

“T’s of Stress and What HELPED in Coping: Understanding the Stress and Coping Strategies of the Pioneer Teachers in the Grade 11 of the K to 12 Curriculum

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Abstract: *Philippines is in its year of implementing a senior high school as part of the K to 12 curriculum. Since it is the first time of the teachers in the country to this curriculum, these “pioneer teachers” are expected to have experienced difficulties. With their stress comes adaptation strategies to help resolve the problem. Hence, this study aims to understand the stress and coping strategies of Senior High School teachers in the first year of implementation of Grade 11 in the K to 12 curriculum. Findings show that the four T’s which causes stress to the teachers which will eventually affect the implementation of the curriculum in the long run were “too much to do with too little time,” “too little support for too many things,” “too much expectations with not enough efforts,” and “too much duties and obligations with too little support.” Moreover, findings indicate that the HELPED coping strategies shows the efforts of teachers in bridging the gap between the ideal and the reality of implementing the Grade 11 in its first-year implementation in the Philippines. They are “holistic acceptance,” “extended efforts,” “laborious preparation,” “personal adaptations,” “extended facilities” and “developed initiatives.”*

Keywords: *teacher difficulties, coping mechanisms, K to 12 curriculum, qualitative case study, pioneer teachers*

1. Introduction

Research demonstrate that 40% of teachers’ experience serious stress symptoms, which appeared due to too big workload, unsatisfied and insulting pupils and their parents (Austin, Shah & Muncer, 2005) cited by Kepalaite (2013). Richards (2012) further stated that the conditions that cause teachers enormous stress are largely beyond their power to control and that the only true power stressed teachers have is their choice of coping strategies as suggested by teachers who are managing to cope and even thrive in these challenging times.

As more researchers go deep into the analysis of stress and coping strategies. Stress coping is now understood as the individual's efforts, manifesting themselves at the behavioral and cognitive level, to cope with external and internal requirements when the existing resources are already exhausted or insufficient (Lazarus, 1993). The term coping is used irrespective of effectiveness or adaptivity of employed efforts (Kepalaite, 2013).

Teachers, the practitioners of teaching, play fundamental roles in nearly all formal instructional systems (Borko, 2004). Therefore, teachers are regarded as a “cornerstone” or “the most influential factor” in educational innovations (Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001). Given the key role of teachers in the implementation of innovations, the researchers attempted to understand the teachers' stress and coping strategies while in the transition of adapting into the uncharted territory of advancing the Grade 11 program of the K to 12 curriculum as mandated by DepEd in the Philippines. Hence, this study aims to understand the stress and coping strategies of Senior High School teachers in the first year of implementation of Grade 11 in the K to 12 curriculum.

2. Methods

This qualitative study employed case study as its research design. Creswell, (2003) cited by Williams (2007) defined case study as “researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals.” Leedy and Ormrod (2001) further require a case study to have a defined time frame. The case study can be either a single case or a case bounded by time and place (Creswell, 1998). Leedy and Ormrod (2001) state that case studies attempt to learn “more about a little known or poorly understood the situation.” Creswell (1998) suggests the structure of a case study should be the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned. This study purports to understand the lebenswelt of the pioneer teachers in the Grade 11 of the K to 12 Curriculum.

Five respondents were chosen following the inclusion criteria of trained and untrained language teachers who taught for the entire School Year of 2016-2017 (1st and 2nd Semester) in the first year of the implementation of Grade 11. The respondents were from Baguio City National Science High School-Senior High Stand Alone, Sto. Tomas National High School, Balili National High School, Evelio Javier Memorial National High School, and Loo National High School.

Having 5 interview subjects for the study was selected base from Creswell’s (2013) suggestion of collecting extensive details about a few sites or individuals. He recommended a sample size that ranges from no more than four to five cases for a case study. The researchers opted to conduct the research from urban (Baguio) to rural (Benguet) schools with a varied number of enrollees to maximize the richness of data.

