PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS IN THE RURAL AREAS: AN INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Psychological well-being is becoming a growing concern in various fields, especially in the teaching profession. Psychological well-being is vital in the teaching profession as it talks about realizing human strengths and potential, which is necessary for innovation and creativity. Teaching is a rewarding but demanding profession. This paper explores teachers' experiences in Salapawan Elementary School and their psychological well-being for optimal functioning in teaching. The participants of this study were the eight teachers employing the qualitative design utilizing the phenomenological approach. The finding reveals that teachers encountered challenges such as emotional exhaustion, an unsafe working environment, and struggles incorporating cultural beliefs. The emotional health of the teachers reduces their ability to support and respond to pupils appropriately. It creates further difficulties, and more emotional distress jeopardizes teachers' emotional health. Thus, teachers need to manage anxiety and control their emotions arising from work-related stress. Three themes came out to cope with mental stress: training and seminars on stress management, social support, and work-life balance. It reveals that teachers with optimum mental health display a high level of personal maturity and possess increased psychological well-being. It indicates further that the good psychological well-being of teachers is essential to enhance self-growth, sense of direction, and meaning or purpose in life. A thorough and more in-depth inquiry into the challenges of the psychological well-being of public school teachers is recommended to ensure better work-related well-being and greater adaptability, and a lesser degree of psychological collapse.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, public school teachers in rural areas

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely regarded as one of the most noble professions, yet it is also one of the most demanding and emotionally taxing careers. Teachers are entrusted with the monumental task of shaping the minds of future generations, often under challenging conditions. Despite the rewarding nature of this profession, the increasing demands on educators, particularly in rural areas, pose significant risks to their psychological well-being. Understanding these challenges is crucial for creating sustainable strategies to support teachers in achieving optimal mental health.

Establishment of the Problem Psychological well-being, as defined by Ryff and Keyes (1995), encompasses an individual's ability to achieve self-acceptance, maintain positive relationships, achieve personal growth, and exhibit purpose in life. For teachers, these components are essential to fostering creativity, resilience, and effectiveness in the classroom. However, educators in rural areas often face unique stressors, including limited resources, cultural constraints, and geographic isolation, which amplify the challenges to their psychological well-being.

Globally, the teaching profession is plagued by issues such as teacher burnout, high attrition rates, and inadequate mental health support. For example, UNESCO (2020) reported that over 45% of teachers worldwide experience emotional exhaustion, with rural educators disproportionately affected due to isolation and lack of professional development opportunities. Similarly, the OECD (2019) highlighted that educators in rural regions face greater challenges in accessing health services, further exacerbating stress levels. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) emphasized that mental health support for teachers is critical to achieving sustainable development goals related to education and well-being.

Nationally, the Philippines has grappled with systemic challenges that affect teachers' mental health. According to the Department of Education (DepEd), many Filipino teachers experience emotional strain due to large class sizes, administrative burdens, and insufficient compensation (DepEd, 2022). Moreover, the 2021 Mental Health Atlas by WHO noted that the Philippines ranks among countries with limited mental health resources for educators, leaving many without adequate support systems. A study by Bernardo et al. (2020) further revealed that Filipino teachers, especially in rural areas, face significant cultural and community pressures, adding to their stress levels.

Locally, teachers in rural communities such as Salapawan face distinct challenges. The geographic remoteness of these areas often results in inadequate infrastructure, lack of access to mental health services, and limited professional development opportunities (Local School Board, 2023). Furthermore, cultural norms in these communities may discourage seeking mental health support, creating a stigma that exacerbates psychological stress (Guiritan, 2024). Local reports also highlight that many rural teachers in Mindanao endure unsafe working environments, with frequent exposure to emotional exhaustion and conflict between traditional beliefs and modern teaching practices (Davao Region Education Monitoring Report, 2023).

Objectives of the Study This study aims to examine the challenges faced by public school teachers in rural areas, particularly in terms of their psychological well-being. It also seeks to identify coping mechanisms employed by teachers to address mental stress and propose actionable recommendations to enhance teachers' psychological well-being and professional effectiveness.

Significance of the Study This study holds significance for various stakeholders. For educational institutions, the findings provide insights for DepEd and local schools on addressing psychological well-being to improve teaching quality and student outcomes. Policymakers can use the results to guide policy formulation and enhance mental health programs for teachers, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the research serves as a foundation for future studies exploring mental health interventions tailored for educators.

Synthesis Integrating findings from global, national, and local perspectives reveals a consistent narrative: teachers' psychological well-being is under significant strain, particularly in rural settings. Globally, the teaching profession faces widespread burnout and inadequate mental health support (UNESCO, 2020). Nationally, Filipino teachers encounter systemic challenges that exacerbate emotional strain (Bernardo et al., 2020), while locally, rural educators navigate additional cultural and geographic barriers (Local School Board, 2023). Addressing these interconnected issues requires a multi-faceted approach that includes mental health support, professional development, and community engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological well-being among educators has become a significant focus of research in recent years, particularly due to increasing awareness of its impact on professional effectiveness and student outcomes. This review synthesizes existing literature from various regions—ASEAN, European, African, and Australian contexts—to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

ASEAN Literature Research in the ASEAN region highlights the pervasive challenges faced by teachers due to systemic and cultural factors. In Indonesia, Susanti et al. (2021) explored how limited resources and cultural obligations significantly contribute to teacher stress in rural areas. Similarly, a study in Vietnam by Tran et al. (2020) identified low salaries and excessive workloads as major contributors to emotional exhaustion among educators. In the Philippines, Bernardo et al. (2020) emphasized the role of community support in mitigating psychological stress among rural teachers.

