



Perception of Teaching During the Pandemic: an Ontological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study describes teachers' perception of online synchronous teaching as an alternative delivery format during the pandemic in specialized curricula in elementary schools in the Philippines. This study uses a qualitative research design and employs the case study method. The methods for gathering data are one-on-one online interviews, face-to-face focus group discussions, and analysis of classroom artifacts, which include weekly home learning plans and lesson modules. The study uses thematic analysis to analyze the data and the triangulation method to validate the generated results. The perceptions were grounded on the reported challenges and coping strategies employed by the participants in addressing the emerging gaps in education delivery during the pandemic, resulting in two major themes: views of online teaching and professional identity. Furthermore, a noticeable unfolding of teachers' professional identity during the pandemic was manifested. The results provide empirical evidence for developing teachers' professional development, well-being, teaching perception, teacher identity, and professionalism.

Keywords: *online teaching, readiness in using technology, teacher professional identity, self-preservation, well-being*

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INTRODUCTION

With the unprecedented global crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, education is no exception. Teachers are at the forefront of ensuring education continuity amidst the pandemic. The role of transforming the written curriculum into a taught curriculum embeds professional duty. However, teaching and learning face daily challenges with the abrupt change and the newly configured learning environment. Transitioning to a different teaching modality requires a lengthy testing process commonly accompanied by crisis. Inevitably, the teacher's decisions and actions, particularly during these trying times, are guided by their understanding of the information presented and what is happening in their environment.

This study, uniquely guided by Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991b) delves into principle that personal experience is integral to the learning process. This theory states that when transformational learning occurs, it undergoes a paradigm shift that directly impact future experiences. There are nine phases of transformation according to Mezirow (cited in Critical theory and Transformative Learning, 2018) which include a disorienting dilemma; self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; a critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared; exploration of options for new roles, planning a course of actions, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; provisional trying new roles; building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's perspective.

Teachers' personal and professional lives have been fully integrated in response to the pandemic and the transition of teaching to an online modality. Teachers are in a dilemma of caring for their families while ensuring they teach online classes. The pandemic inevitably brought a mash-up of teachers' lives, which

brought emotional challenges related to how they formed their identity as teachers (Jones & Kessler, 2020). The teacher's experiences and adaptation to this unprecedented crisis in education have shaped new perceptions of their professional identity and the concept of teaching.

The study by Weiner (2023) conducted on art students revealed that psychological well-being was affected more strongly with a low sense of agency, unstable ontological security, and experienced traumatic reality, while others with a high sense of agency tended to focus on the benefits rather than losses. Therefore, a stable, ontological sense is significant in perceiving one's role and capacity, especially during challenging times like the pandemic.

In this study, an ontological lens will be used to analyze teachers' perceptions and realities in teaching during the context of the pandemic. It seeks to answer the question, "What are the teacher's perceptions of teaching during the pandemic?" This study aims to analyze the teachers' firsthand experiences teaching during the pandemic in using alternative formats of education delivery. This study is significant in producing knowledge that can be used for dealing with future crises in education.

METHOD

The study utilizes qualitative design employing the case study method. Qualitative case study design is an approach in research that facilitates the exploration of phenomena within their context using various data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2015b). The researcher uses a case study as the inquiry approach to explore a phenomenon involving the participants in depth. This research design is used to derive answers to the research question "how," in which the researcher has no control over the condition or event that focuses on the contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2003, p.19). Furthermore, the case study is based on a constructive paradigm (Baxter, 2015b).

The study was conducted in three selected science curriculum elementary schools in the Philippine's Department of Education Division Offices in Central Luzon. The period of gathering data was during the height of the school closure in school year 2020-2021 brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the data gathering period lasted from August 2020 to February 2021. The instruments utilized in the study are validated semi-structured questions for the online interviews and focus group discussions, and observation notes and checklist for the classroom artifacts. The validation methods utilized for the semi-structured questions are content validation from external field experts, and pilot testing of the instrument.

The data sources used in the study include interview transcripts, transcripts of focus group discussions, and classroom artifacts such as weekly home learning plans and lesson modules. The data analysis processes include organizing and managing data, coding transcribed data, forming themes, and synthesizing themes into psychological language that answers the research questions. Methodological comparisons to existing literature are made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme One. Views to Online Teaching

The participants' views on online teaching are described in terms of their readiness to use technology, perceived usefulness of technology, mastery of the content and pedagogy for online modality, and expectations of pupils' performance in online learning.