A two-part instrument was developed by the researchers to gather data and information for this qualitative study. The first part comprises of robotfoto, a Dutch term pertaining to the preliminary sketch of the subjects (Kelchtermans and Ballet, 2002), cited by de Castro and de Guzman (2012) which included the school/level, age, gender, years of service and subject/s taught. The second part consisted of semi structured in-depth interviews (Patton, 1990) data gathering tool. An aide memoire which probed into the stress and coping strategies of the teachers was developed by the researchers. It dwelt on the respondents' stress and coping strategies experiences in the first year implementation of Grade 11 in the K to 12 curriculum.

A letter of request was given to the interviewees prior to data gathering informing them of the nature of the investigation and the extent of their involvement. With their consent, the interview was scheduled based on their availability and convenience. Prior to the actual interview, a robotfoto was utilized to gather the demographic data of the respondents. Interviews were audio recorded for the purpose of capturing everything that transpired in the process. The interview lasted for an average of 45 minutes to 1 hour.

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into texts, then text analysis was utilized to gather the common themes. The process involved sorting, categorization (cool analysis) and thematization (warm analysis). Inductive and deductive methods (Hardy, Gammage and Hall, 2001) cited by de Castro and de Guzman (2012) were used to ensure appropriate placement of themes. To ensure the reliability of data, counter-checking procedures by the teacher interviewees and preparing validating related literatures were done by the researchers. Finally, the triangulation of the gathered data from another set of interview with a Master Teacher and four Senior High students were also conducted.

3. Findings

Cool and warm analyses of the verbalizations and sharing of a selected group of teachers in the Senior High School with regard to their personal involvement in the K to 12 Curriculum and its fifth-year implementation in the secondary level which paved the way in the offering of Grade 11. Their exposure to the setting, organization and other key players (school administrators, community stakeholders, parents and students), yielded features that collectively describe several causes of stress, specifically the four T's which were "too much to do with too little time," "too little support for too many things," "too much expectations with not enough efforts," and "too much duties and obligations with too little support." The HELPED coping strategies shows their efforts in bridging the gap between the ideal and the reality of implementing the Grade 11 in its first-year implementation in the Philippines. They were "holistic acceptance," "extended efforts," "laborious preparation," "personal adaptations," "extended facilities" and "developed initiatives." Although the findings seem to negatively reflect

some aspects of the implementation of Grade 11 in its first year of implementation, the researchers hope that the study will serve as a guide for the Grade 11 implementers in the high offices to help alleviate the teachers' concerns.

3.1. T's of Stress

Too much to do with too little time. In this study, the teachers' struggle in the preparation of lesson was pointed out. As verbalized by the respondents,

- *After a year in teaching in the senior high, I feel exhausted because I have to do extensive research, reading, and preparation of new instructional materials. (1)*

- *The preparation of the lesson logs and so with the instructional materials are really time consuming since the topic/s are new that you need to research and read more about it before making your lesson logs and instructional materials. (4)*

These verbalizations were validated during the triangulation when some student-respondents and Master Teacher-respondent shared their struggles when it comes to references in the school. As expressed,

- *We really lack books. (1)*

- *There were no books and other materials that were distributed to us individually so it's difficult. (4)*

The teachers' expectation might also have played a part as a cause of stress as one respondent expressed, *-I was thinking that I might be just simply delivering the lesson in the learning module and I will be just acting as facilitator, but it didn't come out to be like this, since; most of the time, I do research on the subject matter. I really found it too tasking. (5)*

Being a faculty member of the HEI's for a long time, some newly hired Grade 11 teachers had difficulty in getting used to filling multiple forms required by the DepEd as shared by one of the interviewees,

- *There's a lot of forms to be filled. (3)*

Moreover, one respondent shared her opinion in terms of the list of topics/competencies that they have to finish within a limited span of time. As expressed,

- *There was a lack of time and the list of topics/competencies were really long that we do not have enough time to discuss and prepare everything. (1)*

This was validated by the student-respondents and Master Teacher-respondent when they shared that they need to read in advance to cope with the lessons. As verbalized,

- *I do advance research on the internet. I review also our lessons ahead of time because our subjects are advance. (4)*

- *I need to read in advance. (5)*

In summary, the teacher's stress in preparation is really daunting caused by multiple factors, there seems to be a feeling of exhaustion though they just taught in the Grade 11 for only a year.

