

Stress and Coping Mechanisms for Instructional Leaders in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Education has change over the years and it gone through big transformation since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Teachers and learners adapted through different modalities and technique to continue the quality learning. Instructional leaders faced different challenges and hindrances amidst pandemic that affected their professional and personal lives and developed different coping mechanisms to manage stress. This study aimed to describe and narrate the stress and coping mechanism for public instructional leaders, filled a hole identifying the effective and efficient coping mechanism for instructional leaders, and to offer teaching and non-teaching personnel with necessary resources to assist instructional leaders experiencing stress. The qualitative transcendental phenomenology approach was considered in this study. A phenomenological approach allowed participants to expand on the responses to adequately capture thoughts and feelings through in-depth interview. This design allowed an intensive in-depth study on the shared experiences of a bunch of participants. Six willingly and voluntarily instructional leaders or Master Teacher I from selected public secondary school participated in the study by having an in-depth critical analyzation and with the use of thematic data analysis, ten themes were identified and discussed. Lastly, the stress experiences of the Instructional Leaders (ILs) during the pandemic made them realized that they should always cease the day, model resiliency, and seek for self-improvement. Even amidst pandemic, they learn to be a leader, guide subordinate and have positive mindset.

Keywords – Coping mechanism, COVID-19 Pandemic, Instructional Leaders, Stress

INTRODUCTION

Given that instructional leaders are responsible for a variety of tasks such as resource management, lesson planning, class preparation, classroom management, learners evaluation, and class preparation, teaching is seen as a hard and challenging job. Furthermore, they are the focal point of contact with learners, parents, and other teachers. As cited in the work of Kebbi and Al-Hroub (2018), one of the highest stress levels among different profession is teaching. It was shown that instructional leaders experienced mild stress and anxiety as a resulted from their teaching load and other factors such as tightness of schedules on deadlines of submission of reports. Challenges

and demands rapidly increase last January 2020 as Corona Virus impaired the world. Covid-19 is a novel viral infection that affirmed global emergency that worries everyone's health (AlAteeq et al., 2020). It has been reported as an unusual and highly contagious disease. According to Al-Fudail and Mellar (2018) The rise in anxiety of instructional leaders are because of the adaptation to the new learning model that switched and evolved to other modalities is seen in the field of research and become a subject to different research disturbance thatches. This includes the stress instructional leaders experience while using technology. According to the study, instructional leaders who are older than "Millennials" and Gen

Z are more likely to experience stress. Additionally, instructional leaders reported high levels of anxiety (Allen, et al., 2020) and the pandemic negatively affected instructional leaders' quality of life, especially among women and younger teachers (Lizana, et al. 2021).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education recognized the vital role played by instructional leaders in shaping the future of children. Instructional leaders are expected to perform various duties and responsibilities to provide learners with educational opportunities that shall reflect both excellence and quality and equity. Instructional leaders faced various adversities like work load, diversity of learners, class size, and peer and superior relationships, among others. They are also bombarded with other responsibilities like retaining effective linkages with the community and upkeeping their personal and professional growth. Due to these, the instructional leaders experience high level of stress. The physical and emotional effects of such stressors on instructional leaders may create negative responses, if not managed properly. In addition, they argued that the stress before the pandemic and the stress during the new normal organizational culture has a significant role on digital maturity.

With the cited literatures and observations, the researcher moved to conduct the present study with the hope that this study will determine the stress and coping mechanism for public instructional leaders, filled a hole identifying the effective and efficient coping mechanism for instructional leaders, and to offer teaching and non-teaching personnel with necessary resources to assist instructional leaders experiencing stress.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe and narrate the stress and coping mechanism for public instructional leaders, filled a hole identifying the effective and efficient coping mechanism for instructional leaders, and

to offer teaching and non-teaching personnel with necessary resources to assist instructional leaders experiencing stress.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative transcendental phenomenology approach was considered in this study to describe the stress of instructional leaders in terms of psychological tasks demand, organizational aspect and learners aspect, their coping mechanism and their self-realizations.

