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Instructors' Experiences of Burnout During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant emotional strain on science instructors, yet research on their burnout experiences remains limited. This study examines their emotional challenges, coping strategies, and sources of motivation. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with eight science instructors from Higher Education Institutions in Digos City, Davao del Sur, using a qualitative phenomenological approach during the 2021-2022 academic year. Participants were selected based on their teaching experience during the pandemic, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings revealed three key challenges: (1) work stress due to difficulties in teaching-learning modality, overwhelming school workloads, and student misbehavior; (2) mental and emotional distress, including frustration and fear of infection; and (3) challenges in managing student behavior. To cope, instructors used self-regulation strategies such as self-motivation and redirection, along with seeking social support from family and nonfamily members. Faith, optimism, and professional commitment were key motivators for resilience. This study underscores the need for stronger institutional support systems to mitigate instructor burnout. Enhancing mental health programs, improving workload management, and fostering peer support networks can better equip educators to handle future crises.

Keywords: Teachers' burnout; Pandemic; Phenomenology, Science teachers.

1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed immense psychological and emotional strain on educators, particularly those in higher education. Teachers worldwide have faced increasing stress due to abrupt shifts in teaching modalities, increased workloads, and heightened health risks. While previous research has extensively examined student well-being during the pandemic, less attention has been given to how educators, especially science instructors, have coped with the crisis. This research study seeks to address this gap by examining the mental and emotional difficulties encountered by science instructors and their strategies for coping.

Traditionally, teaching has been regarded as a moderately stressful profession. However, the pandemic drastically altered this perception, as numerous studies have highlighted its negative impact on educators' well-being (Cachón-Zagalaz et al., 2020). Teachers faced unprecedented challenges, including increased workloads, adapting to remote and hybrid learning, and managing student disengagement, all while grappling with fear of infection. The mental and emotional strain experienced by educators has direct consequences on teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Von der Embse et al., 2019; Martinez & Ramirez, 2021). In the Philippines, public school teachers were particularly affected as they navigated excessive paperwork, dual work arrangements (on-site and remote), and mental health concerns exacerbated by institutional pressures (Jimenez, 2021). In extreme cases, work-related stress led to tragic outcomes, such as the suicide of a teacher in Leyte due to overwhelming

responsibilities (SunStar Philippines, 2020). These realities emphasize the urgent need for policies and interventions to support educators' mental health.

Despite growing concerns about teacher burnout, research on the pandemic's long-term effects on educators remains limited. While some studies have examined general stressors in education, few have specifically explored how science instructors in higher education institutions (HEIs) managed the crisis. Recent events, such as temporary school closures in Cagayan de Oro due to flu outbreaks (Inquirer.Net, 2023), further illustrate the ongoing instability in education, requiring educators to remain mentally and emotionally adaptable. However, the coping strategies employed by science instructors and their sources of resilience have not been thoroughly investigated. This research seeks to investigate the experiences of science instructors in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their mental and emotional struggles, the coping strategies they employed, and the motivations that sustained them. Understanding these experiences can help shape institutional policies prioritizing educators' well-being, ensuring better preparedness for future educational disruptions.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study examined the lived experiences of science instructors in higher education institutions (HEIs) during the COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative phenomenology design. As Greening (2019) described, phenomenology is appropriate for investigating deeply personal experiences and understanding how individuals interpret their reality. This approach was chosen to capture the emotional and mental challenges faced by instructors and the coping mechanisms they employed.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in four HEIs in Davao del Sur, including both public and private institutions, to provide a diverse perspective on the challenges encountered by science instructors. These institutions were selected based on their active participation in higher education during the pandemic and willingness to facilitate the research.

2.3 Research Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a widely used technique in qualitative research to identify individuals with substantial firsthand experience relevant to the study (Ellis, 2016). Eight science instructors actively teaching in HEIs in Digos City, Davao del Sur, during the 2021–2022 academic year made up the final sample. Participants had to meet the following requirements to be eligible: (1) have taught for at least three years before and during the pandemic,(2) were actively engaged in teaching science courses, and (3) voluntarily consented to participate.

