

## **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Stress and Emotional Reactions of Practice Teachers**

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**Abstract:** Practice Teaching is one of the highlights in the life of a Pre-Service Teacher. It is a special event where they will experience how to teach a class firsthand. But in light with the current pandemic, the so-called new normal education posted numerous challenges in the whole education sector. This study explored the in-depth perception on COVID-19 issues and how this pandemic affects the stress levels and emotional reactions of Practice Teachers. This study also explored the stress-coping mechanisms and needed support by the Practice Teachers. This helps the school administration and Higher Education Commission in planning appropriate activities for practice teaching. This qualitative study was conducted among the nine (9) Practice Teachers who are conducting their practice teaching in the Laboratory Integrated Schools of Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus during the Second Semester of Academic Year 2020-2021. Data were collected using a structured interview guide and Focused Group Discussions through Google Meet. The findings were organized into the following themes: Perception of the COVID-19 Issues, Stress Levels During the Pandemic, Emotional Reactions, and Stress Coping Mechanisms. This study reports participants' challenges in this new normal education. This research sheds light on Practice Teacher's perspectives and experiences that can inform population-targeted policies in the future.

**Key Words:** Practice Teaching, New Normal Education, Emotional Reactions, Stress, Coping Mechanism

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### **Introduction**

Infection with the new coronavirus (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2) cause coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. A pandemic is not just a medical phenomenon; it affects individuals and society and causes disruption, anxiety, stress, stigma, and xenophobia (Javed, et. al. 2020). COVID-19 poses a real threat to physical and emotional health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of teachers and students in several ways, depending not only on their year level but also on the point they have reached in their degree programs. Those coming near the completion of their education and moving on to another, such as those transitioning from school to tertiary education, or from tertiary education to employment, face challenges (Daniel, 2020). They will not be able to complete their school curriculum and assessment in the normal way and, in many cases, they feel unconfident.

Even those a piece-of-cake away from their educational degree programs, like the Practice Teachers, will be anxious until they have clear indications of how their Practice Teaching will be restored after the crisis. Many of them around the globe will worry about suffering long-term disadvantages, compared to those who had their practice teaching "normally", when they move to another level of study or be employed in educational institutions.

All teachers should be prepared in all teaching roles for inclusive education and thus to work with all learners or students in individualized and close relationships, so that they must play a great role in daily based work and face-to-face with them (Aperribai et. al., 2020). For practice teachers, the work becomes even more difficult when this direct contact must be replaced by an online relationship, and many other factors should be considered. Teachers, in general, are not trained for e-learning programs and activities since this is not included in the curriculum of primary and secondary education (Education Youth Policy Analysis Unit in the Education Audiovisual Culture Executive Agency, 2020). In addition, it should be emphasized that, in crisis situations, teachers may play an additional and crucial role. They can provide psychosocial support to learners. Firstly, teachers can create a safe and supportive interaction where students may express their emotions and experiences; secondly, they can include specific structured psychosocial activities in the teaching/learning process that can strongly help vulnerable students (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). Therefore, practice teachers' workload can be considered quite high, and consequently, the teaching profession can be characterized by high levels of stress and physical complaints (Bogaert et al., 2014).

The pandemic required a very sudden shift to remote learning, and teachers were called upon to support students' academic development and well-being throughout this shift, while also navigating adversity and stress in their own lives (Collie, 2021). In many countries, students have returned to classrooms and teachers have

been called upon to make this return as smooth as possible. Given prior research on the negative impact of major societal disruptions on teachers' well-being (Malinen et al., 2019), the potential for teachers to experience maladaptive outcomes during COVID-19 is heightened.

Practice Teaching, in higher educational Institutions in the Philippines, is offered every first, and/or second semester of the academic year depending on the availability of applicants. Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus offers Teacher Education courses and thus almost always have Practice Teaching applicants except when there are irregular students who cannot comply with the minimum requirement which is to finish the academic requirements.

Despite the COVID-19 Pandemic, the above-mentioned institution offered Practice Teaching last 2nd Semester of School Year 2020-2021 for the welfare of students whose only requirement is practice teaching to graduate. However, it was done virtually at the Laboratory Integrated School of the aforementioned campus. It is in accordance with CMO No. 4, s. 2020 on Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning which state that, "Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) shall continue to exercise judgement/ academic freedom in the deployment of available flexible learning, and other alternative modes of delivery in lieu of in campus learning/ face-to-face modality..." and HEIs shall decide on the most viable form of flexible learning and teaching that they will utilize based on their capability, exciting condition, national government agency and local government unit advisories," respectively.

According to Hayes (2011), Practice Teaching is a time of rapid change and increasing pressure on practice teachers from every direction. Practice Teachers often experience higher anticipation and anxiety during their practice teaching. These emotions impact their ability to function efficiently and learning to cope with emotions is important. Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus often makes efforts to emotionally prepare practice teachers. However, with the first batch of Virtual Practice Teaching, it poses a greater challenge.

As countries introduce measures to restrict movement as part of efforts to reduce the number of people infected with COVID-19, more and more are making huge changes to daily routines. As a result of this pandemic, people found themselves forced to cope with new emotional challenges and particularly with feelings of stress, uncertainty, and fear. COVID-19 poses a real threat to physical and emotional health (Levkovich and Shinan-Altman, 2020). In fact, research on viruses show that pandemic situations exert an emotional impact on people's levels of stress and resilience.

The new realities of working from home, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues take time to get used to. Adapting to lifestyle changes such as these and managing the fear of contracting the virus and worrying about people close to us who are particularly vulnerable, are challenging for all of us.

