Tinuturuan kami paano gumawa ng (In those webinars, we learn how to create) engaging PowerPoint presentations, how to record our classes, how to use Microsoft software.” Teachers gain certificates after completing these capacity-building activities. This means we do not accelerate to the next workshop until we really know how to utilize these applications and software, she explained. Likewise, Valderrama shared in the interview: “The region has searched for volunteers and aside from that, education graduates will also step up once the need to do so arises.” They will be given certificates in return.

Generally, there is no evidence of study being conducted in the Davao Region related to the experiences of College Teachers in the new normal educational setting. Hence, it urged the researcher to pursue the qualitative study entitled “Experiences of College Teachers in the new normal educational setting” to give an account among teachers in tertiary level amidst the educational crisis.

This study intended to assess the experiences of College teachers in responding the demand of educational aspect brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and to address the issues in the said institution. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- To identify the challenges of college teachers in the new normal educational setting;
- To describe the coping strategies of college teachers in the new normal educational setting; and
- To draw insights of college teachers in the new normal educational setting.

METHOD

This study engaged qualitative research. As stated by Maxwell and Reybold (2015), qualitative research is characterized by substantially inductive and open-ended methods. To identify the participants, the researcher utilized purposive sampling due to the participants coming from four Higher Education Institutions’ faculty namely: School A, School B, School C, and School D. The participants of this study were consisting of 12 College teachers who have been teaching for at least five years in teaching field, involved in preparing modules, utilizing platform in teaching-learning process, and handling at least nine units in tertiary level. There were six key-informants for the In-depth Interviews (IDI) and the other six were the participants who undergone the Focus Group Discussions (FGD). In addition, I formulated a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire as a research tool of this study. Semi-structured interview as described by Adams (2015) employs a blend of closed and open-ended questionnaires. During the conduct of the study, the researcher formulated semi-structured interview guide questionnaires was facilitated to the participants. This research tool was containing a questionnaires aligned to the objectives of the study which answered by the participants through interview. Moreover, the said questionnaire was checked by means of

undergoing evaluation by identified experts in the field of social sciences or social studies and was checked by the Research Ethics Committee based on the guidelines.

As a researcher I took into account the welfare of the participants in conducting the research study making sure that they were free from harm and any discomfort during the interview. The researcher obtained the informed consent from the potential participants, the College teachers that they were able to understand that they are taking part of the research and what the research requires of them. Participants were typically only willing to volunteer information, especially information of a private or sensitive nature, if the researcher agrees to hold such in confidence. This is why confidentiality and privacy of the participants is protected by not using the real names in reporting out data. I did not divulge any information or events that has the tendency to identify my participants which include their names, affiliated school, contact numbers, and signatures. Moreover, to describe the experiences of the College teachers in the new normal set-up of education through phenomenological study. College teachers were taking part in audio-taped, in-depth interview, face to face and/or virtual interviews conducted by the researcher via Google meet platform. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended to allow for the greatest detail and the opportunity for the participants to speak in their own words rather than that of the researcher.

In analyzing the results was made through qualitative data analysis. As defined by Williamson, Given and Scifleet (2018), qualitative data analysis is used to determine the meanings of collected data. The main role of this qualitative data analysis is to help researchers to look for connections within data which will be grouped into themes. Technically, transcripts as suggested by Mohajan (2018) should be examined closely for phrases, sentences or paragraphs. This approach along with category coding was considered to be a foundational inductive approach wherein the researcher looked at the connections of the data. Using the thematic analysis, the researchers will be able to categorize the response of the College teacher participants as to the similarities of scenarios which will be set as themes of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found out that students who rely on the internet data or who have no home internet access also struggled same as teachers in College. The shared challenges on limited internet accessibility among teachers and students are not a rare issue in the new normal educational setting. In the study of Jurado, et al. (2010) declared that dealing with a slow internet connection when implementing blended learning; limited internet access is a major concern. Teachers and students agree on how to deal with a slow internet connection in the classroom. Uploading learning materials and assessments to the LMS platform, for example, necessitates a more stable internet connection at home or at the location. In addition, the adaptation of the Learning Management System such as Quipper took them time to explore to be able to integrate it as new means of the instructional delivery. In addition, most of the participants dealt into the challenge of the technology manipulation and utilization in the higher educational institutions. In fact, some Saudi Arabian studies reported similar reasons for educational technology failures: a lack of teacher training in computer use, the use of a delivery teaching style rather than investment in modern technology (Alhamd et.al, 2004), and a shortage of teachers qualified to use the technology confidently (Sager, 2001).

