

Transcending: The journey and lived experiences of the educators who survived COVID-19

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 21(03), 845–861

Publication history: Received on 19 January 2024; revised on 05 March 2024; accepted on 07 March 2024 Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.3.0740>

Abstract

This study described how the educators, both from public and private schools in Cabanatuan City, managed and survived the difficulties they experienced while battling the Covid-19 virus. The researcher used a descriptive phenomenological design for this study, of which an in-depth interview was conducted to generate qualitative data from the twelve (12) educators from public and private schools in Cabanatuan City. Thematic analysis was applied in emerging the five (5) themes, namely: (1) The Crossover of COVID-19 (Initial reaction of participants when infected), (2) Psychosocial Distress Behind the Wall (Physical, Psychological, Social Difficulties including the Post Covid-Symptoms), (3) Conquering Adversaries (Coping Mechanism applied to survive Covid-19 infection) (4) Transcending Life's Meaning (Life lessons learned from their Covid-19 Journey) and (5) Proposed Policy for Educational Institutions (Policies suggested based on their experiences). The findings of the study showed that: the phenomenon under study showed the educators' resiliency through their faith and positivity, which enabled them to survive the difficulties they faced as Covid-19 patients. All these themes form a central idea that educators are in need of institutional support when faced with a health crisis, such as the pandemic, that can put their lives at risk. Based on the results, the researcher crafted a proposed institutional policy that will aid and support the employees in times of health crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19; Covid-19 pandemic; Educators; Covid-19 patients; Resilience; Lived experience; Policy; Educational institutions

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic a year ago, our lives have been turned upside down. There has been a major health crisis impacting various nations throughout the world. It has presented a greater challenge to our nation in a variety of areas, including education.

With the passage of Republic Act 11480, the Department of Education has mandated the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. According to Deped Order 007 s.2020, education must continue to provide hope and stability, contribute to the normalization of the country's operations, support the development of our students, and restore normalcy to their lives. In addition, they emphasize the significance of the health and safety of students and faculty.

The Department created the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP), a bundle of educational activities that will address the basic education problems posed by COVID-19 (DO 012 s.2020). This approach comprises curricular modifications, alignment of learning resources, and the deployment of numerous learning modes. This strategy is intended to provide strategic guidance to public and private schools in Central Luzon so that school-aged children and adult learners gain the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) in the middle of a pandemic. (DEPED 2020)

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In response to the Department's directive, public schools around the nation adopted modular distance learning, while others, particularly those in urban areas, adopted blended learning. Private schools, on the other hand, opted for blended or online learning because the majority of their pupils could afford the necessary technology.

Even with the limited preparation time, a recent study in Nueva Ecija revealed that teachers are prepared to apply modular distance learning in areas such as required knowledge and abilities, access to learning materials, and establishing communication and monitoring student progress. Nonetheless, the same teachers found obstacles or difficulties in implementing the aforementioned learning mode in the same locations. (Carreon, 2021; Santiago et. al., 2021)

These are some of the challenges that served as pressures that negatively impacted teachers' mental health. According to a recent study published this morning in *Educational Researcher*, a journal of the American Educational Research Association, teachers have had much greater anxiety rates throughout the epidemic, even more than healthcare employees. It is based on a poll of millions of American workers done in 2020 and 2021 over the course of seven months. (Sparks, 2022) Since teachers are not immune to the virus, they are in danger while performing their duties to ensure the continuity of education in our country. Kids are exposed to the virus as a result of their daily school attendance requirement. Because of these factors, the researcher has reached out to the educators who were infected with the virus and survived it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the mental and psychological well-being of people worldwide, with survivors facing a heightened risk of psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, or dementia, as evidenced by studies (Taquet et al.; Paz et al. 2020). A KFF Health Tracking Poll highlighted how the pandemic induced stress and anxiety, leading to sleep difficulties, changes in eating habits, substance use increases, and exacerbated chronic conditions among adults. This situation underlines the profound impact of COVID-19 on mental health, exacerbated by ongoing health interventions and the pandemic's persistence. Educators in Cabanatuan City, both from public and private sectors, have not been spared, facing significant mental health challenges due to their crucial societal role. Teachers, who are pivotal in shaping future generations and fostering a sense of purpose and success in students, find their mental and emotional well-being crucial for their effectiveness. This study aims to explore the mental health challenges faced by educators during the pandemic, with the goal of informing educational leaders about these struggles. The intention is to aid in the development of coping strategies and intervention programs, as well as the formulation of policies that support educators during such crises. Effective policies are vital for maintaining the structure, quality, and success of educational institutions, emphasizing the need for well-crafted, concise policies that are regularly updated to address current challenges.

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic, termed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a profound global crisis, has led to widespread economic, health, and humanitarian challenges, putting businesses at risk and threatening the livelihoods of billions, especially those in the informal sector lacking social security and healthcare. This situation has been exacerbated by lockdowns, causing significant trade disruptions internationally and domestically, impacting the global economy profoundly (UN, 2022; Chriscaden, 2020; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). Research into the virus's clinical symptoms—fever, cough, fatigue, dyspnea, and sputum production—highlights its capacity to affect multiple bodily systems, resulting in a variety of symptoms and underscoring the virus's complexity (Y. Alimohamadi, 2020; L.M. Weng, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Variations in symptoms with different virus variants, as reported by WHO-China-Joint Mission and the Office of National Statistics in England, suggest the evolving nature of the disease and the need for ongoing adjustments in public health responses (Mahase 2021). Furthermore, World Bank surveys in collaboration with the Philippines' DSWD reveal the pandemic's broad socio-economic effects on vulnerable communities, emphasizing the urgency for adaptable public health strategies and policies to address the pandemic's multifaceted impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted severe economic hardships, disproportionately affecting the poorest communities with widespread job and income losses, especially in construction, public transportation, and agriculture sectors. Despite a slight recovery in the retail sector by April 2021, construction and transportation remained notably impacted. Social ramifications were initially subtle regarding peace and order issues, yet unemployment led to an increase in such problems over time. Notably, while discrimination related to COVID-19 rose, reports on sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence did not show a significant increase, despite some data indicating a rise in gender-based violence amid stringent lockdowns. Health and vaccine-related skepticism was prevalent, with communities mainly relying on healthcare professionals for credible information, highlighting a demand for more rigorous enforcement of health protocols by local authorities. Psychologically, the pandemic's toll has been significant globally, manifesting as heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. This was particularly acute among those grieving the loss of loved

ones, individuals in quarantine, and vulnerable groups like children and young adults, who experienced notable emotional and behavioral disturbances. In the Philippines, a considerable segment of the populace reported moderate-to-severe psychological distress early in the pandemic, influenced by various factors including gender, age, and quarantine status, whereas access to reliable health information and positive health perceptions were associated with reduced psychological impacts.

