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Untold Stories of Elementary Teachers in the National Learning Camp

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Abstract

The Department of Education recently implemented the National Learning Camp enhancing the students' performance and teachers' efficiency in teaching. This initiative is a recovery program curated to boost educational progress throughout the Philippines. Thus, this study aims to explore the experiences of the volunteer teachers during the National Learning Camp implementation. This study utilizes the phenomenological research design that creates analysis from the eight purposely selected teachers from Cebu, Philippines through an online interview. Colaizzi's seven-step method was also used to analyze the data collected from the selected participants. The analysis of the data gathered formulated five themes — Theme 1: Program Effectiveness; Theme 2: Parental Involvement; Theme 3: Teacher's Commitment; Theme 4: Active Learning; and Theme 5: Students' Welfare. The result shows the significant impact of the teachers' approach and strategies effective for the student's improvement, teachers' efficacy, and the whole implementation of the learning camp. It is recommended that the NLC should continue to improve the teachers' teaching pedagogies and strategies. Furthermore, future researchers should also explore the program's long-term impact on teaching strategies and contextual challenges educators face.

Keywords: DepEd Philippines, Experiences, National Learning Camp, Perspectives, Teachers

Introduction

National Learning Camp (NLC) addresses the learning gap and fosters comprehensive growth of students that enhances learning outcomes and improves teaching efficiency. This encourages teachers to adopt different approaches, strategies, and methods (DepEd, 2024) ^[6]. However, a study noted that teachers encounter challenges in participating in NLC (David *et al.*, 2024) ^[5]. There is a lack of thorough exploration of how National Learning Camp influences teachers in the integration of new pedagogical strategies. Hence, this study aims to describe the lived experience of teachers in the National Learning Camp (NLC), revealing their reflections and experiences during the implementation.

The National Learning Camp (NLC) was recently launched by the Department of Education (DepEd) Order No. 13, s. 2023 which will run from the first day (1st) to the nineteenth (19th) day of July; it is an initiative under the National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP) (Malipot, 2024). The goal of NLC is to improve the learning performance of students and the competence of teachers in the areas of Reading, Mathematics, and Science. It is also stated by the DepEd (2023) ^[6] that NLC plans to include interesting and enjoyable activities to promote the learner's interests, socio-emotional skills, personal growth, and character development to create a camp-like atmosphere. Sustaining the learner's development at NLC offers an opportunity for education sectors to reconsider their approaches to quality improvement. With fewer obstacles and activities for learners, learning camps boost the motivation of educators and students to learn (Augustine *et al.*, 2021) ^[1]. In addition, it strengthens the practices to implement learning-centered education and sincerely emphasizes learner's cognitive approaches, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and place-based learning (David, 2024) ^[5].

National Learning Camp is a learning camp intended to bridge the gap in the student's learning, specifically reading, math, and science. A study shows that the previously implemented recovery program was effective in increasing the interest of learners to

learn, creating a positive impact on their character development, and slightly improving their problem-solving and communication skills (Espinosa & Guevara, 2024). Another study showed that a certain learning camp creates a different atmosphere compared to the ordinary classroom setting, and it showed remarkable outcomes aligned with their goal (Aswad, 2017). Thus, realizing that the learning camps apply a unique approach to achieving goals. According to a study by Apple *et al.* (2015), after seeing a difference that the teachers observe in their learning camp with a different learning area, they became interested and inspired to improve their teaching practices to achieve a successful learning journey with the students.

The National Learning Camp (NLC) emphasizes bridging learning gaps and improving teaching effectiveness, however, teachers' actual experiences with the program are vital. While previous research recognized the difficulties teachers encounter in participating in the NLC, a more thorough exploration of the difficulties that affect their capacity to incorporate new pedagogical strategies (David *et al.*, 2024)^[5]. The current research generally centers on student outcomes and the general efficacy of the NLC, although it overlooks exploring how teachers adjust to and address the pedagogical changes advocated by the camp. The lack of inclusion creates a notable gap in comprehending how teachers assess the efficacy of such approaches in their classrooms and the assistance they may require to overcome these difficulties.