2.4 Research Instrument

Semi-structured interview guide questions were developed to facilitate in-depth discussions on science instructors' experiences. The instrument underwent expert validation by three specialists in qualitative research and education. The review focused on clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness to ensure alignment. Revisions were made based on expert feedback before data collection.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting interviews, permission was sought from the administration of the selected HEIs. Once approval was granted, potential participants were recruited through institutional referrals and personal invitations. They were provided with detailed information about the study, and informed consent was obtained. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their thoughts while ensuring consistency across responses freely. The researcher employed a conversational approach to create a comfortable interview setting. Audio recordings of each 20–30 minute session were made with participant agreement. For data analysis, the study utilized qualitative thematic analysis for a phenomenological study, as mentioned by Sundler et al. (2019); it should entail the following: (1) transcribing discussions, (2) identifying key statements, (3) interpreting meanings, (4) grouping themes, (5) creating a comprehensive account, and (6) confirming results with participants. This structured approach ensured a rigorous and systematic examination of the experiences encountered by the science instructors.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered closely to ethical standards to safeguard participant privacy and rights. Approval was obtained from the DSSC Research, Development, and Extension Office. The goal, methods, and right to withdraw from the study were explained to the participants. All data were safely preserved, and coded identities were used to maintain anonymity.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Affective Predicaments Experienced By the Science Instructors During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Two predominant themes emerged from the participants ' comments about the first research question, which specifically seeks to understand the experiences and repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on science instructors' mental and emotional well-being. These are work stress and mental and emotional distress.

Work Stress

The transition to virtual learning amid the COVID-19 outbreak caused much stress for science instructors. Complicated subjects that required practical experience and in-person engagement caused science instructors to get anxious. Their workload increased, and their stress rose as they adjusted to new apps and devices. Kyriacou (2001), as cited by Maslach and Leiter (2016), defines work stress as the experience of unpleasant tension and frustration related to job responsibilities. Even before the pandemic, teaching was already a demanding profession, with Fitchett et al. (2017) noting that many educators leave within their first five years due to work-related stress. The added pressures of remote learning, ineffective assessments, and technological challenges only exacerbated these difficulties.

The high expectations and workload burden further impacted teachers' ability to perform efficiently (Nayak, 2014). Klapproth et al. (2020) found that European instructors also reported elevated stress levels, citing limited technology resources, poor internet access, heavy workloads, and unmotivated students. Similarly, Digos City, Davao del Sur science teachers and higher education institutions reported emotional challenges during the pandemic. These were categorized into two subthemes: difficulties in the teaching-learning modality, overwhelming schoolwork, and student misbehavior. These factors collectively contributed to the heightened work stress experienced by educators during the transition to online education.

Difficulties in teaching-learning modality. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the shift from in-person to online instruction significantly increased teacher stress, especially regarding sustaining productive classroom interactions. According to Marshall et al. (2020), the challenges of virtual teaching heightened stress levels among educators, as meaningful interaction with students was often hindered by distance and technological obstacles. One instructor shared, "*Instruction during the pandemic is far different from the previous one,*" emphasizing the abrupt shift that disrupted familiar teaching practices. Orhan and Beyhan (2020) highlighted that student engagement is essential for learner and educator satisfaction, yet online education often lacks dynamic interaction in traditional classrooms.

Additionally, science instructors faced difficulties adapting to new teaching technologies. While some educators excelled in using digital tools, others struggled due to a lack of proper training and institutional support, exacerbating stress and feelings of isolation. One instructor expressed frustration over connectivity issues, stating, "*Internet connectivity was a problem,*" making it challenging to conduct seamless online lessons. Hodges et al. (2020) further noted that not all educators and students had equal access to the necessary technology, leading to disparities in learning outcomes. These technological barriers, combined with shifting teaching responsibilities, challenged instructors' professional identity and ability to deliver quality education. Another participant pointed out that "*Virtual meetings were difficult,*" underscoring the communication challenges affecting student engagement and instructional effectiveness.

Adapting to online teaching was further intensified by difficulty accurately assessing student performance. Garcia-Morales et al. (2021) noted that while digital tools provide a means of evaluating student progress, online assessments often suffer from issues such as plagiarism, impersonation, and dishonest practices, leading to unreliable evaluations of student learning. Science instructors expressed concerns over the authenticity of student outputs and the accuracy of cognitive assessments in virtual settings. One instructor explained, "*I have difficulty in*

having laboratory activities during the pandemic; imparting knowledge was very complicated," highlighting the limitations of remote science education. The need for reliable assessment platforms became evident as educators struggled to ensure fair and meaningful evaluations.