Readiness in the Use of Technology. Readiness to use technology relates to successful online instruction. However, challenges were identified with digital technologies, and the need to recognize the potential and increase utilization to improve curriculum, instruction, and learning (Hoyles & Lagrange, 2010, cited in Cao et al., 2021). Moreover, the attitudes and beliefs (Joubert et al., 2012 cited in Cao et al., 2021), and the experience of increased fatigue levels, and perceived difficulty and time-consuming in conducting

distance education (Tzafilkou et al., 2022) significantly influence the adoption of technology in teaching during the pandemic.

The participants in the study described their views about their readiness in the use of technology for online teaching as challenging, time-consuming, requiring much effort, and complex. They attributed their views to delegated new roles, additional tasks, and multiple subject preparations for the implemented teaching and learning modalities during the pandemic, and to their age. The results reveal consistent with the findings of Lizana et al. (2021) that the overload of teachers affected their perception of quality of life during a pandemic. In addition, the differences in the perception of readiness due to age (David & Aruta, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2021), is also unanimously recognized by the participants during the focus group discussion to affect their perception of readiness in using technology for online teaching. However, some of them participants that despite their age, they exerted effort in learning computer applications such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, and Jamboard and used them for online learning activities.

Perceived Usefulness of Technology. The perceived usefulness of technology is one factor that influences teachers' intention to use it (David & Aruta, 2022). It is a motivating factor when explicitly used to address the need for innovation in teaching mathematics online (Zainil et al., 2023). But in using technology, software, or hardware, one must keep trying until the right combination is found to ensure success in teaching and learning (Lawrence, 2022).

Most participants tend to compare face-to-face instruction and online teaching in describing the complexities of online modality. They assert that integrating technology in instruction was not a requirement before the pandemic, hence its usefulness still needs to be verified. Some participants think that the usefulness of technology is based on the teacher's competence in using it and the availability of internet connectivity. There were varied learning paces in using technology among the participants. The participants' awareness of integrating technology as imperative in delivering education during the pandemic moderated their readiness and perceived usefulness. Moreover, the interest in exploring technology to provide productive teaching, such as using available online educational resources, emerged from the participants with their intention to make their online classes interactive. All the participants used video conferencing tools, PowerPoint presentations, video lessons, Google Workspace, and social networking sites.

Mastery of the Content and Online Pedagogy. Teachers know the didactic system must be reconstructed for online teaching and learning (Albano et al., 2021). This is similar to the findings of Carillo and Flores (2020) as the need for a comprehensive review of online pedagogy that integrates technology to support learning such that online teaching lacks hands-on activities and will not help achieve K-12 education goals (Ragpala, 2022). Herwin and colleagues' findings (2021) describe online learning based on a simplified curriculum, and the success and satisfaction of online instruction is predicted by the content area (Ladendorf et al., 2021). Conversely, Suh et al. (2021) reported that teachers used their professional judgment and knowledge of the learning trajectory to assess the quality and appropriateness of the curricular resources as they made instructional decisions to meet the needs of the diverse learners.

The study participants emphasized the importance of having mastery of the content and pedagogy for online teaching. They emphasized selecting and implementing practical teaching approaches in teaching for online modalities, such as using a combination of teaching strategies. The participants have specific three diverging views about teaching mathematics online. These views are classified into three categories: 1) developing mathematics skills from simple to complex, 2) focusing on the quantity and timeliness of the content or lesson coverage, and 3) focusing on the pupils' interests as basis for instructional decisions such as designing learning activities.

The first view focuses on developing learners' basic mathematical competence first before teaching more complex concepts and skills, giving simplified learning activities. The second view emphasizes accomplishing the lesson timetable, and the lesson coverage that must be accomplished for a period of time.

The third view considers the learners' interests in presenting the lesson, and designing online learning activities. All of the participants emphasize the importance of considering the pupils' varied situations at home during online learning.

Expectations of Pupil's Performance in Online Learning. The expectations of students in online learning are one of the salient factors that supported or hindered equitable mathematics instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yilmaz et al., 2021). The teacher's expectations of pupils' achievement are strongly correlated with educational test scores, and the accuracy of such expectations was patterned by pupils' socioeconomic background (Barry et al., 2022). Hence, learning habits and self-directed skills need to be inculcated in students in online and face-to-face contexts (Tay et al., 2021). Moreover, the effectiveness of online learning largely depends on students' discipline (Cao et al., 2021).

The participants expressed the idea that the pupils' learning performance in online modality is related to their previous academic performance, study habits, and attitudes. This beliefs helped them form assumptions and use to set expectations and to monitor and validate pupils' online performance.

