Teachers' Experiences in Deped's National Learning Camp: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract:- **Restoring the learning losses brought about by the sudden shifts in instruction vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the pressing issues facing education today. This phenomenological study aimed to uncover the narratives of teachers in the implementation of the National Learning Camp, one of the learning recovery programs established by the Department of Education. Following purposive sampling, select secondary school teachers participated in in-depth interviews. Following the rigors of thematic analysis, the results of the study revealed the following themes on the challenges: lack of resources, lack of teachers' preparation, and lack of learners' interest. These contributed to the problems experienced by educators and learners in public schools. The participants likewise emphasized that the NLC was abruptly implemented. However, to counter the challenges, the respondents employed various coping strategies: collaboration, conducting LAC sessions, and learners' engagement. Fostering an environment of teamwork and camaraderie has come across as important in the attempt to successfully implement the NLC. Meanwhile, the research extracted educational management insights: learner-centered program, opportunities for improvement, and stakeholders' synergy. The study suggested a thorough program implementation review in different governance levels and advocated for future investigations focusing on alternative demographics and settings.**

Keywords:- *Challenges, DepEd, Learning Recovery, Management Insights, National Learning Camp,*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recovering the learning deficits caused by the abrupt changes in teaching and learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic may be the most urgent challenge in education today. Learning losses are not limited to losing track of academic knowledge; they can refer to reverting to basic skills that students would have picked up while in school (Singh, 2022). According to a report issued by UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP), learning loss caused by the pandemic must be recovered as soon as possible to avoid long-term harm to children's well-being and productivity (2022). With this, education systems around the world take actions by building learning recovery efforts.

A significant number of countries implemented national programs designed specifically to provide additional support to students affected by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2022). Following a variety of strategies, nations streamlined the implementation of summer schools, remedial or accelerated education services, enrichment programs and the like (Azevedo et al., 2020). For instance, in Belgium and Tanzania, free summer schools were offered for all and were successful in providing remediation for vulnerable students (UNESCO, 2021). In India, studies revealed that learning loss was unevenly distributed in society (Zhdanov, et al., 2022; Singh, 2022). With this, the Indian Education Ministry developed Teaching at the Right Level Program to assist foundational reading and arithmetic skills quickly.

Learning camps in the form of remedial and enhancement programs generally prioritize main disciplines such as mathematics, reading, and science (Simonez, 2016). This is what the Philippines had followed. One of the efforts exerted by the Department of Education to counter the learning losses is through the implementation of the National Learning Camp conducted month after the previous academic years. The National Learning Camp (NLC) is a voluntary learning recovery program that aims to improve learner outcomes and strengthen teacher competence (DepEd, 2023). It is a strategic initiative supporting the National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP), which aims to close learning gaps and assist K to 12 learners in all public elementary and secondary schools nationwide in attaining learning standards. In the NLC, learners will be enrolled in one of three camps based on their specific needs: Enhancement Camp, Consolidation Camp, or Intervention Camp. The NLC places utmost importance on fostering learner well-being and engagement, promoting inclusive education, and cultivating a positive learning environment where teachers excel and learners flourish. Further, it seeks to complement learning efforts in the previous school year and provides a firmer basis for further gains in the upcoming school year.

Compliant to this national directive, the Schools Division of Davao City implemented the National Learning Camp. As a rush program which had made rounds in the educational arena, teacher volunteers who are at the forefront of the five-week summer program have aired their sentiments not limited to teaching preparations and personal concerns. The researcher urged to explore this because there are little to no studies on learning camps that have been undertaken in the Philippines.

As the NLC is still a fresh concept, this study hoped to become a benchmark for early implementers by collating the responses from teachers in its birthing pains. This would also counter check if the challenges experienced by teachers

in the Philippines and in the other countries who have implemented this program ahead shared the same way. The insights from this investigation are essential in the implementation of the next phase of the program come the next school year.

This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Department of Education teachers in administering the National Learning Camp in their stations.

➢ *Specifically, this Sought to Answer the Following Questions:*

• What were the experiences of DepEd teachers in implementing the National Learning Camp?
• What coping mechanisms were used by the teachers to counter the challenges in the implementation of the National Learning Camp?
• What educational management insights can be drawn from the findings of the study?

II. METHOD

This chapter presented the method of the study which included philosophical assumption, qualitative assumption, design and procedure, re- search participants, role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study, and ethical considerations.

