



Experiences of Teachers in Upland Schools: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This research study used a descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design which provides a narrative context based on personal experiences. The participants of the study were four teachers, teaching in highland elementary campuses for more than a year. The data were contextualized from participants in depth statement according to the open-ended questionnaire that has been provided during the evaluation. Learners were intellectually challenged, needed to be guided by parents or siblings using supplementary activities given in the modules. With a lack of technological intervention professional teachers in upland areas are having difficulty to monitor the improvement of their learners. Most of the learners cannot fully comply on their academic activities. Learners don't understand the module, they rely on their elder siblings. Moreover, the common struggles of the teachers is the risk in travelling due to the topographical settings. Common disadvantage teaching in upland and remote campuses was the unsuited learning curriculum for the learners. Provided learning guide were not culture based, which means, learners are having difficulty in understanding which translate to haphazard learning development. Participants stated that their students are struggling in self-learning method, considering that most of the parents of these learners are illiterate. Therefore, it suggests developing a mode of learning delivery based on the learner's capacity to learn and improve. In spite of all the struggles, there was enjoyment. Most of them perceived that the common advantage in upland schools is having a small class size. Thus, teachers can focus in teaching.

Keywords *Upland; self-learning method; distance learning*

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INTRODUCTION

When an earthquake struck Pampanga in April 2019, numerous establishments, including the homes and schools of the indigenous people, were destroyed. The barangay captain instructed the natives to evacuate to the lowland areas of Pampanga to avoid further tragedy. Despite this situation, teachers in this remote area persisted in wearing cheerful faces and maintaining a positive outlook for the love of their work and to inspire the lives of the children. These young ones eagerly awaited the start of each week for the love and care that the teachers provided, which helped to improve their living conditions through education. Although personal problems and paperwork were inevitable, staying optimistic was the best choice (Recamadas, 2018).

The problem addressed in this study is the slow coping mechanism of learners, which made the modular method of teaching difficult. Indigenous people's knowledge is somewhat distant from those who reside in flat lands. However, for teachers, educating their students helps them to grow and learn. Unfortunately, while many teachers enter the profession with passion and drive, some

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lose this spark as their careers progress. Some teachers struggle to manage classrooms, meet national educational standards, and communicate with administrative leaders, hindering their abilities to create the desired classroom environment. Not all teachers encounter these problems, and many overcome these challenges, separating the good parts of teaching from the bad. By confronting these obstacles head-on, teachers can maintain their passion and effectively educate their students.

"Education is the most powerful weapon for changing the world" (USAID, 2013). Arne Duncan, the former Secretary of Education of the United States during the World Bank Human Development Forum, stated that education eliminates gender inequality, reduces poverty, creates a sustainable planet, prevents needless deaths and illness, and fosters peace (USED, 2011). Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to enjoy this privilege. About 263 million children and youth are not in school (UNICEF, 2016), and 759 million adults are illiterate (Humanium, nd). These conditions deprive them of the much-needed know-how to improve their living conditions and those of their children.

The field of education, particularly the role of the classroom teacher, presents a host of challenges unknown to other professions. Most teachers enter the field aware that their pay is subpar compared to many other professions. However, for personal reasons, individuals continue to choose teaching as a life profession.

According to the Enhanced Basic Education Information System (EBEIS) of the Department of Education and Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) survey, there were 37,697 public elementary schools, and 12,225 of these are multi-grade due to various reasons such as low enrolment and lack of teachers (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2013). Many of these schools are isolated, geographically inaccessible, and lack educational resources, making multi-grade classes the best option. According to the report of PSA (2017), less than 2% of children are not attending formal school. Family matters, financial concerns, lack of interest, job hunting, and health conditions are the top reasons for absenteeism. Thus, teachers should always remember that teaching is not just a profession but also a vocation. None of them can become effective teachers if they work only for the sake of the degree they earned in college or just for the sake of the salary they receive from their employers. Yes, teaching is a profession that normally involves occupation and a salary awarded to a teacher after hard days of work (Danbert, 2015).

This study determined the lived experiences of teachers in upland based school dealing to the new normal education. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions;

1. What are the lived experiences of the teachers in upland areas?
2. What are the challenges of the teachers in the new normal education?
- 3 What coping strategies that are employed in order to adjust to the situation?

RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers used qualitative descriptive type of study employing the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. It also used the thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), which follows systematically a process of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning from the codes derived from the information gathered. It looks for patterns in the generated codes and themes from the qualitative data that are systematic and accessible. Codes are the concepts of analysis capturing the essentials of the data giving answers to the research questions. It is best to use because of the flexibility in attaining the objectives of the study.

This research study used a qualitative research design, specifically the hermeneutic approach because its goal is to interpret text in the context of the participants, studying experiences through interpretive lens rather than empirical lens, to understand their lived experiences. The qualitative research design helps to open up the view of the behavior and perception of the participant. Creswell (2014) emphasized the use of qualitative research to get meaning from the observed

specific behaviors, knowledge, and perception on uptake of desired actions. The descriptive phenomenological method provides the lived experiences of the participants and does so focusing on his or her perspective without the use of deception (Giorgi, 2009). Furthermore, the method allows the researcher to preserve and hear the “voice” of the participants in the research without abstracting their viewpoint out through analysis. “It is the subjective psychological perspective of the participant that captures the researcher’s” cited Giorgi & Giorgi(2003). Every behavior, reaction from the participants are worthy in the study but also their feelings, impressions, thoughts regarding their experiences were analyzed.

The participants in the study were taken by purposive sampling in which the researchers set criteria in the selection. The participants at least have a year of teaching experience in upland. There are four (4) teachers who have been teaching for more than a year and they are: 1) The head teacher who was transferred 2 years ago after she got promoted in 13 years of teaching at Manibaug Paralaya Elementary School. 2) A pioneer teacher with ten (10) years of experience teaching in the said school, the remaining two (2) are neophyte teachers with almost three (3) years of experience in teaching

The researchers utilized semi-structured interview about the lived- experiences of elementary teachers of upland based school in the new normal education. The guide questions were open ended questions for in-depth gathering. This encompasses to the criteria of all the upland based teacher in the specified locale. The interview guide was validated by three experts, two are Instructors in the Social Work program where almost all of the Ips in the University are enrolled, who in one way or another have ample time being with IP learners, and the other one is a Master teacher in the Department of Education.

Moreover, the researchers used pen and paper for transcription and devices to ensure that data are accurately recorded such as voice recorder to record the questions and answers during the interview.

The researchers also used observation as one of the instruments. The method used was non-participant-overt observation since the researchers did not share the same milieu with the participants. It was where the observer identified himself and his task of conducting research and informing the subjects of the types of data being collected. Data retrieved were validated by member checking; the researchers went back to the participants to confirm the codes and themes, verified if the researchers have the same interpretation as theirs.

The researchers transcribed the data to assess whether the data had saturated or still needing clarifications from the participants. From there, transcripts were manually coded for analysis. The researchers then compared the codes to the original transcripts, re-read, and collaborated in coming up with emerging themes. After the themes were finalized, the researchers got back to the participants for validation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The recordings gathered from the interview conducted by the researchers were transcribed in order to undergo the process of coding based on the guidelines recommended by (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Below are the narratives of the participants.

T1 is 24 years old, three years of teaching in upland

She said that in advantage of teaching in upland, they have least of pupil so isa yun sa mga advantages kase nakakapag focus sila sa mga bata kasi nga konti lang sila. While the disadvantage of teaching in upland, is the risk in travelling, classrooms are not safe, they only use temporary learning space as we can see learners are not equipped in using technology.

She said that the problem she encountered is the modes of learning delivery today is providing self learning modules. The content of the learning modules are not culture based and it is not suited for their learners and the language content used are difficult words. And then, how she address such problems is by providing activities that are easy to accomplish and based on the understanding or on the knowledge of her learners

She said that the teaching strategy/strategies she think is the best to apply in teaching in the new normal is, since the modes of delivery in this new normal education is providing self learning modules

came from the DepEd. The strategy that she apply is providing them additional supplemental activities that are suited for the level of her learners understanding.

