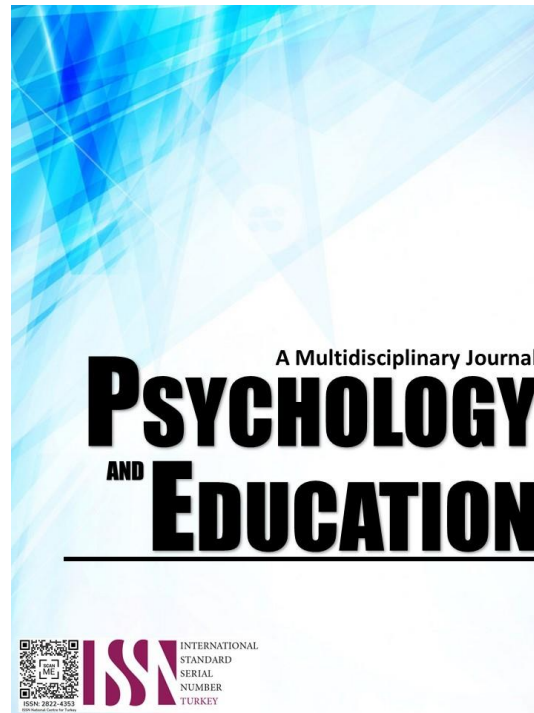


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Real Heroes Don't Wear Capes: The Lived Experience and Challenges Faced by Preschool Teachers Amidst the Blended Learning

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, preschool teachers must quickly adjust to online education. During COVID-19, teachers have been forced to embrace technology. This study investigates the lived experiences and challenges of preschool teachers. Employing the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings of this study were: It was found that managing parent expectations and dealing with challenging parent behavior were among the sources of stress for preschool teachers. This fear of being judged or criticized by parents could influence their teaching practices and interactions with students, leading to feelings of anxiety or insecurity. Further, preschool teachers faced challenges in implementing blended learning, including technological issues, a lack of support and resources, and difficulties creating engaging online content. However, as teachers gained more experience and knowledge about effectively using online tools and technologies for instruction, these challenges became more manageable. Also limited or unreliable internet connectivity was also a significant challenge faced by teachers and students in the transition to online learning. The digital divide and various technical, bandwidth, and security concerns exacerbated it. Internet connection was a major frustration for her during online classes as it affected her ability to communicate and teach her students effectively. Moreover, preschool teachers have had to adapt to the challenges of blended learning by implementing various strategies and making preparations to guide and support their students effectively. These strategies have included using games and other engaging activities to keep students motivated and engaged, developing online lesson plans, and using online teaching platforms and tools. However, the transition to blended learning has also been a source of stress for preschool teachers. They have had to manage additional workloads and responsibilities and deal with challenges such as supporting students with varying technology access and skills.

Keywords: *challenges, blended learning, lived experiences, psychological well-being, preschool teacher*

Introduction

Online education has emerged as a major response to the COVID-19 outbreak, necessitating rapid adaptation of preschool teachers to online education and acceptance of educational technology (Hong et al., 2021). The transition from offline schooling to emergency distance teaching during COVID-19 has put teachers under unprecedented pressure to embrace technology (Ferdig et al., 2020). According to Granić and Marangunić (2021), preschool teachers are no different. They use computer-based educational technology to communicate with young children and their families, share text and video resources, participate in remote training and discussions, and manage daily work affairs, all of which they have never done before. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed numerous challenges to the education system, including technological issues and a lack of digital competence among teachers, but teachers have worked to overcome these challenges by innovating and finding new ways to continue educational activities (Marin, 2022).

