

Elementary teachers' experiences and instructional challenges during the return to school after the COVID-19 closure in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

As education started to recover from the impact of COVID-19, the Philippine Department of Education began to roll out pilot face-to-face classes. Hence, there is a need to explore teachers' experiences regarding the preparations and challenges encountered during the reopening of classes after the COVID-19 closures. Specifically, this study explored teachers' preparation and instructional challenges encountered during the first few weeks of reopening of classes. The study utilized a phenomenological research approach. Seven public elementary school teachers involved in the pilot face-to-face classes were purposively selected for the one-on-one interview. Each interview lasted for about 30-minutes and was tape-recorded. The researcher also conducted classroom visitations to understand better the context of the teachers' responses. Data were then transcribed, translated, and analysed using a thematic analysis technique. The result shows that five themes emerged pertaining to teachers' preparation for the reopening of classes. These include establishing health protocols, school physical improvements, instructional materials development, psychosocial preparation, and acquiring new teaching strategies. As for the instructional challenges encountered, the teachers expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers and students who are mentally and socially unprepared. Other challenges include the difficulty of maintaining health protocols, the need for new teaching strategies, and challenges with time management. The findings suggest that comprehensive reading intervention and psychosocial first aid programs should be part of the school reopening strategy. Furthermore, the researcher recommends that teachers should be trained to handle students during the post-pandemic era.

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INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic has brought enormous challenges to countries worldwide, both in the developed and the less developed regions. It has cost massive changes and damages to all sectors of society. In the Philippines, the estimated loss of around 1.4 trillion pesos a year is in the economic sector alone (Chua, 2022).

In the education sector, a long-term loss of estimated 11 trillion pesos for every year of face-to-face school closure due to decreased productivity can still be felt until the next 40 years. On top of this is the learning loss since online learning is only about 52 percent effective, as shown in one US study (Dorn et al., 2020), and much less effective when using modular learning, only at around 37 percent (Chua, 2022). These estimates were made given the optimum conditions. These conditions include the presence of parents and tutors, students being capable of self-learning, having access to materials and technology, and other advantages. Hence, learning gains may be much lower, if not negative, for disadvantaged children. Many groups like NEDA, UNICEF, parents, and private school sectors have urged the national government to consider the reopening of schools in the country (Chua, 2022; UNICEF, 2021; Bayod et al., 2021). They believed that opening up our schools would contribute to the recovery strategy by providing important social support, especially to vulnerable students (Bryant, Dorn, Hall & Panier, 2020), and to regain a sense of normalcy (Gopez, 2021). It was cited that among the ASEAN countries, the Philippines was the only country in the region to have closed schools for more than a year. In December 2021, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) decided to gradually open schools, starting with 150 pilot schools in the country. Later more schools were included in the expansion phase of the pilot program. While in the Bangsamoro region, pilot face-to-face classes were conducted later, involving 33 schools last October 2021 (MBHTE, 2021).

Reopening classes under the new normal entails many preparations as schools involved in the pilot face-to-face classes need to pass the School Safety Assessment (SSAT), a guideline issued by the inter-agency task force on safe school reopening (Philippine Joint Memorandum circular 1, S. 2021). This strategy for the reopening of classes is based on the idea of shared responsibilities. Other government agencies pledged to assist schools with resources and technical support. The need for stringent preparations is to ensure the safety of the school children and personnel as they physically report to school. The government and school administrators need to ensure that the school reopening will lead to normalcy rather than contribute to the COVID-19 surge. However, the enormous task lies in teachers and other school personnel who are at the forefront of reopening of classes. In addition to the physical and safety preparations, the Philippine Department of Education has emphasized the need for schools to provide psychological first aid (PFA) to help students adjust to physical classes after two years of home-based learning. However, since we have a shortage of PFA providers in school (Manza et al., 2021), teachers are expected to provide these services in addition to their teaching duties. These teachers who are the education front liners are themselves experiencing stress due to COVID-19, which may influence the well-being of their students (UNICEF, 2021). While our schools are still planning for the full-time face-to-face classes, there are many issues our teacher front liners may have encountered. The apparent lack of studies on the school reopening strategies also contributes to our limited understanding of how best our schools can adapt to the new normal. Hence the researcher believed in the need to explore teachers' preparations and challenges encountered with the hope of offering insights into our effective school reopening.