Furthermore, Cuervo Carabel et al. (2018) found that remote work, reliant on information and communication technology, contributed to emotional distress, including tension, frustration, and reduced job satisfaction. The ongoing reliance on online education requires technological competence and institutional support to help educators cope with the mental and emotional challenges of remote teaching. Instructors faced significant difficulties delivering high-quality education without adequate training, resources, and support, reinforcing the need for long-term improvements in digital literacy and assessment methodologies.

Overwhelming school work. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased science instructors' workload and stress levels as they struggled to meet academic deadlines while facing daily health risks. The burden of preparing modular and online lessons added to their already heavy responsibilities, leaving them overwhelmed. One instructor shared, "*I was bombarded with different school works and other activities,*" emphasizing the immense pressure in juggling multiple tasks. Before the pandemic, Rabago-Mingoa (2017) identified work-related stressors among Filipino educators, such as excessive paperwork, large class sizes, non-teaching duties, and financial concerns. The pandemic intensified these challenges, as instructors had to balance teaching, administrative tasks, and personal difficulties, making them more susceptible to stress and burnout. Another participant described how student requests further complicated their workload: "*Students always ask for extension of deadlines, which made my schoolwork pile up.*"

The increased workload of educators during the pandemic was not unique to the Philippines. Beames et al. (2021) found that Australian teachers took on additional roles related to student wellness and safety, further straining their capacity. Similarly, Wohlfhart and Wagner (2023) reported that integrating digital tools into the teaching-learning process placed an extra burden on educators, requiring them to undergo training while managing their regular duties. One instructor explained, "*I had a lot to prepare for my online class, especially on subjects that need hands-on experience,*" highlighting the difficulties of adapting science instruction to a virtual setting. As a result, instructors worldwide experienced heightened stress, underscoring the need for institutional support and policies to alleviate their workload and promote their well-being.

Student misbehavior. Science instructors faced significant stress during online classes due to students' behavior and attitudes, particularly their tendency to hide behind screens and avoid participation. Prescott (2012) explained that online learning environments allow students to feel anonymous, sometimes leading to disruptive behavior. Many educators struggled with students who deliberately disengaged despite having the necessary tools for online learning. One instructor shared, "*Students' lack of discipline worsened during online class,*" highlighting how virtual settings provided more opportunities for misbehavior. In addition to technological limitations, lack of motivation and personal challenges further hindered student engagement. These behaviors made it difficult for educators to maintain classroom discipline and created additional stress as they tried to foster a productive learning environment.

The impact of student misbehavior on the effectiveness of online classes was a growing concern among educators. Ozturk and Kumtepe (2015) highlighted that disruptive behavior can undermine the teaching process, making it harder for instructors to achieve their objectives. Some students intentionally acted out, further complicating online instruction (Sevrika & Merina, 2019). One science instructor noted, "*Students during online class are not attentive during my discussions; some of them are absent during online meetings,*" underscoring the challenge of ensuring participation. Medina-Cascales and Reverte-Prieto (2019) emphasized that maintaining discipline in virtual classrooms is crucial for a positive learning atmosphere. Another instructor added, "*Students are not attentive; they tend to turn off their cameras during online classes,*" making it even more challenging to gauge engagement and comprehension. Pagayanan (2016) identified student disinterest, poor study habits, behavioral issues as major teacher stressors, and insufficient teaching resources and high-pressure work environments in the Philippines. These challenges significantly impacted the well-being of science educators, making online teaching more demanding than traditional classroom instruction.

Mental and Emotional Distress

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified mental and emotional health issues among educators, particularly science instructors, who faced increased workloads and anxiety about infection. Even before the pandemic, teaching was considered one of the most stressful professions, often leading to burnout and declining psychosocial conditions (Garcia-Carmona et al., 2019). Interviews with science instructors revealed that the pressures of adapting to new virtual teaching methods, along with excessive workloads, contributed to feelings of depression and distress. Additionally, the constant fear of contracting COVID-19 further impacted their mental well-being, affecting both their teaching performance and personal lives.

Many instructors experienced restless nights due to students seeking academic assistance outside school hours, adding to their emotional burden. The struggle to balance teaching demands with health risks made the profession even more challenging during the pandemic. According to Teles et al. (2020), the well-being of college instructors is crucial to student success, highlighting the need to address mental and emotional distress to prevent academic risk factors. When educators feel emotionally depleted, they may develop negative perceptions about their work and students, further affecting their teaching effectiveness. Responses from Higher Education Institutions in Digos City categorized these emotional struggles into two subthemes: frustration from overwhelming demands and fear of infection.

