

SCIENCE TEACHERS' VOICES IN THE NEW NORMAL TEACHING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic as a massive global concern has brought unprecedented challenges in different sectors of the world. One of it is education which posed as one of the most vulnerable sectors significantly impacted by it. This phenomenon changed the mode of instructional delivery and the viewpoint of education stakeholders on the kind of learning continuity applicable to the learners amidst the looming uncertainty brought about by the health crisis. Using phenomenology, this study explored the voices of public Science school teachers regarding their instructional dilemmas to adapt in the demands of the new normal teaching and learning. Findings uncovered seven emerging emotional themes capped as **HOPEFUL: Hard-working and dedicated; Optimistic amidst uncertainty; Problematic yet reflective; Evenhandedness in responsibilities; Frightened but ready; Undisruptive desire to reach; and Life-long learner.** Despite the evident uncertainties of the situation, this paper describes the experiences of the Science teachers in their response to their mission of shaping today's generation towards undisruptive education.*

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; new normal in education; teachers' voices; phenomenological study

INTRODUCTION

The onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic around the globe brought dramatic changes and challenges to the global education community (Huang, et al., 2020). Most governments have temporarily closed educational institutions as part of their measures in an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus as it affects 70 per cent of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020). Simultaneously, different organizations and institutions initiated the call for projects and possible solutions linking the pandemic. This is in the light of UNESCO's call in providing support to countries in mitigating the disruption or total shutdown of schools. Hence, continuity of learning is still be possible. Correlated to this, institution's approach to this dilemma varies into known reality. However, a pool of solutions was proposed by institutions and organizations

around the world, and yet different inquiries still arise from how these proposals will become a reality. Teachers, as educational frontliners felt its impact with regards to their instructional duties. In the work of Carisen, et al. (2020), teachers' experiences, obstacles, and opportunities were narrated that while everyone is facing uncertainty, educators' duties are still bound to the consideration of equity, inclusivity, and the importance of access for all children. This massive challenge in educational setting and in reassurance of students and parents is a vital element of institutional response by means of venturing into flexible ways to repair the damage to the trajectory of student learning. Saxena (2020) affirmed that appropriate planning for preparing the children for pandemics must be incorporated in the system so that any future crisis can be dealt with.

In an attempt to curtail the spread of the virus, the education community ventured into

exploring different learning modalities in consideration of the context of the learning atmosphere vis-a-vis the possibility of the exposure of the students to the contagious disease. As emphasized by the UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, Stefania Giannini: "*We need to come together not only to address the immediate educational consequences of this unprecedented crisis but to build up the longer-term resilience of education systems.*" The tsunami of innovations in the field seemed to depend largely on school's ability to swiftly harness available technology, provide adequate infrastructure, and mobilize stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programs. Mailizar, et al. (2020) stressed that the use of electronic learning (e-learning) has been considered the best possible approach to continue the teaching and learning process during the pandemic. In addition, Mukhtar (2020) identified the advantages of remote learning such as: comfort, accessibility, while the limitations inefficiency and difficulty in maintaining academic integrity were raised as a great challenge. Aside from the challenges pertaining to the new anatomy of learners' continuing education, Franchi (2020) also raised issues relating to students' future for having new modalities.

During the hit of COVID-19, some sectors in the Philippines had been closed, affecting the school system. The community's adaptation to face the pandemic had started; schools have resorted to a virtual encounter- the synchronous and asynchronous type of learning with students. On the other hand, it is not simply a transition to online modality, but a system that provides and uses technology efficiently. Most importantly, the school should be able to provide a positive educational environment as well as equal opportunities to all students.

DepEd (2020) developed and released the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) that will serve as the guidebook of the schools to ensure the safety of all stakeholders of the school, upon starting the school year 2020-2021. BE-LCP streamlined the present curriculum and identified the *Most Essential Learning Competencies* (MELCS) that will be the

focus of the coming school year. This provides opportunities for the students to be more adept in 21st-century skills, understand higher concepts, and contextualize lessons into real-life situations. Herein, teachers of the basic education align the topics to be discussed in MELCS adhering its assigned schedule and providing an overview of what topics to teach.

