

Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Education Students: A Policy Issue Paper

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Abstract

Education students face various challenges and depressive situations from their admission to their practice teaching experience. This case study examined how an institution addressed the issues on mental health and well-being of the students through its policy initiatives and sought to identify which policy alternative is best to address mental health issues and psychological distress among education students. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the institution's position and ensure trustworthiness of the results, a methodological triangulation was done. Themes were generated from the data collected through document analysis, observations, and interviews. Results revealed the inadequacy of the provisions of the university code and student handbook to address mental health issues of students, the absence of a clear program and school prevention support, and the existence of Waray habits which restrain a proactive approach to solve similar issues. The study concludes that dealing with these issues on a case-to-case basis necessitates the provision of parameters to guide its stakeholders. From among the five policy options analyzed, the study recommended the development of a comprehensive campus-based mental health and well-being program that will ensure students' mental and emotional preparedness in facing the rigors of their chosen profession.

Keywords: educational policy, mental health, psychological distress, pre-service teachers

Introduction

The psychological distress suffered by higher education students is becoming a global concern. Since one of the leading stress generating occupations is teaching (Kyriacou, 2001), the students need to be prepared to cope with these stressors before they are exposed on the field.

Serdar Tuluca, H., & Cecen, S. (2016) highlighted the great role played by practice teaching in honing the pre-service teachers to be creative and innovative. These pre-service teachers have to be well-trained since they bring idiosyncratic experiences to help students with internalizing problems cope with their academic difficulties and to strengthen their personal resilience to classroom stressors (Bryer & Signorini, 2011). This practicum, however, may prove to be stressful which is predictive of psychological distress in university students (Morrison & O'Connor, 2005). Horwitz (2007) stressed that psychological distress as a

transient emotional response to stress will result to depression if left untreated and can have a deleterious impact on one's mental health and well-being. Garlow et al. (2008) even found a strong relationship between severity of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation.

Several studies highlighted the various difficult situations encountered by practice teachers. In the studies conducted by Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan, and McNamara (2014) and Chaplain (2008), practice teaching was identified as a significant stressor because of the emotional demands and the heavy workload the students face. Results of one study (Lindqvista, Weurlanderb, Wernersonb, & Thornberg, 2017) showed that student teachers associate their distressful situation with professional inadequacy. Aside from students' alcohol consumption, indicators of loss of social support were also found to be associated with increased risk for psychiatric disorders (Blanco et al, 2008). It is also interesting to note that some literature surveyed (Deasy at al., 2014; Lee, Maria, Estanislao, & Rodriguez, 2013; Sarmento, 2015) suggested that students with higher levels of depressive symptoms are primarily women.

Results of a Department of Health funded study in England (Warwick, Maxwell, Simon, Statham, & Aggleton, 2006) noted that students who experience mental health problems tend to be labelled as having 'behavioral problems' such as truanting, being violent, or being withdrawn with their studies and are not typically called "mentally ill" students. Parekh (2015) identified a combination of symptoms that can help predict a mental problem such as withdrawal, drop in functioning, problems in thinking, increased sensitivity, apathy, illogical thinking, nervousness, unusual behavior, sleep or appetite changes, and rapid or dramatic mood changes. Nevertheless, early intervention can help delay, reduce the severity, or prevent a major mental illness altogether. This study likewise reported that one half of all mental illness begins by age 14 and 75 percent begins by age 24.

However, some identified practicum-related concerns are personal from trainee to trainee depending on factors like their personal attributes, beliefs, and expectations. What the student teachers were able to do was dependent upon their capacity to cope with the constraints and emotional problems that they encountered (Pinder, 2008). These concerns include the anxiety felt in their dealings with their cooperating teachers, students, and even with peer student teachers (Celik, 2008). Gardner (2010) aptly discussed that these potential problems for prospective teachers require a holistic approach beginning through understanding contemporary strategies available to individual university students and preventative stress management programs provided within tertiary education which may be made available to future student-teachers. Considering that these trainees are not experienced enough to handle these difficult situations, the institution and their supervisor or cooperating teacher educators should help them develop problem-management strategies (Celik, 2008). These students will, then, benefit from a well-thought management program.