Frustration. Teaching is a high-stress profession, with mental and emotional challenges leading to burnout, low retention rates, and reduced job satisfaction (Farley & Chamberlain, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these difficulties, particularly for science instructors, who struggled with rapid educational system changes without adequate support or adaptation mechanisms. Frustrations arose from increased workloads, shifting teaching methods, and disappointing student engagement. One instructor expressed, "*You cannot impart knowledge when you are frustrated,*" emphasizing how emotional strain hindered their ability to teach effectively. Research by Mari et al. (2021) found that Italian teachers experienced heightened frustration due to constant changes in their responsibilities and the inability to adjust quickly. Similarly, science instructors faced challenges in delivering quality lessons and maintaining motivation, further exacerbated by negative feedback, poor student performance, and lack of meaningful engagement.

The overwhelming demands of pandemic-era teaching led to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and negative self-evaluation among instructors. Martinez-Monteagudo et al. (2019) noted that educators are vulnerable to self-esteem loss and declining motivation, which directly impact their well-being and teaching effectiveness. One instructor shared, "*My teaching was affected because I was frustrated from what was happening,*" underscoring how their ability to engage students was diminished by stress. Another instructor added, "*I feel emotionally frustrated because students are absent and are full of excuses,*" highlighting the demoralizing effect of student disengagement. Interviews with science instructors revealed that persistent frustrations contributed to anxiety, burnout, and even depressive symptoms, as supported by Agyapong et al. (2022). When sustained, these emotional struggles affect educators' mental and physical health, diminishing their teaching productivity and overall job performance. Addressing these issues is crucial to supporting teachers' well-being and ensuring quality education, particularly during crises that demand flexibility and resilience.

Fear of infection. In addition to the struggles of virtual education and technological integration, science instructors faced significant anxiety over COVID-19 exposure in the workplace. Despite safety measures, the fear of infection remained a significant source of mental and emotional distress. One instructor expressed, "*I am afraid that I will get infected from traveling to my workplace,*" highlighting concerns about exposure during daily commutes. Pressly (2021) noted that teacher safety concerns surged upon returning to in-person duties, leading to heightened stress and apprehension. Many instructors felt compelled to resume on-site work despite their reluctance, sharing similar sentiments to those expressed by educators in other studies (O'Brien, 2021). Another instructor stated, "*I am afraid that I will get infected from our office while on duty during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" emphasizing fears of virus transmission in shared workspaces. Despite the risks, the obligation to be physically present in schools contributed to feelings of undervaluation, dissatisfaction, and psychological strain, amplifying their worries about exposure.

Studies from Japan and other countries further emphasize the psychological toll of in-person teaching during the pandemic. Wakui et al. (2021) reported that school reopening exacerbated educators' fears of infection and possible outbreaks, leading to heightened anxiety and concerns about stigma if they contracted the virus. One science instructor shared, "*My family will get affected if I am infected with the virus,*" demonstrating how these fears extended beyond personal health to concerns for loved ones. Amri and Alasmari (2021) also highlighted that teachers were troubled by the unpredictability of safety measures, fearing for their students' health and well-being. Even with vaccinations, the ongoing threat of infection reinforced the perception that schools were not entirely safe, adding to the stressors educators faced in balancing health concerns with their professional responsibilities.

3.2 Essential Interventions to Counter Affective Predicament During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The second research question specifically inquired about the treatments employed by science teachers to address various emotive challenges during the COVID-19 epidemic. The participants' replies revealed the following principal themes: self-regulation and social support.

Self-Regulation

Science instructors demonstrated strong self-regulation in coping with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, both in their personal and professional lives. Their capacity to control emotions and handle stress played a crucial role in maintaining resilience amid the difficulties of online teaching. Hj Ramli et al. (2018) emphasized that self-regulation helps individuals mitigate stress and navigate emotional distress, fostering a sense of calm and optimism. Science educators applied this by comforting themselves in stressful situations, remaining composed despite frustrations, and maintaining a positive mindset. Without effective self-regulation, as McClelland et al. (2018) noted, individuals are at a greater risk of developing mental health issues, highlighting its importance for educators in high-pressure environments.