Correlated to this, DepEd (2020) emphasized that online learning as a new modality, it entails the use of technology and its challenges, such as (a) access to the Internet, (b) teachers training, (c) parents' supervision, (d) hands on sessions, and (e) systems preparation. While pedagogies are readily available, the stakeholders responded to a call for online learning. Hence, teachers must rethink and re-tool themselves on what is to come, making sure that online classes are done holistically, creatively, and with personal touch (Gonzales, 2020).

This research inquiry grew out from the context being faced by the Philippine education in the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, who are the frontliners of teaching and learning were directed to recalibrate their instructional duties to adapt to the changes brought about by the pandemic. Teachers in today's reality are facing uncertainties on how education will push through in the perceived "New normal." Thus, this study examined the voices of the public-school Science teachers about their instructional dilemmas in adapting to the requirements of the flexible mode of delivering instructions to continue the teaching and learning process.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explored the experiences of Filipino public-school Science teachers in preparing for "The New Normal" teaching. In accordance, it sought to fulfill the following specific objectives: 1) Examine the perceptions of the participants about their instructional preparation for the new normal mode of schooling; 2) Describe the ongoing adjustments of the public-school science teachers in the different aspects of teaching and learning; and

3) Identify the challenges that the public-school science teachers are currently facing the regards instructional dilemmas.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed Phenomenology as this elaborative inquiry helped the researcher to discover how the participants made meaning out of their experiences.

The selection of participants concentrated on public school Science teachers in the Philippines. Each of the participants have been on the field for 5-20 years, age 24 to 40, with specializations concentrated only on four major Sciences and teaching Junior High School (JHS) level. A letter of invitation was sent to the participants bearing the objectives and nature of the inquiry. The details of the expectations from the participants, the date and time of the interview were also reflected in the communication. Considering the direct involvement of human participants in the study, potential ethical issues in the data collection stage were given consideration. The principles of ethical behavior outlined by the American Counseling Association (2014) were applied which include autonomy, fidelity, commitment, trust, nonmaleficence, and veracity to protect the rights of the participants. Furthermore, consent was asked that the said group online discussion will be recorded. Participants were also advised that they could withdraw their participation in the discussion if they find it inconvenient. In the transcription of results, codes were used instead of their names for the purpose of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Hence, the researchers' role was to have access to the thoughts and feelings of the teachers without the influence of subjectivity, biases, and personal assumptions.

The conduct of the interview was done in English, but participants could answer in English or Filipino. Responses were transcribed verbatim and translated into English prior to the coding process. Afterwards, rigorous analysis was conducted like identifying the emerging

trends which can be in phrases or words. Member checking was done to ensure that the codes are representations of the participants' lived experiences before the generation of themes (Factor, Matienzo & de Guzman, 2017). Results were presented as findings incorporating quotes from the teacher informants in the premise of their views and perspectives about the transition to "the New Normal" encompassing the curriculum, pedagogical, and learning assessment engagements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored the voices of the public school Science teachers regarding their instructional and pedagogical duties and preparation in adapting the demands and requirements of the flexible mode of delivering instructions in "the New Normal". Analysis of the findings of this inquiry identified seven emerging themes capped into HOPEFUL describing Filipino public-school Science teachers' experiences in time of pandemic.

1. Perceptions of the public-school Science teachers about their instructional preparation for the upcoming "New Normal" mode of schooling

Problematic yet Reflective

In the months of March to May, teachers re-equipped and retooled themselves for the upcoming school year in relation to what the new modality demands. During the old normal, they were sent to In-Service Training (INSET) to help update them on the new trends in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments. However, things took a drastic change, curriculum was readjusted, pedagogy took a turn, assessments became more crucial for the learner's education. In general, the participant's shared their perceived problems and concerns on each factor.