These findings underscore the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on Philippine communities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address economic vulnerabilities, promote social cohesion, ensure vaccine confidence, and mitigate the pandemic's psychological and social effects. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted education worldwide, presenting unique challenges across various levels of schooling and for students transitioning between educational phases or into the workforce. Daniel (2020) & Santiago et. al., (2023) highlights how students have been abruptly separated from their social groups and faced disruptions in completing their curricula and evaluations as planned. The crisis has exposed the inadequacies and inequities within education systems, such as limited access to necessary technology for online learning and a mismatch between resources and needs. The majority of OECD and partner nations experienced prolonged school closures, pushing students and teachers towards remote learning through digital platforms, television, or radio, often without adequate preparation for this sudden shift (Schleicher, 2020) In higher education, the pandemic led to university closures and a swift transition to online learning, impacting learning processes, examinations, and the status of international students. This situation has prompted a reevaluation of the value of university education, traditionally seen as a blend of intellectual content and networking opportunities, and highlighted the need for institutions to adapt by enhancing digital learning environments (NCES, 2019[18]). In the Philippines, the pandemic's impact was immediate, with the nation quickly moving to online education. However, challenges such as a lack of preparedness among educators for online teaching and equity issues related to access to technology led to significant disruptions. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) even suspended online instruction temporarily due to concerns raised by students and teachers (Toquero, 2020). Despite these challenges, efforts were made to continue education through distance learning and the development of learning modules by educators, though this approach also exposed educators to potential health risks.

These developments underscore the profound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector, highlighting the urgent need for equitable access to learning resources, innovative teaching methodologies, and policies that ensure no student is left behind, irrespective of the circumstances.

2.1. Research Model

In this part of the study, the researcher presents a model, which was the process of conducting the research proper to come up with a certain result and outcome.

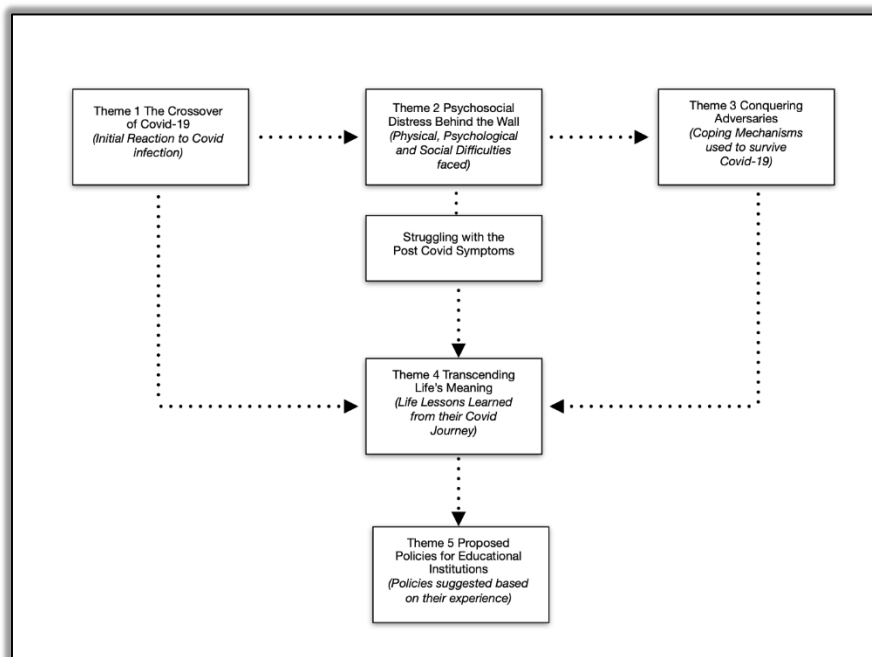


Figure 1 The Journey and lived experiences of educators who survived Covid.

This study focuses on the experiences of educators who contracted COVID-19, aiming to explore their personal narratives during the infection. It delves into how educators describe their initial reaction to testing positive, their distress throughout the illness, their recovery and coping mechanisms, the impact of the disease on their lives, and the lessons they learned as school leaders that could inform future policy and system development. Key terms such as COVID-19, the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, COVID-19 patients, resilience, lived experiences, policy, and educational institutions are defined to clarify the study's scope and ensure a precise understanding. This research is significant for multiple stakeholders, including educational institutions, educators, school heads, principals, and future researchers. It aims to provide insights that could help develop policies to support staff during health crises, shed light on the challenges faced by educators during such times, offer guidance on managing affected staff, and serve as a valuable academic resource for further study.

3. Methodology

This study aims to explore the nuanced experiences of educators in Cabanatuan City who navigated through the challenges posed by COVID-19. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research delves into the personal narratives of twelve educators, selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: being an educator and a COVID-19 survivor. These participants, drawn from a mix of public and private schools, include a diverse group of individuals varying in age, gender, educational attainment, and professional roles. The demographic profile of participants spans from teachers and instructors to principals, with educational backgrounds ranging from master's degree holders to PhD graduates.

