

TEACHING JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL MATHEMATICS IN THE NEW NORMAL: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY

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ABSTRACT This study explored the lived experiences among junior high school mathematics teachers at Misamis Oriental General Comprehensive High School, Cagayan de Oro City in distance education in the new normal. This study employed a phenomenological research design with eleven (11) participants in the semi-structured in-depth interview through a focus group discussion (FGD). Maximum variation sampling was utilized in choosing the participants. Data analysis was done using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The study's findings yielded two (2) central themes: teaching junior high school mathematics in the new normal is challenging, and the new normal promotes teamwork and collaboration.

Keywords: challenges, opportunities, distance education, new normal, COVID-19, pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed abruptly all educational setups into remote teaching to ensure the safety of all learners and teachers. This transition has been a major challenge and is likely to widen existing achievement gaps [1]. Teachers, being the front liners in the educational system, are greatly affected. Because most of them were educated to teach in person, they're having a hard time adjusting to this new teaching paradigm. It was noted that teaching is possible in this situation, but it also comes with its own set of challenges [2].

In Misamis Oriental General Comprehensive High School (MOGCHS), following the DepEd's mandate, blended distance learning has been adopted during the time of the pandemic. It is any combination of the other three types of distance learning modalities such as Modular Distance Learning (MDL), Online Distance Learning (ODL), and TV-Based Instruction/Radio-Based Instruction (TVBI/RBI).

In an initial interview, one mathematics teacher shared that she found it hard to make sure students engaged during classes e.g. answering the modules, joining the synchronous classes, and participating during synchronous discussions. Another math teacher also raised about students' discipline e.g. submitting outputs on time; following the WHLP (Weekly Home Learning Plan) and she added that if students do not follow the WHLP, they are more likely to procrastinate, and their outputs are affected. These shared concerns are considered challenges for the teachers because these can lead to students' poor performance in the subject. These may then cause stress among teachers since it is their obligation to ensure that the quality of learning remains even with the absence of face-to-face interactions.

Hence, if the teachers' experienced challenges will not be addressed, the tendency is our educational system will be unable to develop a long-term alternative method of providing quality education in crisis times. Teachers will be overwhelmed and feel unsupported in doing their jobs well [3]. If teachers are not taken care of, there will be a surge of mental health difficulties, causing learning to be disrupted [4]. Providing a high-quality education will never be easy because they will be left unsure of what works and what does not. Motivating students to continue learning can also be difficult for them if they are having difficulties themselves. This may then lead to students' loss of interest in learning,

increasing the risks of dropping out.

Several researchers undertook phenomenological investigations using various learning modalities in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. However, there is only limited research tackling phenomenology involving how the new normal affects teachers, particularly those teaching mathematics in junior high schools. The researchers believed that by investigating and understanding the junior high school mathematics teachers' lived experiences and challenges, alternative solutions to problems can be offered. Thus, this study aimed to explore how distance learning in the new normal affect junior high school mathematics teachers.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore junior high school mathematics teachers' lived experiences in distance education in the new normal.

The study was participated by 11 junior high school mathematics teachers in Misamis Oriental General Comprehensive High School (MOGCHS). Maximum variation sampling was utilized in the selection of the participants for the focus group discussion (FGD). Maximum variation sampling (sometimes referred to as maximum diversity sampling or maximum heterogeneity sampling) is a sampling method in which researchers attempt to collect data from the widest range of perspectives possible about a certain topic. The goal of this type of sampling is to gain an understanding of a certain topic from a wide variety of angles [6].

The researcher asked permission from the principal and the OIC of the mathematics department to see the profiles of all the teachers in each year level from grade 7 to grade 10 in order to select the participants. The researcher chose three teachers in each year level wherein they are assigned to teach. The researcher made sure that in each grade level, teachers who are extremely different in age and sex were the participants for the interview. The reason for using the maximum variation sampling method for this phase is that by sampling individuals who are extremely different from one another, wherein, in this case, on their ages, and their sex, the researcher can gain a more holistic view of the challenges that mathematics teachers experienced in distance education in the new normal from many different standpoints.

After the selection of the participants, the researchers asked the target participants via phone calls if they were willing to be interviewed. Upon getting their approval, they were given a schedule for the interview.

On the day of the in-depth interview, the researchers held an orientation with the participants prior to the start of the focus group discussion. The COVID-19 healthy protocols were followed by everyone. The orientation included the Data Privacy Act of 2012, Republic Act 10173's data collection process, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Consent from the participants for an audio recording of the interview was sought. The participants were also informed that they could speak freely about their experiences in the vernacular (*Sinugbuanong Binisaya*) language. They were then asked to fill out the interview/focus group consent form.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the interview was held inside the classroom with just the researchers and participants in attendance. To explore the participants' lived experiences in the new normal, the researcher used a researcher-made semi-structured interview with an open-ended questionnaire (see Table 1).