Research Design

This utilized a descriptive research that focuses on developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or issue which eventually leads to drawing a conclusion from studied event, program, and activity of more than one individual.

Participants/Respondents

There are six participants who participated in the study. They are Instructional Leaders or Master Teacher I in different big secondary school. The six participants consisted of five female and one male from selected big schools who has 3 years and above experience in the position. Each participant had the opportunity to take part in a one-on-one, in-depth interview.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this research is a semi-structured interview guide consisting of three general questions that correspond to each research objectives presented. The instrument had undergone validation by the panel of evaluators' one state university in Laguna.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through personal semi-structured interviews used triangulation to validate the information gathered and began highlighting significant statements. Transcription of interview sessions was prepared immediately after each recording was produced. Two language experts validate both the transcription and thematic analysis of the study.

Ethical Consideration

Participants are well-informed about the objective of the study. They were also given chance to withdraw before, during, or after the conduct of the study if they would wish to. Participants were also assured that all data collected would be utilized for the research purpose and that anonymity and confidentiality of the data would highly be observed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is the data analysis technique utilized by the researcher. Thematic analysis as discussed by Braun & Clarke (2014) provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. The researcher developed clusters of meaning from these statements into themes through manual coding using the principles of Saldana. These themes gave the researchers the framework for a description that captures the core of the experience at the conclusion of a phenomenological investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This investigation was primarily concerned about the stress and coping mechanisms for instructional leaders in the Covid-19 pandemic. In-depth interviews were conducted with six instructional leaders. Their responses were openly coded and thematically analyzed. The first research question were analysed in three aspects, namely psychological task demand, organizational aspect, and learners' aspect. Eight themes were formed in the first question. Three themes came up from psychological task demands - Abstrusity of Task, Disparity of Workload, and Urgent Demand. Another three themes were formed from Organizational aspects such as Peer-induced Anxiousness, Obstructive Causes of Pandemic and Self-Induced Anxiousness. Under Learners Aspect, two themes were formed – Learners' Academic Performance, and Angst in Online Classes. After the analyzation of the second

question, only one theme was formed – Wholistic Adaptation. The third and last question also formed one theme, namely Universality of Perception and Understanding to Stressor. In total, ten themes were formed from the thematical analysis.

Theme 1: Abstrusity of Task

Instructional leaders unanimously raised their concern on the abstrusity of task given to them. They particularly focused their responses on the number of teaching preparations and the ancillary assignments given to them such as report preparations and coordinator assignments. Instructional leaders have two or more teaching preparations and on top of those were the reports assigned to them and other coordinator assignments. While they acknowledge such tasks as part of their jobs, they could not deny the fact that these tasks increase their stress level due to time management issues. Especially instructional leaders were not just instructional leaders, they were also parents in their home and have other duties such as household chores. The abstrusity of tasks assigned to instructional leaders was a contributory factor on their stress. That being said, it affirms the Job Demand-Control-Support model of Karasek which stated that psychological demand to workload load causes stress because of time pressure, role conflict, emotional stress and interpersonal conflict (Towler, 2020).

Theme 2: Disparity of Workload

Another theme identified under psychological task demand was the Disparity of Workload. The responses during interview sessions implied that the instructional leaders observed that they have co-teachers with less number of workload than them. The same instructional leader also added that they were given additional workload apart from their regular teaching load. While one instructional leader indicated that she was not comparing hers with another, the response indicated her view on the matter. This could be where stress springs up – when people were not happy with that they do or did not find the value of what they do, they often become stressful. On the other hand, when

instructional leaders found values in what they do, stress could be avoided.

Theme 3: Urgent Demand

Responses of the participants highlighted Urgent Demand. They emphasized their experiences in receiving assignment with unreasonable or conflicting deadlines. To manage their professional careers, additional administrative tasks, and their personal and social lives, instructional leaders need to be able to multitask. They must constantly keep themselves prepare and have a wide range of skills, yet this can lead to additional stress and anxiety. These stressors can cause burnout if they were ongoing and were not accompanied by efficient coping skills. Workplace stress may result in a work-life imbalance between effort and output, which leads to exhaustion (Taher, 2016).