OBJECTIVES

This study was conducted to explore elementary teachers' lived experiences during the return to school for the limited face-to-face classes after the COVID-19 closure. Specifically, it aimed to examine teachers' experiences during the preparation phase and instructional challenges encountered during their first few weeks of the pilot face-to-face classes during the last quarter of the academic year 2021-2022.

METHODS

Design

This study used a qualitative research design, particularly a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study which explores the lived experiences and challenges encountered by the public elementary school teachers during the first few weeks of the reopening of classes after the COVID-19 closure. The choice of the phenomenological approach is due to its ability to understand the issue deeper from the perspective of teachers themselves (Dela Fuente, 2021; Qutoshi, 2018).

Selection of site, inclusion criteria, and participants

This study was conducted in Tawi-Tawi Province, the southernmost province of the Philippines under the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The selection of the elementary school was purposive since only one school in the target district was allowed to conduct the limited face-to-face classes. The teacher-participants included in the study are involved in the face-to-face pilot classes of the Bangsamoro Region in Muslim Mindanao Ministry of education. The seven teacher-participants were selected using the inclusion criteria set by the researcher. This was to ensure that each grade level was equally represented, from kindergarten to Grade 6 and that the comprehensive teachers' experiences were captured (Rahman, et al., 2022).

Ethical considerations

The researcher sought approval and permission from the school heads of the target school through a formal letter of request to conduct the study. Similar letters were sent to the identified teacher-participants prior to the conduct of the actual interview. In addition, the researcher personally explained the study purpose, procedures, and the utilization of the data during the first meeting before the scheduling of the final interview. The researcher assured the participants and school administrators of their anonymity and that due care would be taken to ensure the veracity of their responses. Finally, the researcher secured the signed consent from the participants to manifest their voluntary participation and utilization of their recorded interviews.

Instrument

The researcher utilized a one-on-one interview with the respondents using a semi-structured interview questionnaire as used by Dela Fuente (2019). The interview questions were subjected to three external validators. The questionnaire was also tried out to determine its appropriateness and the estimated time it takes to complete. As a result, possible questions were added, and the expected time was put at 30 minutes per interview. Field notes were used during the follow-up class observation. The guide questions for the semi-structured interview were:

1. What were the preparations you made for the reopening of classes after more than a year of school closure?
2. Based on your experience, which of these preparations were the hardest to do?
3. What were the preparations you had undertaken relating to your teaching strategies for the reopening of classes after more than a year of modular learning?
4. What were the challenges you encountered during the first few weeks of the reopening of classes?
5. What were the challenges you encountered in terms of teaching strategies during the reopening of classes?
6. How did you solve these challenges?

Data collection

In order to capture the actual experiences of teachers, the respondents were allowed to speak in any language freely they were comfortable with (i.e., Sinama, Filipino, or English). During the interview, the

conversations were audio recorded while the researcher made notes of the responses. The researcher then transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and translated them into English. To ensure the reliability of the data, two English teachers reviewed and checked the drafted translation. After reading the transcript of the responses, the researcher realized the need to validate the data to understand the context of teachers' responses fully. Hence, triangulation through classroom visitation and observation was made. The researcher also kept field notes during these visits. The interview guide was:

Data analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interview and class observation, the researcher followed the six-phase approach of thematic analysis, which consists of (1) familiarizing with the collected data by reading the transcript, (2) generating initial codes, (3) search for themes by merging related codes (4) review themes (5) define themes and (6) interpret and make the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was done manually since the data gathered was not too large.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers' preparation for the reopening of classes

Teachers' preparation for the limited face-to-face classes was done months before the pilot face-to-face classes. Analysis of the data on teachers' experiences shows five themes emerged which explain the focus of their preparation, as shown in Table 1, based on the frequency of occurrence.