The creation of modules was an additional workload for the teachers who became a content designer of modules while adjusting to the paradigm shift of the educational system in the Philippines. Teachers are not really trained in making modules and preparing other learning materials for distance learning or online learning modality. Thus, the struggle in preparing learning materials is one of the emerging sub-themes of this study. According to Dangle and Sumaoang (2020), the use of modules has a disadvantage due to increased time for preparation and lack of concrete rewards for teachers and staff.

Moreover, helping teachers and instructors become content developers or instructional designers is certainly

desirable, however, the problem arise due to little or no prior experience in content development (Burns, 2011). Based on my analysis, the role of teachers in the delivery of instruction in this unprecedented time has become more complex because of the learning barriers encountered among the students specifically the lack of resources in accessing the online platforms. Therefore, teachers were forced to deliver the learning materials via door-to-door delivery or the students are living far from the school, the teachers urged to send it through courier. It took additional efforts and consumed time among the College teachers. Thus, all of these fall under the umbrella of the difficulty in instructional delivery because of the paradigm shift from traditional way of learning to flexible learning modality. It is connected to the study conducted by Morris et al. (2005); Von Holzen (2000) pointed out that, another change in faculty roles and responsibilities is the separation of curriculum development, content development, delivery, tutoring, student support services, administration, and evaluation from the responsibility of individual faculty members to a group of people or departments.

Majority of the teachers complained on the students' negative attitude related to the validity of the assessment or evaluation and the retrieval of assessment due to late submission; the delayed submission of requirements; the number of students attending the online class and discussion; and in setting deadlines for the submission of students' activities. These are frequent shared experiences that led to the difficulty of College teachers in dealing the students' negative attitude. In fact, an increasing number of incidents of cheating, plagiarism and procrastinating in submitting the assessments and requirements are being observed by the teachers in this time of pandemic. This kind of challenges that they experience can be link to the study conducted by Klingsieck et al. (2012) emphasized that due to its autonomous nature, the online learning environment places a high demand of self-regulation from students. While, to support the claims of late submission of tasks or assignments in the study of Yilmaz (2017) found that students in an online environment procrastinated more on assignment submissions compared to their traditional face-to-face counterparts.

In other dimension, the commonalities of shared experiences among College teachers implied to the lack of training or lack of knowledge in handling the online classes and they need training to face the challenges of the technological barriers in the new normal set-up of education. Thus, teachers need serious preparation to use online tools and platforms. As explained by Fish and Wickersham (2010), in order to be effective as online instructors, those involved must receive ongoing training and support. Likewise, Ertmer et al., (2012) stated that inadequate professional development and training are the most frequently cited reasons for a lack of technology implementation in the classroom.

The common shared experiences of College teachers pointed out that the numerous workloads such as sending and checking of activities, the tasks, assessments, managing the students' concerns, draw a line for the submission of tasks and activities, preparing modules and other instructional devices for the numerous classes, time schedule for online classes, and other related work activities amidst the new normal educational setting. In the study conducted by Ayeni and Prince (2018) about teachers' instructional workload management and students' academic performance in Nigeria, the findings indicated that teachers' workload is high in teaching activities, data imputation, and marking of students' scripts, and impacted negatively on teachers' instructional tasks performance and students' academic performance.

Lastly, learning on how to manipulate the technologies, adjusting to the finances from the salary, managing personal and work time specially when working at home, and even the threat of the teachers' privacy due to the usage of personal account in communicating with the students. According to the study conducted by Coppola et al. (2002), a friendly, welcoming, and social environment is critical to the success of the teachers. Moreover, some researchers concluded, "managing the transition from expatriate to repatriate assignments is one of the most difficult challenges for corporate expatriates. Expatriates, in particular, are concerned with job responsibility and autonomy, opportunities to apply new knowledge and

skills, career advancement, compensation, and career opportunities for their spouse/partner upon repatriation.” (Xie, 2020).