Too little support for too many things. Lack of facilities, teachers, administrative support, and training were major concerns of the teachers. It does not help that they also lack confidence in implementing the new curriculum. They were overwhelmed by the demands of having to accommodate a new batch of learners as an addition to the former Grade 7 to 10. Currently, they have a new batch of learners as Grade 11 with various needs and demands that they need to accommodate despite their own uncertainties on how to proceed in implementing the new curriculum. Some teacher-respondents shared the lack of classrooms, chairs, learning materials and learning modules as they stated,

- *The foremost challenges we have experienced were unavailability or lack of classrooms, chairs, learning materials, learning modules. (5)*

- *Materials like books, etc., the learners' manual are unavailable. The construction of Senior High Building is ongoing. (4)*

The absence or the on-going construction of Senior High classrooms and lack of facilities were affirmed by the other respondents during the triangulation. As they accounted,

- *Buildings are still under construction so we need to use the Science Laboratory as a classroom. We do not have books and other materials. (4)*

- *What came as a challenge to me and likewise with other teachers, whom I come across with during my classroom observations, was the unavailability of learning modules. It is the teacher's obligation to look for references. (5)*

The mismatch in the of field of specialization and the subject being taught also came out as a part of the findings as some interviewees shared,

-We are given other subjects if there are no teachers available who majored in that specialization. Like for example, me, I am teaching Philosophy. (2)

-I became a generalist. I started teaching subjects that are not aligned with my specialization. (1)

-It's a different thing if you teach another subject which is not your field of specialization. (4)

As a result of the mismatch, some teachers cope by giving too many activities to the students. This was confirmed by the student respondent as she stated,

- Maybe in terms of psychological, the many or overloading of the activities. (2)

Prior to the start of classes some Senior High School teacher applicants were sent for training, but the opportunity of being sent was limited and not for everybody, thus not all teacher applicants attended. As the class starts, some Junior High School teachers were forced to accept teaching loads in the Senior High even if they did not apply for a teaching position, as a result, they were forced to teach even if they did not attend any formal training as one of the respondents shared,

-We were not sent for training. (4)

Finally, the support of the school administration was not felt by the teachers as one of the interviewees shared,

-We do not gain support somewhat like that from the administrator because if we are going to say ahh... it will be like this..... there will always be the chance that our administrator would say that we are going to do remedial class or intervention. If there are competencies they were not able to meet; we need still to teach them. As I said, it is like in the Junior High. (2)

Too much expectations with not enough efforts. The Grade 11 learners were equal to first-year college students so in terms of behavior or discipline the teachers have higher expectations, unfortunately, these were not met by the learners. They don't exert enough efforts in their self-discipline and they don't have academic accountability. As some of them recalled,

-Students still need constant guidance and reminders though they have moved up to one step level of maturity (5)

-The students are having difficulty, especially in expressing themselves and their ideas or in other words, they lack self-confidence. (4)

The concerns of the teachers in terms of the student discipline were affirmed by the two student-respondents and Master Teacher-respondent. As they shared,

-Other lessons are boring so I need to force myself to wake up and listen. (4)

-There had been a problem regarding the student's behavior. I found them unmanageable during the 1st quarter. They become unruly especially if they transfer to another subject. (5)

Too much duties and obligations with too little support. The school administration plays a crucial part in the success of the implementation; however, it seems to be one of the factors that cause the teachers' stress because it instigated the concept of mismatching of the subject taught due to lack of teachers within the school. As verbalized,

-We were given other subjects since there were no teachers available who majored in that specialization. Like for example, me, I am teaching philosophy. (2)

-I became a generalist. I started teaching subjects which are not aligned with my specialization. (1)