Promoting the holistic development among students is critical to the pursuit of academic learning (Payton et al., 2008). Some higher education institutions spend considerable effort on implementing a wide range

of programs that address the social-emotional development of students. Nevertheless, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) found that these efforts are usually seen as tangential rather than core to the function of schools. Therefore, more in-depth attention should be given to the emotional development of student teachers (Marais, 2013) and more effective models for integrating social-emotional learning into the ongoing practices of schooling should be embraced by these institutions (Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash, & Seidman, 2010). Although specific types of support such as counselling and the provision of personal mentors had been found useful by students with mental health problems, just as important to them was the overall ethos of the college as a welcoming and supportive place (Warwick et al., 2006).

This study anchored on the social ecological theory emphasizes the assumption that health is determined by a complex interplay between facets of both the physical and social environments in combination with both personal attributes like temperament and behavioral patterns (Stokols, 2000; Stokols & Pelletier, 1996). This theory contends that environmental conditions, behaviors, and social roles can have a disproportionate influence on a person's well-being (Grzywacz & Fuqua, 2000). Such ecological approach for school-based mental and psychological health services will provide a compelling unifying framework to guide research, policy, and practice (Atkins et al., 2010) to build social and human capital within the school setting.

Colleges offer a promising venue for prevention and treatment to help set the path of young adults to success and well-being (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010) but because of the sparse research evidence on effective programs and policies, it would be premature for schools to draw specific conclusions on how they should move forward on these fronts. Some universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) offer stress management programs and promote mental health and well-being strategies for staff (Woodward, 2006). However, these initiatives are found wanting in the Philippines. The extent of psychological distress and stress management strategies among student-teachers in the 21st century and the policy initiatives of the institutions to address the issue on mental health and emotional well-being of its students appear to warrant further investigations.

Methodology

Having no clear-cut rules and policies on how to address these issues in higher education institutions and universities, an in-depth study was done on the existing policies and on how a particular higher education institution in the Philippines addressed four of these incidents since 2006 to 2016. Likewise, this paper sought to identify which policy alternative is best to address mental health issues and psychological distress among education students in the institution.

A qualitative case study research design was utilized to acquire insight into the institution's policies, actions and directions toward the assurance of mental health of pre-service teachers deployed in the field. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the institution's position and ensure trustworthiness of the results, a methodological triangulation was done. Data were collected through analysis of existing documents, observations, and interviews with the Education Program Head of the institution, the present

and immediate past Practice Teaching Coordinators, the Dean of the College of Education, the Guidance Counselor, and four students who suffered psychological distress. Open coding was used to analyze the data, to generate themes and to formulate policy alternatives. The data transcribed and the completed paper were both shown to the respondents for verification and information.

The four students purposively chosen were all female fourth year pre-service education students when they suffered psychological distress or when this disorder became manifest. All four of them were not able to graduate within the standard four academic years for the undergraduate degree. The researcher was able to observe and interview them as their co-practice teacher, instructor, and legal adviser, respectively. For this paper, readily available interview data of the students were also utilized through anecdotal records and notes at the Practice Teaching Unit. The volitional participation and the confidential nature of the gathered data were emphasized to the participants. They were likewise informed that they could withdraw participation any time. The risks and benefits in the study were fully explained to the participants to trigger a sense of social responsibility.

The documents and papers referred to and analyzed were the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order No. 09, Series of 2013, 1987 Philippine Constitution, *Batas Pambansa Blg. 232* (The Education Act of 1982), University Code (2005), University Student Handbook (2011), and the available conference notes and anecdotal records of the students.

Results and Discussions

Several themes were drawn out from the data reflecting the inadequacy of the provisions of the university code and student handbook to address mental health issues of pre-service teachers, the absence of screening and admission requirements targeting the mental status of enrollees, the lack of collaboration with governmental programs to prevent students' psychological distress and mental illness, and the existence of traditions and school customs which restrain a proactive approach to solve this issue.

Results indicated that the absence of clear guidelines to follow and school prevention support lead to either dropping out of the students and the application of leave of absence from their studies for at least one semester until the school offices concerned deemed them fit to re-enroll.