The first focus of teachers' preparation was on establishing health protocols in their classrooms. While most of these preparations were not strictly required in the typical setting, ensuring school safety is in accordance with the Department of Education school safety guidelines for the school reopening. Including but not limited to the construction of handwashing facilities, trash bins, and the spacing of seating arrangements. One teacher mentioned this: *"...then I proceed to my classroom physical facility, by following the guidelines for the reopening of classes, including the washing facility, the required spacing of each chair, and trash cans."* Another participant collaborated on this response. According to her, she needs to prepare some health measures such as clear signage and handwashing facilities. Upon classroom visit, the teachers had constructed modular washing facilities in every room aside from the school group handwashing. One participant said, *"There are many preparations in classrooms like need having signage on health protocols, hand washing facility that must be followed by the children."* Another tremendous preparation made by teachers was physical improvements due to their desire to make their classroom look presentable for the reopening of classes and for the visitation. One teacher said, *"Before reopening of classes, we decided to start first in our classroom beautify (beautification)..."* Another participant mentioned the need to have a presentable classroom by repainting their classrooms' walls and putting up decorations. She did it in preparation for the school visitation of the regional and division validating team. The teacher said, *"Foremost, the beautification must be the hardest, including the painting of the whole walls, room, followed by the decoration and the rest of the requirements just to pass the validation from the division and region"*. The third theme was on teachers' preparation for instructional materials development. During the pilot face-to-face classes, the teachers still need to use the learning module for the group of students who are under home-based learning during the week. The teachers also use the modules during the actual face-to-face classes as worksheets. One teacher said, *"We used the alternative learning module. During their limited face-to-face classes, discuss the different topics on the module and let them answer some of the activities at home"*. Another teacher mentioned the need to rewrite the learning modules to adjust to the level of their students by making them simpler. One teacher responded: *"The hardest preparation to do is the teaching approaches and strategies we apply during making or rewriting the modular so pupils will understand it in a simple way."* The fourth emerging theme was the psychosocial preparation on the part of the teacher. The teachers believe that more than a year of no face-to-face classes requires them to adjust. One teacher admitted that *"For me, the hardest is how to prepare and face the children because I haven't met them for almost three years because of the pandemic. That's why I really need to adjust."* They mentioned that before the

first day of classes, they need to adjust and prepare. *"In my case, I focused first on self-adjustment,"* another teacher said. The importance of psychological preparation had been highlighted by many researchers as both teachers and students have undergone mental stress brought by COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2021; Lundie & Law, 2020). Lastly, some respondents mentioned the need to learn effective teaching strategies applicable in the face-to-face setting after almost two years of modular learning. As one teacher said, *"Until now, we were using modular learning and needed to devise and think of our own strategy."* *"We used blended learning in which we prepared the adaptive learning module. I do some research on how to handle them, especially preparing their mental health in order for them to be prepared."* This indicates for the need for teachers retooling and upskilling after years of no face-to-face classes as suggested by Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020). The need for upskilling and retooling of teachers' skills is supported by the recent study of Jackaria & Caballes (2022). They emphasized the need for school leaders to be flexible in providing Teachers' Profession Development (TPD) Programs as demanded by the changing education landscape in the post-pandemic world.

