



Research article

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL TEACHERS' STRESS DURING THE RECALL OF IN-PERSON CLASSES: BASIS FOR A PROPOSED STRESS COPING PLAN



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ABSTRACT



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The reintegration of in-person classes poses unique challenges for public school teachers, whose experiences during this transitional period significantly contribute to the overall stress levels. Understanding the nuanced aspects of their lived experiences is crucial for developing an effective stress coping plan that addresses the specific needs and concerns arising from the recall of in-person classes. This study sought to determine the lived experiences of public-school teachers during the recall of in-person classes. The study employed qualitative research design specifically the transcendental phenomenological approach and thematic analysis technique. The study found that public school teachers faced various challenges during in-person classes, including work overload problems, work struggles, students' behavioral problems, and low literacy skill development. To cope with the stress caused by these challenges, teachers used differentiated instruction, and collaborative learning, and focused on their holistic wellness. A stress-coping plan has been proposed that involves developing effective teaching strategies, increasing parental engagement, and building personal and professional resilience. Promoting differentiated instruction and collaborative learning and supporting teachers' personal and professional well-being will be taken into consideration to improve the educational experience of both teachers and students.

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Introduction

The landscape of education has witnessed unprecedented transformations, with the COVID-19 pandemic prompting a swift transition to remote and online learning. As educational institutions strive to restore a semblance of normalcy, the recall of in-person classes becomes a pivotal juncture. Within this intricate process, public-school teachers find themselves at the forefront, navigating the challenges associated with the resumption of face-to-face instruction.

Public-school teachers play a fundamental role in shaping the educational experiences of students. The shift from virtual to in-person classes is not merely a logistical adjustment; it entails a profound reorientation of teaching methodologies, classroom dynamics, and interpersonal interactions. This transition is laden with stressors that are unique to the recall process, warranting an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences during this critical period.

The term "lived experiences" encapsulates the subjective, day-to-day encounters, and challenges faced by public-school teachers as they navigate the complexities of returning to in-person instruction. These experiences are deeply intertwined with the multifaceted nature of the teaching profession, encompassing not only academic responsibilities but also the emotional and relational aspects inherent in fostering a positive and effective learning environment (Varadharajan, 2014).

Teachers, in general, contend with a spectrum of stressors encompassing uninspired pupils, maintaining classroom discipline, managing a strenuous workload, adapting to frequent changes, undergoing external assessments, and navigating complex relationships with coworkers and administrators. The multifaceted challenges in the teaching profession have been persistent, with issues like stress and exhaustion predating the onset of the COVID-19 era. Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) theory underscore that prolonged exposure to teacher stress can culminate in burnout due to the inherent demands of the job, lack of support, and insufficient resources. They believed that the

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sustained pressures faced by teachers, coupled with a dearth of adequate resources and support systems, create a perfect storm for burnout—an enduring state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion.

Therefore, coping mechanisms should constitute teachers' responses to the stressors they encounter. These mechanisms encompass problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, seeking social support, and avoidance, which are commonly observed strategies in the educational context, as noted by Beers (2012). Problem-focused coping involves active attempts to directly alter or resolve challenging situations, allowing teachers to exert control over their circumstances. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping aims to alleviate the emotional toll of stressors, providing a psychological buffer against the challenges faced. Seeking social support becomes a crucial avenue for teachers to share concerns, seek guidance, and find solace within a community of peers, fostering a sense of camaraderie. Avoidance, while not always an ideal strategy, may involve temporarily distancing oneself from stressors to regain composure or reassess the situation.

Moreover, teachers employ a diverse array of coping tactics, such as maintaining perspective, conflict avoidance, post-work relaxation, problem-solving, emotional regulation, time management, communication about issues, and expressing emotions to others (Bjørndal et al., 2022). These coping strategies play a dynamic role in helping teachers navigate the complexities of their profession and maintain well-being. Consequently, the complete avoidance of stressors remains an elusive goal. Hence, this study was conducted to determine the lived experiences of public-school teachers' stress during the recall of in-person classes at Carmen Integrated School during the School Year 2022-2023. Result of the study may have implications for educational policies, emphasizing the need for supportive measures and resources for teachers facing heightened stress during significant transitions, such as the recall of in-person classes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping of Lazarus (1966) and Hezberg's Dual Factor Theory (1983).