She said that the other solution she can think of making the new normal education better in upland areas is, *yun yung pinakamahirap na question kase walang face to face. Tapos yung mga learners nila they are not equipped in using gadgets siguro dahil some of them meron naman silang television sa bahay or radyo so may pinrovide yung DepEd para sa mga mag aaral o yung tinatawag nilang parang sineskwela. Dun sila mag aaral baka yun lang talaga yung pwedeng maapply para sa kanila kasi nga hindi sila equipped para gumamit ng technology. Di sila pwedeng mag online classes.*

T2 is 24 years old, three years of teaching

She said that in advantage of teaching in upland, she acquires knowledge about the culture, realization of her passion in teaching, strengthen her passion in teaching and broaden her understanding in each of her pupil's needs and situation. While the disadvantage of teaching in upland, Lack of classroom and other facilities, travelling the materials needed on her teaching because for the teachers it is risky and delayed submission of their reports. Some of the problems mentioned are the following; the modes of learning delivery today is, receiving unaccomplished modules due to lack of guidance/knowledge of parents, and addressing the problem to provide supplementary activities that suit to her students, and the teaching strategy/strategies she thinks is the best to apply in teaching in the new normal is, by providing a supplementary activities and materials to her students, keeping in touch to the parents of her pupils, and the content of the self-learning module itself. Solution that she can think of making the new normal education better in upland areas is to provide them a television in the community to watch DepEd Educational Channels because some of her students walang tv and then hindi sila makapag gadgets because they are not equipped enough.

T3 is 43 years old, ten years of teaching

Participant T3 gave an advantage of teaching in upland and that is the nature, he can breath fresh air, quoted masarap mag turo sa mga kulot kasi nga napaka innocent nila. On the other side, teaching in upland is disadvantageous is the distance, going to the mountain through motor at napakadilikado ng ganon. He encountered difficulty especially when raining, possibly encountering landslide at malakas yung agos ng tubig sa bundok. Other problems, before, nung hindi pa nagkaroon ng pandemic, sa taas sila but now they are in low land, the problem now is they are just only in the temporary relocation site and then yung mga bata, kung dati mas lalong wala o hindi sila present, ngayon kahit parent ng mga bata yung dapat kumuha sa mga modules nila minsan o madalas hindi na nila nakukuha ng dahil sa daily needs nila, minsan wala sa bahay ang mga parent, nag kakaroon sila ng problem regarding sa pag didistribute ng modules likewise yun yung mahirap kasi hindi nila masyadong maintindihan dahil nga wala yung face to face teaching, kung dati nahihirapan sila mas lalo silang nahirapan kasi minsan sa pag bigay ng mga modules sa mga bata dahil walang sagot pero sabi nga nila may alternative silang ginagawa para sa hindi lang yung mga modules, nag bibigay din sila ng mga supplementary activities.

As regards strategy/strategies he thinks the best to apply in teaching in the new normal is the supplementary activities, actually muntik na niyang na gawa, kinausap niya yung mga parents at mga bata na kung pwede every friday mag kakaroon sila ng face to face pero dapat talagang malayo and more in reading, kaso hindi niya rin ginawa kasi nakakatakot baka mabutasan o mag karoon ng transmission ng dahil sa kanila yung mga bata so hindi na niya ginawa. yun lang talang napakahirap, kung mag aano sila ng mga strategies pinaka main solution nila aside from modules yung ngang bibigyan nila ng ibang activities yung mga bata aside from modules.

He said that the other solution he can think of making the new normal education better in upland areas is, yun nga hindi kamukha noon 2-3 times a week lang sila, ngayon 4 times a week. Kahit papano nanjan yung mga parents kasi pag kokonti lang yung mga days hindi nila na aano yung mga parent ngayon dahil almost everyday sila, nakakapunta yung mga parents. actually napaka hirap talaga ng new normal situation ngayon. kung dati mahirap mas mahirap ngayon. Narinig nyo nga sa mga kasama ko, hindi lang sila multi grade teaching they are in IPED Learning, IP education napakahirap. Kung бага talagang ma aano yung full education nila sa pag tuturo at pag mamahal nila sa mga bata.

T4 is 42 years old, two years of teaching

Participant T4 cited an advantage of teaching in upland is the limited number of pupils, they can focus in teaching their pupils because of limited number per grade level. They easily engage with the community. She also said that IP children are obedient and easy to be with. While the disadvantage is the distance they travel going to the school is risky. Moreover, the lack of equipment needed in teaching and the difficulty of parents to help their children at home during their homework is seen. Absenteeism is also rampant due to financial problem.