Working with preschoolers almost necessitates an integrated strategy, with free play or didactic play

serving as the primary instrument. Considering the pandemic context and the manner in which activities in kindergartens have been carried out since March 2020, when the Ministry of Education and Research decided to suspend face-to-face courses, the education system has had to turn to new practices and methods to continue its activity. Despite being the first to return to face-to-face teaching, preschool schools confronted one of the most difficult situations during online teaching, owing to the very young age of the students. Even though digital education is not a new concept, integrating and utilizing technology in the educational system was and continues to be a challenge, resulting in transformations with numerous benefits but also risks to which children are exposed by carrying out the informative process through technology (Barnett, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the education of nearly 1.6 billion students in over 190 countries worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). School closures have impacted teachers and students transitioning from face-to-face to online and blended classes. In accordance with Khanal's study (2020), he discovered that dealing with the uncertainty and fear of the COVID-19 and the additional pressure of doing online teaching in the midst of the crisis caused

teachers to become frustrated and anguished. Despite a number of challenges and crises, teachers learn to deal with technological challenges and run the class in virtual mode. Nonetheless, they believe online delivery is ineffective due to various constraints.

In addition, some studies say that online teaching demands higher skills to be able to achieve effective teaching. Most of the teachers were not equipped with sufficient knowledge in terms of skills, experiences, and resources to do online teaching. Without recognizing the teachers' readiness, the authorities forced them to begin teaching, the preschool teachers lived experiences with 'fear,' 'anxiety,' and 'pressure' as a result of 'unpreparedness'. However, the teachers used that situation as an opportunity to train in technical abilities and put those skills to use through online learning; in that case, the confidence increased as they gradually learned how to use ICTs, and they became eager and excited about bringing more innovation and change to their traditional teaching (Khannal, 2020).

Furthermore, this study aims to explore the experiences and challenges preschool teachers face and their coping mechanisms amidst blended learning. The study aims to contribute to psychology and education, providing valuable knowledge on the need for the teachers' well-being and support system (i.e., training and benefits). Moreover, it will serve as a basis for program development and evaluation for the Department of Education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences and challenges of preschool teachers. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of preschool teachers amidst blended learning?
2. What are the challenges faced by preschool teachers amidst blended learning?
3. What are the coping mechanisms of preschool teachers amidst blended learning?

Methodology

This study employed Heideggerian phenomenology to explore the participant's lived experiences.

Participants of the Study

This study primarily focused on the lived experience of preschool teachers, the challenges they faced amidst blended learning, and their coping mechanisms in those challenges. The researchers selected fifteen (15) private preschool teachers as research participants.

Instrument of the Study

The researchers interviewed with the aid of an interview guide in order to gather more pertinent data. According to Tenny et al. (2022), interviews are a qualitative research technique that relies on questioning to gather data. A minimum of two people participated in the interview, one of whom asked the questions. A simple list of the high-level topics you intend to cover in the interview and the high-level questions you intend to address for each topic is all that an interview guide is (Bhandari, 2020). To assess their dependability, the interview guide's questions underwent content validation. Each response was assessed and validated according to the research problem and study variables. A specialist carried out the validation. Before conducting the study's fifteen respondents interviews, the tool underwent revisions and modifications after it had been validated.

Data Collection Process

The study has been methodically investigated to ensure reliable data for analysis. Fifteen (15) participants were selected according to the criteria for this study, and then each participant was interviewed in person and their responses were recorded. Each respondent was spoken with separately to ensure their confidentiality and to help them relax and share their stories freely. Interviewees were asked a series of questions outlined in the interview guide to elicit their perspective and shed light on the significance of their experiences, obstacles, and coping mechanisms. Interviews allowed people to express their thoughts and feelings about a topic and demonstrate their level of self-awareness to the outside world. The transcript of the recorded interview was analyzed thoroughly to identify overarching themes that emerged from the participants' responses. Through this interview, the researcher was able to learn about preschool instructors' experiences with blended learning, the challenges they've encountered, and the solutions they've implemented. Interviews were conducted in a secure environment to prevent confidential information from leaking out. Respondents were given

