
Navigating the New Normal: A Glimpse of Students' Lives during the Post-Pandemic Learning Transition

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research aimed to describe students' lived experiences and coping strategies during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning. It utilized semi-structured interviews in gathering qualitative data among the selected BSED Sciences students through a purposive sampling technique. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The findings of this study revealed that when classes are shifted back to face-to-face learning, most students learn more subject content; however, the students took a long time to process the information taught in class. Students also experienced making genuine friends, meeting other learners face-to-face, and reaching out to a person easily.

Furthermore, students also struggled to attend an online class immediately after having in-person classes. Aside from this, learners also felt academically overwhelmed as a result of procrastination. When dealing with the post-pandemic transition of face-to-face learning, most students practiced planning ahead of time, embracing a positive mindset, and taking short breaks when doing school work. This study recommends that students may study the lessons in advance, know one's learning style, and may practice the habit of proper time management. For students to become active learners, different teaching strategies may also be considered by teachers.

KEYWORDS: *lived experiences, post-pandemic transition, face-to-face learning, coping strategies, students*

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has undoubtedly brought abrupt changes to educational practices, particularly the sudden shift from face-to-face learning to online classes. Schools had been closed for almost two years, and students were forced not to be in the physical classrooms, making learning a bit more difficult. Now that the COVID-19 cases have been declining and life has been slowly returning to normal, schools have reopened, allowing learners to have in-person classes.

In connection with this, the post-pandemic transition from an online class to face-to-face learning primarily requires students to make some necessary adjustments. Within the past two years, students' learning has been self-paced, but in face-to-face learning, all class activities happen in real time, and usually, it is fast-paced, which could overwhelm learners along with

the new learning environment. Due to a long period of social isolation, some students nowadays tend not to interact socially. Most do not just deal with academic stress but also with other stressors affecting their mental and socio-emotional well-being. Aside from this, students may also encounter various challenges that could arise during the transition period.

As the students undergo a post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning, there is a need to ensure that every learner can cope with the challenges that emerged during this period. Students must adapt to the learning pace of in-person classes. Otherwise, effective learning would not happen. The students also need to have a robust support system to foster a sense of belonging in the academy which could also promote their overall well-being.

The study of Akram et al. (2022) showed that novice students in the university, especially those who have yet to experience in-person classes in higher institutions, have faced difficulty adjusting to the learning environment. It is also highlighted that the lack of financial support and resources, as well as the academic workload, caused stress to students, but if they have stress management skills, it could positively boost their academic performance. Further than this, students who have socially interacted in academic institutions create a sense of belonging which has a positive effect on their learning (Okita, 2012).

Therefore, the researchers felt to conduct this study to describe the lived experiences of 2nd-Year Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Sciences students at Central Mindanao University during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning.

Statement of the Problem

This study was conducted to primarily describe the lived experiences of students during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the students' experiences during the post-pandemic transition?
2. How do the students cope during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological research design, aimed to describe the students' experiences and coping strategies during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning. Semi-structured interview guide questions, which were content validated by experts, were utilized in gathering qualitative data from six (6) second-year science education students of Central Mindanao University who were selected as research participants through a purposive sampling technique.

Before the data-gathering procedure, a letter of permission to conduct the study was given to the Dean of the College of Education, channeled through the chairperson of the Science Education Department. A provisional notice to proceed was also secured from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC) to ensure that this study adhered to the ethical standards.

Further than this, the data were analyzed through the use of Colaizzi's method of descriptive phenomenology, wherein it used seven (7) distinct processes: familiarizing data, identifying the significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering into themes, writing exhaustive descriptions, reporting of the fundamental structure and verifying the fundamental structure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

When classes are shifted back to face-to-face learning, Figure 1 below reveals that students have encountered various experiences during the post-pandemic transition. Based on the gathered data, the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning allowed students to learn more and interact with other learners while, at the same time, facing some challenges academically.