The personal experiences of these educators with COVID-19 are as varied as their backgrounds. For instance, Participant 1, a mother and wife of a police officer, faced a severe battle with the virus, culminating in a near-death experience during her 28-day hospital stay. Participant 2, whose exposure came through a colleague, and his nurse spouse managed their illness within the confines of their home. Participant 3, mourning the loss of her brother to COVID-19, contracted the virus from him, leading to a brief hospitalization. Participant 4, uncertain of his exposure source, experienced a range of COVID-19 symptoms and negative antigen tests despite a two-week hospital stay. Participant 5 chose self-isolation at home over hospital care due to discrimination from healthcare workers, while Participant 6, a widowed mother, opted out of hospitalization to care for her children despite her critical condition.

Other participants' experiences include Participant 7's traumatic encounter with COVID-19 during a bus trip to Tagaytay and subsequent worries about her child who also tested positive. Participant 8, unsure of his infection source, shared a near-death experience similar to Participant 1. Participants 9 through 12 each have unique stories of exposure and coping, ranging from isolation at home without clear knowledge of exposure to contracting the virus through travel or from family members.

These educators' stories reflect the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 on individuals within the education sector, highlighting their resilience, the challenges of navigating health care and isolation, and the support systems that helped them through their recovery. This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences, shedding light on the personal and professional dimensions of surviving COVID-19 as an educator in Cabanatuan City.

This study aimed to delve into the lived experiences of educators in Cabanatuan who survived COVID-19, focusing on their personal and professional upheavals during the pandemic. Utilizing a qualitative design, specifically a phenomenological approach, the research encompassed in-depth virtual interviews via Zoom with twelve educators from both public and private schools. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they met the criteria of being COVID-19 survivors and educators. The study's scope was intentionally narrow, focusing exclusively on these educators' experiences, and it excluded data from participants who withdrew, adhering to ethical standards.

The research instrument comprised semi-structured interviews, carefully designed to elicit detailed narratives about the educators' experiences with COVID-19. This method was chosen for its ability to capture the depth of emotions, feelings, and opinions related to their experiences. The interview protocol included questions about exposure, initial reactions to positive diagnoses, distress, coping mechanisms, and the impact on their professional lives and perspectives. This instrument underwent validation by a panel of experts to ensure its reliability and credibility.

Data gathering was conducted from April 26 to May 4, 2022, aligning with safety protocols for research during the pandemic. Interviews ranged from one to two hours, allowing for thorough exploration of each participant's experience. The iterative questioning technique fostered a deeper engagement with participants, enriching the data collected. Following the interviews, recordings and analytic memos were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data, identifying recurring topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning. This process was guided by Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, which involves familiarization with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The themes were validated through a rigorous review process involving the researcher, a rater, and an adviser, ensuring they accurately represented the phenomenon studied.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. An approved letter of undertaking, signed by both the researcher and participants, outlined the ethical parameters, including consent, privacy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. This ethical framework ensured the study's integrity and the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

4. Results and discussions

The outcomes of this research are interpreted and presented in accordance with five (5) major themes generated from assessments of the participants' lived experiences, emotions, and beliefs. Each theme contains sub-parts that serve as the conceptual paradigm's foundation. These topics are thoroughly explored in this chapter, along with polished verbatim transcripts. The themes that emerged in the data analysis are as follows:

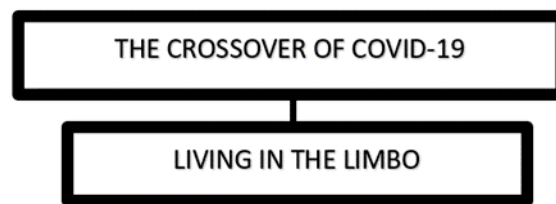


Figure 2 Theme 1 The Crossover of Covid-19

Epidemic breakouts such as Ebola, dengue, Zika, measles, and influenza have garnered international attention in recent years. The global interconnectedness that enables viruses to travel from one region to another within a few hours is predominantly responsible for the increase in the frequency of epidemics, according to the data. Due to the extreme complexity of epidemics, coordinated responses across multiple disciplines are required. Not only biology and medicine are required to understand and treat these maladies, but also anthropology, international relations, and defense. It should come as no surprise that, regardless of one's location, epidemics are important or should at least be of concern. (Karan, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on March 11, 2020. COVID-19 has cost hundreds of thousands of lives worldwide, presented healthcare professionals with pressing challenges, and revealed the flaws in global health systems. Moreover, it has rapidly and on an unprecedented scale caused significant disruption to economies and societies (Gibson 2020). Due to this, a great number of people suffer from uncertainty, fear of infection, moral distress, and sorrow, which are frequently experienced alone. The concern is growing about contending with the resulting anxiety, as well as its long-term individual and societal effects. (Peteet, 2020). The first theme emphasizes the individuals' first response after learning that they are Covid-19 positive. Their reactions have varied widely according to their own experiences. According to the Macmillan Dictionary, an initial response occurs at the start of a process or when you first see or hear about something.

4.1. Living in the Limbo

4.1.1. Refusing Reality

P1's children were the first to get infected with Covid, so when she tested positive, she first refused to believe it because she was thinking about the wellbeing of her two boys, who at that time were in the process of healing from Covid. Whereas P2, P4, P5, P6, and P9 were merely in denial to cope with the truth that they had Covid. Denial is a kind of protective strategy that involves ignoring the facts of a situation in order to avoid suffering. Humans have defensive systems to cope with uncomfortable feelings. Denial may be refusing to recognize reality or refusing to accept its consequences. (Marsh, Cherry, 2022; Santos, 2023) As a result, being in denial when confronted with enemies is typical. Moreover, having this kind of defense mechanism may allow a person to have more time to adjust to a quick change in reality. This allows a person to accept, adjust, and finally move on. After careful consideration, the six participants decided to utilize denial as a defensive strategy against Covid-19. They were first in denial but eventually admitted that they were affected.