In the coping strategies, majority of the College teachers employing flexible learning modality by means of initiating an alternative way through online and offline activities; and providing a hardcopy of the instructional materials like modules in order for the students to cope with the problem encountered on the internet connection. Likewise, this initiative of the teachers to think outside the box and being considerate to their students to continue their studies despite of the technological barriers they encountered in the new normal educational setting. These phenomena can be supported by the study of Subedi et al. (2020), during this pandemic, e-learning tool played a critical role in assisting schools and universities in facilitating student learning while universities and schools were closed. Thus, the educational use of learning platforms, respond to the challenges of distance higher education, customizing tasks, and adapting content presentation to the virtual support, combining with traditional materials (Medina et. al, 2015; Oproiu, 2015).

Helping one another on how to utilize the new adapted learning platforms are very important aspect of teachers’ professional lives, as a means to continuously reflect on and improve the practice of teaching. It is also supported by other participants as they revealed that they are asking help from the colleagues to help them out on how to utilize the Learning Management System as a platform of learning. In collaboration, teachers can, for example, share knowledge, critically reflect on teaching practices, provide collegial support or peer feedback, and collectively design teaching methods (Kelchtermans, 2006; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Likewise, according to Avanzi et al. (2008) claimed that a supportive mentor, colleagues, or team members share positive experiences and work together to complete tasks, thus alleviating workload stress.

Additionally, the common shared experiences among the college teachers is commendable especially on their coping strategies in creating the instructional material called module. The collaborative efforts are manifested in preparing the learning material through helping and motivating each other, as most of the participants shared during the interview conducted. In United States, University faculty who have collaborated on articles and projects, are more comfortable engaging in the sorts of practices that promote community and school improvement, such as on- and offline collaboration and sharing resources and ideas with teachers (Riverin et. al, 2008). The majority of teachers indicate that the support they receive from other teachers in online discussions is very important to them (Zibit, 2004).

It can be shown from the responses of the college teachers that they incorporating online platforms for the instructional delivery amidst the new normal educational setting. They used it to easily deliver the lessons to their students from the absence of face-to-face learning modality. It also affirmed by Spears (2012) that the Council acknowledges that ICT can be a driving force for education innovation through the improvement of instructional material quality, the development of high-quality assessments that indicate student learning, and the increased use of data to provide rich feedback to students, teachers, and schools (President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, 2010).

Furthermore, most of the responses coming from FGD participants can be surmised to personally follow up the students by calling them via cellphone or through video conferencing platforms like zoom; and even contacting them by the used of Facebook. Allocating an extra time and responsiveness to students’ needs beyond classroom hour are two of the qualities of a great teacher embodies. Thus, scheduling consultation hour is deemed necessary. According to Moon et al. (2005) suggest early and ongoing formative evaluation during course development, and during the pilot phase, to ensure that courses are effective and achieving their stated objectives.

Seminars and workshops are essential for the teachers to teach in the new normal educational setting. These are indeed essential for the College teachers. In the study conducted by Andronescu et al. (2010) explained that training needs means the changes required in the skills, knowledge and behaviors of

university faculty to achieve purposes and overcome difficulties. Likewise, Boon et al. (2015) training needs are identified by as the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that need to be changed or modified at the trainee to cope with contemporary or development aspects.

Generally, majority of the participants from both IDI and FGD agreed that one of their coping strategies in dealing with the difficulty of numerous workloads. Thus, this study depicted that the time management techniques among the College teachers is one of the coping strategies to get rid with the difficulty in handling numerous workloads. This diversity of tasks requires the student to adequately manage their academic time and, by extension, their overall time, facing the challenge of organizing it appropriately in order to correctly fulfill all the activities of their daily life and finally validate the acquisition of competencies (Lay et. al, 1993; Marchena et al., 2009; Romero et. al, 2011; Hellsten, 2012; Barberà et al., 2015).

Majority of the responses pointed out to become flexible and adaptive to the shifting of education from a traditional way to a new learning environment. Thus, the commonalities of the responses from IDI and FGD participants revealed that flexibility among teachers are the capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching. Indeed, for teachers, flexibility is much more than the capacity to survive and thrive in adversity. In relation to this, flexibility refers to a degree to which teachers are able to deal with unplanned situations in the classroom that is conceptualized as a variable distinguishing between teachers, related to effectiveness of instruction (Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth, He, Levin, Rohr & Stein, 2010; Parsons, 2008).

The gained insights and realizations implied that teachers must be more technologically equipped to face the challenges and issues encountered in the new normal educational setting. Generally, the College teachers in Panabo City need to be more technologically equipped to be more effective and efficient in the instructional delivery. A technology experts are not always available for help when needed (Ausband, 2006; Chen et. al, 2006).

