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Research Article

The Great Leap: Transitional Experience of Public School Teachers to the New Normal System of Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe how teachers gave meaning to their transition experience to the new normal landscape of education amid the COVID 19 crisis. Using Transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research by Moustakas (1994), the researcher sought to explore the life world of seven (7) public school teachers who participated in individual interviews and focus group discussions and provided formal responses for the study. Interview data were collected and analyzed to offer textural-structural descriptions and the essence of the transition experience. The result revealed thirty-eight (38) significant statements forming six (6) essential themes: 1.) feeling of anxiety and stress, 2.) commitment to work, 3.) high volume workload, 4.) communication constraints, 5.) strong support system, and 6.) embracing new technologies which emerged among participants' testimonies. These themes were further elaborated through textural and structural descriptions capturing the essence of the experience. In turn, emerging themes and underlying universal structures were used in developing a systematic framework named LEAP Transition Model to facilitate an understanding of teachers in transition and to provide them with the help they needed to cope better with the changes brought by an education crisis. The implications were discussed and further recommendations were made along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *new normal education, public school teachers, transcendental phenomenology, transition experience, transition of teachers, transition model*

Background

Over a year, education systems have been unexpectedly and drastically changed by the

COVID-19 crisis. Majority of countries and territories abruptly shifted to online learning platforms to mitigate the impact of school closures,

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address learning losses and adapt education systems particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities (UNESCO, 2020). As the pandemic reshapes how schools operate all over the world, teachers take on multiple roles affecting all facets of life.

From the onset of the pandemic, teachers are immediately tasked with the implementation of distance learning modalities, often without sufficient guidance, training, or resources. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported a number of challenges being faced by teachers around the world in time of COVID-19. Aside from the need of reform to better train teachers in new methods of education delivery, teachers' physical health is also put at risk because adding to the fear of being exposed to the virus was a fear of losing salaries and benefits, all while coping with increased workloads and family responsibilities. Many more teachers will need psycho-social support themselves if they are to meet the needs of their students. These problems, if not addressed, can lead to burnout, resulting in high rates of absenteeism, and can even lead some teachers to leave their jobs, undermining efforts to build school resilience.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) supports the learning continuity of learners amid the COVID-19 pandemic through the issuance of DepEd Order (DO) No. 12, s. 2020 or known as "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 in the Light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency". Given this, everyone in DepEd including the teachers, is entrusted with a mission to ensure that learning continuity will happen in whatever contexts the learners are in. The choice of the learning delivery modality as well as ensuring health and safety of all shall be the highest priority in implementing the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). This is for the fact that more than ever the pandemic has shown the significance of multiliteracies such as information, scientific, health, financial, and civic literacies for people to thrive in crisis (Bureau of Human Resource and Organizational Development– School Effectiveness Division (BHRD-SED)).

One of the challenges that comes with transitioning to new normal education is how teachers handle new situations no one has ever been in. Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transitional Theory opined that a transition exists only if it is defined as such by the individual who is experiencing it. Similarly, people moving into a situation need to familiarize themselves with the rules, norms, and expectations of the new system. Once in a new situation, individuals must learn to balance their activities with other areas of their lives as they "move through" the transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

The literature demonstrated the impact of the COVID-19 crisis to the education systems in the Philippines and across the world. Many educational institutions shifted their systems abruptly from classroom-based instruction to distance learning which come with several challenges and difficulties. Few studies about the effectivity of online, distance, and blended learning and the implications of technology integration in instructional delivery were conducted mostly prior to the inception of the world-wide pandemic. However, very meager research has been conducted regarding how teachers cope with the new situations in time of education crisis. More than ever, an examination of the transition experience of teachers as they navigate the new work environment is significant in gaining deeper insights into the current overall educational situation. By understanding the teachers' perspectives and contexts, education systems may come up with more appropriate intervention programs to help them cope with the changes.

In view of the foregoing situations in the education system and from the aspects of understanding the transitional experience of teachers in time of education crisis, this Transcendental phenomenological study attempted to describe the shared experiences and perceptions of public school teachers in shifting to the new normal system of education. The LEAP Transition Model, which was highly based on the themes that emerged from this study, is developed for school adaptation to direct teachers to the help they needed to cope with the transition. [1].