4.1.2. Facing the Fear of Isolation and Death

The fear of isolation and death profoundly affected participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, with personal losses and the daunting reality of the virus exacerbating these fears. P3, despite the deep losses within her family, including her mother and elder brother to COVID-19, maintained a semblance of calm due to her strong faith, which alleviated her fear of death. P4's anxiety stemmed from the observed pattern of hospital fatalities among COVID-19 patients, fearing hospitalization might end fatally. P5 faced anxiety due to isolation, living alone in the city away from family support. Similarly, P6 and P12 experienced unease, primarily scared by the infection itself. The interplay of fear and the culture of fear, as discussed by Furedi (2002, 2018) and Glassner (2005), highlights the societal and cultural conditioning that shapes our responses to threats. These fears are not solely intrinsic but are influenced by "culture scripts" that dictate expected reactions to perceived dangers, as described by Arlie Hochschild (1979). This cultural conditioning amplifies the fear associated with the pandemic, further influenced by media portrayal and societal interactions. The uncertain nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored by Antoine Pelissolo's remark on the anxiety bred by uncertainty, encapsulates the participants' experiences. Their fears, while personal, are also reflections of the broader societal apprehension and the collective struggle with the unknown aspects of the virus. This scenario underscores the psychological toll of the pandemic, highlighting the need for understanding and addressing the complex web of fear, isolation, and cultural influence in navigating such global health crises.

4.1.3. Worrying about the Family

Participants in the study expressed significant concern for their family members during their battle with COVID-19, highlighting a common thread of worry about the well-being and potential infection of their loved ones. P1 was anxious for her children, who were already affected by the virus before her own diagnosis, while P3's worry extended to her pregnant daughter's exposure to the virus, fearing for both her daughter and the unborn child's health. Similarly, P2, P7, P8, and P9 feared their close contact might lead to their children contracting the virus, with P8 additionally burdened by his father-in-law's infection and his vulnerable health due to dialysis. This familial concern is mirrored in a study by Lebni (2022), which indicated that the presence of a COVID-19 patient within a family significantly heightened fears of further transmission among family members, adding to the overall stress and anxiety within the household. The pandemic's impact extends beyond the patients to their families, who also worry about the infected member's health, creating a cycle of worry and tension within family units. Furthermore, Wade (2020) discusses the broader implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on family well-being, noting the compounded stressors of financial uncertainty, increased caregiving burdens, and the strain of confinement measures. These factors contribute to a pervasive risk that threatens the stability and psychological health of families, suggesting that the effects of the pandemic on family dynamics and well-being are profound and potentially long-lasting. This collective anxiety among participants and their families underscores the widespread nature of concern during such uncertain times, especially when it involves the health and safety of loved ones.

4.1.4. Staying Calm

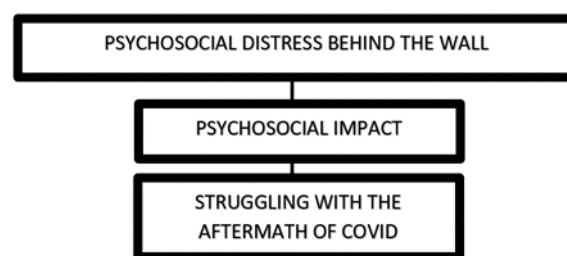


Figure 3 Theme 2 – Psychosocial Distress Behind the Wall

Amidst their COVID-19 ordeal, participants exhibited an extraordinary level of calmness, despite initial reactions of denial and concern, particularly about their affected families. P1's calmness originated from her maternal instinct, prioritizing her children's wellbeing over her own illness, as they were also battling COVID-19. P8 attributed his tranquility to recognizing the symptoms as merely a cough and cold, whereas P9's nature inherently inclined her towards calmness. The support from P10's husband was pivotal to her composed state, and P11's peace was deeply anchored in her faith in God. This diverse foundation of calmness, ranging from maternal instincts and personal demeanor to external support and spirituality, equipped them to navigate the crisis with clarity and optimism. The value of maintaining composure, as highlighted by "Staying Calm in Difficult Times" from Harvard Health Publications, not only enhances mental stability but also reduces health risks and enriches life's appreciation. Despite the pandemic's stress and anxiety, these educators managed to retain their composure, illustrating the significance of emotional

management and a positive outlook during crises. This contrasts with broader public reactions marked by distress and anxiety during the pandemic's early waves, as documented by Heanoy (2021), showcasing the educators' unique coping mechanisms and resilience amidst widespread negativity such as fear and anxiety highlighted in the literature (Chung, 2020; Stombou, 2020; Fardin, 2020).

COVID-19 has had a severe health effect. Covid-19 patients have struggled physically, mentally, and socially. This theme elaborates on the physical, psychological, and social difficulties experienced by the participants, even the aftermath they have experienced due to Covid.

4.2. Facing Psychosocial Impact

4.2.1. Physical Difficulties

The COVID-19 pandemic, recognized by the WHO as a significant public health emergency, has presented a range of physical challenges for those infected, showcasing a spectrum of symptoms from fever and cough to more severe conditions like dyspnea, impacting individuals globally regardless of their recovery environment. A systematic review assessing articles from early 2020 identified fever, cough, fatigue, dyspnea, and sputum production as prevalent symptoms among patients, underlining the virus's profound physical impact (Iser et al., 2020; Brazilian Ministry of Health, 2020). Participants in the study experienced varying degrees of dyspnea, with some requiring hospitalization and oxygen support, highlighting the symptom's severity in acute cases. Additionally, the occurrence of head and body aches among participants aligns with research indicating such symptoms as common in COVID-19 cases, further complicating the illness's physical toll (Shabir, 2021; Bad et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Cippo et al., 2020). The study also revealed that cough and colds were prevalent, reflecting the virus's respiratory nature (L.Huang et al., 2020), while issues with sleeping difficulty were reported, attributed to various factors including pain and discomfort from the illness itself (Monico-Neto et al., 2020). These findings underscore the extensive psychosocial impact of COVID-19, with the majority of participants grappling with symptoms like dyspnea, fever, cough, and sleeping difficulties, indicative of the disease's broad and varied manifestations.