Transactional Theory of Stress. Lazarus (1966) believes that stress can be thought of as resulting from an "imbalance between demands and resources" or as occurring when "pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope". Stress management was developed and premised on the idea that stress is not a direct response to a stressor but rather one's resources and ability to cope mediate the stress response and are amenable to change, thus allowing stress to be controllable. In order to develop an effective stress management program, it is first necessary to identify the factors that are central to a person controlling his/her stress and to identify the intervention methods which effectively target these factors. Lazarus interprets that stress focuses on the transaction between people and their external environment. He contends that stress may not be a stressor if the person does not perceive the stressors as a threat but rather as positive or even challenging. Also, if the person possesses or can use adequate coping skills, then stress may not actually be a result or develop because of the stressors.

In work, teaching is considered a demanding and challenging profession, given that teachers have a range of responsibilities: classroom management, lesson planning, class preparation, student evaluation and resource management. Teachers exhibit higher levels of stress than mainstream education teachers during COVID-19. Students needs require extra attention, resources and time. Teachers may feel less driven to come to work every day knowing that an unrewarding salary

barely meets their basic needs. Along with the effects of this prevailing economic situation, there are many other factors such as poor working conditions, scarcity of teaching aids, heavy workloads, and unacceptable student behavior. Given the multifaceted nature of stressors in the teaching profession, it becomes imperative to establish immediate coping mechanisms and a comprehensive coping plan. Such measures are crucial to not only address the current challenges but also to foster the well-being of teachers, enabling them to navigate their professional responsibilities more effectively.

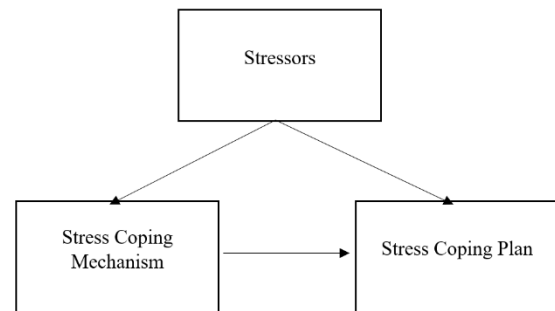


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Methods and Materials

This study employed the qualitative research method specifically the transcendental-phenomenological approach and thematic analysis technique. This design is grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside all preconceived ideas to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity (Moustakas, 1994; as cited by Farrell, 2020). It was through this lens that the study utilized the approach as it explored the lived experiences of public school teachers during in-person classes.

To capture the nuances of these experiences, a validated researcher-made interview guide was employed, effectively measuring each parameter outlined in the study's objectives. Transcriptions were then meticulously performed based on the qualitative data generated and recorded during the interviews. Ethical considerations were paramount, with the researcher obtaining prior approval from the School Research Ethics Committee before initiating the study.

To ensure transparency and informed participation, the researcher sent letters to all involved personnel, seeking their cooperation. Consent from the participating teachers was obtained, emphasizing their awareness of the study's purpose. In accordance with Republic Act No. 10173, known as the Data Privacy Act, the researcher meticulously protected the privacy rights and confidentiality of the respondents' data. Participants were assured that the information collected would be kept confidential and solely utilized for analytical purposes. This commitment reflects the researcher's dedication to upholding ethical standards throughout the research process.

Results and Discussions

The information obtained from the informants was written down and read multiple times. Extracted, grouped, and formed meanings from key statements that were connected to the study problems were then constructed and analyzed to develop a theme.

Experiences of public school teachers during in-person classes

One of the teachers' burnouts during the recall of in-person classes is work overload which results in diminished physical and emotional vitality. Participants in the study believed that one of the key challenges that teachers faced was the pressure to complete urgent papers and reports which included grading assignments, writing lesson plans, or completing administrative tasks. This pressure led to stress and anxiety, which ultimately impacted the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Many of the teachers struggled with managing classroom dynamics, which included dealing with disruptive behavior, engaging students with diverse learning needs, or adapting teaching styles to suit different student needs. These challenges were time-consuming and required a significant amount of emotional and mental energy. On the other hand, most teachers agree that the process of becoming a teacher is not always pleasant. New teachers bring their personal experiences to the classroom and ideas into programs for teacher training (Beijaard et al., 2004). Meanwhile, it has also come to the attention that work struggle is a common experience among teachers. They face various challenges that affect their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Work pressures, in-person classes, and other stressors can take a toll on a teacher's overall health and productivity.