Methods

The study utilized transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. This research design is the most appropriate for this study because it is useful for describing the phenomenon using the participants' experiences, perceptions, and voices. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Likewise, Moustakas' (1994) modified data analysis procedures of Transcendental-phenomenological reduction were the best suited methodology for the study to achieve the textural-structural synthesis and essence of the experience. Transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as people see them and as they appear to them in their consciousness. It requires to look at things openly, undisturbed by the habits of the natural world. [2].

Source of Evidence

In this study, seven (7) elementary and secondary public school teachers were recruited through combined purposeful and variation approaches. They were chosen regardless of their age, religion, language, socioeconomic background, and educational attainment provided that each participant has experienced the phenomenon of shifting from normal to the new normal system of education. Credibility and trustworthiness within the study was increased through multiple data collection sources to describe the phenomenon of interest such as formal responses, observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. Using Creswell's (2013) validation strategies, the study employed triangulation, rich-thick descriptions, member checking, and peer review. [3].

Data Analysis

Moustakas' (1994) data analysis technique of phenomenological reduction was primarily

utilized in this study. After transcribing and analyzing the data from formal responses, interviews and focus group discussions, Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction model was thoroughly followed: a. the inquirer described his own experiences with the phenomenon (epoche), b. identified significant statements in the database from participants (horizontalization), c. clustered these statements into meaning units and themes, d. the researcher synthesized the themes into a description of the experiences of the individuals (textual and structural descriptions), and then e. constructed a composite description of the meanings and the essence of the experience. [4].

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this Transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of participants under the new system of education amid the COVID 19 pandemic. According to Moustakas (1994), "phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved." (p. 58); the phenomenologist's focus is on what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. Capturing the essence of how public school teachers perceived their transition to the new normal system of education was the phenomena under study.

The first step in phenomenological reduction process presented by Moustakas (1994) is horizontalization. According to Moustakas, horizontalization is the "recognition that every statement has equal value" (p. 125). He explains that "a new horizon arises each time that one recedes" (p. 95). These significant statements were simply gleaned from the transcripts and provided in a table so that a reader can identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The result, as represented by selected significant statements, was presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected Significant Statements

<i>It had a huge impact because I was really used to face-to-face (instruction), or in other words, I already have my own strategies in the face-to-face class. Now that we moved to new normal, it was really hard because of communication issues. -Sheryl</i>
<i>I saw a post from DepEd Ed. Tech. Unit, so the first thing that helped were the webinars even before the opening of classes. -Maxine</i>
<i>However, what made it harder for me was the bulk of work handed down to us by DepEd. Worse, the work is repetitive sometimes. It consumed our time and effort. There's no consideration when it comes to deadlines because even on weekend or at night, there will be reports needed to be done and submitted. -Maxine</i>
<i>Despite negative sides, I had a lot of time for my children. I could monitor them at home unlike when I was at school. I am very hands-on in their studies. -Maria</i>
<i>Honestly, one of the thoughts that stood out for me until now is that I am learning to like this system. Honestly, I preferred this more in a way that I have the control of my time, I can multi-task, I can teach while doing other things while staying with my loved ones. I like this more. That's what I was thinking compared to our normal way of teaching. -Teresa</i>
<i>One thing that made it hard was the constant connection with students and parents. I always wanted to guide them even to the point of consuming my personal space and time. -Helen</i>
<i>The hardest part for me was I was not that techy, I needed to study the different online applications that I can use in teaching. I attended webinars to help me teach in the new normal. -Anne</i>
<i>I had anxiety and stress. Well, before I was used to do things my way but now the time management is so difficult. Sometimes, I was having the feeling of fear of getting infected by COVID 19. I'm asking what if this will happen to me or my family. What's going to happen to us? -Albert</i>
+30 other significant statements

The result showed thirty-eight (38) significant statements shared by teacher participants. These statements were a subjective extrapolation from the interview transcripts. There was no attempt to categorize them or to arrange them in a certain order. The researcher only presented how co-researchers perceived their transition experience to the new normal setting. This process of *horizontalization* provided initial ideas as regards the views of the participants about the interest of the study.

