

STAYING AFLOAT IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: REALITIES FACED BY VIRUS-CONTRACTED TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

COVID 19 has been known to impact the education sector whereas its mediums were greatly affected. Given the underlying threats, teachers apparently contracted the virus upon fulfilling their responsibilities of being knowledge providers. They also serve as the front-line defense of education where they were most likely to be exposed to the virus. In this regard, this study was conducted to identify the lived experiences of teachers, highlighting the challenges they experienced after acquiring the virus. It also discusses the mechanisms employed by teachers to cope, their significant realizations pertaining to their experiences, and their suggestions on the interventions to be taken to counter the effects of the pandemic through an in-depth interview and focus group. Conversely, this study employed a qualitative – phenomenological design where a total of 17 participants were selected through purposive and criterion-based sampling. It was conducted within the area of Kidapawan City with the supervision from Kidapawan City District Office. Thematic analysis was then conducted where two themes emerged from the lived experiences of teachers. These are: depressing point of life and worrying about their condition. Four themes then arise on the coping mechanisms of teachers identified as: anchoring faith in God, taking vitamins and eating healthy foods, and linking with family members. Additionally, two themes emerged from the significant realizations of teachers namely: teachers' vulnerability to COVID 19 and prioritizing one's mental and physical health. Hence, another four themes emerged on the suggestions of teachers such as provisions of health kits, strict implementation of health protocols, allowance for teachers, and regular disinfection of school's premises.

KEYWORDS: *Teaching Profession, COVID-19, virus-contracted teachers, Kidapawan City*

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Education is regarded as the most fundamental element in preparing individuals and improving them as a whole to face challenges in their lives (Torani et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced how education leaders and teachers deliver the teaching process. This abrupt transition has left all individuals involved in children's learning, such as parents, teachers, and educational institutions, in complete disarray (World Health Organization, 2020).

Regardless of the pandemic, it is critical to attend to the educational needs of children and youth during times of crisis. As a result, educational leaders must take a proactive approach to both mitigating the virus and advancing education. Collaboration will be critical in order to accomplish this. In order to strike a balance in educational services, social support, teacher professional collaboration, and work with families, educational institutions must also be flexible when it comes to assigning work to teachers (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Based on the researcher's review of existing research and data on COVID-19, it focuses solely on the policy implications at school (Code et al., 2020), teachers' perceptions of teaching during pandemic (Rahayu&Wirza, 2020), and

their mental health (Baker et al., 2020). This implies a knowledge gap, specifically in the study of teachers infected with COVID-19. Because scholarly knowledge is lacking, this is considered a knowledge gap. Given that, the researcher decided to conduct this study in order to fill this gap and produce a study that could be useful to teachers as well as the Department of Education's planning and implementation, particularly the Schools Division of Kidapawan, in terms of its consideration of teachers' health and safety at this time.

Research Questions

- What are the lived experiences of teachers who acquired COVID-19;
- What are the mechanisms employed by teachers to cope with the outcomes of the illness;
- What are the significant realizations they acquired about performing their duties and providing services to their clients;
- What suggestions can they impart to their colleagues and to the Department of Education – Schools Division Office of Kidapawan in relation to health and safety precautions as well as safeguarding the welfare of its personnel against COVID-19; and
- What intervention plan can be proposed based on the findings of the study?

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The scope of this study covers the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, significant realizations, and suggestions of teachers in relation to the realities and situations that they faced with regards to COVID-19. For the scope of the lived experiences they have about COVID-19, the researcher focused only on the occurrences surrounding the time when they were infected by the virus such as the possible reasons for the infection, the experiences they had during that instance, and the practices they employed during their recuperation stage.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a qualitative – phenomenology research. Its purpose is to take into account some of the narratives about the personal lives of the participants (Aspers & Corte, 2021). Through this design, the researcher was able to extract meaning from what the participants have shared during the data collection phase, thus, interpreted its underlying reality (Sale & Thielke, 2018).

Informants of the Study

This study included 15-17 participants. 10 of those participants were assigned to take part in the Key Informant Interview (KII) wherein they were interviewed one-by-one. As for the remainder of the participants, they are subjected in the Focus Group (FG) in which they were interviewed as a group.

Locale of the Study

This study will be done within the area of Kidapawan City, North Cotabato. In terms of the specificity of the sites in which the participants came from, the totality of Kidapawan City is considered as long as the participants are employed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education – Schools Division Office of Kidapawan.

Data Gathering Procedure

In the data gathering procedure, the researcher obtained the approval of the Schools Division Superintendent. This approval allowed the researcher to conduct this study as it was an essential element so that the data gathering procedure would commence. Once she approved the researcher's request to conduct her study to the different schools, the researcher, then, sent a letter to the different school principals wherein the approved letter from the Superintendent was attached.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data which were gathered during the interview, the researcher employed the thematic analysis. This method of analysis is primary used in qualitative research since it granted the researchers the ability to follow a systematic and iterative process. With that being said, the researcher moved back and forth in the analysis in order to review her analytic outcomes and made sure that she is not biased in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter is comprised with the discussion of the results presented. Specifically, the discussions on the emerged themes from the conducted thematic analysis, the lived experiences, coping mechanisms employed, the significant realizations, and the suggestions of teachers upon acquiring COVID 19, in particular.

Lived Experiences of Teachers Who Acquired COVID 19

The threat of COVID 19 extended when teachers obtained the virus themselves such that they have encountered significant changes which affect certain aspects of their lives. From the thematic analysis, two themes were identified. Hence, these themes are thoroughly discussed below:

Depressing Point of Life.