Conducting a study always involves some presuppositions in terms of philosophy and views. The two hurdles in handling them were identifying these attitudes and assumptions and choosing whether to actively integrate them in the study (Slife & Williams, 1995). Creswell (2013) suggested that one might start the process by considering why it was crucial to comprehend the philosophical presuppositions that underpin qualitative research and to be able to communicate them in research. Understanding philosophical presuppositions was crucial, since it affected how one formulated problems, research questions, and information-seeking strategies (Huff, 2009). Additionally, these presumptions were supported by the scholarly community in which one worked and were grounded in one's training. Further, when reviewers of the research made philosophical assumptions about the study, the researcher benefited from understanding where the reviewers stand on important epistemological concerns.

On the qualitative assumptions of the study, people sought to understand their reality and create their own distinctive meanings that correspond to their experiences, utilizing social constructivism as an interpretive framework for qualitative presumptions (Tenny et al., 2022). These meanings were not imprinted or innate in each person. Rather, meanings emerge as a result of interactions with others. These meanings were varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. Further, this study heavily relied on the perspectives of the participants. In social and historical situations, the subjective interpretations were widely contested. This means that rather than being solely imprinted on people, they were created via interactions with others as well as historical and cultural traditions that function in their lives.

The study was conducted using a qualitative-inquiry-based phenomenological research design using open-ended questions. This is a kind of investigation in which the researcher identified the essence of participants' descriptions of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological approaches were particularly effective at bringing to the fore individual experiences and perceptions from their own points of view, and so challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive component to phenomenological research allowed it to inform, support, or question policy and action by allowing it to be utilized as the foundation for practical theory (Lester, 1999). The study aimed to present the participants' real lives as a design that captured the experiences of a select few addressing particular phenomena, ultimately revealing the participants' personal relevance in relation to the experience.

This study was conducted in DepEd Region XI, Division of Davao City. Only 10 participants from the different high schools as the key participants included and were purposely selected based on the nature of their work as classroom teachers. They should have experience working in the Department of Education for at least 5 months or more. As a principle, the purposive sampling technique was the deliberate choice of an in- formant due to the qualities the informant possesses. For Bernard (2006), it is a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants. It was exemplified through the key informant technique wherein one or a few individuals are solicited to act as guides to the phenomenon. Key informants are observant, reflective members of the community of interest who know much about the topic and are both able and willing to share their knowledge.

In qualitative research, the researcher's job was to obtain the necessary data while examining the opinions and feelings of the study subjects regarding the topic under investigation. This meant getting people to talk on subjects that could be extremely sensitive to them. Reliving past experiences can be difficult at times, especially if they were unpleasant and are still fresh in the participant's mind. As a researcher, my first responsibility is to safeguard participants and their data, regardless of the method used to collect it. In other words, participants had provided clear and concise protective methods.

In order to collect the data, I created an interview guide with three (3) primary, impactful questions that probe public school teachers' percep- tions on the national learning camp. The issue of identifying the challenges faced by teachers as they attempt to offer the learning camp was thoroughly discussed. I made sure that the experts approved of my interview strategy. Additionally, I made sure that all ethical guidelines are fol- lowed and put into practice when I gather the data. A formal letter requesting permission to conduct the study would be written to the Schools Di- vision Superintendent of the Schools Division of Davao City. The

requirements set forth by the authorizing authority are taken into consideration and fulfilled after getting the approval letter. The interview sessions came next. To ensure some of the participants' confidentiality, the interviews took place in a closed-off setting. With their permission, the interview subjects had their voices captured on audio. Afterwards, interviews were transcribed with the help of a note taker and recorder. Participants reviewed the written transcripts for accuracy, which enhanced the study's credibility.

In the analysis phase of this research, Thematic Content Analysis was employed, the goal of thematic analysis is to find themes and their patterns in the interview data.

A study's validity is important since it demonstrates that the research methodology was widely applied and accepted by the general public as well as by the relevant academic, professional, and policy sectors (Nowell et al., 2017). Establishing credibility is one way researchers can persuade themselves and their readers that their study findings are important. In order to further develop the idea of trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical considerations are particularly important in qualitative research because of how in-depth it is. In order to conduct this study in compliance with the ethical standards for qualitative research, the researcher took all required steps. The researcher ensured that the participants were fully informed about the study and understood the topics that were explained to them. The researcher will also guarantee that certain documents adhered to the standards set by the ethical committee of the graduate program at Rizal Memorial Colleges.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This portion of the study shows the findings of the research questions. The teacher-participants presented their views and experiences on the implementation of the National Learning Camp and how it affected both teachers and students. In connection with this, a thorough investigation of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights which encompass the experiences were explored in this section of the paper. The content analysis of the findings is presented coupled with the discussions anchored on the themes identified.

