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## Research Article

### Stories of Prevailing: Novice Teachers' Journey in Far-Flung Schools in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore the experiences of novice teachers assigned in far-flung schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, anchoring on reflective practice guided by David Kolb's experiential learning theory. As a strategy to understand the experiences of novice teachers, the researcher employed mini-virtual ethnography by interviewing four novice elementary teachers teaching in schools located in mountainous areas through phone calls and messenger chat. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed, coded, and sorted to identify the different themes. The study revealed that teachers experienced challenging and fulfilling encounters on their journey. To cope with the challenges brought by the pandemic, the teachers find means to ensure that education continues amidst the crisis with the help of various stakeholders. Out of their experiences, teachers have gained a lot of realizations and aspirations for their students, parents, and self. They've seen that what they went through will help them become stronger, and there is still hope despite what is happening. By engaging in reflective practice, using Kolb's learning cycle, teachers could think and reflect on their experiences, learn from the experience, plan for a change, and improve their learning and instructional practices.

**Keywords:** Novice Teachers, Experiences, Reflection, Far-Flung Schools, COVID-19 Pandemic

## Background

The COVID 19 pandemic has brought significant disruptions in our lives. Pohkrel and Chhetri (2019) asserted that lockdown and social distancing measures have led to the closures of schools, training institutions, and higher education facilities in most countries.

This unprecedented closure of learning institutions is one of the most pressing tasks educators face, ensuring that students' learning is uninterrupted (Popa, 2020). At the front line, teachers are compelled to continue educating students despite the pandemic's impediments (Talidong & Toquero, 2020). The change in

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learning mode puts teachers in a strenuous situation, as they struggle to find ways to adapt to the present conditions.

For schools located in remote areas, teachers are challenged in delivering quality education because of the new situation. These teachers, usually novices with five years or less of experience (Kim & Roth, 2011), are confronted with various plights and demands when appointed to far-flung schools (Jensen, Hernández, Knoll, & Gonzalez, 2012). Much more than that, we are under a global crisis; their condition becomes more complex and troublesome.

The distinct experiences of teachers in last-mile schools are genuinely worthy of being heard and shared at this time. Anchoring on the theory of reflective practice utilizing David Kolb's (2015) learning cycle, this study examined the journey and reflections of novice teachers assigned in mountainous areas in one of the towns in the fifth district of Iloilo, Philippines, during the COVID 19 pandemic. Specifically, it aimed to document and analyze the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of novice teachers in far-flung schools in the time of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Sharing their stories can offer entrant teachers an insight into what awaits them along the journey of being a teacher. Aside from that, this served as an opportunity for the local government to see the conditions of far-flung schools and provide necessary assistance to address the needs of the learners, the teachers, and the community.

## Methods

This study is interested in knowing teachers' experiences; thus, the qualitative method was used to understand how things occur, particularly from the subject's perspective. As posited by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the goal of qualitative study is to understand or interpret a phenomenon in its natural settings through a variety of data sources and collection methods that lead to interpretation.

In order to understand the pedagogical journey of novice teachers in remote schools, a mini-virtual ethnography/focused ethnography was used, concentrating on a specific or narrow area of inquiry since time and monetary constraints are evident (Fusch, Fusch &

Ness, 2017). The researcher tried to capture the whole picture of the teachers' experiences (Frankel & Wallen, 2012) to make sense of what they've gone through during this pandemic.

Four novice elementary teachers teaching in mountainous areas in one of the towns in the fifth district of Iloilo served as the interlocutors of the study. These teachers have less than five years of experience, and they are not native to the community where the school is located. Both schools can be reached using a single motorcycle or through a *tura-tura*, a three-wheeled vehicle.

Considering that we are in the pandemic right now, the researcher interacted with the informants virtually. In-depth interviews were done through phone calls and messenger chat, ensuring that saturation of data was attained. The researcher sent the first broad questions in the interlocutors' messenger, and it was followed up by asking probing questions done through a phone call.

As a framework for analyzing the data gathered, I used the six steps to a thematic analysis by Braune and Clarke (2006). After the recorded interviews were transcribed and read and re-read, each line of the narrative texts was labeled using word/ words, capturing each line's salient feature using direct utterances. Codes were sorted out into different categories according to their connection to one another. A thematic map was then drawn to see the alluding relationship between codes, themes, and subthemes. The ongoing analysis was made to refine and define the themes and subthemes.

In the analysis, I made sure that I was able to find the "voices" of the interlocutors in a particular time, place, or setting (Connelly & Clandinin, 2008). To maintain its authenticity in presenting the study's findings, direct quotes spoken by the participants were presented in the study's findings.