both written and verbal instructions on how the interview would be conducted and what to expect before it began, following their written agreement. They were informed of their rights to confidentiality and the procedure for withdrawing their participation, as outlined in the consent form they signed, and given a preview of the interview guide and data collection procedure. To ensure the respondents' anonymity and safety, a code number was assigned to each one.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher guaranteed that the participant's cooperation was entirely voluntary and that they might withdraw from the study at any moment. Doing this ensures that participants won't be coerced into participating in a study if it would negatively affect their physical or mental health or otherwise pose a burden. As mandated by Republic Act 10173, all personally identifiable information given by participants will be treated in full confidentiality and used only for the purposes for which they were originally collected. Ensuring that the data given cannot be used to identify anybody other than the researcher. After receiving all necessary information about it, they have provided their consent to participate in the study. A consent letter outlining some of the main points of the study and what is expected of both the participant and the researcher was given to each participant. Participants who agreed to participate in the study and understood their participation in the research were asked to sign a consent form that was included with the letter.

Data Analysis Procedure

A wide number of strategies are available for the collection of qualitative data. To minimize the likelihood of spotting inconsistencies in the final result, interviews ought to be recorded and transcribed. They analyze the data obtained from preschool teachers to conclude their experiences and problems. The transcript will be reviewed very carefully, and every interviewee's words will be written down exactly as they were said.

For the purpose of this study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was carried out. The strategy of Van Kaam, which Moustakas helped to promote, inspired this approach. There are seven necessary steps, and they are as follows: horizontalizing, reducing experiences to constant parts, thematic clustering in order to create core themes, comparing various data sources in order to confirm the constant parts, making individual descriptions of

texture, making composite descriptions of structure, and combining texture and structure into an expression.

Results and Discussion

The following themes were detected in this study based on the data collected: Specifically, (1) Acknowledging Personal Value, (2) Struggle is Real, (3) Modified Teaching Lifestyle and (4) Acceptance of Reality. Similarly, the following subthemes were found during data collection based on their views.

Acknowledging Personal Value

Personal values are guiding principles that motivate people's actions and serve as goals in their lives. Teachers with high self-esteem believe that they can effectively support students with learning delays through appropriate methods and encouragement, while teachers with low self-efficacy may attribute low grades to student incompetence. Self-efficacy is also related to classroom problem-solving, and recognizing and being aware of personal values can help preschool teachers create a positive learning environment for all students. These values are broad and desirable and shape how an individual approaches life and makes decisions (Sagiv et al., 2017).

I give my best!

As a preschool teacher, it is natural to have concerns about managing a classroom and meeting the needs of students and parents. As participant 1 said, she feels pressure to meet parents' expectations and is concerned about receiving feedback or criticism from them.

"Takot akong mapahiya, masabihan ng magulang. parang lahat na ginawa mo tapos meron pa silang masasabi." (P1)

Managing parent expectations and dealing with challenging parent behavior were among the main sources of stress for the teachers (Kaur & Tan, 2021). This fear of embarrassment and being judged by parents may influence the individual's teaching practices and interactions with students, and may lead to feelings of anxiety or insecurity.

In addition, it may be helpful for the preschool teacher to communicate with parents and establish positive and open lines of communication. This can help to build trust and understanding and may reduce the individual's fear of being judged or criticized by

parents. It may also be helpful for the preschool teacher to set clear expectations and boundaries with parents and to communicate their expectations and policies to them. This can help to establish a sense of mutual respect and understanding and may help to reduce the individual's fear of being embarrassed or criticized by parents.

I am determined to be a teacher.

Being a determined teacher means being committed to your students' success and being willing to do whatever it takes to help them succeed. It also means being persistent and resilient, even when faced with challenges or setbacks, and never giving up on your students or yourself. Just like participant 6 being a determined teacher despite the challenges she faced.

“Mula palang grade 1 ako gusto ko na maging teacher as a kinder teacher po talaga. May pagkakataon na isipan ko na rin mag give up kasi hindi ko na nakikita na masaya na ko sa ginagawa ko, hindi ko na nakikita yung passion ko sa online class, kaya muntik na ako mag hand-in ng resignation noon.” (P6)

Participant 6 said that ever since she was a child, she wanted to be a preschool teacher. However, she planned to resign because of workloads and sudden educational changes that affect her mental well-being. This supports the claims that Kaur & Tan (2021) found that preschool teachers experienced high stress levels due to the shift to blended learning and the need to adapt to new teaching methods.