As every significant statement was initially treated with equal value, this next phase deleted those statements irrelevant to the topic

and others that were repeated or overlapping. The researcher carefully examined the identified significant statements, then clustered the statements into themes or meaning units. These themes could be unique to the individual participant but were often used as a framework within which to understand the experiences of all participants. By pouring through the participants' words during the interviews, while transcribing, through preparing the horizons and invariant constituents, and by reviewing these data, the themes were thoroughly identified. The result was presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and Evidence

Themes/ Meaning Units	Evidence
1. Feeling of anxiety and stress	<i>I had anxiety and stress. Well, before I was used to do things my way but now the time management is so difficult. Sometimes, I was having the feeling of fear of getting infected by COVID 19. I'm asking what if this will happen to me or my family. What's going to happen to us?</i>

	<i>The first thing I asked that time was until when this pandemic is going to be? When will we go back to normal? Sometimes, overthinking is really tiring. I had sleepless nights, thinking.</i> <i>It seemed... the hardest part... before I was used to go out every day, teaching, but nowadays, I was isolated. I'm living alone, and I could not go outside because I'm working from home. It was so hard.</i>
2. Commitment to work	<i>Even though I am the teacher, I still need to learn new things and to adapt to the situation. I need to study everything, so I can deliver my lessons to my students.</i> <i>It was sad to be honest because I miss the feeling of having my students around, all of them. I treat them as my own kids, and they make me happy. I was like their second mother, and they are my children. I miss them a lot.</i> <i>I need to be prepared. I keep reminding myself that what I would be showing or discussing is not only intended for my students but also for the parents.</i>
3. High volume workload	<i>Stressful sometimes because of the volume of paperwork and deadlines.</i> <i>So, the hardest part for me was the bulk of paperwork. I would rather work at school because at least I know how to do my reports with help of my colleagues. I really consumed most of my time to documents than teaching per se.</i> <i>However, what made it harder for me was the bulk of work handed down to us by DepEd. Worse, the work is repetitive sometimes. It consumed our time and effort. There's no consideration when it comes to deadlines because even on week-end or at night, there will be reports needed to be done and submitted.</i>
4. Communication constraints	<i>One thing that made it hard was the constant connection with students and parents. I always wanted to guide them even to the point of consuming my personal space and time.</i> <i>My time has been affected. When a student asked a question, I had to stop what I was doing and to answer the concern. I even had a late-night conversation with parents.</i> <i>It was hard, hard that everything was limited, and even I tried, like asking my students to download the applications so we could meet virtually, it still will not work because they could not, they did not have the access. In other words, there are so many constraints to do that.</i>
5. Strong support system	<i>I'm doing all that I can for my family. They are my inspiration. They are the very reason why do I keep doing what I'm doing. In return, I can feel their love and concern for me especially my husband. He is so understanding.</i>

	<i>I think that one of things that made it easier was we were always guided by our principal. And all our concerns and questions were properly addressed by her. So that's a big help. As well as the assistance I get from my colleagues.</i>
	<i>My family understands my line of work and even sometimes it's so unfair I think they understand why sometimes I need to prioritize my work over them at home. That's rewarding!</i>
6. Embracing new technologies	<i>I learned to embrace the new technology as a new way for teaching and learning. I tried to immerse myself with the resources that can help me teach in the new normal. I attended webinars.</i>
	<i>I saw a post from DepEd Ed. Tech. Unit, so the first thing that helped were the webinars even before the opening of classes.</i>
	<i>The hardest part for me was I was not that techy, I needed to study the different online applications that I can use in teaching. I attended webinars to</i>

The result revealed six (6) themes that emerged from the analysis. These themes underlaid the transition experience of teachers to the new normal environment such as: 1.) feeling of anxiety and stress, 2.) commitment to work, 3.) high volume workload, 4.) communication constraints, 5.) strong support system, and 6.) embracing new technologies.

From the initial data analysis that generated the themes, the researcher provided the composite textural description and structural

description of the phenomenon. In forming composite textural and structural descriptions, the significant statements and themes of every co-researcher were studied in depicting the group as a whole to form a good understanding of the lifeworld experienced by the participants. The themes were synthesized into a description of the texture or the “what” of the lived experience. The following narrative, presented in Table 3, was the textural description of each participant represented as a whole.

Table 3. Composite Textural Description

Teachers' voyage to the new normal education system is depicted as sudden, seemingly hopeless, essentially sentimental, long and somewhat tedious, and preparatory. Blending physical and digital spheres for ubiquitous teaching and learning process requires a major shift in both personal and professional facets described as: “big adjustment,” “huge impact,” “major change,” and “hardest part.” The feeling of “fear,” “stress,” “anxiety,” and “isolation” is quite inevitable. The toilsome “bulk of work” devours hours of “time” and depletes “personal space.” Despite formidable circumstances, with abundant amount of love, care, and sense of responsibility, teachers always look for the silver lining dedicating themselves to serve others unconditionally expressed as “doing this for my students,” “they are my utmost concern,” “will I be effective to them,” and “miss them so much.” Long-distance communication is merely difficult termed as “constant,” “time-consuming,” and full of “constraints.” And in the end, teachers fall back on digital advancement as an armor in a silent but strenuous battle they face every day under a new realm with myriad of challenges and opportunities— “embracing technologies,” “attending webinars,” “making the most of it,” etc.