The literature is empty of baseline information on how Practice Teachers in the Philippines perceives the current pandemic, their emotional reactions and stress coping mechanisms. This study would serve as a pivoting point to understanding the emotional assistance needed and how Filipino Practice Teachers cope up with the new normal way of Practice Teaching.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The phenomenological approach of qualitative research design was used because of lack of previous studies on practice teaching in the "New Normal" in the Philippines. The utilization of phenomenological approach helped explore and understand people's own perspectives, outline, and description of the events from their lived experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). This approach was also instrumental in identifying key topic areas and structured interview guides for data collection supported by the preliminary interactions with the research participants. This study was conducted from February to June 2021.

### **Subjects of the Study**

The researchers employed the Total Enumeration Sampling, it is a form of purposive sampling approach in which the researcher selects the entire population with a certain set of characteristics to study. The Subjects of the Study were composed of four Bachelor of Elementary Education specializing in Enhanced General Education and five Bachelor of Secondary Education specializing in English, Mathematics and MAPEH. They came from diverse backgrounds, ages, civil status and economic status. The commonality is the subjects of the study are enrolled in their Practice Teaching in the Laboratory Integrated Schools of Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus during the Second Semester of Academic Year 2020-2021. In addition, they are the first batch of Practice Teachers in the institution during the so-called New Normal Education.

### **Data-gathering Procedure and Data Analysis**

Focused Group Discussions were conducted employing a structured interview guide, involving the researchers responsible for guiding the discussion, for taking notes and ensuring the video recording. The respondents were divided into three groups supported by their schedules. A total of three Focused Group Discussions of 60-90 minutes each were conducted. After obtaining informed consent, the Focused Group Discussions was conducted through Google Meet at the convenient time for the respondents. The interviewer encouraged participants to talk about their experiences in their own words. The discussions and interviews were conducted in English and Filipino language although respondents tended to mix the two languages. The data were collected for a duration of three weeks. After completion of the data collection, the recorded discussions and notes were transcribed directly into the English language by an expert language translator. The validation of the tool was ensured by conducting a pilot test, triangulation of data and consultation with the experts. Phenomenological analysis method was used to analyze the transcript. The analysis included steps such as familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the basic structure (Colaizzi, 1978). The researchers independently reviewed the collected data and formulated the themes after summarizing and extracting the meaningful contents, bracketing the presuppositions of the researchers.

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of three focused group discussions were conducted to collect data from the nine participants. The responses were classified into four themes as follows:

#### **Perception of the COVID-19 Issues**

Participants reported that the COVID-19 issues are disturbing, it makes them afraid, it is devastating. They are perplexed because they do not know all the facts behind the pandemic. Some of them reported that the vaccines supplied are not actually reliable and there is no proof that it can protect them. In addition, the COVID-19 Issues brought so much discomfort in their lives due to a sudden halt to things they were used to doing. They are worried about the increasing number of cases and deaths reported daily. They began to internalize the difficult situation which generated feelings of frustration. One of them said that,

*“It feels like it would brush off humanity.”* - Participant 2

Despite the negative emotions most of them have felt, a few participants indicated that as they reflect in some areas of their lives, the COVID-19 pandemic is a blessing in disguise. They were able to spend more quality time with their family and loved ones.

#### **Stress Levels During the Pandemic**

Most of the participants reported that their anxiety level rocketed during the Pandemic. Some reported that their mental health is suffering from so much stress.

They mentioned financial problems as the major contributor to that stress. Due to lockdown, many of their families lose their jobs. Some of them must stop doing their part-time jobs and they have used up all their savings. In addition, they are worried about their parents who are at risk of the virus.

Some of them mentioned slow internet connectivity and difficulties during online Learning that contributes to their stress. Lack of student participation, learning applications that do not function the way they want and difficulty in adapting to virtual classes were also mentioned.

#### **Emotional Reactions**

Participants reported that they have been feeling down since the outbreak of the virus. They feel confused, lost, sensitive, moody, and frustrated. Some of them reported to have emotional breakdowns. A few of them reported they preferred being alone.

Many of them reported that they became more cautious of their health and hygiene. Others reported that they became more cautious of fake news and wrong information circulating on the internet.

Moreover, many of them reported that they try to show a composed personality to others, especially to their families. Many of them reported that they try to remain calm, smile and to check on their friend through social media. Participant 5, as a father and a religious leader said when asked on how the outbreak of the virus affected the way he conducts himself with people close to him,

*“I showed them a composed personality, encouraging them to press on even in these trying times. I try to promote a good environment and atmosphere to ease the pain because it is not a joke what we have been through.”*

Participant 2 added,

*"I am being extra kind to other people, thinking that the world is going to end".*

### **Stress Coping Mechanisms**

Praying is the major mention of the participants as their stress-coping mechanism. Most of them found themselves trying to get busy doing the things they love as a form of stress reliever. It includes cooking, singing, listening to music, watching movies, and watching Korean Drama.

When asked on what could help them cope up with practice teaching during this period, many of them answered they would like some help in using technological tools and tips on how to deal with a virtual classroom environment. Many of them mentioned that they need to be immersed in workshops that could help them develop their computer literacy. Others stated that they need financial support/ sponsorship for their internet fees.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the themes created through this study, the institution must create programs for the emotional welfare of Practice Teachers. A number of seminars and workshops on how to use technological tools and tips on how to deal with a virtual classroom environment will be of great help which aims to equip practice teachers with practical skills to help cope with stress. A few minutes each day are enough to practice self-help techniques. In addition, sponsorships and financial support for internet fees would lessen their burdens.

### **Conflict of Interest/s**

The researchers declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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