➢ *Experiences of teachers with National Learning Camp's implementation*

● *Lack of Resources.*
The analysis of the themes showed that one of the major challenges experienced by teachers is the lack of resources in implementing the National Learning Camp. Below are the responses of the participants, to wit:

"Limited resources such as insufficient learning materials, technology or classroom facility. These limitations can impact our ability to effectively implement NLC and provide the necessary support to the students." (P3)

"Insufficient funding can limit the availability of resources, materials, and technology needed for the successful implementation of NLC. Without adequate financial support, teachers may struggle to provide the necessary learning materials and tools to support the learning recovery efforts." (P4)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory that suggests human needs can be arranged in a hierarchical order, with basic physiological needs at the bottom and higher-level needs like self-actualization at the top. In the context of the DepEd's national learning camp experiencing a lack of resources, Maslow's theory can be applied to understand how shortage in resources might impact participants' ability to fulfill their needs and engage effectively in the learning process. It is most likely that students will fail to achieve their highest learning potentials due to the lack of resources.

● *Learners' Lack of Interest.*
Another theme that emerged from the findings is the lack of interest of students. The participants of the study mentioned the following experiences:

"I feel happy and sad at the same time. Happy for these students that I have helped during the NLC but sad because only a small number of learners enrolled in the NLC." (P3)

"Some of the students were present during the first week but as the time goes by most of them tend to be absent." (P5)

The Interest-Driven Learning Theory posits that learners feel more engaged and motivated when they pursue topics or activities that align with their personal interests. When students have the opportunity to explore subjects they find interesting, they are more likely to be actively involved in the learning process and retain information better. It is most likely that the NLC is not interest-driven enough for students to be enticed to enroll in the program.

● *Lack of Teachers' Preparation.*
The abrupt implementation of the National Learning Camp paved the way for problems such as lack of teachers' preparation. Several respondents found difficulty in gauging the lessons and creating lesson plans and activities to implement during the course of the NLC. Below are the responses, to wit:

"Number one factor that contributed to the difficulties in carrying out the NLC is the "Teacher Preparedness" in which some teachers required additional training or support to effectively handle diverse learning needs." (P4)

"I had experience of carrying out the NLC because of the abrupt implementation without proper seminar-workshop or training." (P5)

Teachers' lack of preparation and lack of interest in the implementation of the National Learning Camp may be pointed out to the demands of the program vis-à-vis the resources available. The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests that job demands (such as time pressure and workload) and job resources (such as support and autonomy) influence employees' well-being and performance. Teachers in the national learning camp may face high job demands, such as tight schedules and limited resources, which can contribute to their lack of preparation.

➢ *Coping Mechanisms used to Counter Challenges in NLC Implementation*

• *Collaboration.*
Another theme that came into view is the need for collaboration among teachers. The participants emphasized the importance of teamwork and cooperation in order to successfully implement the program. Below are the responses, to wit:

"Collaboration and support were the coping mechanisms being used. As a teacher, collaboration with colleagues to share ideas, resources, and strategies are necessary. Collaborative planning, co-teaching and peer support can help alleviate the challenges and provide a sense of responsibility." (P4)

"Some teachers had suggestions as they encountered a lot of difficulties and problems and tried to collaborate with their colleagues to make those challenges easy to handle and foster teamwork." (P6)

This is aligned to the Collaborative Learning Theory. This posits that engaging in collaborative activities and interactions fosters deeper understanding, enhances critical thinking skills, promotes social and emotional development, and prepares individuals for success in an interconnected world. This provides opportunities for teachers to construct knowledge collectively through interaction, discussion, and exchange of ideas. By engaging in collaborative problem-solving activities, teachers can leverage diverse perspectives and expertise to deepen their understanding of complex concepts and phenomena.

• *Engage Learners in Activities.*
One of the themes that came about in the study was the need to come up with learning activities that will spark students' interests. This could involve hands-on activities that will inspire students to be more participative during the NLC sessions. Below are the responses, to wit:

"Exploring innovative teaching techniques, utilizing technology and designing engaging activities to enhance learning and participation." (P4)

"Implementing interactive and engaging teaching methods to maintain student interest and participation throughout the intensive sessions." (P6)

This can be related to Self-Determination Theory or SDT. SDT emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence in driving human behavior. According to this theory, when students are given opportunities to pursue their interests autonomously and feel competent in their abilities to explore those interests, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn and engage in deeper levels of learning.