Though the teachers were exerting efforts in teaching subjects that were not in line with their field of specialization their mastery in terms of content were questioned by some students. As some student-respondents shared,

-She is having difficulty explaining to us the concepts and so we also find it difficult to understand her subject. (1)

-One of our teachers is major in Statistics however she is teaching us Earth and Life Sciences. (3)

The unwillingness of school heads to take a part in the failure and lack of discipline of learners remain a burden to teachers as pointed out by one of the respondents,

-Our head always points out to us advisers that it is our fault if we cannot handle our students. (3)

Moreover, the overlapping of functions and distribution of unequal teaching loads were observed as some of the respondents shared,

-Related teaching activities are also expected of me especially that I was given an advisory class. I do teaching at the same time I function as guidance counselor (5)

-Aside from being a Filipino teacher of grade 7, Grade 8, and Grade 11, I am also assigned as the school librarian, designated ICT coordinator, Filipino coordinator, and a school paper adviser. (4)

-The functions were overlapping and the distribution of load was not balanced. (1)

Having a balanced distribution of loads and functions can be of great help in the success of the teaching-learning process; however, this is not the reality of the teacher respondents.

3.2. What HELPED in coping

Holistic acceptance. The teachers' used several strategies in coping with the demands of being a Grade 11 teacher. One of them were students' related coping wherein they employed patience, guidance, and acceptance of their students' limitations. As some of the respondents verbalized,

-I have extended my understanding to the different capability, styles, and behaviors of my learners. (4)

-We really need to be patient with those kinds of students especially if their behavior is somewhat related to their culture. (2)

The teachers claim of using different strategies in dealing with their Grade 11 students were validated in the triangulation. As some student-respondents and Master Teacher-respondent shared,

-If we are sleepy, we go out and then jump or we do something outside and if our teacher notices that we are sleepy, he gives us time to refresh ourselves. (1)

-We have one microscope for the whole class so we go in front individually just to see the parts and be able to use the microscope. (4)

Extended efforts. This refers to the students' and parents' related coping strategy wherein the teachers went the extra mile by extending their efforts by talking with students and parents during their vacant time. Moreover, the teachers also visited the students at home despite the fact that they were already in the Grade 11. As the interviewees shared,

-One thing more, you need to talk to them personally so that you can learn from them through discourse or interaction so that you will know the reasons why they show such behavior in the classroom. (2)

-Talking to parents sometimes teachers, as an adviser, you will serve as a parent to your students. (3)

These extended efforts were confirmed in the triangulation. As the student-respondents and Master Teacher-respondent shared,

-I have seen that they (teachers) have more concern and they really are very concerned with their students. (2)

-Some teachers are very patient and considerate. (4)

Laborious preparation. This pertains to the preparation related coping wherein the teachers labored to deliver the expected lessons and competencies by making schedules, asking help from colleagues, reading on teaching strategies, preparing the lessons extensively and researching on the net. As the respondents expressed,

-DepEd wasn't able to provide so it's on my part as a teacher to do the research, look for books, and go to different bookstores to look for some materials. (3)

-Yes it is a challenge just the same because we need to read books available, make a research, ahh.. in the library or even on the net so that we are going to know the lessons that we are going to teach to our students. (2)

Personal adaptations. This concerns the individual adaptations of teachers in dealing with all the expected functions that they have to fulfill. The teachers have varied reactions with regard to their circumstances but they also have varied personal adaptations as stated,

-I just kept going despite my uncertainties. (1)

-I find time for myself and for my family, and do some things which could relieve stress like having some sort of relaxing activities. (4)

Extended facilities. This pertains to the facilities such as classrooms, chairs etc. that the Senior High used at the beginning of the school year to alleviate the lack of facilities. As some respondents recalled,

-We have been borrowing the BSU-BC Shop buildings for almost 2 months. It was in the middle of August when we have secured or borrowed better classrooms from the multi-purpose building. With regards to the armchair, the neighboring elementary schools lent their extra armchairs (5)

-We were accommodated by other schools because our school is not yet finished (on-going construction) even with the use of facilities. (3)

These were corroborated by a student-respondent. As verbalized,

-We used the Science Laboratory. (4)

Developed initiatives. This refers to contextualizing lessons and materials as well as reading any available materials that might help the teachers. As evidenced by the following statement.

