The Experiences of Teaching Professionals in Private Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Basis for Proposed Stress Management Program

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Abstract

How will our country achieve quality education if teachers aren't able to perform their job? The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of teaching professionals in private institutions as they may have experienced occupational burnout during the global pandemic. This is a qualitative and phenomenological study of five (5) teaching professionals within the age range of twenty-five (25) to fifty-four (54) who have five (5) or more years of teaching and are affiliated with private institutions wherein they are engaged in online distance teaching. The researchers classified and analyzed common themes from the data collected during online interviews. The researchers formulated four (4) main themes: (1) The Pros and Cons of Teaching, (2) The Struggles of Online Distance Teaching, (3) The Implications of Being a teacher, and (4) The Strategies to Reclaim Balance. Practical & Management Implications: Due to the effective coping mechanisms and supportive environment, results showed that the teachers were able to effectively manage their stress to prevent occupational burnout. Recommendations and future directions are discussed.

Index Terms— Occupational burnout, Online Distance Teaching, Coping strategies, Organizational Support

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is one of the most honorable professions in the world since teachers are the ones who mold and produce professionals in various fields and disciplines. Over time, unexpected circumstances have taken place, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected many people, resources, and organizations and changed our lives since the virus was discovered in 2019. As this pandemic remains active and dangerous, the country's education system also continues to face a crisis, along with our healthcare system. Over 168 million children's schools worldwide were closed for over a year (UNICEF, 2020). Most of them abruptly shifted to a new model of learning, i.e., online distance learning, where the physical and mental well-being of students and teaching professionals were greatly affected and had to be prioritized.

"Burnout" is a term coined by the psychologist named Herbert Freudenberger in 1974. It was first used in a clinical sense in the said year and was described as prominent among caring professionals (Samra 2018; Shaufeli 2017). Burnout is characterized as a state of emotional, mental, and physical fatigue caused by long-term stress or when an individual is engaged in a physically or emotionally exhausting role or situation for a prolonged period (Psychology Today, n.d). Concerning the historical overview, burnout was first used in a clinical sense and was described as prominent among caring professionals (Samra 2018; Shaufeli 2017). The multidimensional model of burnout describes burnout through its three major components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout is identified as stress experienced by an individual rooted in the complexity of social relationships as well as including the individual's perception of self and others (Maslach, 1998, as cited in Maslach, 2015). Emotional exhaustion pertains to one's depleted emotional resources and being emotionally strained. Depersonalization is a term that describes a negative, cynical, or overly distant reaction toward other individuals, which frequently includes a lack of optimism. Reduced Personal Accomplishment pertains to a specific decrease in productivity at work and feelings of competence.

The World Health Organization recently classified occupational burnout as an occupational phenomenon associated with prolonged work-related stress that has not been effectively addressed (Turner, 2019), in which the

sustainability of quality performance will be compromised. According to a recent survey by The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (2020), more than 70% of teacher-respondents believe that the distance teaching workload is "negatively affecting their physical and mental health," with approximately 10% admitting to "already falling ill due to the issues with distance teaching and their difficult responsibilities." Now because of the pandemic, workplace stress for our teachers has vastly increased, especially with the transition to the new learning modality which is online distance teaching. Teaching professionals face time pressure, heavy workload, lack of work-related equipment, inadequate salary, and sometimes, a toxic work environment. They must manage these challenges alongside the academic subjects they are tasked to teach, their responsibility to inculcate a love of learning among their learners, and any personal concerns they are possibly dealing with. All these challenges put them at risk of occupational burnout.

As the pandemic continues, articles and research on teaching professionals and the impact of occupational burnout on them still need to be considered and explored. The educational crisis brought about by the pandemic behooved the researchers to investigate the impact of this crisis on teaching professionals who continue to give their best to deliver quality education despite their tremendous challenges. This study aims to understand the lived experiences of teaching professionals in private institutions engaged in online distance teaching, as well as explore the risk factors that may contribute to acquiring burnout, and how it can have an impact to the personal and work lives of the respondents. Particularly, this qualitative study seeks to fill the gaps that provide a better understanding of the literature and further explore how occupational burnout affects the well-being of the participants, which benefits teaching professionals in private institutions.