In the curriculum, the clarity of the contents of the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) released by the Department of Education brought some sort of

confusion among the participants. In terms of the pedagogical aspect, participants found the demands of the instructional preparation as exhausting. The integrity was highlighted as their perceived problem when it comes to the role of assessment in the new mode.

DepEd's MELCs aims to address the country's education. When the participants were asked on their view on the curriculum, they have different responses: *"Most Essentials? It is the same as last year's CG. The topics in MELCS, we still need to be subdivided into its specific objectives. The topics we taught last year will be the same topics that we will teach this year"* (T1). *"I think our curriculum is already outdated. Now, that it has less competencies; I think it should have been more on life skills to help prepare students in life"* (T4). In the eyes of the participants, the new MELCs are similar to the original curriculum guide, wherein it was compressed to focus on the competencies deemed important and could be taken up using the pandemic pedagogy. With this, it has become a problem for the teachers on how to deliver the different essential competencies prescribed every week. In response to their preparation, one participant shared that *"It will be a big adjustment for me. I would need to ensure that all competencies are met. How will I do that? When they are in the classrooms, they already have a hard time understanding, what more if they are only studying through modules or online?"* (T1).

Despite the strain on preparations they managed to be adaptive and flexible, expressed their concerns on pedagogy. In the conduct of classes, where online education and modular approach as chosen modalities, the participants cannot help but be doubtful of it as they asked *"I tried using platforms before but it didn't really work well with my students. Only a handful were using it. How much more now? But I am willing to try and exert more on this. Since they really need to study"* (T2).

A different classroom has been observed in the Philippine education; teachers are adapting to the call of reality. Xiong and Suen (2018) emphasized the importance of assessments in online learning; in their

inference, assessment should not be done for compliance or in their words an "after-the-fact add-on" on every online lesson. They have emphasized that it should be the center of the lesson evaluating the student's understanding. In addition, Gonzales (2020), stated that assessments and grading systems should be re-evaluated alongside the pedagogical approaches that schools will be using. Regardless of the preconceived knowledge of the teachers on assessment, they were anxious and problematic.

The participants also made mention that as teachers they must absolutely comply with the directives of DepEd. Even though they are already accustomed to how they perform and comply with the directives before, the situation that the pandemic dictates are highly incomparable. Leaving them doubtful. T5 inquired that *"DepEd has this instruction that we need to do everything for the students to pass. How are we going to do that now? We have lots to consider... will modules be enough to reach everyone? Will we revise the grading system? How are we going to go through this?"*

In general, students would have their homes as their classrooms, hindered by their environment, gadgets, their own understanding, more so their socioeconomic status. All these, more than anything, contributes to the problems and solution searching of the teachers saying that with them being physically far from the students it becomes *"less personal"* and could possibly turn them into *"robots"*. In addition to this, participants acknowledged that among their students, the need to address the basic needs of their learners before anything else is a major concern, supporting it as *"Honestly, this is least of our problem. They will really not learn, because they are hungry"* (T4). Lastly, teachers are having a hard time looking into the possibilities of the current set up stating that, *"I really don't understand what it will look like. It's so hard for now. I am worried about the set up especially if the parents are working"* (T2).

Undisruptive Desire to Teach

In the absence of training in the early months after the lockdown, teachers participated in webinars that will help them become prepared for the task. In addition, when asked what preparations they are doing, the participants hanged on to their passion of teaching and shared few of their run ups especially in terms of aligning their instructional preparations with the MELCs such as creating a matrix and unpacking the essential competencies expected in their subjects. However, they still acknowledged with skepticism how these competencies will materialize in the actual teaching and learning episode. T3 did the comparison as, *“If we are going to use MELCS in F2F it will be finished, and it will be possible. Online it might be different. We will lack time. Plus, resources for activities might not be available at home.”* Aside from this, as everyone transits to online and distance learning the participant foresees a long and tedious process not only for them who are middle-aged teachers but also for those who are teaching for more than 30 years, this as T5 mentioned, *“Preparation will be longer and harder. Since we have lots to consider we need to double our effort. LMS, schedule and a lot more. We have to adjust to this online setting as teachers, I’ll be having a hard time, I can’t imagine those older than I am.”*

As they dive into a maximum utilization of technology to aid instruction, the participants have exerted their effort in learning how to craft ebooks, recorded videos, and even trying to use different platforms. Alongside these encounters is the reality that technical aspects such as internet connectivity can hinder the optimum learning of the students. They try to solve this dilemma by looking into the probability of solving how to continue education for those who have low to no Internet connectivity. They have specified that they are to utilize different platforms and modes just to provide education for these children.

