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## First Week Chronicles: Teachers' Experiences as Psychological First Aid (PFA) Facilitators in the New Normal

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This qualitative study explored and reached an in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences as Psychological First Aid (PFA) facilitators in the new normal during the first week of the in-person classes for the S.Y. 2022-2023.

**Methodology:** In pursuit of understanding and exploring the experiences of teachers as PFA facilitators in the new normal, this study used a qualitative phenomenological research design. Particularly, it focused on analyzing experiences of three (3) Grade 7 teachers who conducted various PFA activities during the first week of the in-person classes for the S.Y. 2022-2023.

**Results:** Four themes emerged in exploring the teachers' experiences as PFA facilitators: confusion, fear, lack of training, and inspiration and feeling of excitement.

**Conclusion:** Experiences of teachers in conducting PFA activities provided opportunities in voicing out their flexible journey in these trying times. Findings from the perspectives of the teachers showed a glimpse of how COVID-19 pandemic changed the educational landscape in promoting psychosocial preparedness and emotional stability among learners who are gradually transitioning to full in-person classes. This study also revealed the flexibility of teachers as PFA facilitators in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic while catering to the diverse needs of their learners. Regardless of the preparations, it is the responsibility of teachers to provide a conducive learning environment for learners.

**Keywords:** First Week, In-Person Classes, New Normal, Psychological First Aid, Teachers' Experiences

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the educational landscape of the country in the past two years. It has brought forward numerous threats and opportunities not only to learners but to teachers as well (Muñoz & Sanchez, 2023).

Returning to in-person classes may come with difficulties in adjusting to the school environment or learning modality, considering that additional safety and protection protocols should be observed. Dealing with the complex thoughts and emotions brought by the pandemic can also affect the way teachers and learners prepare for in-person classes (DepEd Psychosocial Evaluation Guide, 2022).

Teachers' role as Psychological First Aid (PFA) facilitators became an integral part of the teaching-learning process as it gradually took a leap into the post-pandemic world where learners have diverse experiences in the distance learning modality in the last two years. Psychosocial support activities are imperative in promoting, protecting, and prioritizing the learners' socio-emotional well-being (DepEd Memorandum No. DRRMS-08-20-2022-0002). Accordingly, psychosocial support activities must be conducted during the first week of School Year (SY) 2022-2023, beginning on August 22, 2022. Classroom advisers or designated teachers should facilitate these activities for at least one (1) hour for one (1) week or until the learners are well-adjusted in the school community (DepEd Order No. 34, s. 2022, School Calendar and Activities for the School Year 2022-2023).

As part of the roll-out of preparations, PFA activities were prescribed under the module titled "Psychosocial Support Activity Pack (All Levels): A Teacher's Guide". These activities would ensure that all learners are given appropriate attention by providing psychosocial support and ensuring a conducive learning environment in the new



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normal as part of the transition to full in-person classes starting November 2, 2022. After all, even before the pandemic, it is the responsibility of the education sector and all concerned stakeholders to ensure that learners are in the best learning environment that they can be (Dizon & Sanchez, 2020; Sanchez & Sarmiento, 2020; Sanchez, et al., 2022).

With this, the role of teachers as PFA facilitators during the first week of in-person classes became a significant area of study because of their unique experiences with diverse situations and personal perspectives in conducting PFA activities. By examining these experiences through phenomenology, this paper aimed to explore and reach an in-depth understanding about the conduct of these psychosocial interventions.

## Objective

This qualitative study focused on exploring the teachers' experiences as PFA facilitators in the new normal during the first week of in-person classes for the S.Y. 2022-2023. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do the teacher-participants respond to their role as PFA facilitators in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do the teacher-participants fulfill their role as PFA facilitators while also catering to the diverse needs of their learners?
3. What are the challenges concomitant with the teacher-participants' role as PFA facilitators?
4. Based on the findings of the study, how may the public view the role played by the teacher-participants as PFA facilitators in the new normal during the first week of the in-person classes.

## METHODS

### Research Design

In the pursuit of understanding and exploring the experiences of teachers as PFA facilitators in the new normal, this study used a qualitative phenomenological research design. This design facilitates a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon being lived through as described by the participants (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2012; Sanchez, 2022, 2023a). This study focused on exploring the experiences of three Grade 7 teachers who conducted various PFA activities in the first week of in-person classes for the S.Y. 2022-2023. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to gather substantive data on their specific experiences as PFA facilitators. Diverse experiences were carefully identified through transcriptions of in-depth interviews. Clusters of meaning were analyzed as a springboard in comprehensively identifying the central theme of their experiences.