Despite the professional pressures of virtual education, science instructors implemented various coping mechanisms to maintain teaching effectiveness and well-being. They engaged in activities to counteract fatigue and stress, employing self-motivation and redirection as key strategies. Panahi (2016) supports the idea that mindfulness and proper self-regulation techniques can help educators manage academic struggles and build resilience. The responses from science instructors in Higher Education Institutions in Digos City, Davao del Sur, revealed two subthemes: self-regulation and self-motivation, which involved internal encouragement to persist despite challenges, and redirection, which referred to shifting focus from negative emotions toward positive actions.

Self-motivation. Educators play a vital role in academic systems, making them an indispensable human capital in society. However, beyond technical knowledge, they must also maintain motivation to overcome challenges and stressors in their profession. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all industries, forcing professionals to adapt to the new normal and triggering widespread frustration and demotivation. Science instructors, in particular, experienced emotional distress due to the demands of online teaching and concerns over student performance. One instructor shared, "*I encourage myself to continue the teaching profession during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" demonstrating the self-driven motivation required to navigate this difficult period. While Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) noted that the lack of prior training for online instruction intensified educators' stress, science instructors remained mindful of their emotions. They worked to sustain their motivation despite exhaustion and workplace adjustments. Another educator expressed, "*I toughened myself to cope with the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" illustrating resilience in the face of adversity.

Although educators are expected to inspire students, they too can face demotivation, creating pressure that exacerbates their stress. Contrary to the assumption that teacher motivation was wholly depleted during the pandemic, many science instructors demonstrated resilience. While some educators struggled with decreased motivation due to poor working conditions, their belief in their ability to navigate work-related and personal challenges played a significant role in sustaining their drive (Richardson et al., 2014). One instructor explained, "*I need to step up instead of dwelling on the stressors in working amidst the pandemic,*" highlighting an active effort to remain motivated. Harris (2020) emphasized that teacher motivation is crucial in fostering a productive learning environment, as it directly impacts student outcomes. Despite the pandemic's toll on their mental and emotional well-being, most science instructors remained committed to teaching. Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012) supported

this by asserting that many educators find fulfillment in their profession and are unwilling to abandon it even under high stress.

Redirection. Redirection is a diversionary strategy for science instructors to manage stress by transforming negative energy into productive and healthy activities. As mental and emotional stress impacts educators, engaging in worthwhile pursuits, such as hobbies, helps alleviate pressure. One instructor shared, "*I keep myself busy during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" reflecting the proactive approach taken to cope with the overwhelming stressors of the time. Hartono (2022) found that hobbies significantly reduce depersonalization and exhaustion, supporting the idea that redirecting stress into enjoyable activities can be beneficial. This aligns with the Conservation of Resource Theory by Hobfoll and Freedy, which suggests that engaging in hobbies outside work can mitigate workplace stress and enhance patience. Given the mounting pressures of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, science instructors embraced redirection as a coping mechanism to sustain their well-being. One educator noted, "*I find hobbies to redirect me from the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic,*" illustrating how personal interests became a means of emotional relief.

With the increasing flexibility and performance demands imposed by the pandemic, stress became unavoidable, necessitating innovative interventions to counter its effects. Science instructors recognized this reality and actively sought activities to divert their distress while teaching. One instructor explained, "*I divert myself through different activities,*" underscoring the role of engaging pursuits in managing stress. By channeling their stress into hobbies and other meaningful activities, they relieved immediate pressures and maintained their emotional and mental stability. This cognitive and affective coping approach allowed them to persevere through the challenges of online education, ensuring their ability to fulfill their roles effectively despite the difficulties posed by the crisis.

Social Support

Social support is crucial in promoting well-being and coping with stress, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It fosters individual communication, enabling better mental, physical, and emotional health (Li et al., 2021). Educators, especially new instructors, faced heightened stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion due to the abrupt transition to remote learning (Anderson et al., 2021). Formal and informal support networks, including colleagues, administrators, families, and communities, became essential in helping teachers navigate these challenges. Peer support through mentorship, resource sharing, and empathetic leadership from administrators contributed to a more stable teaching environment.

Beyond professional support, personal connections with family and community also played a vital role in sustaining educators' well-being. Santamaria et al. (2021) highlighted that familial support helped teachers maintain a work-life balance, while virtual platforms provided spaces for educators to share experiences and receive encouragement. These support systems mitigated stress and burnout, enhancing resilience and adaptability among educators (Froehlich, 2021). Science instructors from Higher Education Institutions in Digos City, Davao del Sur, emphasized the significance of seeking support from family, friends, religious groups, and colleagues. Their experiences highlighted two subthemes, family support and non-family support, reinforcing the necessity of strong social connections to overcome the pandemic's emotional and psychological burdens.

