

Mental Health Resilience During the Pandemic: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of the Teachers of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: In all types of disasters, resiliency is a key to recovery and this is also true for the substantially challenged mental health of the people. In the Philippines, education was not halted during the pandemic, and the frontline educators were on substantial struggles with the major shift in the educational landscape. There were efforts and initiatives seen during the pandemic to alleviate the impacts on the community, though how insufficient, are still beneficial especially to the mental health of the people. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of the teachers of higher education institutions on mental health resilience during the pandemic. Data were obtained through key informant interviews with 11 HEI teachers purposely selected and were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenology data analysis model to come up with the essential themes. Two themes emerged in the analysis of the data: community efforts and positive personality. This study reveals the beneficial impact of the support given by the different groups in the community on the teachers' mental health during the pandemic. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of the positive personality of the teachers to cope with the challenges of the pandemic in their mental health over and above the support given by the community. On a broader lens, this study stresses the importance of working together as a community in improving the mental health of teachers in the most challenging time in providing quality education services.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Teachers, Mental Health, Covid-19, Pandemic

Introduction

Covid-19 has undeniably revolutionized the current social setups and engagements in the world. It has claimed lives around the globe and substantially cost different governments in the world. Despite the substantial increase in recovery rate, undeniably, this health pandemic has made a mark on the Filipino people in particular and on the nation in general. According to the press release of Ipsos on their Southeast Asia Study, they stated that "94% of Filipinos are worried about COVID-19, with 38% indicating their income dropped by >50%" (Ipsos, 2020). Filipinos are afraid of being contacted with the virus because there is no vaccine and the continued community quarantine measures have considerably affected the local economy and the daily survival of the people. Filipinos are worried about the present health crisis but are becoming used to the new normal. The Philippine government has issued practices as part of the new normal to better protect the people from the virus such as observing physical distancing, maintaining good physical hygiene, wearing personal protective equipment, regular cleaning and disinfection, and observing stricter precautions for individuals at higher risk.

However, the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of people is substantial. It bears overwhelming implications for mental health and well-being and was labeled as a second

pandemic (Choi et al., 2020). People are haunted by panic and anxiety almost every day, and more and more people are losing faith and a positive outlook due to economic impact and daily survival problems. Fear, worry, and stress are common negative effects of perceived threats, especially when people have faced the uncertainty or unknown. In public mental health terms, the level of stress and/or anxiety is substantially increasing and has become the main psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic to date. Nortajuddin stated that a group of experts had expressed greater concern about the implication of the virus on society's mental well-being; one is Emily Holmes from Uppsala University's Department of Psychology where she emphasized that "We are all dealing with unprecedented uncertainty and major changes to the way we live our lives as a result of the coronavirus." and the other is Rory O'Connor, a professor of Health Psychology at the University of Glasgow, where he strongly stated that "Increased social isolation, loneliness, health anxiety, stress, and an economic downturn are a perfect storm to harm people's mental health and wellbeing." (The ASEAN Post, 2020).

Despite the negative impact of the current health pandemic, there were positive manifestations of mental resilience and well-being during the height of the pandemic (Skalski et al., 2021). This mental resilience and well-being emerged because of the different levels of

coping mechanisms and support programs initiated in the wider community. The role of communities in providing social and psychological support to people is well-founded in social psychology (Bowe et al., 2022). Community support has a significant value to contribute during a crisis, creating a sense of shared fate and identity (Ntontis et al, 2018). Furthermore, the pandemic sparks a shared fate and solidarity manifested through community-based support and concerted activities (Drury & Tekin Guven, 2020). Aside from community support, individual perspective in withstanding the impact of the pandemic has also played a significant role in coping with the challenges of the pandemic towards their mental health. This personal resilient personality is often viewed to be an antecedent of well-being, however, Wu et al. (2020) stated that resilience plays a causal role in well-being, which, in turn, contributes substantially to the levels of overall resilience.

As the current health pandemic continues to harbor time and locations across all parts of the globe, there is a need to further explore these different manifestations of mental resilience and well-being, especially in the sector of education where most governments of the world failed to declare temporary stoppage of curriculum delivery or education services. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of the teachers of the different HEIs in the Province of Southern Leyte on mental health resilience during the pandemic. In the absence of an academic freeze in the country, the findings of this study are so essential to policy review as much as the promotion of mental health is concerned. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is the mental health resilience of the teachers of HEIs during the pandemic?
2. What essence do these lived experiences have?
3. What implications for policy review can be derived from the findings of this study?