Also, the problem that is expected is there is no face to face interaction in the new normal set up. The learners cannot fully comply on the different activities given to them. They cannot answer the modules on their own. In order to address this problem, learners rely on the eldest in the family to guide in learning. Then they need to follow up the lesson by giving the learners supplemental activities.

Regarding the teaching strategy/strategies, the participant employs provision of additional activities suited to the level of the learners. Resolving this, participant is thinking of case to case method (as quoted) per grade level. But, it did not materialize.

Every single conversation took only a minute as they opened their valuable battles to cope up with the demands of being an upland based teacher. The researchers spent a week to complete the interviews. The researchers needed to take data for the spoken text to written form for the analysis. The analysis begun after reviewing the interview session to scrutinize whether they were responding to the research question. The following themes emerged:

LOW FACILITATION OF LEARNING

All the participants mentioned that there is really a problem in their learners facilitation of learning and it get worse when the pandemic came. **T1, T2, T3, T4.**

"It is not suited for our learners. Language content used are difficult words"- T1

"Receiving unaccomplished modules"- T2

"Dati nahihirapan kami mas lalo kami nahirapan kasi minsan pag bigay nga mga modules yun nga walang sagot. Kung pwede every friday mag kakaroon kami ng face to face more in reading"(Before, it was difficult , the more we were when modules given had no answers. If it is only possible, we meet the students face to face in reading)- T3

"Pupils cannot fully comply on the different activities given."- T4

During the pandemic, the attention of the learners was divided or displaced to being worried of the pandemic situation. Learners seem to be less worried on their studies but focus on hoe to be safe and secured during health crisis. Alvarez (2020) mentioned that learners are no longer focused on learning because they are socio-emotionally disturbed and interrupted of the pandemic.

DANGERS OF TEACHING IN UPLAND

Almost our participants said that in their more than a year of teaching upland, they already experienced challenging situation in heading to the school. The way they travel was already a danger plus the pandemic and when natural calamity strikes. **T1, T3, T4.**

"First is the risk in travelling" -T1

"The problem in teaching in upland is the distance. You are going to the mountain through motor at napakadilikado ng ganon (risky). You can encounter landslide at malakas yung agos ng tubig sa bundok (water from the mountain is strong)" -T3

"The distance we travel going to the school it is a risky"- T4

Aquino in 2019 in his study described upland teachers meet difficulty in having to cross rivers, climb mountains and walk for hours just to reach the school.

BEING A TEACHER

All participants cited that there is another discovery when teaching in upland based school;

there are adjustments and adaptation of their environment, culture and situations. **T1, T2, T3, T4**
"We have least of pupil kaya nakakapag focus kami sa mga bata (we have less number of pupil hence we can focus on them)" - T1

"Aquiring knowledge about their culture. Realization of passion in teaching. Strengthen your passion in teaching" - T2

"Kung бага talagang ma aano ka lang yung full education mo sa pag tuturo at pag mamahal mo sa mga bata (It is as if you adjust because you finished education and for the love of children)" - T3

"Limited number of pupils. You can focus in teaching the pupils because of limited number per grade level." - T4

Keeping hope alive during pandemic, challenges giving strength and creativity and leading to rely on each other, can overcome difficulties whatever the circumstances (Lee, ND).

LEARNING MODALITY

All of the participants stated the system on how they manage and apply the type of education that they have been encountering in their teaching career. **T1, T2, T3, T4,**

"Of course the modes of delivery in this new normal education is providing self learning modules came from the DepEd." - T1

"The other solution is to providing them a television in the community to watch DepEd Educational Channels." - T2

"Kung dati mahirap mas mahirap ngayon, narinig nyo nga sa mga kasama ko, hindi lang kami multigrade teaching were in IPED Learning, IP education napaka hirap (If before it was already difficult, now it's even more, you heard my co-teachers, we are not only multigrade teaching,, but we're into IPED learning, IP Education is hard)." - T3

"When it comes to direct teaching, we don't have because there is no face to face." - T4

All is experiencing challenges as regards quality in the abrupt implementation of modular learning. Talimodao and Madrigal (2021) identified parents' incapacity, inconsistent participation and compliance are the major challenges in the implementation of it.