The next step examined the textural descriptions from different perspectives or imaginative variation and eventually arrived at a

description of the structure or the “how”. This entails the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the

phenomenon. The following narrative shown in Table 4 was the composite structural description of the transition experience of teachers in shifting to the new normal system.

Table 4. Composite Structural Description

Teaching in the new normal involves uncharted and complex time and space where personal and professional lifeworld intertwined affecting the overall balance of life. Under a state of being captive by the unprecedented COVID 19 situation, one may find himself completely lost in search of answers; “what if I get infected,” “what to do,” “where to start,” “when we will go back to normal,” and once the fear of the unknown crosses the threshold, the feeling of despair and hopelessness transpire over a period of time. The school as a setting is haunted by “deafening silence” worlds apart from the expected or “the normal” and replaced by “limited movement,” “work from home,” and “virtual meetings,” totally new in terms of teachers’ roles and routines. Teachers take a course of action highly governed by intuition— a rigorous process of trying possibilities and learning from mistakes: “I tried,” “getting used to,” “be prepared,” “it can be done.” Challenges, issues, and problems strengthen their resolve as they choose to have a positive outlook out of the transition experience. Thus, they draw courage and inspiration from the people around them like their “family” and “loved ones”, those in the workplace such as the “school administration” and their “colleagues” and their beloved “students.” The new found world encompasses material and institutional elements from printed bound to electronic and long-distance: “modules,” “worksheets,” “hand-outs,” “webinars,” “video lessons,” “chat,” and “call and text” in an attempt to ensure the continuity of learning amid the crisis. Embracing a digital transformation despite technical “constraints” beyond their control.

Lastly, the textural description and structural description of the experience of the teachers were then assimilated into a compound descriptive passage (a paragraph or two) through the research process called “intuitive integration”. This description served as the structure

of the fundamental “essence” which captured the meaning attributed to the experience of teachers in transitioning into the new normal environment amid the COVID-19 crisis. It was presented in Table 5 as follows.

Table 5. The Essence of the Lived Experience

The transition of teachers into new system amid the COVID-19 crisis is a constant flow where ups and downs are part of the whole experience. The changed set of routines, roles, and relationships generated liabilities such as anxiety and stress, excessive workloads, and communication barriers particularly with the structure of time and space. Notwithstanding, teachers readily undertake challenging activities and perceived them as opportunities for development through strong interactions, self-motivation, and embracing of technologies enabling them to make better and adequate reactions and adjustments to new situations.

Conclusion

The transition of teachers to the new system of teaching in time of COVID-19 crisis has changed their perceptions, roles, routines, and relationships and greatly affected their work and life balance. The cyclical process is described to be challenging, stressful, and difficult due to many problems such as excessive and unlimited workloads, communication and technical barriers, and the feeling of anxiety

and stress. The paradigm shift from the classroom instruction to digital space for ubiquitous teaching and learning requires amount of time, effort, and resources to make practical and effective use. In moving in the transition, teachers highly learn the mechanics of the new system by immersing themselves to technological advances and other relevant practices. They also weigh in on both the assets and liabilities of the experience and try to focus on what

would make the adjustment relatively easy. Majority of teacher participants have taken on the adversities brought by the new system with positive outlook, resiliency, and commitment which also become effective coping strategies. Other strategies include situational awareness, utilization of available technologies and resources, and the strong support they draw from their families, loved ones, colleagues and school heads. Strong support systems provide them with affection, aid, and honest feedback. Teachers undergoing the transition have understood the impact, or degree to which the transition alters their daily life and coped in the best possible manner by remaining flexible and using multiple strategies. The data indicate a number of implications for teachers transitioning to the new work environment amid an education crisis. The need for the development of a systematic framework that would facilitate an understanding of teachers in transition and direct them to the help they needed to cope with transition is highly recommended. Hence, it should be noted that the small number of study participants may limit the range of understanding the transition experience and the ability to generalize and represent the findings of this study. For this reason, additional, similar studies of other groups of teachers besides public school teachers as well as teachers at other types of institutions and in other geographical areas would add to the research base.

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