Struggle is Real

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2022), struggles refer to people who experience difficulty and make a great effort to do something. Like how participant 11 and participant 15 experienced struggles amidst blended learning.

Work Overload

As a preschool teacher teaching in a blended learning environment, it can be challenging to adapt to use online tools and technologies for instruction. For someone not used to spending a lot of time on gadgets, it may take some time to get comfortable with using these tools and incorporating them into lesson planning like participant 11 said about her experiences.

“Sa simula ng online talaga nakakastress kasi nangangapa talaga kasi hindi rin ako type na more on gadget syempre more on stressful talaga

magpepreapre ka ng lesson through powerpoint gagawa ka lang ng isang powerpoint nag coconsume na ng isang oras sa tagal din po naadapt na yung challenges sa new learning so mas naging madali na siya.” (P11)

The study of Günay and Öztürk (2021) showed that preschool teachers faced many challenges in implementing blended learning, including technological issues, a lack of support and resources, and difficulties in creating engaging online content. As participant 11 mentioned in the statement above, creating a powerpoint presentation can be time-consuming, especially if you are not familiar with the software or are not used to it regularly. However, participant 11 said that as you become more familiar with the software and the blended learning environment, creating PowerPoint presentations and materials for lessons becomes more manageable and quicker.

Despite the challenges, the teachers also reported some successes in implementing blended learning, including reaching more students and using new technologies to enhance learning (Günay & Öztürk, 2021). Moreover, this suggests that as the teacher gained more experience and knowledge about how to use online tools and technologies for instruction effectively, the challenges they faced became more manageable.

No Internet Connection

One of the most challenging parts preschool teachers experienced in blended learning was a poor internet connection. Wherein an internet connection is necessary to be able to teach and communicate with the students effectively.

“Internet connection pinaka frustrations ko during online class kasi maraming time actually na mawawalan ka kaya ikaw na yung mapo frustrate dahil ikaw wala kang signal tapos yung mga estudyante mo meron parang naghahanapan kaya nakakafrustrate talaga siya dahil yung mga estudyante mo nag aantay makapag connect ka hirap kasi ipaintindi na wala kang signal na mahina internet mo that time naka wifi na.” (P15)

Limited or unreliable internet connectivity was a significant challenge faced by teachers and students in the transition to online learning, exacerbated by the digital divide, which disproportionately affected certain groups of people, and compounded by technical difficulties, bandwidth constraints, and

security concerns (Bax et al., 2021). Participant 15 said that internet connection was her frustration during online classes, which highly affects her way of communicating and teaching her students effectively.

Modified Teaching Lifestyle

One of those challenges is preparing for a class observation during the blended learning where everyone is adjusting to the sudden shift of teaching-learning episodes due to strict compliance with the health quarantine protocols (Castillo & Eleanor, 2021). At the same time, preschool teachers experienced a lot of adjustments during blended learning regarding workloads, preparations, and learning new strategies to teach their students effectively.

Strategies for Blended Learning

One strategy that has been shown to be effective in supporting the learning of preschool students during blended learning is the use of games, just like participant 1 said, it helps her catch the student's attention.

“In a form of games doon ko na catch-up yung attention nila kahit naka online class kami.” (P1)

Most of the interviewed participants have different teaching strategies on blended learning, but playing games are more dominant. Chen and Chen (2020) found that preschool teachers utilized different types of games, including digital and non-digital, to keep students engaged and motivated while also promoting the development of skills such as language and literacy, math, and social-emotional skills. Also these games fostered a sense of community and connection among students and created structure and routine in the virtual learning environment.

Preparation on Blended Learning

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, preschool teachers have had to make several preparations to teach and support their students during blended learning effectively. This has included familiarizing themselves with online teaching platforms and tools, developing online lesson plans, establishing routines and procedures, building relationships with students and families, and seeking professional development opportunities.