2. Ongoing adjustments of public-school Science teachers in different aspects of teaching and learning

Hardworking and Dedicated

The participants acknowledged that their duties as teachers are shaped by the challenges that they face in the field. However, these arising problems in the profession never hindered the teachers in providing the learning that the children deserve. One teacher shared that *“Even though I say I can’t, I am still trying. I am not just a teacher. I am an adviser and a parent too. I have many roles to play”* (T1). Another teacher unveiled that it has been part of her routine to assure how learners enjoy her teaching saying that *“In my class, I do more activities. I want to see them smile and enjoy. Even if my subject isn’t my major; I make sure I study it and do my best for the kids”* (T4). Participants have been living a normal routine in their profession with dedication and hard work even before the pandemic.

Though the preparation for teaching in the “New Normal” is assumed by the participants to be very tedious and challenging, T1 explicitly signified and acknowledged that *“...preparations will have to be adjusted. Since there is this MELCS that we need to comply with. It would take time for me to prepare what is needed for me.”* T4 further mentioned how she will connect to the learners in a new learning space, when asked how the new set up will be in the new normal. T1 pointed out that her preparation needs to be consistent with her mission in the profession and was just agitated by the surprising impact of the pandemic. *“Our role is very crucial. The future of children depends on us. Whether inside the classroom or not, we need to assure the learning of students.”*

Frightened but Ready

The parents’ act of expressing their dismay through social media platforms contributed much to the teachers’ dilemmas and worries. They too became anxious of the pressure and expectations on their shoulders. This is not just true in the Philippines but in other countries as well.

Their concern with the public schools and their personal materials; communication with

their superiors; availability of Internet connection of both the teachers and students. Asking the teachers to reimagine their first day of school in the upcoming school year, *"I think on August 24, I will feel dumbfounded because I don't have my students in front of me. Or probably, I am riding a motorcycle delivering the modules to my students"* (T1). T3 shared the same view pointing to the limited interaction with the students. It underscored the exhaustion of the teachers during the preparation.

Lifelong Learner

Teachers' attitudes towards learning are incomparable. They are regarded as people who have high importance to lifelong learning, in the end acquiring required competencies (Tenekeci & Uzunboylu, 2020). Now, that they are facing a pedagogy new to the system they continue their efforts in learning it. *"Preparing for this setup will be very challenging. I think I would have to prepare ten times more. I would exert more effort in this new normal"* (T1). Participants acknowledged that it is in these trying times that they need to be open minded to welcome professional development and training that they can use to fully prepare themselves in the upcoming school year. Testifying how hard they prepare every beginning of the academic year, T1 voiced out, *"There are those who say that teachers do not do anything during summer and that we should not even get paid. We do a lot every summer, especially now. We still need to think of ways to conduct education in this situation. We are the original WFH."* As the first day of the school year approaches, their teachers extend their patience, creativeness, and effort. The teachers vowed that: *"I will make sure I find a way just to have them learn. If I need to study, then I will"* (T3).

3. Challenges that the public school Science teachers are currently facing with regards to instructional dilemmas.

Optimistic amidst Uncertainty

In the cease of function of schools, teachers have remained optimistic in the fate of education during the pandemic. Two of the participants shared: *"I think even though it is hard, just be positive. Even if there are many negative things, stay positive not just as a science teacher but generally as a teacher."* (T1). *"In all of these, there is no place for negativity. Even how unsure you are. The students will feel that. You should be positive. I should be positive"* (T4).