Moreover, the challenges involve minor dissatisfaction and disagreement related to the learning atmosphere, the use of learning resources, and the promotion of innovative teaching methods (David *et al.*, 2024)^[5]. The adoption and reception of innovative pedagogical approaches can be strongly impacted by variables including socioeconomic class and geographic location (Smith & Jones, 2022). The understanding of these contextual differences is essential for adapting professional growth and reducing gaps. By exploring the experiences of elementary teachers on the implementation of novel techniques within the NLC framework, this study strives to bridge these gaps and offer a more thorough understanding of how contextual factors affect their experiences. The adoption and reception of innovative pedagogical approaches can be strongly impacted by variables including socioeconomic class and geographic location (Smith & Jones, 2022).

This study analyzes teacher's experiences at the National Learning Camp. It highlights its importance as it provides an understanding of the difficulties. The gaps in studying may include the lack of integration among the teachers of new and adapting pedagogical strategies additionally, the lack of resources and preparation. The objective is to comprehend the teacher's viewpoint, identify the difficulties, and evaluate the camp to influence professional development significantly.

Philosophical Assumptions

Ontology is defined as the nature of reality where participants constantly recreate reality according to their perceptions of it (Slevitch, 2011, as cited by Moroi, 2021). This study will use ontological assumptions because the researchers assume that teachers' lived experiences at the National Learning Camp are not objective but are shaped by socio-cultural factors. Several factors like individual perspectives, specific context of events, and cultural background influence their

interpretations of the camp. By avoiding the imposition of predetermined categories or interpretations, this acknowledgement of the social construction of reality enables a more nuanced understanding of the varying and complex experiences of the teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used descriptive phenomenological research design because it aims to describe the experiences of Grades 1, 2, and 3 elementary teachers who were voluntarily involved in implementing the National Learning Camp. Tanhueco-Tumapon (2024)^[18] expressed that phenomenology focuses on explaining the nature of things with the use of people's experiences with them. Its literal translation is a "study of phenomena," which indicates investigating the relevance of these phenomena for the subjects of the study. With the use of this strategy, the researchers were able to collect pertinent data using qualitative techniques. Thereafter, the researchers analyze it to provide insightful findings.

Sampling Design, Research Respondents, and Environments
Purposive sampling is used in the method of this research to choose respondents who will serve as a representative sample of the entire population. Purposive sampling, according to Nikolopoulou (2023)^[12], is a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected according to characteristics that are essential for the sample. Stated differently, the "on purpose" selection of units is included in purposive sampling. For this reason, eight (8) purposely selected Grade 1, 2, and 3 elementary teachers in Cebu, Philippines are successfully interviewed for this study using this sampling approach. The chosen grade level teachers were from Grades 1, 2, and 3 since these grade levels were added for the second implementation of NLC in accordance with the general guideline of DepEd Order No. 014, s. 2023 or the "Policy Guidelines On The Implementation of the National Learning Camp" (DepEd to Conduct National Learning Camp to Enhance Learning Outcomes, Support Teachers | Department of Education, 2023)^[6].

Research Instrument

This study was conducted in an interview focusing on uncovering reflections, and perspectives on the adoption of new approaches during the implementation of the National Learning Camp of purposely selected teachers in Cebu, Philippines. The researchers used a semi-structured type of interviews in conducting this study. The main instrument are the researchers who gathered the data. George (2023)^[9] stated that a semi-structured interview is a type of data collection method where it counts on probing questions within an already-established theme structure. Furthermore, it frequently utilizes open-ended questions to promote flexibility.

Data Gathering Procedure

To ensure the integrity and ethical standards of the study, researchers undergo several necessary measures. They have to obtain ethical clearance from a qualified ethics review board. This procedure signifies that the study conforms to accepted ethical standards, especially about participant rights and welfare. All interviewees must provide their informed permission after clearance is given. The goal of the study, the nature of their participation, any possible risks or advantages,

and their freedom to withdraw their participation at any moment without any consequences are all explained in detail during the consent procedure. Participants must comprehend these factors completely before agreeing to participate in the study.