“Syempre ang ginagawa ko after ng class ko laging gagawa na agad ng powerpoint para sa lesson, para kahit kinabukasan prepared nako after ng class ko ng

5pm dire diretso ako gawa ng presentation para sa mga estudyante ko sa kinder the next day para at least prepared na.”

Most of our participants said that their experiences in the first year of teaching in blended learning were difficult, and they found adjusting to the new setting hard. They said in the interview that there are times that they want to resign because of heavy workloads and high demands of parents, which they said that it really affects their mental health. Based on the study of Gaffney & Knapp (2020), preschool teachers faced challenges including adapting to new teaching methods and technologies, supporting students with varying levels of technology access and skills, and managing the logistics of combining in-person and online instruction, and that they also experienced stress and feelings of being overwhelmed due to the additional workload and responsibilities associated with blended learning.

Acceptance of the Reality

Sharp Health News (2021) defines acceptance as fully acknowledging the facts of a situation and not fixating on how it shouldn't be that way. Such as how the participants embrace the new changes of the educational system and having their experiences in adjusting to it.

Embracing the New Modality of Learning

The shift towards new learning modalities, such as online and blended learning, presents challenges and opportunities for teachers and students to enhance learning and engage in new and innovative ways of teaching and learning.

“After ng preparation at nagamay mo na parang mas hayahay at naenjoy ko na, kasi dalawang oras lang klase ko unlike sa face to face class before.”

Participant 1 viewed it positively, in which she claimed that if you practiced and got used to it you will feel better because they do not have a choice but to do their job. Blended learning can be beneficial for teachers and students by improving learning and engagement and offering personalized and flexible learning opportunities, however, it is necessary to think carefully about the design and implementation of blended learning programs in order to achieve success (Estrella, Snyder, & Faherty, 2020).

Go with the Flow

The transition to blended learning was challenging, it required them to adapt to new teaching methods and technologies, as well as manage the logistical challenges of dividing their time between in-person and online instruction.

“Sabayan nalang kasi wala naman tayong magagawa non kung online class yon at bawal mag face to face kasi syempre pandemic so ang pinaka focus naman natin non is health so go with the flow na lang kung ano ang daloy ng online class.”

Just like how participant 15 said in the statement above, by going with the flow and embracing the challenges of online teaching, preschool teachers can help ensure that their students continue to receive a high-quality education despite the difficulties posed by the transition to blended learning. This may involve finding creative ways to engage students online, adapting their teaching methods to the virtual environment, and seeking out resources and support to help them succeed. Based on Dunlap and Chaudoir (2021) found that preschool teachers faced challenges such as managing the demands of online and in-person instruction, adapting to new technologies, supporting the social-emotional needs of their students and using strategies like seeking social support, practicing self-care, and focusing on the positive aspects of the situation were associated with higher levels of well-being and work satisfaction among teachers.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- It was found that managing parent expectations and dealing with challenging parent behavior were among preschool teachers' stress sources. This fear of being judged or criticized by parents could influence their teaching practices and interactions with students, leading to feelings of anxiety or insecurity.
- Preschool teachers faced challenges in implementing blended learning, including technological issues, a lack of support and resources, and difficulties in creating engaging online content. However, as teachers gained more experience and knowledge about how to use online tools and technologies for instruction effectively, these challenges became more manageable. Also, limited or unreliable internet connectivity was also a major challenge faced by teachers and students in the

transition to online learning, and was exacerbated by the digital divide and various technical, bandwidth, and security concerns.

- Preschool teachers have had to adapt to the challenges of blended learning by implementing various strategies and making preparations to teach and support their students effectively. These strategies have included the use of games and other engaging activities to keep students motivated and engaged, and the development of online lesson plans and the use of online teaching platforms and tools. However, the transition to blended learning has also been a source of stress for preschool teachers, as they have had to manage additional workloads and responsibilities, and deal with challenges such as supporting students with varying levels of technology access and skills.
- Accepting the reality of transitioning to blended learning offers challenges and opportunities for preschool teachers and students to improve and explore new innovative teaching and learning methods.

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