

The Lived Experiences of Beginning Teachers: An Odyssey

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ABSTRACT

The attrition rates for beginning teachers have been high and widespread, which oftentimes resulted in a teacher shortage. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of beginning teachers during their first three years in teaching. Specifically, it digs a deeper understanding of the challenges beginning teachers face, such as classroom management, support received, differentiated instruction, and unexpected expectations. An in-depth interview was conducted to ten beginning junior high school teachers from public and private schools within DepEd Puerto Princesa. Member checking was done to validate the accuracy of the data and to establish credibility. The four constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered to substantiate trustworthiness. The study reveals that beginning teachers are mostly challenged by the behavior of the students in classroom management; get the needed support from their administrators, colleagues, students' parents, and immediate families; find difficulty in differentiating instruction to address learner's differences; and are overwhelmed by the enormous amount of paperwork, extra-curricular assignments and teaching subjects not in line with their specialization. Likewise, salary, lack of training and orientation, work environment, and

workload emerged as minor themes. Thus, beginning teachers' found their first three years as challenging, overwhelming, shocking, tiring, difficult, stressful, and struggle yet wonderful, exciting, fun, colorful, rewarding, and fulfilling.

Keywords — Education, beginning teachers, lived experiences, phenomenological study, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a complex and challenging profession, but a prestigious one and the noblest of all, yet some teachers are overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. Ironic, indeed! This is factual, alarming, and widespread. In Brazil, "Society recognizes the social role of the teacher, more than that of the support staff, but the salaries and working conditions discourage young people from going into the profession. The average salary of teachers with higher education is 35% less than that of other professionals with the same level of education." (Brazil, Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Educação - CNTE); similarly, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reported that "Teachers and education support personnel are not accorded the respect that other professions with similar qualifications are in the U.S."; in the Philippines, "Teachers and education workers are underpaid and overworked." (Philippines, Alliance of Concerned Teachers - ACT) (Symeonidis, 2015).

The question is: why do people go into teaching, despite the complexities and the challenges of the profession? Teachers come into the profession for different reasons in different country contexts, in differing economic circumstances and with varying expectations of the rewards and challenges of the role. Common to all, however, is a need for appreciation, autonomy, and affiliation - the latitude and discretion to exercise professional judgment, together with recognition and endorsement for such initiative and a sense of belonging to a cadre of like-minded people whose interests and motivations one share. The place of these within a hierarchy of needs varies country by country depending on an essential infrastructure of safety, security, working conditions, resourcing, and adequate remuneration (MacBeath, 2012).

Beginning teachers struggled to negotiate the paradox of loving the idea of being a teacher, but not necessarily like the work as a teacher. They often function in a mode of sustained experimentation. The responsibility of being a professional educator can, in fact, be most daunting to the novice teacher who must, with a

seemingly intense urgency, cater to an array of professional responsibilities while becoming acclimatized to measures of accountability (Cherubini, 2008). As stated by Stansbury and Zimmerman (2000), the attrition rate for beginning teachers has always been extremely high, nearly a third of novice teachers are leaving the profession within their first three years. At the school-wide level, high teacher turnover drains energy and resources as well, requiring that administrators and teaching colleagues constantly focus on bringing newcomers up to speed on everything. At the same time, of course, their departure further exacerbates existing teacher shortages.

The Philippines is also among the countries that are experiencing a constant turnover of its teachers, especially at the basic education level. Low salary, workload, and long hours of work, lack of challenge, and personal circumstances are among the reasons why they do not stay long on the job. In many cases, they end up getting better salaries as domestics in other countries. Another reason given is that teaching leaves the teacher “emotionally drained.” Some leave because they feel that the teaching profession is less attractive than other professions or that they feel they do not have much control over the work environment. (Braid, 2015).

These factors affecting beginning teachers’ attitudes towards teaching are widespread and do not exempt the Department of Education – Puerto Princesa. The issuance of DepEd Order No. 43, s. 2017 also known as Teacher Induction Program Policy and DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016 also known as The Learning Action Cell (LAC) as a K to 12 Basic Education Program School-Based Continuing Professional Development Strategy for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, recognizes the fact that beginning teachers need to be supported through continuing professional development and progress. Both are anchored on the principle of lifelong learning and the agency’s commitment to developing teachers’ potential for the improvement of practice and learner achievement.