On the other hand, FGD participants have the same common realization with the IDI participants by stating that: they have to be resourceful to enhance the delivery of instruction; they always their part in imparting knowledge toward the students; and enhancing the creativity in designing lessons for the students to learn more despite of the new normal education setting. In other words, setting goals matters in motivating and inspiring the teachers to do maximize their potentials in the field of teaching. A teacher's "goal orientation" appears to impact his/her likelihood of seeking help in the face of teaching challenges (Butler, 2007), effort at creating classroom environments that emphasize growth over competition (Shim et. al, 2013), commitment to serving as a socio-emotional support for students (Butler, 2012), and resistance to teacher burnout (Retelsdorf et. al, 2010).

Most of the FGD participants revealed that patience really is important to practice in this unprecedented time through being open armed in accommodating with the concerns and issues of the students they are facing in along the implementation of the new normal educational modality. Thus, dealing with the challenges need patience. According to Peterson et. al (2004), patience is associated with positive social characteristics and virtues, and patient people are more empathetic and grateful.

Majority of the FGD participants argued that looking at the advantages of the situation and seeing it as an opportunity to learn more and develop professionally despite of the unexpected crisis in the higher educational institutions. Thus, the result can be surmised that the College teachers are being optimistic to see the situation as a blessing and opportunity for them to grow holistically. They always looking at the brighter side of the situation and take it as challenge for them. Speaking of being optimistic, a study conducted by Wu et. al (2018) defines optimism as a belief that something good will happen in the future. While, Huffman et al. (2016) explained that optimism also causes a person to have hoped that the desire will

be realized through hard work.

Moreover, the common gained insights related to adaptive capability or being resilience amidst the challenges and issues of the new normal educational setting is an attribute a novice and performing teachers. Thus, understanding teachers' resilience amidst the pandemic is quite commendable in a way that they were urged to adapt the transition of the academic institutions from a traditional way of teaching to a new normal educational setting. It was mentioned by Martin et al. (2013) that coping and resilience are responses to adversity, adaptability is a response to change, novelty, and uncertainty, which can be positive or negative.

Above all, the capacity to adapt and being resilient are one of the significant gained insights of the College teachers in pursuing the teaching-learning despite the threat of COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study entitled "Experiences of College teachers in the new normal educational setting," the following implications have been generated:

They encountered problem related to technical issues due to the poor internet connection, lack of knowledge in using the technology, and even the geographical barriers where few of the students and teachers residing. The learning management issues was a manifestation of lack of preparedness and knowledge in teaching in distance or online learning platforms. Lastly, the work-related issues are the problem encountered by the college teachers due to the unprecedented time which was an additional workloads or burden for them. Thus, there is a need for College teachers to be knowledgeable, skillful and with technical support aim to address the issues encountered by teachers in the Higher Educational Institutions. Nonetheless, these are the identified challenges they encountered in the new normal educational setting.

On the other hand, communicative skill is a strategy in looking for an alternative learning modality to cater the students with poor internet connection or no internet connection at all in their respective areas. With this, a connection between the students and teachers is a key to continue the teaching-learning process. Also, the help of the skillful colleagues to adapt and embrace the technology through imparting their knowledge on how to manipulate the technology is often mentioned by the participants during the interview conducted. The development approach through managing the time and to cope with the changes and adjustments by being flexible and adaptive was another coping strategies of the interviewed participants. Thus, the abovementioned can be surmised as a coping strategies of the College teachers amidst the global health pandemic for them to continue the undertaking responsibilities and obligations toward the future hope of the nation.

Consequently, the findings of the research study related to drew five insights of the College teachers in the new normal educational setting namely: need to be more technologically equipped, goal-driven, value of patience, possessing positivity, and adaptive capability. These are the emerging insights based on the interviewed participants. Hence, despite of all trials and challenges brought by COVID-19 pandemic in the higher educational institutions, teachers continue the teaching-learning process in any means they could in order for them not to compromise the dreams and aspiration of the learners to pursue their education. To sum up, all of these were a manifestation of college teachers' perseverance, determination and passion in the teaching profession. Like there is no circumstances that would hinder to hone, to guide and to empower the future hope of the nation into their brighter tomorrows.

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