Table 1. The emerging themes on teachers' preparation for the reopening of classes

Theme	Selected Quotations
Establishing Health Protocol	<p><i>"There were many preparations that need to be done by the school for the reopening of classes like (passing) the validation to make sure the safety of the return to school and followed the social distancing, health protocol, the school must have a washing facility, there are also many preparations inside the classroom like having signage on health protocols" (P2)</i></p> <p><i>"...then I proceed to my classroom physical facility, by following the guidelines for the reopening of classes, including the washing facility, the required spacing of each chair, and trash can(s)." (P4)</i></p> <p><i>"There are many preparations in classrooms like need having signage on health protocols, hand washing facility, that must be followed by the children" (P6)</i></p>
Physical Improvement	<p><i>"Before reopening of classes, we decided to start first in our classroom beautify (beautification)." (P5)</i></p> <p><i>"Foremost, the beautification must be hardest including the painting of the whole wall, room, followed by the decoration and the rest of the requirements just to pass the validation of the division and region." (P7)</i></p>
Instructional materials Development	<p><i>"We used the alternative learning module. During their limited face-to-face classes, discuss the different topics on the module and let them answer some of the activities at home." (P2)</i></p> <p><i>"The hardest preparation to do is the teaching approaches and strategies we apply during making or rewriting the modular so pupils will understand it in a simple way." (P3)</i></p>
Psychosocial Preparation	<p><i>"For me, the hardest is how to prepare and face the children because I haven't met them for almost three school years because of the pandemic. That's why I really need to adjust." (P1)</i></p> <p><i>"In my case, I focused first on self-adjustment." (P4)</i></p>
Upskilling Teaching strategy	<p><i>"Until now, we were using modular learning and needed to devise and think of our own strategy." (P7)</i></p> <p><i>"We used blended learning in which we prepared the adaptive learning module. I do some research on how to handle them, especially preparing their mental health in order for them to be prepared." (P2)</i></p>

Teachers' instructional challenges encountered during the reopening of classes

The teacher-respondents were asked to talk about the challenges they encountered during the first few weeks of the face-to-face classes, particularly those relating to instructions. Thematic analysis of their responses leads to the formation of five themes. Overwhelmingly, all the teachers I interviewed expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers in their classes. They said it was challenging since they needed to make adjustments just to be on the students' level. Hence, they cannot continue with their supposed lessons as stated in the curriculum. Some have resorted to sectioning their classes into readers and non-readers.

Here are some of the teachers' responses: *"Reading is declining. We do our best to go down their level in which pupils (are) divided into categories; fast learners and slow learners."* This was supported by the response of another teacher who said, *"During the first week, most of my pupils cannot read. I decide (d) to separate the readers from the non-readers."* Other teachers have resorted to preparing supplemental reading materials for their classes instead of using the module or following the curriculum strictly. She said, *"We have set A and set B; for set A, I prepared a module, and for set B, we downloaded a Marungko approach (materials)..."*. She made mentioned them using Marungko materials, popular reading materials especially used for Filipino students. While the study is based on the limited number of respondents, the alarming number of non-readers in school is collaborated by other credible reports such as the World Bank (2021) and UNICEF (2021). According to these reports, around 90% of Filipino children by the age of 10 are non-readers. The finding suggests that prior to the limited face-to-face classes, a reading assessment should be conducted to determine the number of non-readers. The result should then be used in planning reading interventions. This reading intervention should be part of the school learning recovery plan. Another common challenge encountered by the teachers is having students who are mentally or socially unprepared for face-to-face classes. As one teacher commented, *"During our class session, they (students) are almost tired, hungry, not interested and insisted (in) going home."* This shows that the students still have difficulties adjusting to physical classes. For the primary grades, the students need both mental and social preparation. It is observed that some small children are not comfortable in class with a teacher and still want the presence of their parents. One primary school teacher said, *"The attention of pupils (are) still distracted since they were absent for so long; adjustment takes time. Some of them are mentally scared, especially the lower grades."* This finding shows that children were affected by the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly on their social and mental health. These teachers' experiences are similar to the findings of Wang et al. (2021), who conducted a national cross-sectional study across China and found an increase in psychosocial and behavioral problems in children during the early reopening of classes after the COVID-19 lockdowns in China. Similar to Lundie and Law (2020), who highlighted the need for schools to work on students' mental health and wellbeing. The third theme on teachers' challenges was the difficulty of maintaining health protocol while the children are in class. This is related to the finding of Tran, et al. (2021), who noted that our traditional classroom spaces posed a challenge in maintaining a socially-distanced classroom. According to the teachers interviewed, they need to remind the students from time to time, even while the classes are ongoing. In addition, maintaining minimum health protocols such as physical distancing, frequent handwashing, wearing of facemask, and the like are part of the school safety assessment tool. One teacher mentioned: *"Every day, I should remind the students regarding the health protocols by observing the social distancing, washing hands, and using alcohol before entering the classroom."* This was supported by another teacher who said, *"The management of pupils, each meeting I must always remind them about the health protocol because I cannot avoid (stop) them from sitting together."* This is in line with the recently published findings of James et al. (2022), who found out that health and safety are still the top concerns of teachers in the school reopening. The fourth emerging theme pertains to the need for new teaching strategies appropriate for the new normal. For instance, previous strategies such as group work which were very effective in fostering student-to-student interaction, are no longer applicable. As one teacher aptly put it, *"To make sure that the learners will learn, we must involve them in the teaching and learning process (group activity or class reporting). Since we are still (observing) the health protocols, there was no group actively involved*

