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Lived Experiences of Public Elementary School Teachers in Managing Classroom Challenges and Addressing Learning GAPS

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Abstract- This study explored the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in managing classroom challenges and addressing learning gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducted at Mapaga Elementary School in Prosperidad District, Agusan del Sur, during the 2023-2024 school year, the study focused on teachers who transitioned back to full face-to-face instruction after prolonged school closures. Using a qualitative descriptive design anchored in phenomenology, seven purposively selected teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method to ensure systematic interpretation of lived experiences. Findings revealed six major themes: struggles in teaching, changes in learners' behavior toward learning, widening learning gaps, teacher adaptability and resourcefulness, teaching as both challenging and rewarding, and the creation of supportive and engaging learning environments. The findings suggest that post-pandemic teaching extends beyond academic recovery, requiring emotional resilience, instructional flexibility, and sustained support systems. The study highlights the need for long-term, context-sensitive interventions that address both cognitive and psychosocial dimensions of learning recovery.

Keywords- Lived Experiences, Teachers, Learning Gaps, Classroom Challenges, Post-Pandemic Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Basic education in the Philippines has long faced persistent challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, and diverse learner needs. These conditions were further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools shifted to remote and modular learning modalities, disrupting instructional continuity and learner engagement.

As face-to-face classes resumed, teachers encountered a significantly transformed classroom environment. Learners returned with varying levels of academic readiness, noticeable gaps in foundational skills, and behavioral changes shaped by prolonged isolation and disrupted routines. These conditions required teachers to navigate a more complex teaching context while still meeting curriculum expectations.

Although existing studies have documented learning loss and instructional challenges during the pandemic, limited attention has been given to how teachers manage both academic recovery and learner reintegration in localized settings. In particular, there is a need to understand how teachers respond to the combined demands of addressing learning gaps while rebuilding supportive classroom environments.

This study, therefore, examines the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Prosperidad District as they manage classroom challenges and learning gaps in the post-pandemic setting.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

General Objective

To explore how public elementary school teachers manage post-pandemic classroom challenges and learning gaps while fostering engaging and supportive learning environments.

Specific Objectives

1. Describe teachers' lived experiences in managing classroom challenges and learning gaps intensified by COVID-19.
2. Examine the strategies used to create engaging and supportive classroom environments despite these challenges.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Fiedler's Contingency Theory, which posits that there is no single best approach to leadership or management; instead, effectiveness depends on situational factors. In the context of post-pandemic classrooms, this suggests that teachers must continuously adapt their instructional strategies based on learners' evolving needs.

Phenomenology serves as the methodological foundation of the study, emphasizing the importance of capturing individuals' lived experiences.



This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how teachers perceive, interpret, and respond to the complex realities of post-pandemic teaching.

Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of adaptability, context, and human experience in shaping effective teaching practices.

IV. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely recognized as a major disruption to global education systems, resulting in significant learning loss, reduced engagement, and increased educational inequality. Studies have reported a rise in struggling and non-readers, particularly in foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Teachers have also faced increased demands, balancing academic instruction with psychosocial support while navigating limited resources and shifting instructional modalities. Professional development and training programs have been identified as key factors in enhancing teacher adaptability during this period.

However, much of the existing literature focuses on general trends and outcomes. There remains limited research that captures the lived experiences of teachers, particularly in localized settings, as they navigate both instructional recovery and emotional reintegration of learners.

This gap underscores the importance of phenomenological inquiry in understanding the nuanced realities of post-pandemic teaching.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a phenomenological approach. Seven public elementary school teachers were purposively selected based on their teaching experience before, during, and after the pandemic.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences. The use of open-ended questions enabled the exploration of both instructional and emotional dimensions of teaching.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step method, ensuring systematic extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, and development of themes. This approach strengthened the credibility and depth of the findings.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Struggles in Teaching

Teaching in the post-pandemic classroom is marked by a significant mismatch between curriculum expectations and learners' actual readiness. Teachers reported the need to reteach foundational competencies, particularly in reading and numeracy, before progressing to grade-level content.