The respondents highlighted the significant aspect of their lives where they experience their lowest as they dealt with COVID 19. Their encounters revolved from experiencing weakening flu-like symptoms that contributed to their anxiousness regarding their recovery as well as the symptoms which contributed to their depressing point, specifically as marked the beginning of their journey of uncertainty.

Worrying about the Condition.

Being affected with the COVID 19 virus connotes to different ideologies in perceiving recovery to the illness resulting for them to experience episodes of fear, excessive worry, and other stress-related emotions. This thought was put forward by Dong et al. (2022) stating that patients with COVID 19 experience at least moderate level of illness uncertainty where perceptions of unlikely recovery are usual.

Mechanisms Employed By The Teachers To Cope With The effects Of COVID 19

Upon the encounter of COVID-19, the respondents identified coping mechanisms in which they employed during the tough encounter with COVID 19. These mechanisms helped them in their through recovery wherein it became their weapon in battling with their acquired illness. In line with this, four themes emerged from the thematic analysis where it is discussed and explained below:

Anchoring Faith In God.

It became the primary approach of patients in battling the virus by utilizing prayers and contemplations in responding to their difficult moments. As such, Sahgal & Connaughton (2021) revealed that most individuals returned to God and/or their respective religions due encountering the pandemic which helped them in staying positive throughout the duration of their illness.

Taking Vitamins and Eating Healthy Foods.

The respondents, moreover, are already equipped with knowledge pertaining to mechanisms that counters the effects of the virus on the physiological aspect specifically in terms of having a healthy lifestyle in which taking vitamins, exercising, and heating healthy foods as well as following the protocols implemented are believed to have the greatest contribution to their recovery which is in line with the claims of Joseph (2020).

Linking With the Members of the Family

. The respondents considered familial support as one of the most impactful coping strategies because the support they received have provided them with great strength that helped them in their journey of recovery. In this case, support system is of great significance, thus, comes in many forms.

Having Positive Outlook in Life.

Positivity have become another source of strength of the respondents as it provided a sense of stability on their way of looking unto another aspect despite the lingered negativity of COVID 19 which is linked with relationships with family and God for which it become a determinant of the overall response of the respondents to the pandemic.

Significant Realizations Teachers Acquired About Performing Their Duties and Providing Services to Their Clients

After the employment of the coping mechanisms, significant realizations pertaining to what is proper and what is needed, as well as what is urgent in the time being. As for the respondents, it was important to emphasize teachers' vulnerability of contracting the COVID 19 as well as prioritizing one's mental and physical health. These are also the themes that have emerged based from the challenges and coping of the respondents.

Teachers' Vulnerability of Contracting COVID 19.

The teachers are among the most vulnerable to acquiring the virus due to the nature of their work as they are responsible in teaching as well as interacting with parents and students. Apparently, the respondents realized the importance of following health protocols whereas they are the one who acts upon and adjusts to the protocols implemented.

Prioritizing One's Mental and Physical Health.

With the reality of being vulnerable to COVID 19, the participants cannot help but to excessively worry on their condition knowing that they should go back to work immediately as the need to fulfill their responsibilities cannot be skipped. In line with this, the participants then realized that it is prioritizing both mental and physical health is important in this time, especially because they know that they can withstand more if they learn to set boundaries that settles within their limit.

Suggestions Imparted by Teachers in Relation to Health and Safety Precautions Against COVID 19

A total of four themes emerged from this research question, consisting of the climax of the experiences of the respondents. Upon their recovery and realizations, they have also imparted these suggestions as a way to help others as much as they

can. As a matter of fact, these suggestions benefit the greater good of the whole. It includes the provision of health kits, strict implementation of health protocols, allowance for teachers and regular disinfection of school's premises.

Provision of Health Kits.

The primary suggestion of the respondents is the need to acquire health kits that contain essentials that will help them in their battle against COVID 19. The availability of these will provide teachers with assistance as they are provided service with quality within reach. Then again, health kits serve as urgent response to emergency situations. The respondents, considering its importance, are quick to think about what is urgently needed in this time. This conforms to the statement of Ataguba and Ataguba (2020) emphasizing that health kits are one of essential things for school administrators as they cater the immediate need of everybody when emergencies take place.

Strict Implementation of Health Protocols.

This second theme is the most highlighted among all as it primarily sums up other themes as well. The health protocols, which can be divided and classified accordingly, have been circulating around since the beginning of the pandemic. In this regard, schools are an excellent way of promoting health and preventing public health issues. Due to their ability to reach the entire population in specific age groups and instill healthy patterns of behavior early in life, they are regarded as critical sites for the implementation of health promotion programs (Coles et al., 2020; Van den Broucke, 2020).

Allowance for Teachers.

The third theme emerged as reference from the first theme in which reflects the reality that teachers have needs on their own pertaining to responding to the virus, that being said, the respondents were also quick to realize that the allowances for teacher will allow the schools to provide them with necessities, especially those that in urgent need. According to the Department of Education (2020), they have recognized the importance of allocating allowances for teachers as it is utilized to render quality service despite the challenging crisis brought by the pandemic.

Regular Disinfection of School's Premises.

Sanitation is among the most promoted recommendation around the globe. In relation to this, the respondents stressed the importance of maintaining cleanliness and regular disinfection of the school's premises as individuals, may it be parents, students, visitors, and other staffs, enter nonstop. According to UNICEF (2020), case-specified COVID-19 response measures can support and prevent vulnerability in both students and teachers.

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