Method

This study utilized phenomenological qualitative research. Phenomenology is concerned with personal meaning-making as the quintessential component of the human experience (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, a phenomenological investigation is best appropriate for exploring affective, emotional, and intense human experiences (Merriam, 2009). The phenomenon under study is mental health resilience as it is substantially affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study is

convinced that there is a paramount necessity to explore this phenomenon in an in-depth study rather than statistically investigate the same. This phenomenon can be equated to other pandemics however the way resiliency is manifested is quite different and revolutionary. This is a new phenomenon and consists of multiple realities. It is a fact that realities are socially invented and these realities are not to be measured but require an in-depth investigation to come up with a real essence. Online key informant interview was used in gathering the needed data and where the main and significant instrument is the researcher itself. Data saturation was able to reach the 11th key informant and key informants were purposely selected in consideration of the established criteria of the study. Transcription of the interview and data analysis using Colaizzi's phenomenology data analysis model was done every after the conduct of the interview. The transcribed and analyzed data were triangulated using three validation strategies to improve the trustworthiness of the study and to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study, namely: observation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. The ethical soundness of the study was evaluated by the University of the Visayas Institutional Review Board and the established ethical protocols was strictly implemented in the entire data-gathering process.

Result

Despite the challenges the different key informants faced during the new normal on their state of workplace mental health, the lights at the end of the tunnel still shine on them giving them reasons to continue pursuing the ends or aims of higher education. Filipinos are known in the world to be resilient people. They always find ways to recover from every tragedy, be it man-made or not. The current health crisis did not only create a new order or normal in society but it also manifested the great spirit of every Filipino to see beyond the realms of the crisis. This pandemic has undeniably shown that the sun shines after the storm so the different key informants who continue to live by their calling and with the help of their respective institutions, realized the aim of quality, inclusive, accessible, and liberating higher education for all Filipinos.

Based on the thematic analysis of the coded significant statements of the teachers of HEIs, two (2) major themes were developed explaining the two important drivers of mental health resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic and were organized as follows: community efforts

and positive personality.

Theme 1: Community Efforts

Key informants emphasized the support they have received from their organizations and those from the initiatives of other entities in the community and described how these supports impacted their mental health resilience during the health crisis. Furthermore, the key informants shared how the internal and external supports were able to help them bridge the challenges of the health crisis toward a responsive and holistic provision of quality education in the new normal.

Internal support is very important especially when the crisis is still uncertain and its valued human resources are also affected by the onslaught of the current health crisis. Since this pandemic had changed the conventional way of mobility and interactions of people in the community, support to cope and adapt to these trends and demands is of paramount necessity. The key informants have appreciated the internal support they have received from their organizations. These supports ranged from basic to professional necessities and interventions. The management of their respective organizations ensured that teachers are well taken care of by providing developmental and capacity interventions in the new normal in curriculum delivery on top of the provision of food, transportation, technologies, and medical support among others to guarantee their mental health resilience amidst the health crisis. Furthermore, the management of their respective organizations had formulated responsive measures to be observed during the pandemic, however, it did not deprive the teachers of their academic freedom on how to better implement the appropriate teaching and learning activities including the assessment tools for teachers not to be alienated of their teaching profession. It is very important to note that keeping our constitutional liberties free from unreasonable restraints also enhances the teachers' mental health resilience, innovativeness, and creativity. But what is more significant here is that there is real support from the organization where teachers' welfare, safety, and drive are maintained and that the continuity of work, engagements, and education is pursued holistically and efficiently.