The interviews are done online, providing convenience but requiring attention to technological and privacy concerns. Each interview is planned to last for at least 45 minutes to 1 hour, to collect comprehensive information while honoring the participants' time. The researchers can examine specific aspects of the teachers' experiences using probing questions to elicit more in-depth responses throughout the interview. These interviews are recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy in data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

This research employs Colaizzi's seven-step method (Colaizzi, P. F., 1978) to analyze the teachers' lived experiences of the National Learning Camp. Colaizzi's method involved seven steps: (1) familiarize the data, (2) identification of significant statement, (3) thematic clustering,

(4) identification of core themes, (5) description of core themes, (6) verification of themes through member checking, and (7) writing the final analysis. This method was chosen for its ability to deeply explore participants' experiences and reveal the core meanings of their narratives. By following a structured process, the analysis aimed to identify key themes that emerged from the teachers' accounts capturing the essence of their experiences. Additionally, the study examined the camp's impact on teachers' self-esteem and teaching methods. The findings presented in the next section suggest that peer support and collaboration during the camp are vital in addressing challenges and improving facilities effectively.

Rigor of the Study

To ensure the rigor of the study, the researchers give a thorough attention to detail of the research process. The study's rigor is known to be the golden standard in determining the reliability of the data presented (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). This begins with minimizing the bias and errors by using suitable and clearly defined research design. According to Carpenter and Streubert (2013)^[17], ensuring the credibility of the study lessens and prevents the biases. This can be manifested through the use of member checking, allowing participants to validate the data accuracy. In terms of dependability, audit trail was used to practice transparency with the data collection and data interpretation. (Abbaszadeh, 2012).

Furthermore, the researchers identify the possible biases and assumptions that may influence confirmability by engaging in reflexive practices. (Koch, 2006, as cited by Anney, 2014). Transferability of the research pertains to its relevance in the future research in the similar area, (Carpenter and Streubert, 2013)^[17]. This is ensured through the use of applying thick descriptions to input the context and results. By adhering to the methodological standards, this study will contribute meaningfully in the field of education carrying reliable and relevant findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring the confidentiality of information that will be gathered is crucial to the ethical conduct of research.

Individual researchers must prioritize the protection of confidentiality at all stages and in all types of research, including when they collect, disseminate, use, and read about data (Bos, 2020). To guarantee that the research protocol adheres with ethical standards and the safeguarding of rights and welfare of the respondent, the study will comply with the moral standards and legal guidelines established by relevant institutions or regulatory authorities. It will be forwarded to the relevant ethics committee for review and approval. In data gathering, researchers will provide a consent letter to inform the respondents; will not disclose any of the participant's personal information, should only ask relevant questions, and will not gather any information beyond what the research is all about. Furthermore, the participants will be provided with compensation for their participation in the study.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study offer valuable insights into the experiences of the purposely selected elementary teachers who participated in the National Learning Camp (NLC). This section highlights the main results and examines their possible implications. The discussion focuses on the opportunities and challenges encountered by the elementary teachers during their involvement in the NLC. Furthermore, this explores the implications of their experiences for future teacher training programs and how to enhance NLC's impact on teaching strategies.

Theme 1: Program Effectiveness

National Learning Camp is an intervention that addresses the educational needs of the students, especially in literacy and numeracy. This program shows effectiveness in improving students' academic performance. It provides a crucial refresher in subjects that are challenging like Math for Grade 1 students. This is supported by Teacher Jonah's statement:

“..For me, it's effective. I'm really happy because it helped my students, especially in Math, which is challenging for Grade 1. It was a big help. Before they moved to Grade 2, they got a refresher, especially in addition and subtraction”

Teacher Eury also noted that students who participated in the program for a longer period showed progress in their learning and it is supported by Teacher Eury's statement:

“..but regardless, the learning progress is visible, especially to the learners who finished or had attended the program longer.”