TEACHER'S STRATEGIES

All of the participants almost have the same strategy on how the modular method effective by giving the learners extra activities that suits to their learners level of understanding. **T1, T2, T3, T4**

"The strategy that we apply is providing them additional supplemental activities that are suited for their level of understanding." - T1

"Addressing the problem is to provide supplementary activities that suit to them." - T2

"Strategies pinaka main solution namin aside from modules yung ngang bibigyan namin ng ibang activities yung mga bata aside from modules (The main solution is to strategize and give students activities aside from just giving merely modules" - T3

"We only provide additional activities that suited to their level of understanding." - T4

To strategize is the most expected action to address the challenges brought about by the modular learning. Itorralba(2022) gave her viewpoint that educators should provide enjoyable, inspiring or simplified learning tools and materials to motivate students. She further suggested enforcing remedial classes for the students who lack the capacity to comprehend.

HINDRANCE TO STRATEGIES

Two veteran participants mentioned that there's a hindrance in applying the strategy that they think can cope to this new normal education. **T3, T4**

"Hindi ko rin ginawa kasi nakakatakot baka mabutasan at mag karoong ng transmission dahil samin yung mga bata (I did not give additional activities to pupils for this may entail misinterpretations)" -

T3

"We want to apply the case to case method per grade level. But since we are not allowed to do it because it might be dangerous in both parents so we cannot pursue but we are looking forward in the future." -T4

In contrary to what stated above, enforcing remedial classes was not employed due to health hazard.

CLASSROOM SET-UP

Two veteran participants said that both like to teach in an upland school. The learners are very innocent. The environment he encounters is far different in the lowlands. **T3,T4**

"The advantage in teaching in upland first of all is the nature, you can breath fresh air. Isa pa ang advantage dun dahil sa mga kulot masarap mag turo sa mga kulot kasi nga napaka innocent nila (Another advantage of teaching the IPs is that they are so innocent and naive)" -T3

"Children are obedient, easy to be with and easily engage with"-T4

Above all these downsides, the participants managed to see the goodness of teaching in the upland and appreciated the IP learners in their strengths rather than weaknesses. We often hear many Ips referring to themselves and others as uneducated, but Dr. Nina Ingle, the President of the Wildlife Conservation Society of the Philippines and Biodiversity Conservation Society of the Philippines emphasized that Ips are not ignorant, and that they had enormous amounts of knowledge in their ecosystems that we will never able to match it.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of the findings the researchers gathered suggest a thorough examination on struggles of the participants in upland schools. They refrain to be demanding to ease the difficulty they are experiencing, instead they are coping and continuously adjusting to the situation. Participants somehow see chances of hearing their voices when they are being sought by researchers. Despite challenges, still they see opportunities like widening their level of understanding to different type of learners in a different context and imparting knowledge using differentiated instruction. It is with utmost concern that concerned institution may notice what is lacking and what is really the need in upland education and ultimately what they are going through along the way. The delayed submissions of modules; modules which are not culture-based, lack of parental support, etc are just some of the basic deficiencies. Above-all, institutional support is seen as a major solution to the challenges experienced.

Teaching in the upland is more challenging than in the lowland. Although there are cases when the researchers see good things like learners are more behaved, the surroundings is more conducive because of the beauty of nature, etc., there seem to be more problems encountered along the way.

Based on the summary of findings, the researchers conclude the following:

- a. The participants experienced difficulties that they expected but embraced the situation for love and passion to their work,
- b. The participants made adjustments due to the pandemic that challenged their passion in teaching, and
- c. The participants need help in terms of assistance in providing educational resources like facilities; library, shops, etc.

It is therefore recommended the following measures:

1. Provide an orientation for teachers especially the neophytes who are assigned to upland schools so they would better understand culture of the school and community and the workload

they will have to expect especially in this new normal education. Provide monitoring as well to act promptly in anticipation of problems that may arise.

2. Larger support for upland based schools, their students, and all the stockholders is necessary because it can be a good help to produce a great professional indigenous people someday. Maybe the teachers are really lacking in educational materials and that limit their potential to produce one.

3. Teachers should strive to develop the openness trait/s in their personality and pursue the parent-teacher communication in terms of the progress of the children so that their teaching becomes more effective.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was conducted during the pandemic where the delivery of instruction was modularized. Future researchers may look into the scenarios pre pandemic, pandemic and post pandemic. Moreover, this study was confined to two research locale and limited to four participants. Future research may widen the scope by exploring other upland schools outside Pampanga and interview as many participants as possible to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching in upland.

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