Also, before the study commences, the researcher sought permission from the interlocutors. Clarifications and apprehensions of the participants were addressed thoroughly before they agreed to participate in the study. In general, I assured my interlocutors of the confidentiality of their responses and the anonymity of their identities.

## Results

### ***The Experiences of Novice Teachers in Far-Flung Schools***

Based on teachers' experiences, they expressed that their journey this pandemic is *mabudlay gid* (challenging) and *masadya man* (fulfilling). These paradoxical experiences of teachers pointed out the challenges they faced in this new "normal" in education; nevertheless, they still found purpose in what they were doing.

#### *Mabudlay gid*

Being at the front line, teachers are facing various challenges in implementing this new learning modality to carry out their professions. As one of the teachers expressed:

*"Sa akon bilang isa ka manunodlo mabudlay gid. Isa gid ka challenge ang pandemiya sa buluhaton kag responsibilidad sang isa ka manunodlo. Isa ka rason nga mahambal ko nga challenging kay madamo ang nagbag-o sa aton system sa DepEd."*

*[As a teacher, it's tough. The pandemic has been a challenge for teachers in performing their duties and responsibilities. One reason is that there are various changes in the educational system.]*

Primarily, teachers pointed out that the rugged road they needed to travel made it troublesome for them to reach the school. They would usually ride a single motorcycle or *turatura* carrying the modules they needed to distribute to the community. Things get worst when the weather is not fine. One group of teachers needed to cross three overflowing rivers to reach the school, while the other teachers must walk for 2-3 hours traversing a slippery and boggy road.

Since they are exposed to various people as they fulfill their duty, traveling to school, distributing modules to the parents, and doing home visitation, the teachers expressed fear that the COVID virus will infect them, or unknowingly, they will spread the virus to the community and their family.

The lack of phone signals and internet connection in the community also affected teachers' performance to monitor their students and

reach out to their parents. They still need to go to the town to download the learning material from the DepEd link for reproduction. However, there are times the needed modules for a particular week were uploaded late, this created delays in the distribution of modules.

Furthermore, the lack of preparedness of the parents to teach their children have been a primary concern of teachers. Teachers relayed that most of the parents in the community weren't able to finish their elementary education, and some did not even know how to read and write. As one of the teachers remarked:

*"The rest sang mga parents nada is struggling (reader), most of them wala katapos sang ila high school, ang iban elementary lang. Nagahambal na sila nga "Sir, kuhaon namon ang modules, pero ibalik man na namon sa inyo nga wala sabat kay indi kami kahibalo magtudlo sa amon mga bata"*

*[The rest of the parents there are struggling readers, and most of them weren't able to finish high school, some are just elementary graduates. They would tell me, "Sir, we will get the module, but we will return it with no answer because we don't know how to teach our children."]*

#### *Masadya man (Fulfilling)*

Given those challenges faced by teachers, they still found a reason to keep going on.

*"Amidst this pandemic, we're still true to our taglines, para sa bata, para sa bayan. It's fulfilling to hear thank you and witness grateful hearts from our pupils and parents."*

The teachers are grateful for the active participation and the support provided by the community. The kindness shown by the people makes them feel that their hardships are being compensated, giving them a sense of accomplishment. These are the reasons that motivated and inspired them to go to school every day.

Likewise, teachers feel satisfaction if their students can accomplish the task in the modules given to them. They feel happy when they see their students' performance improving through time and know that parents are taking time to teach their children even though they have other responsibilities to do.

### **How Novice Teachers Cope with the Challenges Brought by the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Given the various challenges faced by teachers during this pandemic, they have shown courage, resiliency, and dedication to continue their duty. Teachers anchored themselves on their faith to remain steadfast and not be defeated by the situation. Moreover, the consistent support of the people from the community lightens the burden they carry. As expressed by one of the teachers:

*"Gina try gid namon nga mahatag ang amon nga best sa pagpanghatag sang module, sa pag-monitor, para macope gid namon bala ang mga needs sang amon mga bata, needs sang mga parents, ...gina suit man namon ang amon self sa change."*

*[We try our best to do our duty, in giving the modules, in monitoring our learners so that we can address the needs of our learners, parents...and we adapt to the changes in the educational systems]*

Monitoring the progress of learners is an essential part of this new mode of learning. Aside from tracking the learners' progress through their answer sheets, the teachers conducted home visitation once a week. This helps the teachers know their learners and their well-being at home.

Although there are a lot of circumstances that hinder teachers from going to school, they did not lose the enthusiasm to go there and distribute the modules because they have seen the care and active support of the people to them. The teachers believed that without their help, they wouldn't be able to fulfill their work.

Lastly, faith has been a great source of strength for teachers in their challenging journey. Through prayers, this provided them with the courage to persist, relying that God is on their side, protecting them and making them stronger.