The key informants also emphasized the role of the external supports the other entities in the community had freely provided during the pandemic to help them better cope with the trends and demands of the new normal including the issue of taking care of their mental health considering that not all higher education

institutions in the province were able to provide sufficient support to their faculty due to technological and financial constraints. Because of these available national and international virtual engagements, the schools were able to be assisted with their institutional constraints and the teachers were able to widen their horizons due to the diverse avenues and speakers discussing the trends and demands of the new normal in education. The beauty of these external initiatives in providing free access to online services did not only provide technical knowledge on the new normal in education but also provided responsive avenues to better address the different levels of impact of the health crisis on the mental well-being of the teachers in higher education considering the consequential implications which are very substantial to the teachers' economic, social, personal, and professional standing. The fact that they were able to convey their struggles in formal engagements and engage in a productive exchange of experiences and lessons had proved to be valuable in keeping their mental well-being as well as their drive to continue delivering quality education and to spark inspiration among contemporary learners amidst the changing conditions of our society in general and our educational landscape in particular.

Some are the key informants' narrations of their lived experiences pertaining to the support extended to them:

"Though there are only a few online workshop or training opportunities provided by the school for the digital work setup, I am able to explore and discover local and international seminar, trainings, or workshops that are absolutely free and are significant to the integration of lessons and learning strategies in this time of crisis" (KI 8, lines 32-28)

"I feel grateful from the administration for giving me and some of the employees a free accommodation at xxx Hotel. Also, during the initial stage of the pandemic, they are so supportive for always fetching me (free transportation) whenever I need to work on-site." (KI 6, lines 41-46) "I appreciate the support mechanism and programs being initiated by our institution in battling this pandemic especially when we were quarantined. Our university took care of us very well. They shouldered our food, necessities and everything." (KI 3, lines 64-69)

The importance of providing support, whether internal or external, during an uncertain crisis is of paramount consideration. The key informants have exemplified that their drive to

Theme 2: Positive Personality

The implication of the current health crisis is vast and its presence continues to harbor time and places. Despite the spread of the virus in the entire globe in general and in the country in particular, Filipino teachers continue to work with unwavering determination and commitment as they ensure the realization of the right of every Filipino youth to education. They learned to live with the new normal, though the challenges and threats are still there, and thrive to upscale and reframe themselves to better respond to the call of times as they deliver the liberating process of education among young Filipinos. Reframing oneself has become an important element not only to cope with the new normal in education but also to ensure the well-being and welfare of everybody. It is very noteworthy to mention that the current health crisis is not just a health issue but has become a socio-economic issue where everyone needs to survive when communities are in lockdowns, businesses are halted and earnings are dwindling.

The health crisis, though how challenging it is in the new normal and how revolutionizing it is the way is done before, still sheds light at the end of the tunnel. Some of the key informants appreciated the implications of this new normal and were able to learn to live with it. Positivity has played a very important role in the teachers urged to continue their profession and be able to deliver the curriculum with greater effectiveness and efficiency. Their skills are sharpened due to the trends and demands of the new normal, and their social horizons are widened due to interdependence with other people which is key to keeping their mental health robust and intact. Furthermore, the work-from-home set-up also increases the state of their mental health considering that they need not go outside their homes to report for work. This setup helps the teachers to avoid being infected by the virus and keep the family members' health intact and well and also enables them to value the essence of work, time, and significant others. Nevertheless, the health crisis, as experienced and reflected by the key informants, had produced substantial personal and professional life experiences. Since there is a need to rise from the ashes of this health crisis, teachers became resilient and strived to find ways to better improve themselves to inspire their learners despite the most challenging time to learn and study. Coping is not easy when mobility is restricted, however, responsive adaptation is the key to survival in a very dynamic world and for one to succeed in the chosen life.

Some are the key informants' narrations

of their lived experiences pertaining to their personal resiliency amidst the health crisis:

"I can describe my teaching experience in this time of crisis as a new learning experience. Because of this time of uncertainties, I was able to learn how to use different online learning platforms." (KI 3, lines 26-30)

"I felt that I have to strategize whatever is needed for them to sustain their interest in learning even this pandemic times." (KI 1, lines 117-119)

"What I did during the pandemic is to have a routine of activities such as engaging into physical and mental exercises. I strictly followed the health protocols especially when going out because my mother is at her old age and I am after of her welfare and health. I also attended various webinars on battling and coping amid pandemic given that our mental health was the primary target of this pandemic. I have to make sure that my mental health is stable so that I can make wise decisions being a teacher and a citizen." (KI 9, lines 112-123)