In terms of organizational stress, the researcher was able to identify three themes – peer-induced Anxiousness, Obstructive Causes of Pandemic, and self-induced anxiousness.

Theme 4: Peer-Induced Anxiousness

Peer induced stress was stress caused by their colleagues' failure to comply with reports on time. They also put emphasis on "You should justify the reasons why your colleague don't submit the needed report in the end.." which implied that they were just convincing themselves to avoid conflicts with colleagues.

Theme 5: Obstructive Causes of Pandemic

Another theme identified was Obstructive Causes of Pandemic which pertains to the stress caused by restrictions brought by the new normal in education. Instructional leaders get their stress from their inability to expound lessons due to the short span of time and limited number of meetings allotted to them.

The stress of the instructional leaders also came from their unfamiliarity of their students' identity which implied the difficulty in assessing performance. They felt doubt in the genuineness of the outputs submitted by their students. These showed that instructional leaders were bothered by the idea that they might be giving the wrong assessment of the students' true ability due to the

obstructive interaction between teacher and students brought about by the new approach in education.

The Covid-19 pandemic created rapid global change that affected the teaching world. Due to changes in modalities, some of the longstanding yet effective teaching styles were now improper to the modality. Instructional leaders who experienced role obstructions caused stress and work exhaustion (Lizana et.al 2021). It affirms the Person-Environment (P-E) Fit theory wherein the instructional leader can make explicit the interaction between the individual and the environment in shaping their response to work situations and events, but also highlights the importance of the individual's perception of the environment (Grimsley, 2021).

Theme 6: Self-Induced Anxiousness

The researcher observed self-induced anxiousness. Self-induced anxiousness was a product of uncontrolled thoughts. It could also be caused by overlooking or ignoring small tasks that when build up over time lead to anxiety, exhaustion, and fatigue. In this study, the researcher found the respondents overthinking.

In terms of learners' aspect, the researcher was able to identify two themes – Learners' Academic Performance and Angst in Online Classes.

Theme 7: Learners' Academic Performance

Instructional leader's experiences showed that low or poor performance of their students and their unfortunate situations of them affect their stress levels. Students' late submission or failure to submit, failure to get instructions correctly, lack of parents' support for their children, lack of gadgets and internet connectivity, and working student were among the stressors identified. Most of the participants shared their thoughts as they look to the classrooms outside.

To improve students' academic performance and students' information-seeking behavior, it is essential for them to have gadgets and internet connectivity. (Abbas J,2020) Yet, students with low socioeconomic background have lower chance to possess those essentialities. Most probably, students who don't own gadgets

during pandemic will fall behind. (Yassen, et.al, 2021) In addition to that, especially this time of pandemic, parents were the ones to provide the students with materials used in school, discipline, love, respect, values and attitudes. The parents were the ones to take care of the overall children physical and intellectual development. Students' that don't have parents and focused on earning money for livelihood ought to not perform well in class because all their needs were not being met. (Ndayambaje, 2021)

Theme 8: Angst in Online Classes

Instructional leaders also expressed their apprehension on the angst in online classes due to students' behavior. They particularly focused their responses on struggling learners and timid learners. Two of the instructional leaders mentioned that knowing the struggles of their students causes instructional leaders' emotional stress. The most common problem instructional leaders faced during online classes are unresponsive students, internet connection and students who struggle in the use of application platform and in the subject matter being discussed. (Glazier and Harris, 2021) These problems, if not resolved, can cause one-way problem to instructional leaders. Disruption of classes, time consuming and stress were the collective effects of the problem. (Menon et.al, 2022)

Theme 9: Wholistic Adaptation to Challenges Brought by Pandemic

In terms of coping mechanism, only one theme was developed. The second question addressed in this investigation focused on the coping mechanisms of the instructional leaders. The theme Wholistic Adaptation were the coping mechanisms acquired from their responses such as acceptance and positive mindset, time management, peer support, flexible work arrangement, family support, and food, entertainment and medical intervention.