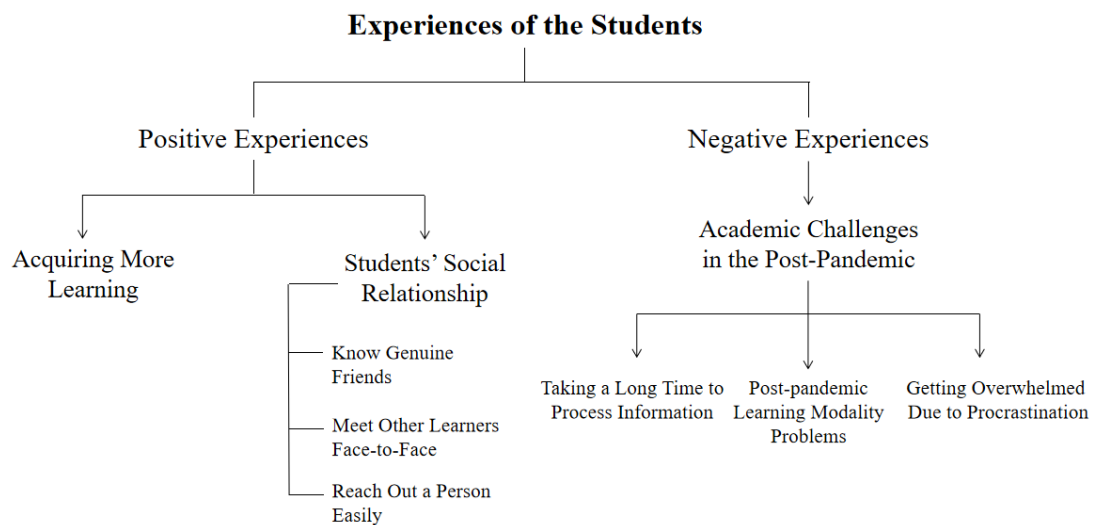


Figure 1. Experiences of Students During the Post-Pandemic Transition

Acquiring More Learning

When schools were reopened for in-person classes, students were given the opportunities to learn more about the content of the subject matter which the teacher was teaching in the physical classroom. The shift towards the face-to-face mode of learning pushed students to make an effort to study the lessons, particularly if they have to take examinations, just like what was shared by Participant 2.

“I actually learned something in face-to-face than in online because I tried harder this time since there are no more notes [to scan], there is none [at all]. There’s no way to cheat...it seems like my willingness to learn becomes more eager now that it’s face-to-face [learning].”

The student’s motivation to learn was increased as the learner had to solely rely on one’s knowledge upon taking examinations since cheating in all forms is prohibited in schools. Aside from this, the transition from online learning to face-to-face classes created better learning opportunities because students were able to physically interact with what the teacher was teaching, unlike during the two years of the pandemic when online classes were the only way to learn, students tend to get tired just by staring at the gadgets which paved the way for them to get asleep during an on-going class session as what was experienced by Participants

1, 5, and 6. Accordingly, the interaction between the students and the teacher was an essential part of face-to-face learning as it allowed direct communication with the teacher where the learners could voice concerns, ask questions and even participate in collaborative class activities (Costado Dios & Piñero Charlo, 2021).

Students' Social Relationship

After almost twenty-four months of being in a virtual classroom, the second-year science education students became eager to personally see the other learners of the same class when the mode of learning transitioned back to face-to-face. While online interactions help students build relationships with their classmates, meeting the whole class in person is something that everyone looks forward to, most notably when it enables them to quickly reach out to a person and know their true friends. In fact, Participant 5 was happy to meet his classmates.

“I'm very happy to [finally] see my classmates. Especially that in first year college, it was still online, we haven't seen each other yet in-person and when face-to-face is now allowed, I am able to see them personally).”

Participant 3 claimed that as she experienced the post-pandemic transition, it made her able to know genuine friends since she could see them in person, where she might notice some behaviors and facial expressions. Looking back, she could not ensure if what had been shown to her during the phase of online classes were actual acts of friendship or not. Nevertheless, in face-to-face, she could feel the depth of their relationship. Regarding knowing the person's availability, she also shared that the face-to-face mode of learning allows students to reach out to a person quickly and know if the person is readily available, which is not the same case online. On the other hand, Participant 6 was able to listen well to her classmates and work in a group activity with them which was an improvement in her performance in terms of cooperating with others during classroom activities and projects.

Participant 6 said:

“Before, in online learning, I only have less interaction with my classmates. I don't interact well when there are group activities, that kind of things. Then, I also didn't cooperate. And then now, I feel like I'm improving since I have now an interaction with my classmates, including doing projects and activities.”

Ransom et al. (2022) mentioned that the face-to-face mode of learning allows learners to join in a physical classroom along with the other students. This encourages interaction among learners which fosters social communication and a sense of belonging. In addition, the in-person classes also helped in transmitting information. The study by Kemp and Grieve (2022) shows that students were more actively involved in face-to-face learning particularly during class discussions. These researchers also stated that learners opted to accomplish academic tasks in person rather than in an online setting which explains the experience of Participant 6.