### Population and Sampling

The participants of this study were purposively chosen from three different secondary schools in the City of Passi and Municipality of San Rafael, Province of Iloilo. They were invited to participate through contacting via online messaging. The PFA facilitators included in the study are Grade 7 Homeroom Advisers who teach a Grade 7 subject and have common experiences as PFA facilitators in the new normal during the first week of the in-person classes for the SY 2022-2023.

The teachers who met the inclusion criteria were requested to read and review the interview consent form, affixed their signature for approval, and voluntarily signed the informed consent form for research participation. The interviews were held face-to-face at a mutually agreed upon location where privacy of participants was ensured. Purposively, three participants were identified and also signified their positive response to participate in this study.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Participants	Grade Level/ Designation	Subjects Handled	Mode of Interview
Teacher 1	Grade 7 Homeroom Adviser	Grade 7 Science	In-Person/ Audio-Recorded Interview
Teacher 2	Grade 7 Homeroom Adviser	Grade 7 Filipino and Grade 9 TLE	In-Person/ Audio-Recorded Interview
Teacher 3	Grade 7 Homeroom Adviser	Grade 7 English and Grade 10 MAPEH	In-Person/ Audio-Recorded Interview



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### Instrumentation

This study utilized triangulation which includes interview transcripts of participants. The interview guide consists of four central questions that probe on teachers' experiences as PFA facilitators based on the objectives of the study. The interview protocol was developed from the researchers' initial interview with the teachers and from the policy framework of DepEd's psychosocial support for learners. The interviews were semi-structured since a few questions were predetermined but some follow-up questions were not planned.

### Ethical Consideration

Before the schedule of interviews, the researchers arranged an initial meeting with the target participants through online messaging if they were willing to share their experiences as PFA facilitators. The confidentiality of responses, anonymity of participants, and contents of the informed consent form were explained to the participants. Participants were informed that the interview process would be audio-recorded for accurate transcription of data. They were informed that all raw information will be deleted after publication of research results to address privacy and confidentiality concerns.

### Data Collection

The use of interview approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the teachers as PFA facilitators. It also helped the researchers to gather detailed thoughts and insights of the participants by employing one-on-one interviews. Teachers 1 and 3 were from the City of Passi while Teacher 2 was from the Municipality of San Rafael, Iloilo. Individualized in-person interviews were conducted and audio-recorded with permission from the participants. Verbatim transcription was done to include certain non-speech sounds, interjections or signs of active listening, filler words, false starts, self-corrections, and stutters.

### Data Analysis

After transcribing the data in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, the initial transcripts were read to assess the level of data saturation. Transcripts were manually coded and presented following the guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data by Richard H. Hycner (Human Studies, Vol. 8 No. 3, 1985). For a better visualization and coding process, the final transcription was checked and critically analyzed in generating codes, categories, and themes.

## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged in exploring the teachers' experiences as PFA facilitators in the new normal during the first week of in-person classes for the S.Y. 2022-2023. These themes were: *confusion*, *fear*, *lack of training*, and *inspiration and feeling of excitement*.

The first theme that was reported talks about confusion. The participants had a feeling of confusion in conducting the PFA activities. Teacher 2 (T2) shared her feelings of confusion because she was not oriented how to do it, to wit:

<sup>14</sup> "We were just given a copy of the PFA module and when I tried to scan it, nakasiling ako sa self ko nga daw obra ini sang guidance counselor haw" (T2)

(We were just given a copy of the PFA module and when I tried to scan it, I told myself that it seems like this is a job for a guidance counselor)

In conducting the PFA activities by utilizing the prescribed module titled "Psychosocial Support Activity Pack (All Levels): A Teacher's Guide", Teacher 1 (T1) revealed that she was able to conduct the evaluation after seeing the files just a week before it, to wit:

<sup>3</sup> "...because uhhm before we administered the evaluation, we were only given ahh I think less or just a week to see the files" (T1)

<sup>5</sup> "...and we were not oriented on how to handle or how to administer it to our students" (T1)

T2 also mentioned that she does not know what to expect in conducting the PFA activities for learners.