in the teaching and learning process". On a similar note, another teacher said that they were searching for effective teaching strategies, "Some research regarding teaching strategies that should be used during the distance learning or blended learning." This result highlights the need to provide teachers with professional learning opportunities, as mentioned in Darling-Hammond and Hylar (2020), through quality programs and mentoring. The fifth theme that emerged was the issue of time management. One teacher said, "We encountered many challenges; foremost is the time management." This was seconded by another teacher who said, "...the time allotment in teaching is some of the problems." This may be due to the long hours (i.e., 3.5 hours) of classes with only a short supervised break. In contrast, the seemingly long hours were not enough if they had to strictly follow all the subjects that should be taught in a day as suggested by the curriculum. According to the teachers during the follow-up class observation and interview, the problem of so many subjects to cover contributes to students' inattentiveness. This was especially obvious during the last part of the class hours, especially in the lower grades. Admittedly, according to some teachers, they felt overwhelmed and exhausted during the last part of their session.

Table 2. Emerging themes on teachers' instructional challenges during the reopening of classes

Theme	Selected Quotations
Non-readers	<p>"Reading is declining. We do our best to go down their level which pupils (are) divided into categories; fast learners and slow learners." (P3)</p> <p>"During the first week, most of my pupils cannot read. I decide to separate the readers from the non-readers." (P6)</p> <p>"We have set A and set B, for set A I prepared a module, and for set B we downloaded a Marungko approach (materials)..." (P4)</p>
Mentally and Socially unprepared	<p>"During our class session, they (students) are almost tired, hungry, not interested and insisted (on) going home, time management by pupils." (P3)</p> <p>"The attention of pupils still distracted since they were absent for so long, adjustment take time. Some of them are mentally scared, especially the lower grades. Parents' presence is needed because of the strong bonding with them at home." (P7)</p>
Maintaining health Protocol	<p>"Every day, I should remind the students regarding the health protocols, by observing the social distancing, washing hands and use alcohol before entering the classroom." (P2)</p> <p>"The management of pupils, each meeting I must always remind them about the health protocol because I cannot avoid (prevent) them from sitting together." (P4)</p>
Teaching strategy during the new normal	<p>"To make sure that the learners will learn, we must involve them in the teaching and learning process (group activity or class reporting). Since we are still the health protocols, no group was actively involved in the teaching and learning process." (P4)</p> <p>"Not like normal, where we use student-centered applied in teaching strategy, but then in this pandemic, we adjust not to apply grouping student-centered." (P5)</p> <p>"Some research regarding teaching strategies that should be used during the distance learning or blended learning." (P2)</p>
Time management	<p>"We encountered many challenges; foremost is the time management." (P1)</p> <p>"... the time allotment in teaching are some of the problems." (P2)</p>

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher believes that more than the physical and safety preparation, there is also a need to make sure that our teachers are competent to handle classes in the new normal, being the key movers in education. As we are still in the expansion of pilot face-to-face classes, there is also the need to identify challenges teachers encounter and hopefully offer insights as we are planning for our learning recovery programs. Hence, this study was conducted aimed at exploring elementary teachers' personal experiences during the return to school for the limited face-to-face classes after almost two years of school closure due to COVID-19. Particularly, it examined teachers' preparations and instructional challenges encountered with a focus on their first few weeks' experiences of the pilot face-to-face classes.