Academic Challenges in the Post-Pandemic

The shift to face-to-face learning after two years of online classes made students experience struggles in terms of processing information taught by the teacher. Students have to try to study the lessons during the transition period, which was not often practiced in online

learning. Participant 2 shared that way back in her junior high school, she could easily catch up with concepts and ideas of the subject matter, but when the online class became the mode of learning during the pandemic, she turned complacent about not studying what had been posted in the Google Classroom or being taught by the teacher in an online class session. When face-to-face learning had finally returned, she felt like her mind took longer to process information than what she was used to before in high school.

She said:

“I think my brain works differently now like it processes slowly compared before. Way back in junior high school, I can easily catch up but when online classes came and suddenly, it shifted back to face-to-face, I feel that I need to adjust because I’m not really used to it.”

Aside from this, the student’s dependency on the internet during online classes also influenced why learners faced difficulties processing information in the face-to-face class setup. Participant 3 shared:

“I became dependent on Google because when I don’t understand, I just searched it (on the internet). And then now (in face-to-face learning), it is difficult for me to process terms which I don’t relate to. I could understand what it means but it will take a long time.”

According to Steinhoff (2016), being able to access information on Google constantly affects the way students learn. When learners knew that information could be quickly accessed online, students could remember the process as well as where to certainly find the information but only part of the content itself. As a result, it makes students less motivated to memorize the content since Google users become dependent on the search engine instead of relying on one’s memory.

Since the first few months of the transition towards face-to-face learning still incorporates online classes in some subject areas, students faced problems with a poor internet connection, just like in the case of Participant 3.

“One of the experiences that we had is that we attended a face-to-face class then after that went to an online class. Actually, it’s okay but the only problem we have is the internet connection.”

Participant 3 also added that students felt stress due to the reason that they were always in a hurry to catch up for an online class while being already bombarded with face-to-face learning and, at the same time, feeling the burden to look for a signal to be able to attend a class held virtually. The same experience was also encountered by Participant 6, wherein she shared that face-to-face learning, although okay, seems tiring, especially when online learning is also incorporated. There are also cases when the instructor has made delayed announcements if class sessions will be held online or in person.

Frustrations due to a weak internet connection distract learners along with the interruptions which may happen in the student’s learning environment during an online class session

(Klawitter, 2022). This was also true in the study of Venkataraman (2020), wherein the researcher highlighted that learners would fail to keep pace in an online class if students don't have access to a strong internet connection.

While transitioning to face-to-face learning, the students feel academically pressured when being bombarded with school-related tasks successively. Poor time management makes students feel overwhelmed, particularly when learners do the given activities on the day of the deadline instead of prioritizing them beforehand. As a result of delaying work with the activities due to procrastination, students feel pressured to finish everything. Participant 6 stated:

“Sometimes, there are so many things to do and then, it happens one after the other and then it seems that I can't handle it anymore.”

There was also a case when students had to do many activities that were given to them simultaneously, and based on the experience of Participant 1, she felt like it was a struggle not just for her but for her other classmates as well. Participant 5 also felt pressured when unfinished school works got piled up one after another.

“Because there are times, it just piles up. Instead at the beginning, I was just chilling around and then, the activities that I need to work on piled up so I got pressured. We say due tomorrow, do tomorrow or due today, do today.”

Learners with poor time management skills exhibit reduced effectiveness and productivity, leading to difficulties when being tasked to finish workloads. In return, it can negatively impact the student's academic performance, particularly when students do not know how to properly manage time in doing activities (Briones et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Figure 2 below shows that students are determined to plan their work ahead of time while embodying a positive mindset and taking a break to stay motivated.