FRAMEWORK

This phenomenological study adapted the Stages of Development of Teachers by Dubble (1998) and the Five Phases of Beginning Teachers’ Attitude towards Teaching by Moir (1999). Dubble’s theory of teacher development highlights the experiences and growth of beginning teachers from their first year of teaching (neonate) until their eighth year, where they become a seasoned one. However,

only the first two stages of teacher development of this theory were adapted and modified to suit the framework of the study. Moir's five phases are the by-product of her long years of providing assistance to thousands of beginning teachers in the University of California, Sta, Cruz. It vividly describes the attitude of beginning teachers as they confront the challenges in their day to day experience in the classroom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of beginning teachers during their first three years in teaching. Specifically, this aims to dig a deeper understanding of the challenges beginning teachers face such as managing a classroom of diverse learners, the kind of support received from the administration, colleagues, students' parents and immediate family, differentiation of instruction to address individual needs and in dealing with the enormous amount of unexpected expectations required of the teaching profession.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is qualitative phenomenological in nature, which deals with life experiences as it is lived. The focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within the experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Shahbazian, 2015). Phenomenology is the most appropriate method to use since the purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of beginning teachers as they enter the world of teaching. Moreover, this method best represents the interpretation of their experiences, perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of how it is to be a beginner.

In particular, the conduct of this study was viewed from the standpoint of an external researcher --- which means that she is not part of the community and phenomena being studied. In like manner to achieve impartiality, the researcher adopted the "etic" approach, which viewed the phenomena from the lens of an outsider.

Research Site

This phenomenological study was conducted in the Department of Education Division of Puerto Princesa. Puerto Princesa is classified as a highly urbanized city and has been densely populated since then. The growth in population resulted in more enrollees which, in turn, require the hiring of additional teachers to cater to the needs of the increasing student population.

DepEd Puerto Princesa has a total of 2,525 teachers both in public and private schools. Each year the Department is hiring newly qualified teachers --- those who are licensed ones and whose qualifications meet the existing vacant position. Fresh graduates who are about to take the licensure examinations are sometimes hired by private schools to fill the immediate need of teacher shortage.

Participants

The participants in this study are ten beginning junior high school teachers who are in their first, second, and third years of teaching. Beginning teachers as defined are those teachers in their first, second, and third years of teaching (Brubaker, 2016). Five males and five females make up the composition of research participants; six are from public schools, and four are from private schools. They were purposely selected from schools that have a greater number of beginners and whose Principal allowed the conduct of the study and has a willing beginning teacher to be a participant.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sought permission from the Schools Division Superintendent to conduct the study in the Division. Upon approval, the consent of the Principal of the identified school was also secured. Afterward, the researcher was given a chance to meet and talk with the prospective participants, where she presented the informed consent for their perusal and approval. In addition, the procedures to be done during the conduct of interviews were discussed and explained thoroughly to avoid confusion on their part. Rapport was established during this meeting, and the venue for the conduct of the interview was agreed upon.

An in-depth interview was conducted to 10 purposely selected and willing participants about the challenges they face as they start their teaching career. Interviews were scheduled during the participants' free time to avoid disruption of classes. The chosen venue for most of the interviews was in a neutral ground --- that is outside the school premises, so that participants will be able to share their thoughts freely without the worry of being listened to by other school personnel.

Each participant was interviewed individually until the needed information is saturated, which lasted from an hour but not exceeding two hours. A set of guide questions was used during the conduct of the interview, but flexibility as to the sequencing of questions was adapted to suit the situation at hand. Follow up questions were asked to clarify points of interest and to probe further the expressed experiences.

The interview proceedings were audio and video recorded to capture the exact words of the participants in describing their experiences. The recorded interview proceedings were transcribed, coded, and interpreted. The three phases of the data management, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015): data preparation, data identification, and data manipulation, were used during the analysis of the transcript. Member checking was done to validate the accuracy of the data and to authenticate the interview transcript. The four constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed to validate trustworthiness.