-Lessons have to be contextualized according to the availability of materials as well as to suit the experiences, level, and reality of the students. (1)

This was confirmed by a student-respondent when shared how the initiatives of the teachers helped at the time when there was lack of references. As stated,

-Even though we lack references as I said awhile back, our teachers are doing their best to provide what are lacking. We were taught to be resourceful; we use what is available. (2)

4. Discussions

Our findings show that the four T's which causes stress to the teachers which will eventually affect the implementation of the curriculum in the long run were "too much to do with too little time," "too little support for too many things," "too much expectations with not enough efforts," and "too much duties and obligations with too little support."

Kepalaite (2013) stated that several tendencies could be distinguished in the researches on teachers' stress. One of them is researches into teachers' stress, analyzing the so-called external stressors. It was identified that main sources of the teacher's stress were: too heavy workload, problems in cooperation with colleagues, poor administration and management (Kyriacou, 2001), too many roles (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005), lack of support, excessive social expectations, lack of autonomy (Punch & Tuettemann, 1990), constantly changing requirements, too much of bureaucracy (paperwork), too little work with the class (Moriarity, Edmonds, Blatford, & Martin, 2001), pupils' problematic behavior, bad working conditions, lack of time (Abel & Sewell, 1999), etc. These findings complement Skaalvik, E. & Skaalvik, S. (2014) study on job satisfaction, stress and coping strategies in the teaching profession, which found that teachers experience high workload and a severe time pressure at school. Several teachers said they were worn out at the end of the school day. This finding has clear practical implications. Most importantly, the workload on teachers has to be reduced, particularly the number of meetings, paperwork, and documentation. Secondly, the findings strongly indicate that teachers need flexibility regarding where and when to prepare for teaching. The causes of stress emphasized by the teachers are partly interrelated. For instance, workload and time pressure most likely increase because of disruptive student behavior, conflicts in teacher teams, and the inclusive school policy not being accompanied by sufficient resources.

However, findings also indicate the HELPED coping strategies which show the efforts of teachers in bridging the gap between the ideal and the reality of implementing the Grade 11 in its first-year of implementation in the Philippines. They are "holistic acceptance," "extended efforts," "laborious preparation," "personal adaptations," "extended facilities" and "developed initiatives."

Common positive strategies teachers use to alleviate stress include exercise, social resources, avoidance, reading, hobbies, movement, and meditation (Gulwadi, 2006) as cited by Sprenger, (2011). These coping strategies used by teachers affect their outlook on the situation, thereby altering the perception of stress (Griffith, Steptoe, & Cropley, 1999). To alter the perception of stress, teachers may invoke inward or outward coping strategies. Inward strategies, such as concentrating on something narrow in the field of stimuli around oneself, include seeking stillness and focus. Outward strategies, such as exercise, involve seeking connections, distractions, and movement (Gulwadi, 2006) as cited by Sprenger, (2011). Although there are many common coping strategies available, most teachers rely on social support, active planning, restorative experiences, and suppression of competing behaviors. Social support can reduce the impact of stressors on teachers' well-being, job satisfaction, and physical illness risk. Teachers seek support from family, friends, and colleagues in order to receive advice, discuss feelings, get emotional support, get sympathy and understanding, and to talk about their feelings. Teachers who have more support within their personal lives tend to experience less stress in the workplace. Active planning, although a part of the normal workload, allows teachers to take their mind off stress and focus on their work. The process of active planning involves concentrating efforts, developing a plan, taking

some action, coming up with strategies, trying to take steps, and doing what has to be done in order to keep their attention on the students rather than the stressor (Griffith, Steptoe, & Cropley, 1999).

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