Family support. Family support emerged as one of the primary sources of strength for science instructors in overcoming the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience and adaptability during crises are often rooted in strong familial bonds, as these connections provide emotional reassurance and stability (Karagöl & Kaya, 2022). Science instructors echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing that family support helped them navigate the uncertainties and pressures of remote teaching. As one instructor expressed, "*My family is my main support system in doing my job during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" highlighting the vital role of family in maintaining their motivation and well-being. Schenke et al. (2018) highlight that feeling connected to family members during difficult times significantly enhances emotional, mental, and physical health. Conversely, a lack of familial support can exacerbate stress and lead to emotional distress.

While Li et al. (2020) suggest that social support, including family connections, does not directly impact burnout levels, other studies provide contrary evidence. Wang et al. (2020) found that family support moderates emotional exhaustion, improving overall well-being and reducing occupational burnout. Similarly, Slaughter et al. (2021)

argue that emotional and instrumental support from family members plays a critical role in alleviating work-related stress, thereby enhancing job performance. For science instructors, family support became a vital resource in managing the emotional and mental toll of the pandemic. As one educator shared, "*My family is the reason I continue teaching amidst the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" underscoring how family connections served as a source of encouragement. This unwavering support enabled instructors to sustain their motivation and continue their professional responsibilities despite the challenges.

Nonfamily support. Aside from the mental and emotional support provided by family members, science instructors also identified non-family support—particularly from colleagues and friends—as a crucial mediating network in overcoming the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social connections beyond the family sphere were essential in helping instructors manage stress in their personal and professional domains. One instructor shared, "*My colleagues provide support in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" emphasizing the importance of peer relationships in sustaining motivation and resilience. Fiorilli et al. (2019) emphasize that peer and coworker support is instrumental in mitigating occupational stress, enhancing teachers' sense of belonging, and reducing emotional exhaustion, ultimately leading to improved work engagement. This suggests that while science instructors rely on their families for emotional and mental well-being, they turn to their colleagues for professional reinforcement and shared understanding.

Support from colleagues became even more critical during the pandemic, as teachers faced challenges such as adapting to curriculum changes, managing virtual classrooms, and transitioning to new teaching modalities. Froehlich (2021) highlights that the shared experiences and camaraderie among educators reinforced their professional identity and commitment, creating a support system that helped them navigate an unpredictable teaching environment. One educator noted, "*I talk to my friends for support during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" illustrating the role of friendships in providing emotional stability during uncertain times. Woltran et al. (2021) further suggest that non-familial social support, particularly from coworkers, is often more effective in alleviating work-related stress than familial support. While family provides emotional comfort, colleagues offer professional insights, practical assistance, and encouragement, fostering resilience and greater engagement in teaching (Van Tilburg et al., 2021).

Ultimately, social support from colleagues and friends became an indispensable coping mechanism for science instructors, offering diverse perspectives and strategies to navigate their struggles during the pandemic. The exchange of advice, emotional reassurance, and professional collaboration helped sustain their motivation and effectiveness in their personal and professional lives.

3.3 Silver Linings That Keep One Going Beyond the Pandemic

Corresponding to the third research question, which explicitly solicits the heart-warming silver linings that keep one going beyond the pandemic, the major theme, resilience, emerged from the participants' responses.

Resilience

The resilience of science instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic was evident as they adapted to increased workloads and mental strain. Resilience, the ability to recover and endure adversity (Amin et al., 2022), enabled them to maintain professional performance and personal well-being. Research highlights that resilience is a dynamic trait that fosters growth, helping educators navigate challenges despite stress and burnout (Gibbs & Miller, 2014). Key themes from science instructors in Higher Education Institutions in Digos City, Davao del Sur, were optimism and faith—both essential in sustaining motivation and perseverance. Optimism provided hope for overcoming hardships, while faith reinforced inner strength, allowing educators to persist beyond the pandemic's challenges.

Optimism. Optimism is crucial in maintaining resilience, particularly among science instructors facing adversity. It is characterized by a positive outlook on future outcomes, influencing personal well-being and professional engagement. Science instructors emphasized that optimism helped them navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one instructor expressed, "*Be positive in the situation that you have. Do not be hopeless,*" highlighting the role of optimism in sustaining motivation despite uncertainty. Research by Carver and Scheier (2014) supports this, indicating that optimism reduces stress and

depression among educators. Optimistic teachers are more likely to persist through difficulties, as they utilize personal-regulatory resources to adjust their efforts based on circumstances (Petrakova et al., 2021). Their positive mindset fosters stronger social connections and engagement, enhancing their ability to cope with crises (Anderson, 2012).