Ethical Consideration

Adherence to ethical standards was strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Prior to the conduct of the interview, the researcher prepared informed consent to the participants. This discussed in detail concerns regarding the recording of the interview through video and tape recorder, the strict confidentiality of the participants' identity, and the proper management and treatment of data. Utmost care in handling the gathered data was observed, pseudonyms were used, and no single information is included that would lead to the identity of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Management

Most of the participants found the attitude of the students as the most challenging part in classroom management, but it is of different aspects and varying levels such as students' garrulousness; noisiness when they fight each other; addiction to gadget and games; fidgetiness; close-mindedness that makes giving advise difficultly; followed by absenteeism due to mobile games (students frequents computer shops); and giving assessment since it is a heterogeneous class. The experiences of the participants are similar to the result of the study conducted by Headden (2014), which says that almost all new teachers struggle

in one way or another. Most commonly, they wrestle with classroom management and student behavior. Likewise, Abdurrahman (2016), reveals that beginning teachers have classroom management problems and are having difficulties in finding a way to approach students' problematic behaviors. This indicates that beginning teachers are struggling in classroom management and in dealing with students' attitudes and behavior not only in the local scene but also in the global scene.

Support Received

Administrator. Most participants are supported by their administrators (principals), in the following manner: class observations and post-conference afterward; attendance to seminars related to their field; encouragement to enroll in the graduate studies; to read more references to enhance knowledge; apply for promotion; and free lodging. Only a participant does not get the support of her principal but was assisted by the master teacher in their department. This experience is similar to the results of the study conducted by Headden (2014), where participants reflected through personal experience that their first year(s) were made more challenging by the lack of support they received from administrators. Quite simply, teachers don't think the people they work for care about them or their efforts to improve. In like manner, the same sentiment is reflected in the study of Ozturk & Yildirim (2013) where about 30% of the teacher participants usually or always had principals or supervisors who were not sympathetic listeners trying to understand them --- that principals did not nurture an environment encouraging new teachers.

Colleagues. Generally, the foremost support that participants get from their colleagues is in working out and accomplishing the different school forms aside from the moral support as indicated by five participants, and two said that they were helped with computing grades. The study of Dickson et al. (2014) said that there is much evidence in the literature that gaining support from colleagues, feeling socially comfortable and having both personal and professional support from colleagues is critical in the first years of a teacher's journey, as well as for teacher retention. On the other hand, three participants expressed that friction and conflict are felt and unavoidable in their place. The participants' experience is similar to what Barth (2006), said that educators become one another's adversaries through *competition*. They become competitors for scarce resources and recognition. The guiding principles of competition are, "The better you look, the worse I look," and "The worse you look, the better I look." No wonder, so

many educators root for the failure of their peers rather than assist with their success.

Students' Parents. Four participants said that students' parents are very supportive and that they asked about their child's performance in school. When it comes to school projects and school activities, the parents are always there. Sapungan & Sapungan (2016) says that many parents, whose children are currently enrolled in a particular school, are enormously concerned, more often being active to assist in their child's classroom, constantly communicating with their child's teachers, assisting with their homework, getting involved with school projects and discussing their child's individual academic strengths and weaknesses with teachers. Similarly, three participants said that parents are also supportive, but only a few attend homeroom meetings.

The participants' experience is supported by Dickson et al. (2014) study which reveals that some teachers talked of the apathy which they felt some parents exhibited in terms of communication and attendance at meetings, only seeing a small number of the parents, numerous times, and finding this a challenge to deal with. On the other hand, two participants said that some parents are very supportive, they asked about their child's performance in class, but most of the parents just shrug it off and that they are difficult to reach out especially if their child has a problem. They even blame the teachers for their child's mishap. One participant's experience is quite different from the others, for he encountered hostile parents during his first year of teaching; being compared to the previous adviser of the students, and parents seldom attend classroom meetings. The study of Sapungan and Sapungan (2016) says that regrettably, there are also some, if not many, parents who are quite passive in their child's education. Some of them are not directly involved. Sadly speaking, some parents have obvious manifestations of their "I don't care" attitude. Neither are they visible in the school premises and get involved in the desired goals of the school where their children are getting what they need most for life.