4.2.2. Psychological Difficulties

The COVID-19 pandemic, following the precedent of previous outbreaks like SARS and Ebola, poses a significant threat to global mental health, with the WHO predicting increased stress and anxiety as primary psychological impacts (Shuja KH, Aqeel M, Jaffar A, et al. 2020; WHO, 2020). Psychological implications have been closely linked to the pandemic's progression, with affected individuals potentially developing delirium, depression, anxiety, and insomnia, indicating direct or indirect psychopathological impacts of coronaviruses on the central nervous system (CNS) (Troyer et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). Among the participants, P1's prolonged hospitalization and isolation led to moments of despair, countered by her positive outlook, highlighting the power of positivity in overcoming critical conditions as supported by Dr. Manda (Lead Naturopathy Counselor, YO1 Longevity & Health Resorts). Similarly, P10 managed her initial quarantine anxiety with a positive mindset. Conversely, P2 and P8 experienced guilt and distress over familial infections, reflecting the complex emotional responses to the pandemic, including fear, guilt, and the psychological burden of potential contagion to loved ones (Tangney and Dearing, 2002; Cherry et al., 2017; Sahoo et al., 2020). These experiences underscore the multifaceted psychological challenges posed by COVID-19, from fear of death and isolation to work-related anxieties and the stigma associated with infection, pointing to the need for understanding and addressing the pandemic's profound mental health implications (Dehkordi et al., 2020; Robosa et al., 2021; Cesari et al., 2017; Maclean et al., 2016; Miller and Raison, 2016; Najjar et al., 2013; Brooks et al., 2020; Carvalho et al., 2020).

4.2.3. Social Disturbances

During their COVID-19 confinement, participants experienced significant social disturbances, feeling isolated from society and their loved ones. Four of them reported feelings of boredom, a state exacerbated by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, limiting available activities and social interactions, as noted by Boylan et al. (2020). This condition was particularly poignant for those quarantined, whether in hospital or at home, with P4 likening his hospital stay to being in prison and P5, accustomed to solitude, managing better than others. Discrimination emerged as another challenge, with P5 facing prejudice from healthcare workers and P6 from neighbors, highlighting the stigma associated with COVID-19 infection and the isolation it enforced (Whitley and Kite, 2009). The global response to the pandemic, including widespread home-confinement directives and social isolation measures, has been aimed at controlling virus transmission but has also led to a range of psychological and social issues such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, and in some cases, increased psychological distress due to physical symptoms of the virus and medication side effects (Hossain et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Goyal et al., 2020). These findings underscore the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on individuals' social health and well-being, highlighting the need for supportive measures to mitigate these effects.

4.3. Struggling With The Aftermath Of Covid

The aftermath of COVID-19 has introduced a spectrum of postinfectious conditions collectively identified as long Covid, significantly impacting survivors' lives. Among the participants, P1 recounted the trauma experienced during her hospital stay, including witnessing a roommate's death and adverse reactions to medication, alongside enduring post-Covid symptoms like persistent dyspnea. Similarly, P7 found her Covid experience traumatic, especially fearing re-infection due to her asthma. P2 noted post-recovery symptoms of shortness of breath, fatigue, and brain fog, highlighting a drastic decline in his capacity for work and concentration. Brain fog was also reported by P4, who faced forgetfulness, and P9, who experienced mental blocks and unusual hair loss, a condition known as Telogen effluvium, potentially triggered by the stress of the illness or its treatment (Seyfi et al., 2022). P3, along with P5, P6, P8, and P11, mentioned fatigue and breathing difficulties as lingering challenges, with P5 specifically struggling with breathlessness for six months post-recovery and battling feelings of self-pity, which she overcame with faith. These narratives underscore the diverse and prolonged impact of COVID-19, affecting physical health, mental well-being, and the ability to engage in daily activities, marking a prolonged journey to recovery for many survivors. After recovering from COVID-19, several participants reported ongoing challenges with everyday activities. P6 and P11 experienced significant fatigue from tasks as simple as climbing stairs or doing household chores, indicating a marked departure from their pre-COVID capacity. P8, dealing with persistent shortness of breath, now relies on an inhaler, likening his condition to asthma, a symptom he attributes to long-term effects of COVID-19, compounded by guilt over his father-in-law's death. P10 and P12 struggled with sleep disturbances, with P12 unable to sleep for a month post-recovery. These experiences align with findings on post-COVID-19 syndrome, which includes a range of symptoms from pulmonary issues like dyspnea to neuropsychiatric manifestations such as cognitive disturbances, anxiety, and depression (Nalbandian et al., 2022; Taboada et al., 2021; Augustin et al., 2021; Montani et al., 2022). Half of the respondents reported dyspnea as a post-COVID symptom, supported by studies showing it as a common complication among those who had been critically ill. Fatigue and 'brain fog' were also reported, highlighting the virus's long-term impact on patients' neuropsychiatric health and overall quality of life (Davis et al., 2021; Delas Peñas et al., 2021). Moreover, psychological issues like guilt, self-pity, and trauma underscore the psychological toll, suggesting that the virus's effects extend beyond physical health to deeply affect mental well-being, potentially due to the stress of hospitalization and societal concern during the pandemic (Lou et al., 2021). The enduring nature of these difficulties illustrates the complex legacy of COVID-19, with patients facing a wide range of symptoms that impact their health and quality of life long after the acute phase of the virus has passed.

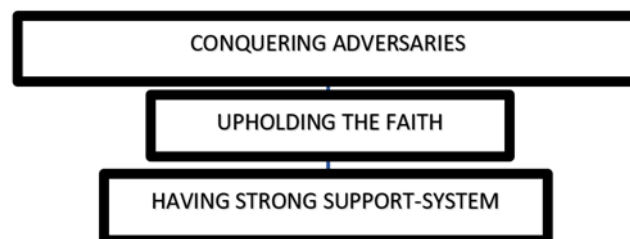


Figure 4 Theme 3 – Conquering Adversaries

When individuals are subjected to a stressor, the varying ways of dealing with it are termed 'coping styles,' which are a set of relatively stable traits that determine the individual's behavior in response to stress. These are consistent over time and across situations. (de Boer SF et. al., 2017)

The third theme focuses on the coping mechanisms of the respondents for them to survive the difficulties of having Covid-19.