Policy Options

The latest incidents of students' psychological distress made the institution review its existing policies for its resolution. The education faculty members proposed for the inclusion of neurological-psychological examination as an admission requirement to the university and to the practice teaching program. This proposal was presented before the academic council meeting of the institution which decided to maintain status quo after much deliberation. Listed below are the policy alternatives and their perceived strengths and weaknesses.

Neuro-psycho test as basis for admission to the university

The current policy of the university on entrance requirements entails the approval of the Academic Council and the Board of Regents (Article 23, Sec.1, University Code 2005). Section four of the university code requires every applicant to pass a thorough physical, medical, and other necessary examinations as prerequisites for admission. If so endorsed by the Academic Council, approved by the Board, this requirement could easily be added to the entrance standards currently comprising of a test and interview, copies of relevant forms, chest X-ray and urinalysis result, and a grade point average of 80% or higher (University Student Handbook, 2011).

This added requirement will initially screen applicants who are mentally stable to study and undergo training as a future educator but this will involve an additional cost to the applicant of about Php 200.00 to Php 420.00 from nearby hospitals and health clinics. Passing this test will not also guarantee the absence of psychological distress in-between the students' successful entrance to the university up to his graduation. As what Parekh (2015) pointed out in his study, one half of all mental illness begins by age 14 and 75 percent begins by age 24. Students with emotional breakdown tendencies will still be able to enroll if indications come later.

Neuro-psycho test as basis for admission to the practice teaching program

A graduating student shall only be recommended if he has satisfied all academic and other requirements prescribed for graduation (Article 27, Sec.1, University Code 2005). One of these academic requirements is to undergo practice teaching. The student handbook (University Student Handbook, 2011) provides the general requirements for the internship program which include a physical-medical examination by the university physician but this health examination mainly consists of chest x-ray and urinalysis.

This policy will help screen those who are mentally and emotionally stable to enroll in the practicum so as not to jeopardize the safety of the students, the supervisors, the university, and even the pre-service teacher himself. But aside from the cost, this policy will pose an additional challenge for those suffering psychological distress in their senior year. If the student fails this neuro-psycho test, should he be always banned from the practice teaching program and to eventually graduate? Should the policy be applied retroactively to include him or should it apply only to the new entrants of the institution? Article 28, Sec.1 (g) of the University Code 2005 provides that every student shall have the right to be informed of the rules and regulations affecting him.

Further, the code provides that every student officially admitted to the university has the right to continue and pursue his course of study therein up to graduation, except in cases of academic delinquency and violation of disciplinary regulations (Article 28, Sec.1 (n), University Code 2005). Failing to pass the neuro-psycho examination is neither a delinquency nor a violation of disciplinary regulations. The following questions should also be considered. If the student fails in the neuro-psycho test, can the institution disallow him to undergo practice teaching? This could be answered affirmatively if the new policy clearly states so and as long as everyone has been properly informed. Will this be an assurance that

the education graduate who passed the neuro-psycho exam will always be a mentally and emotionally stable teacher in the future? The test result will not give such confirmation. Hence, this option may not be sound and practical to serve as a future reference for one's mental stability.

Neuro-psycho test as basis for admission to the university and to the practice teaching program

This option will double up the burden of its cost for the pre-service teachers but will not increase twofold the assurance for the sanity and emotional well-being of future educators. Same arguments above, likewise, apply to this option.

Requiring neuro-psycho test on a case-to-case basis

This option gives the idea that the institution will act once the problem or suspicion arises. This will not entail additional cost to the entire student populace but this policy needs to be well-defined and properly disseminated. Mental health is critical in nature and should be cautiously dealt with, else, issues on human rights violations might arise.

The Philippine Constitution states that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor shall any person be denied the equal protection of the laws. (Article III, Section 1, 1987 Philippine Constitution). The students' right to education comes within the purview of this provision. This is also supported by *Batas Pambansa Blg. 232* or The Education Act of 1982 (Section 3) which provides that the State shall promote the right of every individual to relevant quality education, regardless of sex, age, creed socio- economic status, physical and mental conditions, racial or ethnic origin, political or other affiliation.