### **Insights of Novice Teachers on their Experiences**

Looking back at their own experiences provided opportunities for teachers to reflect and examine their own experiences. Out of their reflections, they expressed their realizations and aspirations, which they refer to as *madamo gid*

*ako natun-an* (I realized a lot) and *kabay pa* (I am hopeful).

#### *Madamo ako natun-an (I realized a lot)*

The first theme, *madamo gid ako natun-an* focuses on the lessons that teachers have acquired from their personal and professional experience. Through this, they were able to see the purpose and meaning of their journey.

The current situation made the teachers ascertain that they need to be resilient to overcome the challenges to fulfill their duty for the sake of their students. Teachers see the trials they face as an opportunity for them to grow personally and professionally. They are confident that there are more trying times that await them on their journey. As expressed by one of the teachers:

*"Ang first gid aspect is maging mabakod ako sa pag face sang mga challenges. Kung baga indi lang ni ang akon paga-atubangon so kailangan maging strong ako... kailangan ko atubangon ang akon nga mga responsibility kag para man matagaan ang mga bata sang quality education."*

*[The first thing that I must consider is that I need to be resilient in facing challenges in this profession. This will not just be the difficult situations I will encounter, so I need to be strong...I need to do my responsibility to deliver quality education to my learners.]*

Since everything is new in this time of the pandemic, the teachers emphasized the need to adapt to changes to survive and cope with the demands of this new mode of learning. The teacher must learn new skills, especially in manipulating "new" technology, because these are the primary tools in the new normal in education. It's not enough for teachers to settle on what is usual; otherwise, effective service can't be delivered.

Because of the pandemic, being destined in a remote school and one's well-being is at risk because of the pandemic, the teachers never lost hope that better days are coming. The love given by the people from the community, the support given by the parents, and the success of their learners are the fuels that ignite their hearts to continue serving. As discussed by one of the teachers:

*"Motivated pa gid man. Kung baga may kalyo pa. Despite our situation, may kasanag pa man sa unhan nga nagahulat...I'll still provide the education of my students this time of the pandemic, still being true to what I've sworn."*

*[I am still motivated. The passion inside me is still burning. Despite our situation, I am still hopeful that better days are coming... I'll still provide my students' education this time of the pandemic, still being true to what I've sworn.]*

#### *Kabay pa (I am hopeful)*

The theme *kabay pa* (I am hopeful) is teachers' pronouncements on their hopes and dreams for their students, their parents, and themselves. They are looking forward to the development and improvement of each other in the future.

*"Ginapaabot ko gid sa mga bata nga kabay pa makatapos sila sang ila pag-eskwela. Gi-nahambal ko gid na sa ila nga bakas lang kay sa ulihi malab-ot niyo gid ang inyo dream ...kag makabulig kamo sa inyo community."*

*[I am looking forward and hopeful that my students will be able to finish their education. I always told them to persevere because, in the end, they would be able to reach their dreams...to be able to help in their community.]*

In general, the teachers are hoping that their students will become successful in the future to help their parents and uplift the status of their community. For teachers, seeing their learners become successful is a great achievement for them too.

Similarly, the teachers are looking forward to parents always being there for their children to guide them on the right path, show love for their children, send them to school, and affirm their dreams. Given the cost, risk, and distance they need to take, the teachers hope that one day they will be assigned near their home and that their experience will be temporary. The four teachers are enrolled in graduate school, pursuing their Master's Degree because they see it as an opportunity to get promoted and be transferred to better schools. One of the teachers said:

*"Tani makapanaog nako sa ubos. Gina forsee ko man nga indi man ko magdugay sa bukid. Kay ga-eskewela man ako, siyempre as a teacher nagahandom man ako sang mataas."*

*[I hope that I will be assigned to the lowland. I also foresee that I will not stay long in the mountain. Because I am continuing my study (Master's Degree), I aimed for a better assignment and position as a teacher.]*

## Discussion

Being at the front line in carrying out this new learning modality, the teachers are very much aware of the reality of what's going on in the field. Novice teachers in far-flung schools are fighting their own unique battle to serve the community. Being inexperienced in the field and now presented with the new "normal" in education, their journey is a great source of prevailing stories.

Using Kolb's (2015) experiential learning model gave me a lens through which to see the experiences of novice teachers in far-flung schools in the time of the COVID 19 pandemic. The various stages in the learning cycle, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation were contextualized to fit the aims of this study. It highlighted the reflections of teachers that occur before, during, and after their experiences.

The first stage of the cycle, concrete experience, as explained by Brown (2017), includes consciously and physically experiencing a situation. This stage made me identify the direct experiences of teachers teaching in far-flung schools in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, which they described as *mabudlay gid* (challenging) and *masadya man* (fulfilling).