4.4. Upholding the Faith

When the pandemic began, many people experienced dread and anxiety, particularly those who are elderly, have underlying medical conditions, and even those who are physically fit and youthful. Few, however, realize that these feelings increase our susceptibility to the dreaded virus. This is due to the negative impact that fears, worry, and psychological discomfort have on immune function (Glaser and Kiecolt-Glaser 2005; Coughlin 2012). Fear and anxiety have the exact opposite influence on the immune system, as do positive emotions. These positive sentiments are known as the "fruit of the spirit" among Christians (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; Galatians 5:22–23). In fact, the first of these is known to alleviate fear (1 John 4:18). Decades of research

indicate that religious individuals use spirituality and religion to manage stress (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 2001; Koenig 2018), and consequently, interest in religion has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not surprising given that religion is a crucial aspect of identity that people rely on to cope (Aten et al., 2019) and that religion undergoes significant changes during and after mass societal trauma (Henrich et al., 2019), changes that can have long-lasting and even intergenerational effects (Bentzen 2019). Most of the participants relied on the power of prayer, whether may it be personal or from others, and in their faith. Further, the participants' narratives revealed that the participants engaged in spiritual activities during their quarantine period, such as personal devotion and listening to music. Results of a study about the role of religious faith, beliefs, and practices as a coping mechanism of hypertension patients (Anyan & Knizek, 2017) showed that participants used their religious faith, beliefs, and practices as coping resources. Participants employed a deferring-collaborative style of religious coping, which appeared to have afforded them an avoidance strategy that shielded them from conscious confrontation with their illness. The participants' religious faith and beliefs also provided them with a sense of coherence that enabled them to manage their stress, reflect on their external and internal resources, and promote health-promoting coping and adaptive functioning.

4.5. Having a Strong Support System

According to research, having a strong support system has numerous good effects, including increased levels of well-being, improved coping abilities, and living a longer and healthier life. Social support has also been found in studies to alleviate sadness and anxiety. A robust support system may often aid in stress reduction. The participants' experiences with obtaining social support had a significant influence on how they dealt with the challenges of Covid-19.

4.5.1. Receiving Social Support

The narratives of the participants underscore the vital role of social support during their challenging times with COVID-19, highlighting the significant appreciation for the assistance and support received from friends, relatives, and health workers. Social support, encompassing the emotional and practical help from friends and family, is crucial for fostering a positive self-image and resilience against adverse life events. It not only enhances the quality of life but also acts as a protective buffer, with research indicating that individuals with strong social bonds are less prone to illness and have better survival rates in the face of serious diseases (Salovey, 2000). Specifically, COVID-19 patients, grappling with both physical and emotional turmoil, greatly benefit from the support system provided by their close networks. A study by Yang et al. (2020) revealed that psychosocial issues were prevalent among COVID-19-positive ICU patients, emphasizing how social support positively impacts physical and mental health, as well as sleep quality, potentially leading to better clinical outcomes. Furthermore, the correlation between social support and mental health suggests that such support functions as a protective factor, enhancing stress tolerance and guarding against trauma-related psychopathology (De Silva et al., 2005; Harandi, Taghinasab, & Nayeri, 2017; Ozbay et al., 2007). For the educators in this study, the encouragement from principals and colleagues played a crucial part in their recovery, motivating them to persevere and surmount the obstacles posed by the virus. This collective support underscores the indispensable role of social connections in navigating the recovery process from COVID-19.

4.5.2. Helping Oneself

Self-care is defined by the World Health Organization as "the capacity of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and deal with illness and infirmity with or without the assistance of a healthcare provider." In addition to hygiene, nutrition, and lifestyle, it also includes environmental and socioeconomic factors. Due to the fact that many of us are self-isolating or in quarantine, self-care activities at home are crucial right now. These may include listening to music, gardening, meditating, contacting a friend or family member, taking prescribed medications, and having a shower. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has published a self-care and resilience guide, and the Quebec government has released an English version of its COVID-19 self-care guide, which provides specific information on caring for children, the unwell, and those with disabilities. Self-care can help alleviate the psychological distress and anxiety caused by the pandemic and prevent the development of long-term negative psychological outcomes. As a coping strategy, the Canadian Mental Health Association recommends self-care. Being able to help oneself in times of difficulties is a sign of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person's confidence in his or her ability to execute the behaviors necessary to produce particular performance outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). It is the belief that one can exert control over his or her own motivation, behavior, and social environment. On Covid-19, the ten individuals who showed self-care throughout their infection proved their self-efficacy. They did not depend only on the medications prescribed to them; instead, they learned how to manage their challenges by eating the correct meals, exercising, and doing activities that made them feel better (like watching Netflix and joining Zumba sessions). They were able to overcome adversities by strengthening themselves. Benight and Bandura (2004) synthesized data from numerous research on the impact of self-efficacy in traumatic experience recollection (terrorist attacks, natural disasters, military combat, technological catastrophes, criminal and sexual assaults). According to the findings,

perceived self-efficacy is a modulator of post-traumatic retrieval. The contribution of perceived coping self-efficacy as the single mediator for post-traumatic retrieval implies that an individual's belief in his or her capacity to exert control over traumatic and stressful situations is operating well. This proved that the participants have high self-efficacy because they were able to help and support themselves during the time of their difficulty.