The participants' expectations of pupils' performance in online learning shaped their actions in preparing and implementing teaching and learning activities in their online classes. In addition, the pupils' attitudes towards online learning and study habits at home are also basis for the participants expectations for pupils. It is also worth mentioning that all of the participants acknowledge the challenges associated with the online resources availability. Generally, the participants' expectations of pupils' learning performance in online modality were described in terms of its relatedness to previous school year academic performance, attitudes towards online learning, study habits at home, and the availability of online learning resources such as internet load, and gadgets.

Theme Two. Professional Identity

The participants' views on professional identity are described in terms of their commitment to teaching profession, intuitiveness to pupils' varied situations, and self-preservation during the pandemic

Commitment to Teaching Profession. This sub-theme reflects the participants' responses on commitment to teaching even during the pandemic. It is expected that "every teacher shall actively ensure that teaching is the noblest profession and shall manifest genuine enthusiasm and pride in teaching as a noble calling. The Philippine 1987 Constitution Article IX Section 1 to 2 and the Republic Act 7836 mandates that that every teacher should uphold the highest possible standards of quality education, make the best preparation for the teaching career, and be at his best at all times and in the practice of his profession. Teachers have a significant role in educational stability (Stoiljovic, 2020) and public recognition of them in society increased significantly (Vegas & Winthrop 2020, as cited in Engelbrecht, 2023). Education opportunities during the pandemic include maintaining social distance and increased confidence in the effectiveness of e-learning (Ozdamli & Karagozlu, 2022), comfort, and accessibility (Mukhtar et al., 2020).

Results reveal the participants' commitment to the teaching profession even during the context of the pandemic. Despite the challenges of online teaching, they are determined to continue even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The commitment to the profession emerged from the participants' responses was demonstrated in the following: attending the online class regularly, ensuring mastery of the lesson before teach online, subjecting oneself to routine performance evaluation, and attending professional development activities. Moreover, the participants shared expertise with newly hired teachers and those who needed help handling their online classes. All the participants employed school-wide programs and implemented innovations to enrich online instruction and giving interventions. They also participated in routine evaluations of their teaching performance, regularly implemented by the Philippine's Department of Education.

Some of the participants able to see the chance and emerging opportunities despite the problems in teaching via online delivery. They believe pupils have ample time to study at their own pace and eventually

become problem solvers. However, a report on Filipino children's mental health was conducted by Malolos and colleagues (2021) and found that Filipino children were subjected to drastic conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and there were no unified and comprehensive strategies to mitigate this deterioration.

Intuitiveness to Pupils' Varied Situations. The caring attitude of teachers toward their pupils could be a personal choice and can be associated with their professional identity (Jones & Kessler, 2020). All participants expressed their understanding of their pupil's varied situations and learning needs during the pandemic. They all implement intervention strategies such as providing a more personal learning approach to pupils to address and mitigate learning gaps, especially for pupils who lag behind the digital learning environment. They emphasized that the teacher's intuitiveness to pupils' varied situations at home and identified needs, such as academic and emotional, is very important in teaching during a pandemic. They further realized and proved that teachers have a significant role in sustaining education for the society's development, especially in these trying times. The participants' responses demonstrate the pursuit of continuing educational goal of education amidst the pandemic.

"In the context of teaching now, our goal is for the pupils to continue learning even during the pandemic, education will never stop. Even though teaching is challenging, I still enjoy doing it and I know that as teacher, I have an important role to play in the lives of my pupils."

Participants demonstrated intuitiveness by identifying pupils' learning needs before giving intervention classes through a personalized learning approach. They mentor the pupils' parents on how to mentor their children in studying at home, provide access of learning resources, and give feedback. These are some of the practices explained by the participants in their contexts after determining pupils' learning needs.

Self-preservation is a natural instinctive tendency to act to preserve one's existence (Merriam-Webster.com). Self-preservation is caring for one's needs and setting compassionate boundaries to avoid burnout when supporting students 24/7 (Aebersold, 2020). Being unsure who is listening during online class conversations was one of the challenges of implementing social and emotional learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Levin et al., 2023). A high percentage of teachers have demonstrated symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression and women showed significantly more symptoms (Santamaria et al., 2021). On the other hand, female teachers scored significantly higher than men in the identified regulation and balance of adverse effects, while men scored higher in loneliness. The elementary teachers presented worse quality of life and health indexes in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramos et al., 2023).

It can be assumed that the participants were thinking about self-preservation when they shared experiences that caused them too much physical exhaustion in executing their teaching loads for modular and online synchronous modalities of teaching delivery. In the pursuit of quality instruction, all the participants are teachers in schools implementing science curricula, where they are expected to provide the highest possible education quality through continuous teaching presence in an online modality. The participants felt sad and frustrated when unsure if their pupils were still listening during online classes.