Table 1. Researcher-made interview questions

<p>General Question: Could you please share your experiences in teaching mathematics in this new normal?</p>
<p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you tell me more about...? 2. You said, ... Did I hear it correctly? 3. What support did you receive? 4. How about your relationships with parents and colleagues 5. Aside from those you mentioned, what other challenges and difficulties have you experienced?

The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedures such as familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme defining and naming, and writing up. In this study, the audio recording of the interview was repeatedly listened to by the researchers, who then had a verbatim transcription of the data and have it translated into the English language. After the translation, the researchers started coding the data and generated themes from it. It was then double-checked by reviewing the translated transcription again. Based on the translated transcription and coded data, the researchers have emerged themes and defined them. Then the researchers wrote the data analysis.

To avoid misconceptions and biases, the researchers presented the result to the participants to seek clarification and confirmation of the data analysis since the trustworthiness of results is the bedrock of high-quality qualitative research studies [7]. Furthermore, to hide the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used. For example, participant 1 is to P₁; participant 2 is to P₂, and so on.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study on the junior high school mathematics teachers' lived experiences in distance

education in the new normal yielded two (2) central themes: teaching junior high school mathematics in the new normal is challenging, and the new normal promotes teamwork and collaboration.

Theme 1. Teaching junior high school mathematics in the new normal is challenging.

The most common theme identified by the interviewees was teaching junior high school mathematics in the new normal is challenging. The interviewees expressed their struggles with technology use; students' inability to join online classes; emotion management; module preparation, distribution, and retrieval; parent and student management; assessment integrity; and financial problems.

Challenges in Using Technologies

During the interview, participants declared that they were struggling with the use of technology. For instance, they asserted that they were not skilled in creating and editing videos, which are crucial for carrying out distance education. The following observations and comments capture this category.

I have trouble utilizing modern technologies.

I had a hard time utilizing things related to technology. At first, I really cried because I felt so helpless. I didn't even know how to use online platforms like google meet, zoom, etc. Although I've been into webinars, I am still not a fast learner. I don't know much about technology. I am not yet very capable of creating and editing videos. I need someone to assist me in doing these things. I won't deny the fact that I'm one of those teachers who find it hard to adapt to the advent of new technology. I don't even know how to start a presentation with the use of a cellular phone.

I lack the necessary devices.

My processor is not good enough. Every time I open applications like Canva, my laptop lags. Sometimes I get frustrated because my laptop lags and I can't finish my tasks right away. My laptop keeps lagging and I can't edit videos on it. I think I should be able to do it with a high-end PC or laptop. The technical proficiency of teachers and students with regard to using computers and the internet is a critical factor impacting the success of online programs [8]. Hence, effective teachers need to be both subject matter experts and flexible in their use of various pedagogies' affordances for various content areas. [9].

Challenges in Conducting Online Classes

Although teachers were not required to hold online discussions, many of them, particularly the math teachers, preferred to do so to aid students in understanding the module's contents. The accessibility of students to online classes is described below.

Many students are unable to attend online classes.

I have students who are willing to attend online classes, yet they could not because they are just using their parents' cell phones. Hence, whenever their parents are not around the students don't have gadgets to use. I cannot force my students to join our online classes. Most of the time only 10 out of my 50 students can join our online class. I have students who have no internet signal in their places. These are the students who live away from the city. The students have to hunt for spots with an internet signal or go to the city whenever we have online classes.

Online learning is seriously hampered by a lack of connectivity [8]. In addition to not having connections where

the students live, internet access is also pricey. If all the subjects do online classes, students must have their own Wi-Fi at home or purchase a large quantity of internet data each day. For the parents, especially those who lost their employment because of the pandemic, this would be an additional strain. Parents' and students' financial circumstances need to be considered. In conclusion, teachers cannot compel students to join in their online classes. As a result, only a few students get to participate in the actual discussion with the teacher.

Challenges in Managing Emotions

This showcases the teachers' personal feelings. The participants expressed how they felt about conducting distance education in the new normal.

It's not that simple to deal with personal feelings.

I no longer really feel my worth as a teacher. I can't even get my students to appreciate me. It came to a point when I got really depressed. Given the numerous distractions on the part of the students, I couldn't be certain that all of them were listening to what I was saying during our discussion.

I already felt depressed and stressed just to make sure the students will still learn from me despite not having in-person classes. But it seemed that for them it was just nothing. It's disappointing on my part.