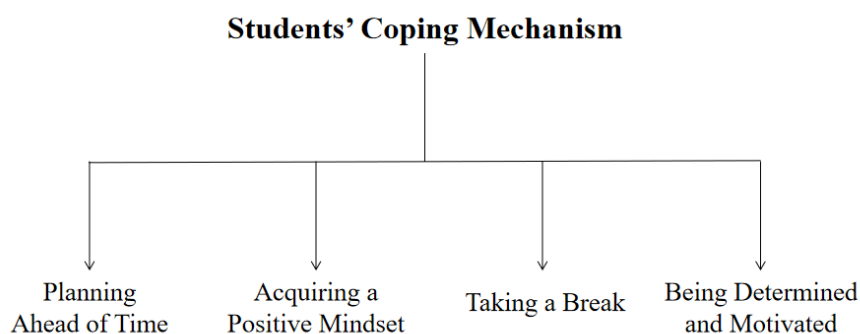


Figure 2. Coping Mechanisms of the Students

Planning Ahead of Time

The post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning pushed students to look for strategies to cope with the situation. In the case of Participant 2, she had made a to-do list, set an alarm clock for a wake-up call, and assigned a time frame for the rest of the activities that should be accomplished. She emphasized that her alarm clock would ring at a specific time, and it would be her cue to do what she needed to prepare for her classes. Setting a schedule for completing the tasks one step at a time also lessens the feeling of tiredness. Participant 1 also shared that she does her schoolwork ahead of time to avoid getting so stressed out. She also added that she had divided her tasks daily, wherein she should see to it that she could finish two activities within this given day and another set of tasks will be done on the next day so she does not cram doing school work on the day of the deadline.

Participant 1:

“I broke down my tasks wherein within this day, I need to finish two activities and on another day, I need to do these activities so that I won’t get too tired and won’t cram on the day of the deadline.”

Accordingly, stress could be avoided, and time could be saved if someone plans ahead of time (Sands, 2017). Making a to-do list helps reduce anxiety, mainly when many tasks are to be completed. Aside from this, it is cited by Hawkins (2020) that it also served as a shred of evidence that the daily goals have been achieved. This technique is associated with improving performance in academics and reducing anxiety (Jenaabadi, Nastiezaie & Jalalzaei, 2016).

Having a Positive Mindset

Having a positive mindset is also a coping strategy for students who have experienced the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning. Participant 5 realized that he needs to think positively and be faithful to God. The same is also true for Participant 4, wherein she believed that whatever may happen, people need to keep going. She also emphasized always praying to God. She said:

“In everything that I’ve been through, I just need to keep going and always pray to God.”

It is emphasized that a positive mindset allows a person to maintain intrinsic harmony as well as acquire a more upright attitude to life in general. This mental attitude influences thought processes which are crucial for aiming to be successful (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2013).

Taking A Break

When there are many things to do, taking a break is necessary. Participant 6 stated that if there are many things to be completed, a quick break is a breather for her, and after a while, when she feels like she has recharged, she would go back to doing the activities. She also claimed that one should set a time or a schedule where one can see when he or she can start working.

“If you have a lot to do, just take a break and then do it again.”

In terms of dealing with stress, Participant 3 also shared that one should take rest for a while. Interacting with friends would do good since she believed doing these things would give a person peace of mind. This is supported by the study of Kim et al. (2017), wherein it is highlighted that mini-breaks improve performance and would not jeopardize the person's well-being.

Being Determined and Motivated

Learning to motivate oneself is also one way of coping with the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning. According to Participant 1, motivating oneself reminds one of the goals, which will let someone keep moving forward despite the trials and challenges.

“Whatever difficulties we have faced, or experiencing right now, we have to learn to motivate ourselves. Remind ourselves with our goals despite our difficulties. You will be able to continue and enjoy life while learning.”

This was also true to Participant 4, wherein she said that in terms of academics, one should try his or her best to show that he or she could do it at the end of the day. The learners' motivation is demonstrated by the time and effort they put into doing their learning tasks. In an article posted by Cherry (2022), when an individual is self-determined, this person feels more in charge of his or her own life, which can also influence one's motivation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the students experienced being able to learn more content during the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning; however, students also required an extended period of time to absorb information, particularly during class sessions. The post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning also enabled students to enhance their social relationships as they can know their genuine friends, meet other learners face-to-face, and reach out to a person with much ease. Students also got overwhelmed in doing the academic workload due to procrastination and struggled in attending online and face-to-face classes during the transition period. On the other hand, planning ahead of time is the students' most common coping mechanism, which includes making a to-do list. Students also cope by having a positive mindset and taking breaks while doing school-related activities.

The study recommends that students may practice studying the lessons or the learning materials in advance, may know the effective ways how they learn, and may also practice the habit of proper time management to avoid stress. Other students experiencing the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning may also use the coping strategies presented in this study. On the other hand, teachers may also use different teaching strategies, and school administrators may also create a new policy of implementing an entire face-to-face class during the post-pandemic while considering the welfare of both teachers and students.

For further research, a comparative study may be conducted which explores students' experiences in the pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and in the post-pandemic period as well as to determine if there are significant similarities and differences with these experiences in different phenomena. Furthermore, future researchers may also conduct quantitative research with more participants to verify the fundamental structure made from the results of this study.

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