4.5.3. Having Positive Outlook

The power of positive thinking in managing stress and enhancing overall well-being is well-documented, with research indicating its benefits for physical health, self-esteem, and a positive outlook on life (Kim ES et al., 2017). Positive thinking involves approaching life's challenges with optimism, seeing the best in others, and viewing one's abilities positively (Seligman M.; K. Cherry, 2022). It has been shown that positive automatic thoughts can make individuals more resilient to life's stressors, enabling them to find greater meaning in life's challenges (Boyras G, Lightsey OR Jr, 2012). This optimistic outlook serves as an effective coping mechanism, as illustrated by the participants who, despite experiencing trauma or anxiety from COVID-19, chose to remain positive. This positive mindset is linked to better psychological resources, aiding in adaptive coping with chronic conditions and stressful events (Fredrickson, 2000, 2001). The anticipation of positive events, a cognitive process that can evoke emotions expected during the actual event, further supports the role of optimism in stress regulation under chronic stressors (Van Boven and Ashworth, 2007; Waugh et al., 2008; Wilson and Gilbert, 2003). Optimism, characterized by the expectation of positive outcomes, has been associated with resilience and effective coping with significant life stresses (Scheier et al., 1986; Fredrickson et al., 2003; Carver et al., 2010). Participants' coping strategies during COVID-19, including reliance on religion, social support, self-help, and maintaining an optimistic outlook, significantly influenced their recovery process. While only five explicitly stated their optimism, it can be inferred that all approached their COVID-19 battle with positivity. Spirituality played a crucial role in fostering this optimism, with studies showing that religious and spiritual practices can help individuals cope with everyday stress and contribute to handling negative emotions positively (Whitehead BR, Bergeman CS, 2012). Fuller and Huseh-Zosel's research (2020) further emphasizes how spirituality and faith-related activities bolster resilience, enabling individuals to adapt and overcome adversity. Thus, the narratives reveal that positive thinking, supported by spirituality and social connections, empowered participants to navigate the challenges posed by COVID-19 with resilience and hope.

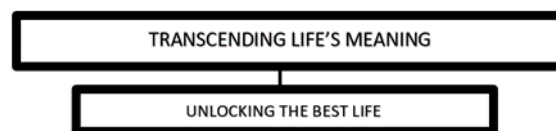


Figure 5 Theme 4 Transcending Life's Meaning

The participants had gone through a difficult and traumatic experience, some when they were hit by Covid-19. But they were able to overcome and survive it, with life lessons as their takeaways. This theme emerged from the participants' answers when asked about how Covid-19 changed their life. A life lesson is founded on the concept of gaining knowledge from one's errors. These teachings might be defined as memorable defining events. Because they are based on a person's life experiences, they are unique to every individual. Life lessons can be learned in any circumstance. Although we learn a great deal each day, it is not always something that we believe will have a lasting impact on our behavior. This distinguishes a life lesson from all other lessons we acquire. It is typically something that profoundly alters our lives. (Cyprus, 2023)

4.6. Unlocking the Best Life

The participants' narratives revealed that through adversity, they had gained valuable life lessons. Nine out of twelve individuals understood the importance of life and family. They have recognized that life is brief and that they must cherish their time with family and loved ones. This life lesson can be rooted in the fact that they were isolated from their family and feared that they might not see them again. Wright and Leahey (2013) stated that the science and practice of Family Nursing are founded on the systemic premise that serious illness and life challenges impact the family unit and that the functioning of the family unit (including its structure, development, and function) influences the health and well-being of each family member. This is notably true for the coronavirus pandemic, which caused unique difficulties and suffering for an alarmingly large number of patients and their families worldwide. According to the study entitled "Covid-19: A Family Affair (2020), there are numerous distressing accounts of patients who must deal with the news of their COVID-19 diagnosis without a family member present and of patients who are admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) and must say goodbye to their family in the emergency department without knowing if they will ever see each

other again. Patients who survived, just like the eight participants, were reminded of the importance of life and family. They were relieved of the fear they felt and learned to value their time with their family.

Seven of them had a stronger faith in God as a consequence of what they experienced. It is important to note that their faith and spirituality were one of the coping mechanisms that helped them survive the pandemic. Therefore, their faith became stronger. Religion and spirituality benefit mental health during disasters because individuals can rely on their beliefs and practices to make sense of perplexing and agonizing moments (Walsh, 2016a,b, 2020), particularly during pandemics in which a large number of individuals experience anxiety and stress. The participants clung to their faith in times of distress, that leads to a deeper relationship with God. One-third of the participants have been health conscious after their recovery, realizing the importance of keeping their bodies healthy by eating healthy foods, while three participants were reminded of the value of rest. Since the virus affected their health and immune system, they are reminded to have a healthy lifestyle. Individual consciousness includes health consciousness. Becker et al. defined health consciousness as "a person's propensity to engage in healthy behaviors" (Becker et al. 2013). It demonstrates sensitivity to physical health, stress, and health risk factors (Kraft, Goodell, 1993). As a result of their encounter with the pandemic, the participants' health consciousness has been heightened so that they can avoid health problems. Other life lessons that the participants have realized includes valuing the community they belong, being good to others, being prepared and vigilant at all times. P11 who is the oldest among the participants have learned to be contented with her life. According to the New York Times, researchers have discovered that seniors in their 80s and 90s, as well as older people in general, report higher levels of happiness and well-being than adolescents and young adults. This is what gerontologists term the paradox of aging. Resilient are elderly individuals who have endured and overcome numerous hardships and losses throughout their lives. Even though elderly adults may experience declines in their physical or cognitive capacities, they have a more positive outlook on life than younger adults. There are several life lessons regarding the epidemic available on the internet nowadays. It only implies that the pandemic's trials and tribulations helped us understand crucial life lessons. After experiencing what they have, these participants, who are educators, have gained valuable life teachings that have had a significant impact on their lives. They are reminded of the valuable things they must uphold.