Acceptance and Positive Mindset

In terms of acceptance and positive mindset, instructional leaders taught of

stress as an inevitable part of holding master teacher positions. When facing urgent reports, student-related problems, and abrupt changes, they try controlling their minds by looking at the positive side of every situation. Faith also emerged as an important factor in accepting situations that caused stress. One instructional leader said with a smile, "Keep having faith on God. And also, being simple and knowing how to accept things. Having a positive mindset and knowing that all of this stress will be gone soon," which implied her reliance on God when facing stressful moments.

Time Management

Another coping mechanism which instructional leaders indicated was time management. They indicated that "It's all about time management" could make tasks assigned to them manageable. They also indicated the strategy of prioritizing tasks based on their level of urgency. One said as she touches her forehead, "time management based on your priority and based on the urgency." Additionally, one said that working on tasks at the earliest possible time would help her beat deadlines and consequently, avoid stress.

Peer Support

The most notable response on coping mechanism implied peer support. Peer support improved mental health and well-being of every individual. Instructional leaders expressed their need for open line of communication with colleagues in order to accomplish assigned tasks easily because it produces a collective sense of belonging and connectedness in school with shared concerns and needs (Ho et.al 2022). Such communication line was built to constant interaction over lunch, and conversations inside teachers' lounges. Instructional leaders also indicated the helpful function of social media applications in keeping harmonious relationships among colleagues, but their responses put much emphasis on the need for face-to-face interactions.

Flexible Work Time

Flexible work arrangement also emerged as coping mechanism. The work from home scheme helped instructional leaders to

develop a sense of appreciation of the school environment saying with no emotion, “During this pandemic, especially when our set-up is work from home, sometimes I just missed going to school even there is a pandemic but since it was the peak of Covid-19 pandemic, we do not have a choice but to stay at home.” It also helped them in managing work-related activities in a more flexible schedule. One participant said as she smiles, “there are things that you can do at night because we’re practicing flexible school hours unless there are important meetings that you need to attend. Therefore, we as instructional leaders should adjust. This implied the omission of travel time and the feeling that they could do it anytime, in between house chores. Flexible work time helped instructional leaders maintain their good health. It was evident that working from home with flexi time help them meet their professional and personal needs and demands. Flexi time provided them more time and energy to spend with their family, engaged them in help-promoting activities and experience less stress. (Shifrin and Michel, 2022)

Family Support

Instructional leaders also highlighted in their responses the significance family in coping with stress. Their bonding time with their families helped them enjoy. Instructional leaders said, “we just enjoyed watching TV”; and “we just so we just comfort ourselves within our family because it will be a burden to other when you ask for something since, we are all experiencing stress.” Spending time with their families emerged as a healing factor for stress which is a much healthier coping mechanism. Families’ understanding in situations when instructional leaders needed to change plans due to work was another important factor. On the contrary, when families and friends do not understand the situation, stress was aggravated. For instructional leaders with family support system, such as help coming from children who are more technologically skilled, stress is not only alleviated but avoided. All of the participants responded gladly with smiles on their faces.

Food, Entertainment, and Medical Intervention

The last coping mechanism identified in this study was food, entertainment and medical intervention. There are numerous approaches exist for how foods might reduce stress. Serotonin, a soothing brain chemical, can be increased by comfort foods. Other meals can lower cortisol and adrenaline levels, which are stress hormones that over time damage the body. By boosting the immune system and reducing blood pressure, a balanced diet can help counteract the effects of stress.

Additionally, there were instructional leaders who sought help from physicians to address their stress level. The adverse effects of stress on their sleep and eating habit led them to seeking medical interventions. According to their responses, their condition improved after taking prescribed medicine.