Immediate Family. Most participants have all-out support from their families --- from a simple gesture of preparing food so that they can do their paperwork to having an internet connection installed at home for research purposes. Karataş and Karaman, (2013) state that the family is another support provider novice teachers identified in the study and that support from the family was more likely to predict high levels of perceived efficacy in general. However, one participant has a less supportive family because there were times that he could not send his financial support due to the low salary. This is in contrast to what Anastasiu

(2012) said that the family is the best and adequate group to satisfy the needs and that is because it is involved at all levels --- biological, psychological and social - but also because its primary group structure gives it a huge advantage over the other agents of socialization, such as school or the peer group.

Differentiated Instruction

The participants admitted that differentiating instruction is difficult to do, but they are doing the best they can to effect learning among the students. The diversity of the students' background and capability to learn, and the heterogeneous groupings made teaching more challenging. Common to all is that they analyze first the background and demographic profile of their students to know them better and to find the most appropriate approach; translate difficult English words to Filipino for students to have a better understanding of the lesson; video presentation using the cartoon to capture and sustain the attention and interest of the students; re-teach and conduct make-up class for slow learners to catch up with the lesson; use spiral progression and relate the lessons to real-life experiences, and have the fast and slow learner sit together. The participants' experiences are supported by Brubaker's study (2016) states that one of the greatest areas of challenge experienced by the beginning teachers is in differentiating instruction for the various learning needs of their students. Moreover, Cherubini's (2008) study says that the participants admitted that they struggled with focusing on student development and achievement. They experienced a great deal of stress, catering to students' learning abilities.

Unexpected Expectation

Beginning teachers are given the same workload and other job-related functions just like the veterans, though they are still in the adjustment period. Aside from teaching their field of specialization, they were also given other subjects to handle, which requires a lot of preparation. Moreover, all of them are class advisers and are given other tasks and responsibilities such as Learners' Information System (LIS) coordinator, screening officer for athletes in the City Meet, Boy Scout of the Philippines (BSP) coordinator, choir coordinator, the board of director secretary, guidance designate, school paper coach, trainer/coach in almost all school-related activities, journalism technical adviser, and emceeing in school-related activities, MTAP reviewer, school nurse, focal person for the voucher program of the senior high school students, grammarian, and research adviser.

All these extra-curricular assignments surprised the beginners and somehow affected their attitude towards teaching. As one participant said, “*parang ayaw ko na magturo* [Feel like I do not want to teach anymore].” Similarly, their experiences are also experienced by other beginners in the field as these studies abroad confirm Beltman and Price (2011), teachers were at greater risk of losing their commitment to and motivation for teaching with heavy workloads; Nahal (2010) teaching is a lot more work than expected; Brubaker (2016) the participants confirmed that they were unaware and somewhat surprised at the amount of expectations outside of teaching and struggle most of all with the unexpected expectations of the teaching profession; Ozturk & Yildirim (2013) found non-instructional duties tiring.

Emerging Themes

As the analysis of data progressed, additional themes emerged, aside from the four major themes already identified at the start of the study. Emerging themes are expressed using descriptive words to have a clear picture of how it is to be a beginner in the world of teaching. Adjectives like challenging, overwhelming, shocking, wonderful, struggle, exciting, fun, colorful, tiring, difficult, rewarding, stressful, and fulfilling vividly represent the participants’ initial years in the profession.

Challenging. The participants are particularly challenged by students’ attitudes towards their studies, school forms, different monthly activities, new lessons, appropriate strategies to address learner’s differences, adjustment to students’ capability, lack of books and other instructional materials, and loads of paperwork.

Tiring yet fulfilling. Participants find lesson planning, paperwork, frequent school activities, attendance to meetings and seminars, beating deadlines, and numerous workload tiring but fulfilled when they see progress in their students’ scholastic performance and when their efforts are recognized and appreciated by the students and other stakeholders.

Other Emerging Minor Themes

Further analysis of the data led to the identification of these other emerging minor themes. The mentioned of these minor themes made them noteworthy.

Salary. It is both a motivation to do their best in teaching and stay in the current work, and a motivation to seek transfer to a higher paying agency for their salary is low.