Because of this pandemic, we all experience uncomfortable and uncontrollable feelings [10]. When students do not pay attention, teachers can sense it and it makes them feel disappointed because showing up just for attendance purposes only will not help the students learn and it makes the teachers feel unworthy. Feelings of worthlessness often involve a sense of insignificance in oneself and are strongly linked to hopelessness and self-blame [11].

Teaching can be challenging and frustrating, especially in these difficult times [12]. It was reported that teachers have experienced alarmingly high rates of anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic — even more than healthcare workers, according to recent research published in Educational Researcher, a journal of the American Education Research Association [13]. Those teaching remotely reported substantially higher rates of depression and feelings of isolation than those teaching in person [14].

Challenges in Module Preparation, Distribution, and Retrieval

This describes how module preparation, distribution, and retrieval affected the teachers. Participants described that preparing, distributing, and retrieving the modules required considerable time and effort. Participants also shared their experiences on retrieving outputs with few questions answered and submission of blank answer sheets.

It is daunting to prepare, distribute, and retrieve modules.

Some of my struggles were the production of modules, distribution, and up to the checking part. It required considerable time and effort.

I constantly notify the parents and guardians of my students on the schedule for module distribution and retrieval but not all of them follow the schedule.

I have received outputs wherein students only wrote their names on them with no answers at all! There were also outputs submitted without names on them. While others answered only a few items. The unprecedented transition and

shift to modular distance learning had placed teachers into unprepared situations making the modality time-consuming [15]. Because there are so many different tasks that need to be accomplished, the current modality implementation requires a lot of time [15]. For instance, they need to edit the modules, then print them, and then sort them [15].

In the module distribution and retrieval, the parents/guardians were tasked to get and return the self-learning modules from and to the school to ensure the safety of learners [16]. However, not all the parents would get and submit the modules on the scheduled date. Teachers needed to give consideration because many of the parents were in financial instability due to losing their jobs. Some parents/guardians were working too, and sometimes they forgot the schedule or they have other appointments on the scheduled distribution day [17]. This resulted in unnecessary reporting to school teachers as they went back and forth just so they could entertain the parents [18]. This was such a huge health risk for them given the circumstances of the COVID-19 infection [18].

The issue of students turning in blank answer sheets or with only a few questions answered arises from their inability to comprehend the module's contents. Hence, the students have left no choice but to leave answer sheets in the module blank because of the level of difficulty in the activities provided in the module [5] and Mathematics is the most challenging module [19, 20].

Challenges in Managing Parents and Learners

This explains how teachers were challenged in managing parents and learners. Participants claimed that there were communication gaps among teachers, parents, and students. They also found it hard to manage vulnerable students.

Managing parents and students is crucial.

I keep calling the parents through phones but some of them did not respond. I even found out that a parent has blocked me. Others also gave unattended numbers. Hence monitoring became more difficult.

I have students who keep calling me even at 12 midnight or 1 am. One of my parents reported that his son said that he'd rather want to be in jail because there is no module in prison. My student told me that it would be better if he'd get COVID because there is no module in the hospital. Most of the participants observed that many students are available online at nighttime and most of the students preferred to communicate with their teacher late. Hence this added another burden to teachers because they're not used to staying awake late at night.

Teachers were also concerned about how to treat vulnerable students since they lacked the necessary training. Students expressed to their teachers that they feel tortured by the learning modalities. The teachers found this alarming and it is difficult for them to deal with these vulnerable students. It has been noted that loss of school connectedness, due to school closures, may exacerbate the risk of educational disengagement, especially for vulnerable young people [21]. Unlike face-to-face classes wherein they can consult with the teachers directly and they can socialize with their classmates.

Challenges in Upholding Assessment Integrity

This highlights how difficult it was for the participants to maintain academic integrity in assessments.

It is challenging to uphold academic integrity in assessments.

Behind their submitted nice and correct answers, I don't really know who answered it. Was it really the student? We don't have any assurance.

I wanted to conduct an online evaluation, wherein their cameras are on and students will be answering it simultaneously. But I can't oblige the students to do so considering that many of them don't have access to the internet and gadgets.

I have neighbors who hired a tutor. They were all of the same grade levels. In order to pay evenly, they divided the payable amount. However, it turned out that they were only paying the tutor to answer their modules since they all have the same materials.

Hiring tutors is a great help for students to understand the topics. In fact, tutoring ranks among the most widespread, versatile, and potentially transformative instruments within today's educational toolkit [22]. But hiring them just to merely answer the module without explaining it well is unacceptable.