• *Conducting of LAC Sessions.*
Another theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was the need to incorporate the NLC implementation in the Learning Action Cell Sessions of teachers. Here are the answers of the respondents:

"We have focus group discussion together with my co-teachers and we share ideas on how to handle difficult situations during the NLC implementation, especially if the students have a consecutive absence in the subject." (P2)

"When facing difficulties, teachers tend to do a close door meeting to discuss the problem. Having LAC Sessions also helps in facing those difficult situations." (P3)

This could be related to Resilience-Based Learning Theory. This theory proposes that individuals can develop resilience skills through the process of facing and overcoming difficult situations. By embracing challenges as opportunities for growth and learning, individuals can cultivate resilience, adaptability, and perseverance, leading to enhanced personal development and success.

➢ *Educational Management Insights*

• *Learner-Centered Program.*
The National Learning Camp (NLC) was viewed by the teacher-implementers as a program embracing real learner-centered philosophy. Below are the significant pronouncements of the respondents:

"The program can enhance the ability of the strugglers especially in mathematics." (P2)

"Teaching directs the learners to enhance skills in achieving their desired profession." (P4)

"Teaching strengthens the weak points and enhances the learner's ability to think, read and write." (P5)

• *Opportunities for Improvement.*
In its maiden launch in the Philippine basic education schools, the program recorded multiple points of opportunities for improvement from the respondents.

"The NLC Program must be more interactive and manipulative." (P1)

"The learners must be grouped in accordance with Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences." (P2)

"Provide sufficient resources for the students to address the learning gaps being experienced in the teaching-learning process." (P5)

This could be attuned to the theory of Progressivism by John Dewey. This learning theory is anchored on the idea that education should be rooted in the experiences of the learner. He argued that students learn best when they actively participate in hands-on activities and engage in real-world experiences. Moreover, as P2 suggested, the NLC should take into account the importance of taking into consideration the Multiple Intelligences of students as suggested by Howard Gardner.

- *Stakeholders' Synergy.*

  As one of DepEd's flagship programs to recover the learning losses, the investigation revealed the role of synergy through total stakeholders' partnership in the different phases of program implementation.

"The implementation of a program depends on how cooperative the administration, teachers, students and stakeholders are to realize the effectiveness and the success of the program." (P9)

"I learned that NLC needs community engagement or community involvement for it is the backbone/supporter of the camp's objectives." (P6)

This could be related to the Collaborative Learning Theory where collaboration among group members is encouraged. This way, participants can foster critical thinking skills, creativity, and problem solving together. Additionally, the Community of Practice Theory may likewise be used as an anchor as it indicates that in order to achieve highest learning potential, various professionals and stakeholders should work together in delivering a child's education.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of the thematic analysis, the following themes were discovered.

The challenges experienced by teachers with the National Learning Camp were summarized into: lack of resources, lack of teachers' preparation, and lack of learners' interest.

The first major issue impeding the successful adoption of the NLC was a conspicuous lack of resources, including inadequate technology, learning materials, and teaching implements. The teacher participants mentioned that the lack of learning materials and absence of technology in their NLC classrooms made it harder to deliver the lessons effectively. Because of this, students could not maximize their learning experience and teachers found difficulty delivering the lessons.

In addition, teachers emphasized that they needed more time to plan their lessons and that they were unable to provide the necessary resources. The abrupt implementation of the NLC subjected teachers to much pressure and stress. As a result, some participants felt like they had negative experiences with the implementation of the NLC.

Additionally, enrollment was low and attendance rates were dropping during the camp, indicating a worrying lack of student interest. Teachers were also ill-prepared to deal with a variety of learning requirements in the absence of adequate training or support, which was a result of the NLC's sudden adoption. Further, enhanced teacher training, adequate resources, and methods to improve student participation might be necessary to tackle these issues.

Meanwhile, the results of the research revealed that learning camp teachers employed the following coping strategies to address issues with the implementation of NLC: collaboration, conducting LAC sessions, learners' engagement.

Participants emphasize the value of cooperation and teamwork among colleagues, and collaboration emerges as an important strategy. Peer assistance, joint instruction, and collaborative planning are emphasized as successful strategies to ease difficulties and develop a sense of accountability among the core implementers. It was found that it is essential to involve students in activities, with a focus on creating interactive and practical learning opportunities to pique their interest and encourage involvement.