Section 5 of the same law (Sec. 3, B.P. 232) likewise maintains that every citizen has a right to select a profession or course of study, subject to fair, reasonable, and equitable admission and academic requirements. Though an institution has the right to formulate its own policy, certain safeguards are to be considered in ensuring that these policies are within the bounds of law. Hence, dealing with this matter on a case-to-case basis necessitates the provision of parameters to guide its stakeholders. Loopholes in a broad and imprecise policy may lead to violations of human rights and cause further trouble.

Developing a program for students' mental health and emotional well-being in lieu of a neuro-psycho test

This option will, of course, not cause additional cost to the students but will require allotted funds and a collective effort from the institution. CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, Series of 2013 on Enhanced Policies and Guidelines on Student Affairs and Services mandates universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide guidance and counseling services for the students' welfare. Section 14.2.3 of this Order provides that appropriate and pro-active intervention programs and strategies may be adopted by HEIs to ensure that every student's need for guidance and counseling and psycho-social services may be provided in a timely manner. Its section 14.3.2 added that there shall be provision for a well-planned assessment program for students with appropriate standardized psychological tests administered, scored

and interpreted by qualified personnel. The test results are interpreted to students, teachers, and concerned individuals.

If this will be implemented in HEIs, there is no need to be requiring a neuro-psycho test from the students which does not even guarantee a hundred percent mental and emotional stability once they become full-fledged teachers. Mental health assessment can be done by the school psychologists and guidance counselors with entrance interviews done by these experts and not just by any faculty member for initial screening. Also, developing a comprehensive program for the students' mental and emotional well-being will help all education students to be prepared for the psychological stressors they will meet as education students, pre-service teachers, or even as qualified teachers. This will even help them choose the program of studies appropriate for them.

This provision in the CHED Order is also reflected in the university code stating that every student is entitled to guidance and counseling services to enable him to know himself, to make decisions, and to select from the alternatives in the field of work in line with his potentialities (Article 28, Sec. 1 (b), University Code, 2005). If implemented, this program for students' mental health and emotional well-being will even be a best practice that the institution could boost upon.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings of this study can help guide the development of a campus-based mental health and well-being program in a higher education institution. However, more research is needed towards building additional local knowledge on the topic and to provide a broader and more comprehensive result.

The policy recommendations in this paper respond to the problem of ensuring that the pre-service teachers and the education graduates of the institution are mentally and emotionally prepared to face the rigors of their chosen profession. It is not a question of whether an additional requirement such as a neurological-psychological examination will obtain the desired screening result but on how the institution will implement a program imposed by law and of the Commission on Higher Education to guarantee that students are cared for mentally and physically before they graduate.

The result of a neuro-psycho test is not an assurance of lifetime mental stability of qualified teachers since studies stressed that indications and symptoms may come years later. What the university can do is to provide a comprehensive mental health and well-being program to equip and develop the students holistically. Hence, from among the five alternatives, the last option presented is more sensible and practical. It will not only free the college entrants and students from additional expense but will also urge the institution to act proactively. This will lead to the inclusion of necessary provisions in the university code and student handbook addressing the mental and psychological needs of the students and the development of clear guidelines and systematic support for the resolution of similar issues. Steps to be undertaken have to be specified in the university code and student handbook which should be thoroughly implemented by

the school body concerned. This will also aid in getting rid of human rights violations issues. A study stressed that there is a link between poor mental health and student retention (Brown, 2016). Creating this mental health and well-being program will definitely help to support and nurture all students and eventually increase student retention rate.

Higher education institutions should be encouraged to improve support for these students by increasing funding for their counseling services and reviewing their policies. Future studies should concentrate on finding larger number of participants to bring more accurate results. Further studies must also be conducted to see how a university will develop and implement a comprehensive mental health and well-being program for students.

The university code provided that a student should be respected as a person with human dignity, to full physical, social, moral, and intellectual development, to humane and healthful conditions of learning (Article 28, Sec. 1 (i), University Code, 2005). This, however, should not stay merely on paper but should be whole-heartedly carried out to be true to its commitment of providing excellence, integrity, and service.

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