Two important things we can get from the essence of their lived experiences to wit: strategy and flexibility. Teachers learned that this health crisis cannot be solved overnight and there is a need to identify responsive strategies to sustain its drives to continue education and to safeguard general welfare and safety. Key informants had adjusted themselves to this new normal by transitioning from what they normally do before the pandemic to healthy and productive activities that improve their state of well-being as well as their professional standing. Engaging in healthy and productive activities helps them to counter stress and improve their outlook in life and professional undertakings. However, a strategy must be coupled with flexibility. Embracing realities in the new normal requires a magnanimous consideration of the different levels of impact the pandemic had brought to the people, especially the learners. It cannot be disregarded that there are gaps as to the impact of the health crisis. Some were already struggling even before the pandemic. Teachers are not exempted as well, however, this pandemic manifested that teacher is a source of inspiration and motivation among their learners. Teachers who were able to responsibly strategize and be flexible enough not only survived and coped with the pandemic but also spark greater inspiration among their learners and drive the educational system to accomplish its direction and objectives.

Discussion

It has always been the mantra of the Filipino people to rise from every calamity or

misfortune of any sort. A nation that is always challenged from all directions and all kinds of dilemmas would explain why Filipinos are so resilient and this pandemic is just like other misfortunes experienced that Filipinos were able to recover from. The researcher acknowledges the extent of the impact this pandemic has on the mental health of teachers in HEIs; however, this does not hold back the teachers and the HEIs to continue the liberating process of higher education to its main stakeholders – the students. The researcher agreed that no matter how insufficient or inadequate the support given by the different HEIs to the needs of the teachers during the pandemic is far beyond beneficial than no support given at all. The researcher realized that this insufficiency is also because of the economic impact this pandemic has on the different HEIs. However, there was also external support extended to the teachers and HEIs from government and non-government organizations to strengthen and support their curriculum delivery and innovations in the most challenging time of Philippine society and history. This, the researcher agreed with the proverbial saying that states “*It takes a village to raise a child.*”. Other stakeholders in the education community must participate in the schools’ efforts in providing accessible and sustainable learning experiences and environments even in the most challenging time. These external supports were undeniably very instrumental and substantial in patching the inadequacies or insufficiencies the different HEIs had provided their teachers during the pandemic. Despite these supports, the researcher agreed with the key informants lived experiences that the personal drive to cope with these challenges is very elemental to the success in overcoming obstacles facing their mental health and in reassuring the realizations of the goals or ends of the liberating process of higher education. Everything must start within ourselves and this personal act of resiliency the different HEIs must not allow this to fade away. The researcher emphasizes the importance of this positive outlook and thriving personality of the teachers towards this pandemic. None can ever defeat a confident, resilient self in hurdling the profession’s challenges. These manifestations the researcher is genuinely convinced to be the most essential asset the Filipino people has against other nations and states. The researcher reflects that contemporary HEIs must take advantage of this personal urge of the teachers in harnessing their professional skills and in striving to improve their mental health resilience because support is nothing if the intended groups or individuals are not resilient

enough to view the positive consequential impacts of every misfortune or fortuitous phenomenon harboring our society and history.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have substantial implications for human resource practices, existing theory, and to future research. In line with the human relations approach to management, the findings of this study reiterate the fragile nature of the teaching force in HEIs that contemporary management must recognize. In these fast-changing conditions of contemporary society, HEI management and HR practitioners must see to it that their human resources are socioemotional resilient and academically responsive enough to the trends and demands of these social changes and/or developments. They have to realize that the health of their human resources shall also reflect and/or affect the overall health of their organizations. Another thing is that the findings of this phenomenological exploration complement the tenets of the Organization Support Theory (*OST*) that states “*employees develop a general perception concerning the extent to which their work organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being*” (Eisenberger et al., 2020). The major findings of this study as perceived by the key informants have led to the proposition that the personal drives of the teachers in HEIs to cope with the challenges and struggles of their mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic can be further boosted by providing essential organizational support. This organizational support is not only a key to the teachers’ adaptability to the demands and trends of the new paradigm in higher education brought about by the health crisis but also to the demands for responsive measures and programs toward a healthy and sustainable workplace mental health. And lastly, with the methodological limitations this study possesses, the researcher encourages other scholars and investigators alike to further research this area of human resource management using the different methods and designs in either quantitative, qualitative, and/or mixed methods.

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