Similarly, in a study by Filippo and Kelly (2013), it was found out that teachers who provided psychosocial support as School-based Mental Health Practitioners (SBMHPs) experienced uncertainty about their involvement with student mental health issues, and that this uncertainty was reinforced by organizational structures that promoted a separation of teaching from School-based Mental Health (SBMH).





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The second theme, fear, was evident from the shared experiences of T2. She revealed that she felt scared to facilitate something she does not fully understand. She has this fear that if she is not able to facilitate well the topics, she might do more damage. The fear comes from facilitating something which involves sensitive psychological topics. She further added that she is afraid that she might trigger traumas among students. In connection with this, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2019 identified more training for teaching in a multilingual and multicultural setting as the third highest area of need for teachers' professional development. In all these three contexts, the lack of preparedness and the existence of negatively charged feelings related to imagining themselves in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms seem to be persistent issues (Dražnik et al., 2022).

For the third theme, which is lack of training, T1 and T2 both shared similar sentiments in conducting the PFA activities. T1 revealed that she had no orientation about what to do and does not know how to handle the reactions of the students. She only received the materials, but she did not receive any instructions from her superiors, to wit:

<sup>42</sup> *"wala gid kami sang may ginhawidan from sa higher ranks kung maano kami on the first day"* (T1)

(*"we did not receive instructions from the higher ranks on what to do on the first day"*)

T2 mentioned that she cannot make a connection as to the purpose of the test and she feels that she needed the PFA too more than the students needed it. She further stressed that she needs to be guided and be put into the process so that they would not be shocked. She feels that she would be able to do better if they were given relevant trainings.

In a Chinese study conducted by Wang et al. (2014) with 94 teachers from 92 elementary and secondary schools in Beijing, China to explore their perceptions on the roles, training, and challenges of school psychological service providers (SPs), it was revealed that teachers were dissatisfied due to lack of training and skills. The results further suggested that there was a severe shortage of training and other challenges including low status and work-related stress. This is consistent with the study of Sanchez, Sanchez and Sanchez (2023) which argued on the importance of trainings for educators for better educational achievements.

In terms of the fourth theme, inspiration and feeling of excitement, Teacher 3 (T3) revealed that the positive response from the learners made her feel inspired and excited in conducting the PFA activities. She also emphasized that she regained momentum because we gradually returned already to the usual situation in the classroom, to wit:

<sup>85</sup> *"Ya positive nga response nga makita mo sa mga kabataan"* (T3)

(*The positive response of the learners*)

<sup>86</sup> *"Nga haros tanan sanda gaparticipate sa imo nga activity"* (T3)

(*Almost all of them actively participated in the activity*)

<sup>89</sup> *"Nagbalik kung baga ya momentum, nga nagbalik kita sa ano... Amat-amat don kita nagabalik sa dati naton nga sitwasyon inside the classroom"* (T3)

(*I regained momentum because we gradually returned already to the usual situation in the classroom*)

Pherali et al. (2020) emphasized that teachers focused on the well-being of children and the wider community, and on the environment, they considered most conducive to learning, particularly in a context where children are experiencing disruption, discomfort, and distress. Teachers play multiple roles in crisis settings, including helping students develop the linguistic skills, supporting learners' social-emotional well-being, and helping students adapt in new educational environments while acknowledging their prior education experiences and cultural values.

## Conclusions

The untimely pandemic health crisis caused by COVID-19 paved the way for learning institutions to require teachers to take on the role as PFA facilitators during the first week of the in-person classes and prematurely immerse their learners in an extremely dynamic learning situation. The shared experiences of the teachers provided opportunities in voicing out their flexible journey in these trying times. The teachers' perspectives showed a glimpse of how COVID-19 pandemic changed the educational landscape in promoting psychosocial preparedness and emotional stability among learners who are now gradually transitioning to full in-person classes. This study also revealed the flexibility of teachers as PFA facilitators during COVID-19 pandemic while addressing the diverse needs of their learners. It is a major responsibility of teachers to provide a conducive learning environment for learners in order for effective learning to happen. The prescribed teachers' guide for the psychosocial support activities could be more meaningful and effective if teachers were given the appropriate immersive experience or simulation experience to address time constraints on preparing for and conducting PFA activities during the in-person classes. With the help of psychosocial professionals, it is recommended that school officials should craft a localized action plan for



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psychosocial support interventions that enhance teachers' readiness and address difficulties and challenges as PFA facilitators.

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