This finding supports existing studies that emphasize the long-term instructional disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in foundational learning areas (Reyes et al., 2023). However, beyond confirming prior research, the present study reveals a deeper tension between curriculum demands and learner readiness. Teachers are placed in a position where they must balance content coverage with meaningful comprehension, often resulting in instructional compromise.

More importantly, these struggles are not purely academic. They reflect the emotional burden experienced by teachers who must compensate for systemic learning loss. This aligns with literature suggesting that post-pandemic teaching requires not only pedagogical adjustment but also emotional resilience (Torres, 2021).

6.2 Behavior Toward Learning

Learners exhibited varied emotional and behavioral responses upon returning to school. While some demonstrated enthusiasm and eagerness, others showed hesitation, anxiety, and reduced participation.

This pattern reflects the socio-emotional impact of prolonged isolation and disrupted routines during the pandemic. Previous studies have noted that learners returning to face-to-face instruction often experience difficulty readjusting to structured learning environments (Origenes & Alejandro, 2023).

Interestingly, the findings suggest that social readiness does not necessarily translate into academic readiness. While learners may be eager to reconnect with peers, their ability to engage in structured academic tasks remains inconsistent. This highlights the need for instructional approaches that integrate both academic recovery and emotional support.

Thus, learning recovery should not be viewed solely as a cognitive process but as a holistic one that includes emotional and behavioral reintegration.



6.3 Learning Gaps

Learning gaps emerged as the most persistent and critical issue identified in the study. Teachers reported significant regression in foundational skills, particularly in reading comprehension and numeracy, with some learners categorized as non-readers despite being in higher grade levels.

This finding reinforces global and local research highlighting the severity of pandemic-induced learning loss (Amar et al., 2023). However, the present study adds nuance by linking these gaps to the nature of modular learning, where parental assistance may have limited the development of independent learning skills.

What becomes evident is that learning gaps are not isolated deficiencies but cumulative effects of disrupted instruction, inconsistent learning environments, and reduced learner autonomy. This suggests that remediation efforts must go beyond content review and address underlying learning processes.

Without sustained intervention, these gaps risk becoming long-term educational disparities, particularly among already vulnerable learners.

6.4 Teacher Adaptability and Resourcefulness

Teachers demonstrated strong adaptability by employing differentiated instruction, modifying learning materials, and incorporating interactive strategies to address diverse learner needs.

This aligns with studies emphasizing the importance of teacher flexibility in crisis-affected educational settings (Creswell, 2013). However, the findings further suggest that adaptability is not merely a skill but a necessary response to constantly shifting classroom conditions.

Teachers, therefore, assume a more dynamic role - transitioning from knowledge transmitters to responsive facilitators who continuously adjust instruction based on learner feedback and performance.

6.5 Teaching as Challenging Yet Rewarding

Despite the increased demands, teachers described their experiences as both challenging and rewarding. While they reported stress and pressure, they also expressed fulfillment in witnessing learners' progress.

This duality reflects the intrinsic motivation that sustains teachers despite systemic challenges. It supports the idea that professional satisfaction in teaching is often derived from student growth rather than external conditions.

6.6 Supportive and Engaging Learning Environments

Teachers emphasized the importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and engaging classroom environments through empathy, positive reinforcement, and flexible teaching strategies.

This aligns with trauma-informed approaches to education, which highlight the role of safe learning spaces in promoting student recovery and engagement (Origenes & Alejandro, 2023).

More importantly, the findings suggest that supportive environments are not optional but essential in post-pandemic classrooms. They serve as the foundation for rebuilding learners' confidence, participation, and academic motivation.

VII. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study revealed that post-pandemic teaching involves navigating multiple challenges, including learning gaps, behavioral changes, and increased instructional demands. However, teachers demonstrated resilience through adaptability, creativity, and emotional commitment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The pandemic has reshaped classroom realities, requiring teachers to take on expanded roles that go beyond instruction. They serve not only as educators but also as facilitators of recovery, addressing both academic and emotional needs.

This study underscores the importance of supporting teachers through flexible policies, targeted interventions, and continuous professional development. Sustainable recovery in education depends not only on learners but also on empowering the teachers who guide them.

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