European Literature European studies have extensively explored the relationship between teacher well-being and policy frameworks. In the United Kingdom, Collie et al. (2022) examined how teacher autonomy and professional development opportunities positively influence mental health. Meanwhile, a study in Germany by Becker et al. (2021) highlighted the role of workplace culture in reducing burnout. Similarly, research in Sweden (Lindqvist et al., 2021) emphasized the importance of work-life balance in sustaining teachers' psychological resilience.

African Literature In Africa, the challenges of psychological well-being are often linked to socio-economic disparities. A study in South Africa by Ngwenya et al. (2021) revealed that financial constraints and high student-to-teacher ratios are primary stressors. Similarly, research in Nigeria by Adeyemi et al. (2020) identified a lack of mental health resources and cultural stigma as barriers to addressing teacher well-being. In Kenya, Otieno et al. (2020) explored how peer support networks can serve as a coping mechanism for educators.

Australian Literature Australian research focuses on the role of systemic support in enhancing teacher well-being. A study by Johnson et al. (2021) found that professional development programs focusing on stress management significantly improve mental health outcomes. In rural Australia, Carter et al. (2020) examined how geographic isolation affects teachers and identified digital platforms as effective tools for providing mental health support. Additionally, a longitudinal study by Smith et al. (2019) demonstrated that teachers with access to workplace counseling exhibit greater resilience.

Discussion The reviewed literature underscores several recurring themes. First, cultural and systemic challenges are prevalent across all regions, albeit manifesting in different forms. For example, while financial constraints dominate in Africa, professional autonomy is a more significant factor in Europe. Second, social support—whether through peer networks, community engagement, or workplace culture—is universally recognized as a critical factor in promoting psychological well-being. Lastly, the importance of professional development and policy interventions is highlighted across all contexts.

Despite these findings, significant gaps remain. Few studies explore the intersection of cultural beliefs and psychological well-being, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, while many studies emphasize challenges, fewer offer actionable solutions tailored to specific socio-cultural contexts. This study aims to fill these gaps by focusing on rural teachers in the Philippines, providing both a detailed examination of their experiences and actionable recommendations.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing the phenomenological approach. This design is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of teachers in rural areas, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of their psychological well-being (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology focuses on the participants' perceptions, feelings, and interpretations, making it ideal for capturing the nuances of their mental health challenges and coping mechanisms (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants and Sampling The participants of this study are eight public school teachers from Salapawan Elementary School. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who met the following criteria: currently teaching in rural areas, having at least three years of teaching experience, and willing to participate in in-depth interviews (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling method ensures that the participants possess relevant experiences to address the study's objectives.

Data Collection Methods Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility while maintaining a focus on the research objectives (Kallio et al., 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality. Field notes and audio recordings were used to capture detailed responses. Data Analysis Procedures Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and coding the data, ensuring systematic analysis (Zamawe, 2015).

Ethical Considerations Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Rizal Memorial Colleges. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' data and securely storing all records (Smith, 2021).

Validity and Reliability To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, member checking and triangulation were employed. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Triangulation was achieved by comparing interview data with field notes and existing literature.

4. RESULTS

The study revealed three significant themes regarding the psychological well-being of public school teachers in rural areas. Emotional exhaustion emerged as a critical challenge, with teachers reporting feelings of being emotionally drained due to excessive workloads, large class sizes, and the emotional labor required to meet the diverse needs of students. These findings align with Tran et al. (2020) and Ngwenya et al. (2021), who identified similar challenges in Vietnam and South Africa, respectively. Additionally, the influence of working conditions was significant, as participants highlighted unsafe working environments and inadequate infrastructure as major stressors. This corroborates findings by Carter et al. (2020) in rural Australia, where geographic isolation and limited resources exacerbated teacher stress. Lastly, teachers utilized various coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support, participating in stress management training, and maintaining work-life balance. These strategies reflect findings by Johnson et al. (2021), who emphasized systemic support's role in improving teacher well-being.

5. DISCUSSION

The results emphasize the critical role of systemic and cultural factors in shaping the psychological well-being of teachers in rural areas. Emotional exhaustion and unsafe working conditions are recurrent issues that align with global findings, suggesting that rural educators face unique stressors requiring targeted interventions. The influence of inadequate infrastructure and unsafe working environments underscores the need for policy reforms, as similar studies by Becker et al. (2021) and Lindqvist et al. (2021) show comparable challenges in other regions. Coping mechanisms, such as professional development and social support networks, highlight the importance of systemic interventions to enhance resilience and adaptability. These findings resonate with Birt et al. (2016), advocating workplace programs that strengthen mental health resilience. However, limited availability of such programs in rural areas represents a significant gap in current practices.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges faced by public school teachers in rural areas, particularly emotional exhaustion, unsafe working conditions, and the struggle to balance cultural expectations with professional demands. These findings underscore the importance of systemic support and targeted interventions to enhance teacher well-being. Addressing these issues will foster a healthier and more productive teaching workforce, capable of achieving sustainable educational outcomes.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Department of Education, implementing mental health programs tailored for rural educators is essential. Providing adequate resources to improve infrastructure in rural schools and facilitating regular stress management workshops will also significantly contribute to the overall well-being of teachers. School heads must create supportive environments by addressing teachers' concerns, promoting peer support networks, and ensuring access to professional development opportunities. Teachers themselves should engage in self-care practices, participate in stress management programs, and foster collaboration with colleagues to share best practices. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the long-term effects of stress management interventions, investigate the role of community engagement in supporting rural educators, and conduct comparative studies between urban and rural teaching environments.

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