Since preparation is one of the key factors in keeping education at its optimum, the participants showed different perceptions to it. Henceforth, opening opportunities and exposing their challenges in their preparation for the upcoming school year. It can be underscored that the teachers who were happier began preparing more than those who expressed their anxiousness as they explained *"Determination will be the key factor to our achievement. If we do not have it, we will have a hard time coping up with the new mode"* (T5)

Even-handedness in Responsibilities

Students' homes were suddenly turned into learning spaces where they have limited interaction with their teachers. Parents are now given the challenge to become as their child's second teachers analogous to the responsibility of the teachers when they were at school. For this reason, parental guidance and teachers' personal involvement have a big impact on student's progress; though it remains to be seen as the participants perceived *"It is also part of my job to condition the parents and teach the parents in using the modules. They need to understand that the students should be very honest, in answering the exams. Values should be more important than grades"* (T3). Lansangan (2020), narrated on his online learning experience that a provision of open communication to parents is necessary to mitigate the challenges in supervising their children in distance learning.

The importance of parental engagement has been emphasized by the participants to create a very meaningful learning for the students. However, some of the participants have identified the problems they have encountered during the pre-pandemic days that could have an effect as well during the pandemic education. As they shared, *“Communication is challenging especially with the parents. My concern now is the low and high-risk students”* (T4). *“Most of the students’ parents really aren’t hands-on when it comes to their children. We need them now more than ever”* (T1). One of the important factors in studying that parents are supposed to be engaged in supervising the students is the assessment process. This crucial process involves the student’s honesty and integrity. That without the presence of the teachers, the assessment’s authenticity is jeopardized. In all of these, the teachers cannot be left alone in this endeavor.

To be at level with other countries, aside from re-aligning the curriculum, a re-evaluation of their workload should also be considered by the administration. T4 described her work in the setting in comparison to the private sector as *“It is very different teaching in public schools compared with private schools. In public schools you almost do all the work, from registration, teaching, even being the nurse. In private if you may experience similar tasks, but you are still more focused on teaching”* (T4). This was also affirmed by T3, *“Teacher’s workload should be considered. We do all the work from registration to teaching. We do this out of love. But now, I think we should focus more on what we are supposed to do. The situation requires us to be more creative and flexible than ever”*.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the present study raised the instructional dilemmas by the public-school Science teachers on how they played their role in the New Normal teaching and learning and at the same time their perceptions in reimagining their new roles as underpinned in the following conclusions:

1. The respondents maintain the sense of being hardworking and dedicated in the practice of their profession by making the most of what they have and what they can.
2. Optimism despite some uncertain conditions brought by pandemic is their key in embracing the challenges ahead of them.
3. The different problems that they encountered during their preparation in the New Normal teaching became their points for reflection especially in reassessing how they can be relevant.
4. The respondents acknowledged that the new modalities of teaching and learning are the shared responsibilities among the stakeholders of the school community.
5. The teachers’ readiness is disturbed with fright, but they still maintain their undisruptive desire to reach out to the learners.
6. The new challenges and opportunities being laid by the new normal mode of teaching tested teachers’ resilience and that they too, are lifelong learners.

While this inquiry documented the voices of the public-school Science teachers in terms of their instructional dilemmas in the New Normal, it is equally important to recognize that the experiences emerged in the course of the study are dependent from the context of the participants. Therefore, the insights gathered from this study cannot be generalized as true to all the teachers in the country. In addition, it is also good to point out that the researchers did not attempt to traverse in detail the specific practices by the respondents in relation to what was mandated by the learning continuity policy of the Department of Education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings of this research, it can be further enhanced and supplemented by:

1. Explore the teachers’ actual experiences during the new mode of teaching and account for factors that impede its

- implementations in terms of personal, pedagogical and professional inquiries;
2. Ascertain the impact of the New Normal teaching to the learning experiences of the students;
 3. Conduct a quantitative inquiry that explores the readiness of teachers, parents, and students in flexible learning modalities; and
 4. Compare the experiences of teachers from different learning areas with regards to their instructional dilemmas during the pandemic.

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