In a recent study, it was found that the integrity of mathematics classroom assessment is a critical concern and a challenge for teachers, parents, and students [23]. Honesty and morality are the cornerstones of integrity; when applied to one's academic life, these form the foundation of Academic Integrity [24]. It is being questioned due to the widespread availability of cheating techniques and the growing pressure on students to perform even during these trying times [24].

Challenges in Managing Finances

This discusses how the teachers' financial difficulty affects their performance.

Financial difficulties affect teachers' personal and professional lives.

Another challenge is that some of us receive very low net take-home pay due to having debts. They don't seem to be motivated to go to work anymore. Yes, particularly those who provide for almost an entire battalion as the sole earner in the family. Having a Wi-Fi connection at home is expensive. It's an additional budget. Providing a constant internet load for us would be a great help. It can lessen our financial burden.

It was noted that teachers spent their salaries to equip them with the necessary learning or classroom resources [25]. Financial woes are frequent issues observed with public school teachers [26]. Teachers' academic advancement, capabilities, and professional upgrading activities contributed to enjoyable and productive teaching. However, financial worries sometimes form part of the teachers' failure in doing their best in the teaching arena [26, 27]. When it comes to how financial hardships affect teachers' personal and professional lives, their living situation has an impact on how they perform at work [25]. Their enthusiasm and focus on their work have also declined [25]. Hence, teachers need to live a balanced life to inspire others as teachers [25, 28].

Theme 2. The new normal promotes teamwork and collaboration.

The second theme discusses the positive effects found by junior high school mathematics teachers in the new normal. They found this as an avenue to collaborate well with parents and colleagues, an opportunity for improving themselves, and a time to showcase their resiliency.

It is the chance to collaborate with parents and colleagues.

Although we are struggling in this situation, we are fortunate that there are teachers who are eager to assist us who are in need.

Actually, I believe this scenario has real potential. It's the chance wherein we can collaborate with the parents and give parents trust in ensuring that their sons/daughters have understood the topics, even just the basic concepts.

It was evident from the participants' responses that asking for help and advice from colleagues or other experienced teachers has helped the teachers cope with their difficulties. Being open and willing to accept constructive criticism also helped them perform better [17].

Additionally, collaborating with parents was also of great help. Making the parents realize the essence of helping their sons/daughters in their lessons will be of great help in building their future. Also, their bonds with their sons or daughters during this period can be strengthened. Hence, collaboration between parents and teachers is considered essential in supporting a child's academic and social development [29].

This is an opportunity for improvement.

I didn't imagine entering the teaching industry and experiencing this setting. I didn't expect this, but I also find this as an opportunity for improvement.

In using technologies, most of us had limited knowledge of using these before. But because of the scenario, we were forced to be resourceful enough in order to deliver the lessons effectively to the students.

Teachers saw room for improvement in this situation. This means the pandemic did not only bring negative but also positive aspects. This is in consonance with Magomed (2020) saying that incorporating technology into the educational system comes to mind when talking about the pandemic's positive effects. Education and technologies always come together, but with the pandemic, it took a new level. Although this can be seen as a forced transition, at the time this is the only fusible solution [30].

This is the time to showcase mathematics teachers' resiliency.

Despite the numerous problems encountered, I always mind my role as a teacher. No matter how tired I am, I always keep in mind to always act responsibly and do my best.

Yes. We must do our best as teachers. It's up to the students now how they maximize the things we have provided for them.

It was evident that through these challenges teachers were given a chance to show how good they are at finding ways/solutions to cope and simplify things, not just focusing on the negative aspects. Positive thinking helps teachers maintain a calm perspective despite the difficulties and challenges caused by the changes in the educational setting

[17].

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, the researchers conclude that public junior high school mathematics teachers experienced difficulties in distance learning in the new normal. Due to the sudden shift of learning modalities, they were challenged in using technologies, students' inability to attend online classes, teachers' personal feelings; module preparation, distribution, and retrieval; managing parents and students; ensuring academic integrity in assessment; and financial difficulty. Teachers need more actual training to become more competent, and they also require more parental, administrative, and other stakeholder assistance in order to carry out their jobs effectively. However, on the other hand, they also found this scenario as their opportunity to grow more as teachers. They searched for solutions and never gave up, no matter how difficult the situation was for them.

5.ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to express their sincere gratitude to MOGCHS led by Mr. Abdon R. Bacayana PhD, Principal IV, and Ms. Emelda S. Arabala, the OIC of the mathematics department, for allowing the researchers to conduct the study in the school. Furthermore, the researchers are also grateful to the College of Science and Technology Education (CSTE) of the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines (USTP) led by Ms. Laila S. Lomibao PhD, for the support and approval of the study. Most importantly, thanks to the Department of Science and Technology – Science Education Institute (DOST-SEI) for the scholarship grant.

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