II. METHODOLOGY

Guided by the constructivist philosophical worldview, the researchers decided to apply a qualitative methodology approach as it identifies and characterizes the basic components of the phenomenon. The researchers employed this worldview as the study was conducted under the qualitative methodology approach (Cresswell, 2018). In line with this, many have conducted research about burnout but employed a quantitative approach, in which they have already proven its significant relationship to different variables. Only a few have taken the challenge to analyze the in-depth experiences of the participants. Furthermore, in seeking to address the phenomenon of occupational burnout experienced by teaching professionals in private institutions engaged in online distance teaching, the researchers believed that a phenomenological research design would be the best for this study because it examines actual events to determine how individuals experience them (Dumlao, 2022).

The study focuses on some cities within Metro Manila, which primarily include Las Pinas and Manila. The research participants consisted of five (5) senior high school teaching professionals in private institutions engaged in online distance teaching in different academic institutions within the various cities in Metro Manila. The participants came from high schools within Metro Manila, as the recent statistics showed the highest burnout rate in this area (Hernando-Malipot, 2021). The three (3) research participants came from Bernardo College in Las Pinas City, while the other two (2) came from Lyceum of the Philippines University in Manila City. The participants were recruited through posts on social media platforms and utilizing the existing networks made by the researchers. Incentives were given based on the agreement between the researchers and participants. The number of participants is limited to keep the study manageable. The participants will be selected using purposive sampling, wherein the researchers determined the participants based on the characteristics of the population. This type of sampling method is applicable to this qualitative study where the following criteria have been set for the participants: a) senior high school teaching professionals engaged in online distance teaching within Metro Manila; b) must be regular teaching professionals, c) with five (5) or more years of teaching experience; d) part of private academic institutions, and must be e) twenty-five (25) years old and above as mentioned earlier.

The researchers utilized researcher-made interview questions based on the topic of occupational burnout. A semi-structured interview format proved valuable to the study in examining the extent and characteristics of occupational burnout of the participants. The aim was to examine and describe the experiences, explore the risk factors that could affect occupational burnout, and its impact on the teaching professionals' work and personal life. Thus, the participants were given the freedom to express their feelings and share their experiences.

The participants were formally informed through e-mails. Moreover, the researchers provided informed consent which the participants were requested to sign after brief explanations of the study's procedures, guidelines, and the confidentiality of their information. The selected five (5) research participants underwent a semi-structured interview. The whole interview is expected to be conducted either face-to-face or virtually based on the availability of the participants. Throughout the semi-structured interview, a series of interview questions were fielded to the participants, who were expected to answer honestly, to explore their lived experiences as teaching professionals in

private institutions engaged in online distance teaching. Participants were asked to share their lived experiences regarding online distance teaching, the risk factors affecting their profession, and how it impacts their lives. Permission to audio or video record the whole conversation is requested as part of the ethical protocol. The interviews were recorded via notetakings, and phone recorder, with the participant's consent, and transcribed verbatim. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality of the information disclosed. The data was saved in a private folder that only the researchers can access. After conducting the interviews, the researchers then proceeded to the transcription process. Which then led to the researchers' formulating codes with their answers. After this, the researchers categorized the codes based on which statement of the problem they belong to. With that being said, the researchers were able to successfully create themes to encapsulate the data gathered. A peer debriefing was conducted to establish the validity of the researchers' findings. In addition to this, the researchers consulted a professional who had no personal interest in the study to remove any biased data. Furthermore, the professional evaluated, assessed, and gave suggestions to the themes presented. Thus, a symbolism was formulated to creatively present the four (4) major themes.

III. RESULTS

Theme 1: The Pros and Cons of Teaching. As one of the main themes, the pros and cons of teaching elaborates on the experiences of teaching professionals in private institutions. It discusses both the positive and negative experiences that they have encountered using online platforms as a learning modality as well as the challenges encountered in their roles as teaching professionals. The researchers specify the experiences of the teaching professionals such as: Negative Experiences and Positive Experiences.