Theme 10: Universality of Perception and Understanding on Stressors

The theme universality of perception and understanding on stressors formed from the responses of the instructional leaders. Their responses highlighted learnings on ceasing the day, modelling resiliency, and improving oneself. Instructional leaders indicated that the pandemic made them realized that they would never know what will happen in the future, particularly with their families. This implied the need to work on things immediately so they could spend more time with their families. Ceasing the day means doing what they could do for the day instead of leaving them for the next. One instructional leader also highlighted the need to model resiliency. The Instructional leaders saw herself as someone whom other could rely on in terms of coping with stress. She believes that as an Instructional leaders, she should always project a resilient image. The last response implied self-improvement. Instructional leader believed that learning how to manage time and learning coping strategies could help them relieve stress. Improving themselves in organizing tasks could help in ensuring that stressful moments are alleviated. This study also included the

perspective of the instructional leaders identified the need for self-development amidst pandemic. (Steinmayr, 2021) Webinar empowered educators on how to cope with the new normal setting of education. Attending different webinars is truly helped instructional leaders to become more updated with the different trends of education. Through trainings Instructional leaders model resiliency ability to educate and enable, inspire and persuade, enlighten and empower their subordinate. (Li and Yu, 2022) This affirms the Effort-Reward Imbalance Model (ERI model) developed by Johannes wherein employees has choice to improve themselves by grabbing opportunities for improvement, accepts the imbalance for reasons and improved working conditions and copes with the demands at work through over commitment (Ren, et.al, 2019).

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Instructional Leaders (ILs) faced more stressful experiences in terms of psychological tasks demand particularly with 'urgent' reports and conflicting assignments. They have less organizational stress and learners' aspect stress. Specifically, the most stressful tasks experienced by the instructional leaders were different coordinator assignment, ancillary activities, additional workloads aside from the regular teaching loads, sudden and urgent reports and meetings, overlapping deadlines of submissions, delayed reports caused by colleagues, insufficient data for reports and lack of resource materials, assessing students' performance in modular modality, restricted teaching styles and Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, catering timid and struggling learners with no gadgets, internet connectivity and lack of parents support. In addition to that, instructional leaders are also parents that have other responsibilities at home such as household chores, roles as guardian and husband/wife and personal businesses.

As for coping mechanism, instructional leaders (ILs) depend more on themselves and the support they receive from colleagues and families. These three were the key coping

mechanisms of Instructional leaders in addressing their stressful experiences. However, two of them sought medical interventions. Distinctively, in order for the instructional leaders to cope up with stresses during pandemic, they possessed acceptance and positive mindset and proper time management. They have support system and surround themselves with their family and peer. Flexible work time schedule also helped them to dedicate more of their time to their family and friends. Lastly, food, entertainment and medical intervention coagulate their mental stability such as consuming specific comfort food or beverage like salted garlic peanut and coffee, watching TV shows like Netflix together with family and being a "plantito/plantita".

The stress experiences of the Instructional Leaders (ILs) during the pandemic made them realized that they should always cease the day, model resiliency, and seek for self-improvement. Even amidst pandemic, they learn to be a leader, guide subordinate and have positive mindset. Also, to attain self-improvement, they attended trainings and webinars and practice good study habit such as professional readings.

This study evolved on "Stress and Coping Mechanisms for Instructional Leaders in the Covid-19 pandemic". Using phenomenological approach, the participants shared their stresses thru personal interview. The following recommendations are offered in consonance with the instructional leaders' unique coping mechanisms: to provide stress management capability training for Instructional Leaders that would increase their level of resilience to stressful moments in their career, to extensively promote No Assignment Policy during weekends and beyond class hours so that the mental and emotional health of instructional leaders, learners and parents are well taken care of. to strengthen the culture of peer support system in the workplace. While instructional leaders have complex duties and responsibilities in school, the stress they might cause may be lightened when support system is in place, to match instructional leaders' competencies to

their assignments both in academics and ancillary could help in alleviating their stress levels, to strengthen the implementation of well-being, psychological and protection support in schools which protects the instructional leaders from the adverse effects of stress. This could also provide them with opportunities to build resiliency towards work-related stress, to sustain and strengthen the guidance and counseling in school which will constantly monitor and provide assistance to school personnel including students requiring mental health support and q create area that will help the teacher bond and chat during their leisure time that could lessen their stress level such as Kapehan sa Paaralan.

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