The resilience and optimism displayed by science instructors during the pandemic highlight the role of a positive mindset in overcoming personal and professional challenges. One educator noted, "*Be optimistic about whatever you do during the COVID-19 pandemic,*" reinforcing the importance of maintaining hope and determination in the face of hardships. Optimism integrates mental, emotional, and motivational processes, helping educators manage uncontrollable situations and prolonged crises (Alarcon et al., 2013; Nes, 2016). Those with high levels of optimism are better equipped to align coping strategies with challenging scenarios, leading to improved well-being. Another instructor affirmed this belief, stating, "*Everything will just pass by, so be optimistic,*" emphasizing a forward-thinking perspective that fosters resilience. Additionally, optimism has been linked to lower disease-related anxiety and even physiological benefits, such as adaptive immune responses that mitigate stress (Hirsch et al., 2012). In this way, optimism supports emotional resilience and contributes to overall health and effectiveness in the workplace.

Faith. Faith is an essential source of strength for science instructors, serving as a bridge to a higher power that provides reassurance and hope. Science instructors stressed the importance of faith in assisting students in overcoming the psychological and emotional strain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their religious beliefs and prayers offered solace, reinforcing their resilience in fulfilling their teaching responsibilities despite the uncertainties and difficulties they faced. One instructor shared, "*I pray to God to overcome challenges,*" emphasizing the role of spirituality in sustaining their perseverance. The pandemic severely impacted educators' well-being, yet research suggests a strong connection between faith and overall contentment during crises (Rabacal et al., 2020). Huber and Huber (2012) further explained that many individuals rely on religiosity as a coping mechanism, as it influences various aspects of human behavior, practices, and beliefs. Similarly, Batara et al. (2016) found that faith fosters pro-social behavior, allowing individuals to find comfort and stability amid adversity.

The belief in a divine presence strengthens resilience, offering protection, hope, and perseverance in times of crisis (Dolcos et al., 2021). Faith and religion are protective factors for science instructors, helping them manage stress and providing coping strategies for life's challenges. One instructor expressed, "*I believe that God will get me through the COVID-19 pandemic,*" underscoring the profound impact of faith in navigating difficulties. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators turned to their faith to regain a sense of normalcy and emotional stability. By relying on their spiritual beliefs, they found renewed motivation and inner peace, reinforcing their capacity to endure hardships while maintaining their personal and professional commitments.

4.0 Conclusion

This study examined the mental and emotional challenges experienced by science instructors in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Digos City, Davao del Sur, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that instructors faced significant work-related stress and emotional distress due to overwhelming workloads, difficulties in adapting to new teaching modalities, student misbehavior, and concerns about health risks. These challenges negatively impacted their well-being and professional motivation. To cope, instructors employed self-regulation strategies such as self-motivation and redirection, alongside seeking social support from family and nonfamily members. Additionally, resilience, strengthened by optimism and faith, played a crucial role in sustaining their motivation despite the adversity of the pandemic.

Given these insights, HEIs should implement targeted interventions to support instructors' mental health and well-being. Key recommendations include adopting flexible teaching modalities, managing workloads effectively, addressing student behavioral concerns, and providing access to counseling services and peer support networks. Furthermore, fostering resilience through workshops on stress management, success-sharing platforms, and self-care initiatives can enhance instructors' ability to navigate future crises. Future research could explore long-term strategies for preventing burnout among educators, particularly during educational disruptions. Strengthening institutional support systems will improve instructors' well-being and contribute to a more sustainable and resilient higher education sector.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

As the sole author of this study, the researcher takes full responsibility for every stage of the research process. This includes the initial conceptualization, design, and formulation of research questions, collection, organization, and rigorous data analysis. Furthermore, the author has independently conducted the manuscript's writing, editing, and refinement, ensuring clarity, coherence, and academic integrity. The finalization and preparation of the study for publication were also solely managed by the researcher, demonstrating a commitment to the work's accuracy, validity, and overall quality.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this research. All findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this study are solely based on the researcher's independent analysis and judgment, without any external influence or bias.

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