Lack of training and orientation. This is very crucial to beginning teachers, for it will help them to properly execute the task expected from them. Participants said that they did not have a proper orientation on how things are done in the school, including the ins and outs in the bureau and other pertinent matters relative to teaching.

Working environment. This is as important as the other factors to make the first years of the beginners a pleasant one. A healthy working environment makes a person motivated and dedicated to his work while the opposite one discourages a person. The physical environment, including the school personnel as well as the students, may make one's stay comfortable or miserable. It was found out that some of the participants' environment is not that pleasant and is not promoting a harmonious relationship.

Workload. It was found out as one of the struggles that make the job more challenging. Five of the participants are given extra load and are teaching other subjects, not in line with their field of specialization. This they say add to the already bulk of work to be done for they have to study the subjects again to teach it with confidence. As stated by a participant, "*struggle po talaga everyday [it is really a struggle everyday].*"

CONCLUSIONS

Managing a classroom of diverse learners is considered a problem encountered by most of the participants. Although of varying intensity and gravity, it has a significant effect on the beginning teacher's way of handling concerns in the classroom. This adds up to the already challenging nature of the profession—making the beginners' grope to find the most appropriate approach to address the issues at hand. At times this challenge left the beginner in surprise if not disoriented, which has a significant consequence in the performance of duty.

Generally speaking, beginning teachers get the all-out support of their principals, colleagues, students' parents, and their immediate families except in some cases. The support given to them is significant for it will sustain their enthusiasm for effecting change among the lives of their students. Moreover, this will keep the fire burning to persevere despite the complexities and the struggles encountered every day. This support system makes them confident that whatever happens, they have someone to lean on, and this thought makes them brave to face each day without fear.

The participants find differentiating instruction a struggle ---- they have an objective in mind, but the challenge lies on how to make learning effective considering the varied personalities of the learners. The diversity and peculiarities of the learners make the task more challenging, for they have to exhaust all possible means to make learning takes place without pressure. Though overwhelmed the determination and dedication to impart knowledge in the best that they can is there. Differentiating instruction is like cooking a dish that one has to mix all possible ingredients to make it palatable to different taste buds, yet all will find it delicious. In teaching, the teacher has to exhaust all possible means to make learning takes place, considering the uniqueness of each learner.

Participants are surprised and shocked that aside from teaching their field of specialization, they have to also teach other subjects and perform other tasks. These they said consumed much of their time for they have to study, prepare lessons, research, and juggle the hours between teaching and doing other assignments. Adding to this is the bulk of paperwork to comply and submit on time which they failed to do at times because of lack of orientation about its what's, when's, and how's. The enormous number of tasks to be done drowns the poor beginner that at times made them say, "*parang ayaw ko na magturo* [Feel like I do not want to teach anymore]."

The salary which does not receive a special mention in the reviewed studies and literature has been a concern by some of the participants. This made them decide to transfer to a better paying agency. As fuel to vehicle salary is for teachers --- for this does not only finance their personal needs but of their learners as well who are indirectly benefited by it through the instructional materials that they purchase from their own pockets. This somehow contributes to their financial burdens.

Equally worth noting is the working environment --- the very atmosphere where the hours and days of beginning teachers are spent. Though most of them are in the calmer environment, others are in the hot seat brought about by their autocrat administrator, unsupportive colleagues, and hostile parents. This definitely impacts teaching and makes them agitated, that affects their well-being.

Their journey has been challenging, overwhelming, tiring, exhausting, frustrating and a struggle was yet fulfilling and rewarding. This is because of the insurmountable duties and responsibilities attached to the profession and the expectations they have for themselves. Likewise, meeting and living up to the trust and confidence of the community because they are "maestro" and "maestra" --- whom the public entrusts the future of the learners. These tiring

and challenging situations made them vulnerable at times, but a simple gesture of appreciation and a tap on the back rekindles the desire to be the molder of the future of yesterday's dream --- who are equipped not only with skills and knowledge but also of proper values and attitudes.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The result of this study could be translated through a journal article for international publication and other media to promote a heightened awareness of the plight of beginning teachers so that appropriate intervention could be done by concerned authorities. Moreover, the results could be considered by DepEd personnel and other school administrators to revisit the policies concerning beginning teachers to enhance the support system extended to them.

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