"When you teach the class online and you cannot see your pupils, it's a little bit lonely."

"Sometimes I wonder if my pupils are still joining our class or busy doing other things online during our class."

Participants felt lonely during online classes in the circumstances such as when only a few pupils attended the online class, when the class was interrupted by poor internet connectivity, when they were not

satisfied with their instruction via online modality, when disparities occur among pupils in accessing online class, and when assessment results are questionable.

Discussion

In this study, an ontological lens is used to analyze the teachers' perception of teaching realities derived from their first-hand experiences during the pandemic, using online modality as an alternative format of education delivery. It sought to answer the question, "What are the teachers' perceptions of teaching during the pandemic?" Results reveal two emerged themes: their views in online teaching, and their formed professional identity.

The participants views online teaching during the pandemic through their readiness in the use of technology, perceived usefulness of technology in teaching, mastery of the content and online pedagogy, and expectations of pupils performance in online learning. For a successful online teaching to occur, teachers must be ready to use the technology in the newly configured environment. However the level of readiness can be influenced by the attitudes and beliefs shaped by the actual experiences of the participants. They generally described teaching online as challenging, time consuming, requiring much effort and complex. Moreover, the increased fatigues due to additional new roles with accompanying new tasks, the multiple modalities for teaching and learning delivery in placed, and their perception of age affect and shaped their views of readiness. These circumstances limit their time and motivation in using technology for online teaching. Conversely, all of them understand the need to respond to the demand for education delivery during the pandemic; hence, readiness to use technology in teaching is inevitable and imperative. Although in different paces, some of the participants eager to learn and use computer applications for their online classes, while others were seeking help to deliver. The perceived usefulness of technology emerged on how the participants view online teaching. The pupils' learning outcomes provides significant measure on the usefulness of technology in instruction. The usefulness of technology is not yet verified in the participants classroom instruction prior to online modality, hence their views on its usefulness is not totally favorable. The views in online teaching also differs with content area. The differences of views regarding the focus on online mathematics teaching during the pandemic demonstrate that participants used professional judgment in determining instructional decisions in their online classes. Generally, the participants' expectations of pupils' learning performance in online modality significantly influence how they prepare and implement instruction in online classes. However, changes to pupils expectation happen only when assessments provide authentic and reliable results.

The formed professional identity primarily focuses on commitment to teaching profession, intuitiveness to pupils' varied situations, and self-preservation during the pandemic. The high regard for teaching is demonstrated by the participant's feeling of enjoyment in the performance of duty even in challenging times, recognition of the roles and professional duties, submitting themselves to routine performance evaluation, and providing professional assistance and sharing expertise with others. The participants show concern and care for their pupils during the pandemic and instructional decisions based on care and by being intuitive to their pupil's varied situations at home, learning needs, and well-being are practised. The participants expressed their current state of self-preservation in circumstances such as acknowledging that there is a need for self-care, feelings of frustration in teaching online caused by pupils' low attendance, disruption of classes due to unstable internet connectivity, and feeling of guilt when in doubt of the authenticity of the assessment results.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The following conclusions are drawn based on teachers' perceptions of teaching during the pandemic. The teachers generally perceived teaching during the pandemic as challenging and requiring much effort. The unprecedented shift to alternative teaching and learning formats has challenged teachers' personal and

professional lives. Teachers' perceptions shaped their online teaching practices. Teaching during the pandemic did not hinder the teachers' continuous desire to learn more and improve instruction in aspects such as technological integration to pedagogy, approaches and strategies for online teaching, and authentic assessments for online learning. The teacher's ability to address challenging situations in teaching in the newly configured learning environment has increased with time. Their deliberate actions toward addressing challenging situations demonstrate professionalism and teacher identity. They became problem solvers and critical thinkers and demonstrated growth-mindedness.

In light of the research findings, this study strongly recommends professional development opportunities for teachers in the following areas: technological, pedagogical, content mastery and online pedagogy, and social and emotional well-being.

Professional development and mentoring program, in both national and local settings for technological skills is needed for teachers in using tools such as computer software applications for interactive learning activities, and for developing teaching materials for online modality, using technology for recording, documenting and computing scores. Learning the fundamental skills in navigating the online platforms of teaching and learning delivery is likewise imperative for teachers. Relevant, timely, and needs-based pedagogy for online instruction and continuous professional development in content areas must be a significant part of any professional development opportunities. Teachers are the primary actors situated at the forefront of education delivery must at all time mentally sound and physically healthy. A proper balance of the teacher's work and self posits a significant factor in the success of education implementation, even in the trying times such as pandemic

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