Subtheme 1.1: Negative Experiences. Negative experiences include the challenges in setting and maintaining student engagement because there is the presence of distractions during online classes and uncooperative students. The participants also had difficulties handling simultaneous work tasks, and there might be times that they feel unsatisfied with students' output because there have been questions regarding its credibility.

Subtheme 1.2: Positive Experiences. For positive experiences, the participants shared that they are lucky enough to be employed in an organization that invested in establishing learning management systems and trained them in handling online platforms wherein they enjoyed exploring different applications that can be used in class discussions.

Theme 2: The Struggles of Online Distance Teaching. As the experiences of teaching professionals in private institutions have been stated and discussed, this theme, the struggles of online distance teaching, discusses the risk factors that teaching professionals face while working in private institutions. The researchers give emphasis on the causes of burnout among the participants of the study. This includes individual factors, technological challenges, social factors, and organizational factors.

Subtheme 2.1: Individual Factors: This subtheme focuses on individual factors as one of the main causes of occupational burnout. In a study done by Golonka et al., burnout can also be explained largely by a person's personal traits or their individual factors (2019). Due to tasks and workload needing to be completed, some of our participants shared that they resorted to different techniques such as self-motivation, to complete tasks within their given deadlines.

Subtheme 2.2: Technological Challenges. As we have been pushed to make use of modern technology not only for education but for other fields as well, we did not take note of the disadvantages of shifting into online distance teaching. One of the essential tools needed to conduct successful online distance teaching is having a stable internet connection, but the country's internet speed is still poor and overly expensive (Porcalla, 2018). This has already been a nagging issue even before the pandemic started.

Subtheme 2.3: Social Factors. Like any other profession, teaching requires an individual to travel from home to school, but others live far away from their schools. This requires them to travel or to look for temporary homes near their workplace while living away from family. Due to physical distance, teachers only have limited time to spend with families.

Subtheme 2.4: Organizational Factors. With the shift to a new mode of learning, teachers need to be trained with the necessary skill set such as being technologically literate. Respective organizations should take note and provide teachers with proper training for them to be fully equipped to face the new mode of teaching. And due to private schools having less benefits, teachers are less willing to apply, which leaves them understaffed. Because of this, teachers take on more roles. Here are some of the sentiments of the participants facing role overload.

Theme 3: The Implications of Being a Teacher. Participants from this theme, The Implications of Being a Teacher, describe both the negative and positive impacts of burnout symptoms on teaching professionals in private institutions. It discusses how teaching is exhausting as a job, leading to times when teaching professionals question their own capabilities and whether they are still effective in the field of teaching. Despite giving their best in teaching, they may end up with feelings of inadequacy and even a lack of work-life balance. Nevertheless, they are still optimistic about their jobs as they continue to carry out their responsibilities to the individuals they serve. The researchers specify these impacts of burnout symptoms on teaching professionals as they teach in private institutions as Positive impacts and Negative Impacts.

Subtheme 3.1: Negative Impact. Teaching in an online setup entailed additional work for teaching professionals. Pre-pandemic teaching was stressful and already a handful, but with the pandemic restrictions, teaching became an even more difficult job, which causes exhaustion for most teaching professionals. Some of them experienced too much physical and mental exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment in their job. These factors affect the onset of occupational burnout among teaching professionals, which in turn leads to various consequences on their physical and mental health apart from affecting their personal and work life (World Health Organization, 2019; Turner, 2019; Alsalhe et al., 2020).

Subtheme 3.2: Positive Impact. When the researchers asked the participants about how fulfilling or rewarding, they find their job, their responses revealed that they generally felt a sense of fulfillment in their job especially when they see their students learn from what they teach, graduate from the university, and become successful in their life. The psychic rewards of the teaching profession often outweigh the challenges.

Theme 4: The Strategies to Reclaim Balance. In this theme, the coping strategies of teaching professionals during online distance teaching as well as the support of their organization to manage their health well are described. It explores their experiences while assessing the effective strategies for reclaiming their balance in their work-life and how they successfully adapt to difficulties and challenges from shifting to online distance teaching.