The Participants stated that the NLC program is effective based on their experience. They also stated the benefits of the program, especially for their students. They also hope a program like NLC should continue because it has particularly benefited students and learners. According to DepEd (2023)^[6], this evidence indicates that NLC can effectively enhance literacy and numeracy skills. It shows the effectiveness of the program and the effectiveness that helps to support students needing improvement. It implied that the National Learning Camp Program plays a crucial role in helping address the needs of the students this is a powerful tool for education

Theme 2. Parental Involvement

The lack of parental support and understanding happens

when parents are reluctant or fail to deliver their child the emotional, intellectual, and social support they need such as a lack of awareness of a child's needs and difficulties or failure to participate in their child's education.

These findings were collected from Teacher Eury who described the experience as challenging because of the lack of parental support. This is supported by her statement:

"...one of the challenges is that not all parents are willing to send their children to school and not all learners can finish the program. It is difficult if there is a lack of parental support because there are sessions that students miss, and not all of them can finish the program."

Teacher Eury has also added the possible reasons for this:

"... there are financial constraints and busy schedules. It's difficult for parents to send their children to sessions."

The participant revealed that one of the problems they encountered during the program implementation was the lack of parental support and understanding for their children. Parents lack this aspect due to financial constraints and time in sending them to schools which are important for students to bridge their learning gaps. According to School (2023), parents' participation in their child's education such as taking interest in their schoolwork as well as communicating with teachers is crucial in reducing students' absences and boosting behaviours leading to improvements in academic performance. Supporting students is important in their academic achievement, self-worth, and also in social interactions helping them feel secure and motivated to learn. This suggested that parents should always give out support and understanding in their child's academic performances to answer learning gaps at present.

Theme 3. Teacher's Commitment

Teachers' commitment means being dedicated to helping students succeed and grow by creating a safe and inclusive environment where students can learn and feel valued. It also means being a good example and improving as a teacher. The responses of the following supported these:

"..I don't experience any pressure when it comes to preparation of lesson plans and activity sheets because all materials were given and all we have to do is to teach."- Teacher Zari

"Yes, it is provided. They gave out modules to use. Before it started, they gave us materials to print which were in bulks."- Teacher Jonah

"We are provided. They provided us with soft copies and our principal provided us with inks and bond papers so that we could reproduce materials. We were provided before NLC started. Beforehand, the district oriented us, the volunteers."- Teacher Jess

"... I will continue to volunteer because this is for the children. I will keep volunteering."-

Teacher Jess

"...Yes, I will continue, especially since I've seen the good effect, and it's truly our role as teachers to help the children, especially those who are struggling... They're more motivated and confident when

they work in groups with peers of the same level."- Teacher Teacher Lora

Teacher Jess, Teacher Lora, Teacher Zari, Teacher Jonah emphasised that their commitment to the National Learning Camp (NLC) is driven by their desire to address learning gaps and create a supportive environment for students. It is suggested that long-term engagement often stems from a strong sense of purpose and fulfilment, especially when volunteers feel that they are making a meaningful difference (Wilson, 2012). Teachers' willingness to continue volunteering reflects their intrinsic motivation and recognition of the positive impact the NLC has on students, as they are encouraged by the noticeable progress in students' participation and learning. This implies that the program's design, particularly its focus on addressing students' specific learning needs and providing teachers with necessary resources and support, is essential to maintaining teachers' long-term involvement, as it creates a meaningful and rewarding experience that motivates them to continue their volunteer work.