It was also revealed that the incorporation of Learning Action Cell (LAC) meetings was advantageous to program delivery. The cell gives teachers a forum to exchange ideas, talk about difficulties, and come up with ways to improve the implementation of NLC. Teachers overcome challenges and guarantee the success of the camp for the benefit of students by working together and utilizing creative teaching methods.

Moreover, strategies to keep learners engaged are also among of the coping mechanisms. The results showed that when learners are engaged, they are more likely to pay attention, process information deeply, and actively participate in learning activities. This leads to better retention of knowledge and a deeper understanding of concepts.

Further, the educational management insights drawn from the study were: learner-centered program, opportunities for improvement, and stakeholders' synergy.

Teacher-implementers view the National Learning Camp (NLC) as a learner-centered program that embodies a philosophy that focuses on the actual needs and skills of students. Respondents mentioned its value in fostering skills necessary for desired careers, its ability to improve the mathematics skills of challenging students, and its efficacy for motivated learners. On the other hand, during its initial

implementation in Philippine basic education institutions, areas for improvement were noted.

Accordingly, the program should be made more interactive and manipulative as a way to foster more opportunities for improvement. This could be done by grouping the learners based on Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, topic time allotments should be changed. Moreover, there should be enough resources available to solve learning gaps.

Furthermore, respondents stressed the significance of collaboration between administrators, teachers, students, and community stakeholders, emphasizing the relevance of stakeholders' synergy for the program's success. Including professionals from a variety of fields to enhance students' educational experiences and encouraging community involvement to support the program's goals were two suggestions. With the help of all relevant partners, the NLC is anticipated to better meet students' educational requirements through cooperation and focused enhancements.

The results of the analysis revealed the following significant findings:

The challenges faced by the teachers reveals important areas that need to be addressed for the program to be implemented successfully. The biggest obstacle is a lack of resources, which includes insufficient instructional tools, learning materials, and technology. Teachers' lack of time for lesson preparation exacerbates this shortfall, which hinders effective teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, a conspicuous lack of student involvement is highlighted by low enrollment and declining attendance rates, which presents a substantial obstacle to reaching targeted learning outcomes. To tackle these issues, better teacher preparation programs, sufficient budget allocation, and strategies to boost student engagement are required.

Teachers have used a variety of coping mechanisms to address issues at hand, such as teamwork, facilitating Learning Action Cell (LAC) meetings, and involving students. Collaboration becomes apparent as a crucial technique, encouraging colleague teamwork and offering a forum for idea and support sharing. In order to pique students' attention and promote active involvement, it is also an imperative to involve them in interactive and practical learning activities. The conduct of LAC sessions must be sustained as it deemed to be contributory to the success of the teachers in light of delivering the lessons by solving problems and sharing ideas more easily, which enhances program implementation in the long run.

The study also revealed areas for development and highlights the learner-centered approach of the NLC in educational management. Although the program is praised for emphasizing the development of pertinent skills and meeting students' actual needs, there are still areas that could be improved, including increasing the program's interactivity, classifying students according to multiple intelligences, and providing enough funding to close learning gaps. Additionally, the success of the program is considered contingent upon the synergy of stakeholders, with a focus on collaboration between administrators, teachers, learners, and community stakeholders. Suggested techniques to support program objectives and improve students' educational experiences include increasing community involvement and bringing in specialists from a variety of industries. These suggestions are eyed by the teachers to improve outcomes of the program.

The following future directions were surmised based on the findings of the study:

The Department of Education may consider proposing additional directives aimed at supporting the NLC program. This could involve prioritizing the provision of adequate resources, including technology and learning materials, to better support both teachers and learners participating in the program. Ensuring sufficient resources will enable educators to deliver quality instruction and create enriching learning experiences for students.

At the legislative level, lawmakers may review policies related to learning recovery programs, including the NLC. Considering the success and potential impact of the NLC, policymakers may contemplate institutionalizing the camp through national-level policies. Institutionalization would help maximize participation and ensure the sustainability of the program over the long term, thereby benefiting a larger number of students across the country.

Educational leaders and teachers can explore innovations to enhance the delivery of the NLC program. This could involve continuous capacity building for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement the program. Additionally, incentivizing teachers who volunteer to participate in the NLC program can help motivate teachers and recognize their efforts in supporting student learning and development.

Researchers in the future may work on the same study with a different group of subjects and demographics. For improved results, additional methods that have not been employed in this study could also be investigated or implemented.

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