Subtheme 4.1: Self-coping Strategies. To prevent burnout, it is important for individuals to prioritize self-care and engage in activities that reduce stress and promote overall well-being. This can include regular exercise, healthy eating, and getting enough sleep. This subtheme mainly describes how teaching professionals managed to reduce the stress, difficulties, and challenges they faced during online distance teaching. Participants also expressed that it was fulfilling and meaningful for them when they are remembered by their past students or appreciated by their present students as it lessens the stress, they experience during their work hours.

Subtheme 4.2: Organizational Support. Employers or the organization itself can also play a role in preventing burnout by providing support and resources to employees, such as training on time management and stress reduction, as well as opportunities for growth and development within the organization. This subtheme explores the experiences of teaching professionals regarding how a support system helps them to be healthy and to manage a positive outlook despite the difficulties and challenges they faced in online distance teaching. This explores the support they have received from their organizations, their families, colleagues, and friends, which greatly helped them to adapt and manage a balanced work-life. Participants expressed when they experience the support they need.

It was found that respondents do not currently experience burnout based on Maslach's components. They only fit under emotional exhaustion. Depersonalization did not occur among participants because they all enjoyed a supportive environment in both their personal and professional spheres. Reduced personal accomplishment was not experienced either by the participants because no decrease in productivity was seen and instead, increased productivity was shown in times when too many tasks were required of them.

IV. DISCUSSION

After analyzing the results, the following conclusions were drawn from the study.

It revealed that negative experiences added to the exhaustion of teaching professionals whose mental health may have been compromised. However, it was established that the teaching professionals in the sample are currently not experiencing occupational burnout and they still find meaningful experiences in being a teacher.

Participants perceived that there are certain factors that may contribute to acquiring burnout, among them are individual factors, social factors, organizational factors, and technological challenges, as explained earlier.

Even though occupational burnout was not currently experienced by the participants, the study revealed the negative and positive impacts of stress when things became uncontrollable for them.

The study revealed further that developing an effective coping mechanism and perceived organizational support is one of the means of preventing the onset of occupational burnout.

Practical Implication

In this study, the findings imply that occupational burnout can be managed and prevented through various approaches. As discussed, occupational burnout was not seen among the participants because they were able to develop an effective coping mechanism through self-care routines along with the help of their respective organizations through conducting programs or webinars on how to properly take care of one's mental health. Along with this finding, the researchers also opted to develop a project proposal that might help in the prevention of occupational burnout to occur within the workplace. The researchers believe that the welfare of the teaching professionals is just as important as the students'. In line with this, this study aimed to propose a stress management program inculcated with different activities that will help different universities and schools establish organizational support through prioritizing the mental well-being of teaching professionals without compromising the quality of their work. The proposed program is entitled:

#ChooseMentalHealth: Prioritizing the Welfare of Teaching Professionals. This proposed program intends to enhance one's coping mechanisms in dealing with stress to prevent occupational burnout and establish organizational support through providing different activities such as stress management program, providing psychosocial services, and team building workshops. A team building among teaching professionals will be performing specific activities tailored to enhance their coping mechanisms and manage stress. By doing team buildings and igniting the teams' spirit, the relationship and chemistry between employees will unite them. By creating this bond between employees pushes them to support one another.

Objectives

• To gain profound knowledge and understanding on how to manage stress andunderstand what coping mechanisms work best for them.

• To provide psychological and social support within a professional environment.

• To establish camaraderie among co-faculty members that can help establish a supportive working environment.

Activities:

• *Stress Management Training Program:* This program will help the teaching professionals to be knowledgeable on different strategies on how to properly deal with stress. Moreover, it can help them better understand what coping mechanism can be used when things get too overwhelming for them.

• *Providing Psychosocial Support:* Teaching professionals shall also enjoy guidance services and be provided with psychosocial support when they are dealing with personal matters and need professional advice.

• *Team-Building Activities:* A two-three days out free from academic duties and filled with fun physical activities can help them feel recharged after workload stress. Physical exercises can help them boost their immune system while also having fun playing different activities with their colleagues. This also helps open barriers and create stronger foundations for organizational support due to the trust they have formed with one another.

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