Theme 4. Active Learning Strategies

Active Learning Strategies refers to the varied techniques and methods employed by teachers to engage students in the learning process, encouraging participation, critical thinking, and hands-on activities to deepen understanding and retention of lesson content. These were supported by the responses of the following:

Teacher Jess highlights the relevance of integrating learner-centred approaches that involve collaborative and hands-on learning experiences to engage students actively and is supported by her statement:

"We should integrate learner-centred activities that are entailed with collaborative learning, peer teaching and experiential learning wherein they will do hands-on (activities)." - Teacher Jess

Meanwhile, Teacher Vince and Teacher Lora had come up with their strategies to make the teacher and learning process more efficient and effective. This is supported by their statements:

" I provide them with concrete examples, pictures or even videos that can motivate them to listen as well." - Teacher Vince

"The coverage is broad which can be simplified for them to understand easily, that's the first that we did. Then, we catered to the academic level of the learners and their learning styles." - Teacher Lora

Teacher Jess, Teacher Vince and Teacher Lora experienced using strategies that promote active learning by engaging students in meaningful and participatory educational activities. Chan and Elliot (2004) confirmed that those with strategic beliefs see learning as an active process where knowledge is built through learners' inferences and experiences, rather than just remembering what the teacher has taught. The tutoring program allowed teachers to be creative and innovative, making their lessons more appealing to the learners they were tutoring. It is implied that tutoring in the National Learning Camp allowed teachers to incorporate various teaching strategies to effectively and

efficiently deliver their lessons in each session.

Theme 5. Student's Welfare

Students welfare refers to the students' overall well-being and support that encompasses their physical, psychological, and emotional health. It involves an environment that provides the student's safety, value, and support. The responses of the following supported these:

"...pupils were also showing eagerness to learn and they are very participative during class discussions." — Teacher Zari

"...they will work within their level, plus the teacher adjusted to what they are capable of, you even helped them, which makes them more eager to learn... They have confidence, and it will be boosted more if they are at the same level." — Teacher Lora

"... also catered to the academic level... of the child, his/her learning styles. I also look at it to provide proper activities that also match his/her abilities." — Teacher Lora

"...give them more... spe— simple and specific, uhh, activities, many activities based on their level of understanding and capability." — Teacher Vince

Teacher Zari, Teacher Lora, and Teacher Vince observed that students showed strong eagerness to learn and were highly participative during class discussions, showing engagement in the learning process while adjusting their teaching methods to meet the students' diverse learning styles and needs. Teacher Lora also stated that the learners become more motivated to learn when instructional strategies were adjusted to meet students at their respective levels while Teacher Vince emphasized the importance of giving simple and specific, varied activities tailored to students' level of understanding and capability to support more effective learning engagement. Kember *et al.* (2010) agreed that the teaching and learning environment motivates students' participation and engagement. Aligning the instructional strategies with the students' skills and fostering a more inclusive and engaging learning environment can increase students' motivation and engagement in the learning process while ensuring that the diverse learning needs of the learners are given priority by emphasizing the values of adapting instructional materials allowing teachers to create a more inclusive, active, and positive learning environment.

The National Learning Camp (NLC) has proven its effectiveness in improving the students' literacy and numeracy skills, especially in some subjects like Math, by participating for a longer period of time. However, there are factors that affect students' full engagement in the program, such as the lack of parental support, which is often due to financial struggles and busy schedules. Despite these challenges, teachers are still motivated and remain dedicated to participate in the program because they are driven by a strong sense of purpose. They provide hands-on and engaging activities to cater the diverse needs of their students. These strategies have enhanced their understanding and boosted their confidence and motivation for learning. This only shows how NLC creates an environment filled with support, inclusiveness and engagement, enabling student's educational progress and overall well-being. Teachers' intrinsic motivation to create a positive effect on the students' learning journey sustains their engagement in long term

volunteerism for National Learning Camp, as they recognize the students' learning needs and gaps to foster their valuable learning outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study also reveals the great effect of the National Learning Camp on teacher effectiveness as well as the key challenges they faced during the implementation. The program fostered a positive learning environment and helped improve academic performance in essential subjects. Teachers emphasised the value of thorough preparation and the need to deliver diverse and inclusive education. Therefore, it is recommended that the NLC should also enhance the teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional practices. Furthermore, future researchers should explore the program's long-term effect on teaching strategies and the contextual challenges faced by educators.

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