Nevertheless, another most difficult obstacle that the teachers faced in the classroom was the students' behavioral issues. Student behavior problems are one of the significant sources of stress for teachers. Dealing with disruptive behavior, disrespect, and noncompliance can consume a significant amount of the teacher's time and energy. It can also have an impact on classroom management, student learning, and overall teacher well-being. However, if students' reading competencies are poor, then their writing competencies and their comprehension levels would also be poor (Botha et al., 2008). The ability to read, comprehend, and write is crucial for a student's academic success, and poor reading and writing skills can significantly impact their ability to learn and achieve their full potential. Teachers often face the challenge of addressing these skills gaps, as they are essential for students to perform well in different subjects.

Coping Mechanism of Public- -School Teachers During In-Person Classes

One way that teachers can help students with different learning styles and abilities is through differentiated games. By tailoring activities to meet the individual needs of students, teachers can make learning more engaging and fun. A teacher might create a game where students who struggle with reading can use visual aids or hands-on activities to better understand the content. On the other hand, the use of collaborative learning is distinct from other group-based learning techniques even though it necessitates a component of groups. Collaborative learning involves grouping students to work on a project or complete a task, promoting teamwork and cooperative learning. Teachers believed that using this they can reduce their workload and delegate some of the responsibility for learning to the students themselves.

To deliver high-quality education, a wellness program is essential. Holistic wellness refers to a comprehensive approach to achieving overall health and well-being, which includes physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. As stress and burnout are common among teachers, holistic wellness can be an effective coping mechanism for them to manage their stress and improve their well-being. Teachers believed that holistic wellness such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and exercise help to reduce stress and promote physical well-being.

According to National Education Association, "Strategies that helped teachers alleviate stress included giving students more autonomy and responsibility for their learning, providing opportunities for professional growth, and participating in support groups" (NEA, 2021). Li (2023) found that "teachers who reported higher levels of coping self-efficacy (belief in their ability to manage stress) also reported lower levels of burnout". Thus, teachers need to prioritize their well-being and use coping mechanisms to manage their stress and workload.

Proposed Stress Coping Plan

Parental involvement in a child's education is for parents to provide a safe and healthy environment, appropriate learning experiences, support, and a good outlook on school. Developing effective teaching and parental engagement can be a key strategy in managing teacher stress. Teachers' averred that effective teaching involves incorporating various teaching strategies that can help reduce workload, while still promoting learning. Differentiated instruction, where teachers modify teaching approaches to meet the needs of individual learners, thus reducing the stress of managing a diverse group of students with different learning needs. According to Bransford, et al., (2005), teachers should possess a specific set of personal qualities or professional convictions that motivate them to always seek to advance their careers as educators. Personal and professional resilience is a proposed stress-coping plan that emphasizes the importance of developing skills and attitudes that can help teachers cope with the demands of their profession. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficult situations, to adapt to changing circumstances, and to maintain a positive outlook despite challenges.

Taking time to relax and unwind is an important stress-coping mechanism for teachers. Finding a quiet place after school to decompress and ease one's feelings can help reduce stress levels. This can involve engaging in activities that promote relaxation such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises. These activities have been shown to reduce stress and improve overall well-being. Teachers believed that this coping stress makes them relaxed and productive.

Finally, setting priorities is an important stress-coping plan for teachers. It involves identifying the most important tasks and activities that need to be completed and organizing them in order of importance. This allows teachers to focus on what is most essential and manage their time more effectively, which can help to reduce stress. To set priorities, teachers can use tools such as to-do lists, calendars, and schedules to help them organize their tasks and activities. They can also use time management strategies such as batching similar tasks together and delegating tasks to others if possible.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Public school teachers faced various challenges during in-person classes, including workload problems, personal struggles, behavior problems, and low literacy skill development. To cope with the stress caused by these challenges, teachers used differentiated instruction, and collaborative learning, and focused on their holistic wellness. Additionally, a stress-coping plan has been proposed that involves developing effective teaching strategies, increasing parental engagement, and building personal and professional resilience. These suggest that addressing the workload and behavior issues, promoting differentiated instruction and collaborative learning, and supporting teachers' personal and professional well-being were essential steps toward improving the educational experience for both teachers and students. Moreover, schools should explore ways to reduce the workload burden on teachers by streamlining administrative

tasks, providing support staff, and implementing effective time management strategies. Thus, provide training and support, promote differentiated instruction and collaborative learning, prioritize teacher wellness and lastly, increase parental engagement are among the top priority need by the teachers in the present in order to deliver quality and efficient teaching.

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