The result shows that five themes emerged in the teachers' preparation for face-to-face classes. Foremost, teachers' preparation includes establishing health protocols in schools and classrooms, such as the construction of handwashing facilities, trash bins, and the spacing of seating arrangements. This was followed by the need for instructional materials development, such as module and supplemental materials printing. Aside from these physical preparations, the teachers also spend hours on psychosocial preparation as they expect to meet their students face-to-face after almost two years. According to these teachers, they need to find time learning new teaching strategies for the face-to-face classes. Then the teachers were asked to talk about the challenges they encountered during the first few weeks of the face-to-face classes, particularly those relating to instructions. Based on the teachers' responses, five themes emerged, including the alarming number of non-readers, the presence of students who are mentally and socially unprepared for face-to-face classes, the difficulty of maintaining health protocols while the children are in school, the need for new teaching strategies appropriate under the new normal, and the challenge with time management for them to meet the set curriculum contents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the nature of the qualitative study is limited and cannot be generalized, the findings offer insights into teachers' preparations and challenges which are important as we are still preparing for the rolling-out of face-to-face classes in all schools nationwide after the expansion phase. Based on the conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should be provided with training that will improve their competence with a focus on remedial Reading, numeracy, and new teaching strategies that are engaging in the new normal setting.
2. In the absence of PFA providers, teachers should also be trained to provide Psychosocial First Aid (PFA), especially those that are appropriate for young children in the school context.
3. School officials may adopt flexible time and subject arrangements during the first few weeks of classes until students have already adjusted to the face-to-face classes.
4. Comprehensive reading intervention should be implemented as part of the learning recovery strategy, including assessing students' reading levels, allotment of time for Reading, and developing reading materials, among others.
5. A better school-community coordination should be established to involve parents and community members in the implementation of limited face-to-face classes, such as the implementation of health protocols, providing psychological first aid, and the physical preparation and improvement of classrooms and schools.
6. A more rigorous quantitative survey should be made involving more teachers representing different sectors such as rural, urban, public, private, big, and small schools.

IMPLICATIONS

From the findings of the study, we can draw many important insights and implications. The findings suggest that rigorous reading programs should be part of the school learning recovery strategies as teachers reported problems with many non-readers. The teachers' experience with pupils' behavioral problems suggests that teachers should

also be trained in providing psychological first aid to children after no face-to-face classes for two years. Teachers also experienced difficulties in their non-teaching duties, such as maintaining health protocols which suggest the importance of school-community coordination. Community members and non-teaching personnel should help assist in ensuring that health and safety protocols are in place. The vast physical, material, and financial preparations needed for the school reopening, such as hand washing facilities, health equipment, and the like, require the assistance of all government agencies and stakeholders. The teacher-respondents also expressed problems with time management. They have problems with fitting all the required subjects in a single session, which accordingly has contributed to some students' misbehavior problems. This suggests that school administrations should consider offering fewer and essential subjects during the first few weeks of the classes until such time the students have fully adjusted.

LIMITATIONS

This study focused on determining the experiences and challenges encountered by public elementary school teachers during the first few weeks of the reopening of classes. By the nature of the phenomenological study, the study findings were drawn from the real experiences of a limited number of participants. The study captures the experiences of the seven teacher-participants who are part of the pilot face-to-face classes. In addition, the context was in a rural setting and did not provide insights into the experiences of the urban and private school teachers, who may have different experiences and insights.

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