Consistent with the finding of the study of Quijada and Orale (2018), they asserted that teachers had varied experiences in their work being assigned in far-flung areas. These experiences can be described as paradoxical as it involves difficult and delightful experiences, pains and successes, and frustrations and fulfilments (Lapuz, 2015)

Even if they encounter inhibiting circumstances, teachers make sure that modules are delivered to their students for them to continue learning. The coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic may have brought new challenges to the teaching profession, but it never changed the profession's love (Punzalan, 2020).

The second stage in the cycle is that of reflective observation. This means taking a time-out from "doing" and stepping back from the task, and reviewing what has been done and experienced (Kolb, 2015).

This stage allows me to elaborate on the experiences mentioned by the teachers in far-flung schools to understand their situations. The teachers primarily identified that the distance of the school and the quality of the road going there is difficult to traverse. Novice teachers in remote areas need to endure the uncomfortable and less safe modes of transportsations to reach their destination (Quijada & Orale 2018).

On the other hand, teachers can still find happiness out of the adversities they've gone through. It was the kindness and the goodness of the people that lightened the burden they carried. Javilla & Fabilla (2019), in their study, pronounced that as time goes by, teachers get attached to the community because of the hospitality and the love returned by people towards their service.

The third stage, abstract conceptualization, relates to my second question on the coping mechanisms of novice teachers in far-flung schools. The guiding question for this stage is, what could I have done better or differently? How can I improve? (Brown, 2017).

To continue serving the community, teachers find the means to thrive in these trying times. The embodied values/personal qualities of teachers in far-flung schools made them devoted to the profession. The passion, dedication, and commitment made them persist in rendering their service. These values enable teachers to perform their tasks selflessly and wholeheartedly (Campos, Daclan & Gempes, 2013).

Active experimentation, the fourth stage, is about taking one's reflections and thoughts about improvements and the theories back into practice and trying out new strategies (Brown 2017). I see this stage as coherent to the third aim of my study. The insights expressed by the teachers, referring to their realizations and aspirations, are the focus of this part.

Bilbao (2012) considered that the varied experiences enable the teachers to realize the purpose of their job and life that would help

them spend passionately on teaching. The teachers are aware that these challenges are a means for them to be strong and better.

The teachers envisioned the success of their students and parents in the future. They hope that they were able to make a difference and touch the lives of their students and that somebody from the community will graduate as a professional teacher who will stay with them forever (Luz, 2015).

Quijada and Orale (2018) contended that no matter how teachers wish to be assigned permanently in far-flung schools, teachers are still looking forward to better assignments closer to their homes and family. This has been looked forward by teachers to be assigned in lowland near to their loved ones.

Allowing the teachers to recollect their stories enables them to look clearly into their experience, determine the challenges that arise, think of strategies to overcome them next time, look into other possibilities, and accumulate lessons that will make them stronger and better prepared.

Drago-Severson (2009) asserted that reflective practice is essential in supporting personal and professional learning and growth. He affirmed that teachers could think and reflect on an experience or event through reflective practice, learn from the experience, plan or change direction accordingly, and ultimately advance in their learning and improve instructional practices).

This is further supported by Dobos (2014), emphasizing that reflective techniques help develop self-awareness, professional confidence, emotional intelligence, and the ability to see professional problems in a broader context.

Informed by these, Kolb's experiential learning cycle can be immensely helpful in designing programs/ workshops that are intended for teachers' personal and professional development. Doing this will capacitate teachers in the field and empower them as they navigate this challenging and noble profession.

## Conclusion

Looking at the experiences of novice elementary teachers in far-flung schools in the time of the COVID 19 pandemics, it can be described as paradoxical, a combination of

challenging and fulfilling encounters. What made their experiences challenging are the distance and rugged road they need to travel, the state of the community, the situation of the learners, and the unpreparedness of parents to guide their children. On the other hand, they still find satisfaction in what they are doing because of the kindness shown by the people and the fulfillment they feel accomplish their mission. To cope with the challenges brought by the pandemic, teachers conduct home visitation to monitor their learners, seek support from the community, and rely on their faith in the Almighty.

From their experiences, teachers were able to gain insights, expressing their realizations and aspirations as they accomplished the mission of their profession. They realized that what they go through will help them become stronger, that there are many things to be grateful for, and there is still hope despite what is happening. Furthermore, the teachers hope that their students will become successful and serve their community in the future, and they will be assigned to better schools.

By recollecting the experiences of novice elementary teachers in far-flung schools during the time of the COVID 19 pandemic, it enables the teachers to think and reflect on their experience, learn from their experience, plan or change direction accordingly ultimately advance their learning and improve their practices.

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