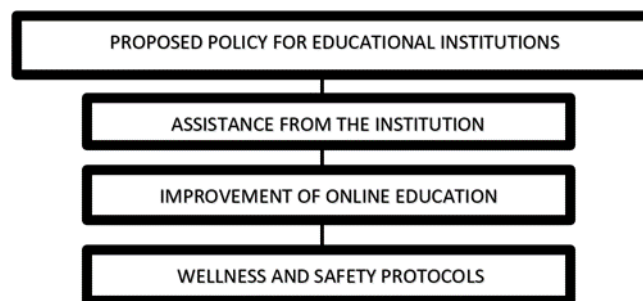


Figure 6 Theme 5 Suggesting Policy for Educational Institutions

This theme was derived from the participants' responses to a question regarding the policy that could have aided them during their sickness.

The policies suggested above by the participants were based on their experience with regard to the support given to them by their institution. Four participants, P1, P2, P4, and P10, suggesting that the institution should provide them with medical insurance other than Philhealth, these participants came from government institutions, and three (P2, P4, P10) from the same institution. Having health insurance is important because coverage helps people get timely medical care and improve their lives and health. (Bovbjerg & Hadley, 2007) Medical or health insurance is really a need, especially when there is a health crisis. These participants who suffered from the deadly virus were deprived of this essential benefit.

On the other hand, seven participants expressed that they did not receive any kind of support from their institution from the time of their isolation. Although they are thankful for the financial and moral support that their co-workers have given them, according to their narratives, they cannot help but to expect the assistance of their institution, may it be financially like P6, P8, P9, and P11, spiritually for P3 and P5, mentally for P7. In times of health crises like the pandemic, institutions should provide support to those who were infected by the virus. It's a way of showing concern for them.

Other policies suggested by the participants include the improvement of online education by P2 and P9; having an active Risk Reduction Management team who will establish safety protocols and monitoring strategies by (P3, P9, and P12); and establishing a policy that promotes employees' health and wellness.

Policies are essential because they assist schools in establishing operating procedures, establishing quality standards for learning and instruction, and establishing expectations and accountability. Without these, schools would lack the structure and functionality required to meet students' educational requirements. Therefore, policies are essential to the success of a school and provide many other advantages if they are well-written, concise, and regularly updated.

Due to the sudden onset of the pandemic, educational institutions were unprepared for the potential effects of the quarantine and Covid-19 hazards on their employees, the educators. These suggested policies were given by the participants based on their own experience as educators who experienced the attack of the Covid-19 virus. According to the participants' statements, the institution needs to provide reliable health insurance that will help them with future health concerns. Further, the institutions also need to look after the welfare of the employees by means of supporting them. One important factor to consider is their mental health. Since Covid-19 brought stress and caused a traumatic experience to some, employees who were infected should undergo psychological debriefing to help them process their trauma before allowing them to go back to work. According to the Clinical Society of Psychology, psychological debriefing is a formalized form of providing emotional and psychological support immediately after a traumatic event; its purpose is to prevent the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and other negative outcomes. These participants are educators who are expected to provide quality education to all the students. Hence, how can they be an effective educator if their psychologically unwell? According to research, teachers who cultivate mindfulness and resiliency, manage stress, and cultivate self-, social-, and situational awareness not only enhance their own well-being but also contribute to the social, emotional, and academic development of their students. (Schussler, et.al. 2017). Based on the fifth major theme **Proposed Policy for Educational Institutions**, which narrates the participants' recommendations with regards to the policy that the educational institutions should have, that would aid its employees in times of health crisis like the pandemic; the researcher pinned the focus on designing the recommended institutional policy on the health crisis.

4.7. Proposed School Policies during the Health Crisis

To address the health and well-being of faculty and staff during health crises, a comprehensive policy has been proposed. This policy aims to establish a support system within the school, ensuring employees have access to necessary health benefits and resources to maintain their mental and physical health.

A key component of this policy is the formation of a committee dedicated to promoting good mental health and habits among faculty and staff. This committee would oversee the provision of several services, including psychological assessments to gather objective information about individuals' mental health, life coaching for personal and professional advice, and a psycho-social training program. The training program would cover essential skills such as coping, self-esteem enhancement, problem-solving, stress management, and trust building. Additionally, spiritual enhancement activities would be organized to support employees' holistic well-being.

Health benefits form another crucial aspect of the policy. Employees would be entitled to full coverage for hospital benefits, ensuring they receive necessary medical care without financial burden. Furthermore, the school would provide free annual medical check-ups, including laboratory tests, to all qualified faculty and staff, promoting preventive healthcare.

The policy also includes provisions for group life insurance, with premiums shared equally between the school and the employees. This ensures all full-time employees have life insurance coverage, offering financial security in times of crisis.

To support employees affected by health crises directly, the school would provide a stipend, which could be in the form of cash or food assistance, for up to one week. This assistance aims to alleviate the immediate financial or logistical burdens faced by employees during their recovery. Additionally, medical assistance and ambulance services would be readily available, especially in cases of contagious illnesses, to facilitate prompt and effective treatment.

Lastly, ongoing monitoring of affected employees' health, both physical and mental, is proposed to ensure their complete recovery and return to health. This comprehensive approach to health and well-being during health crises reflects the school's commitment to its employees' overall health, safety, and security.

5. Conclusions

The study on educators who overcame Covid-19 revealed their exceptional ability to adapt to the diagnosis, initially met with denial due to concerns for personal and family health but eventually leading to acceptance and effective coping with the challenges posed. The shared experiences of the participants, irrespective of their hospitalization, highlighted the extensive impact of Covid-19, characterized by physical symptoms, psychological stress, and social challenges, with the most severe trauma reported by those who faced near-death experiences. A key finding was the resilience displayed by these educators, driven by faith, optimism, and the support of family and friends, which not only facilitated their recovery but also prompted a profound appreciation for life, a reevaluation of priorities, and the realization of the importance of health and family time. Based on their experiences, the educators suggested the formulation of specific institutional policies for better support during health crises, including comprehensive medical insurance, wellness programs, crisis management teams, and ongoing health monitoring, especially for those with lingering post-Covid symptoms. This study underscores the importance of resilience and institutional support in navigating the challenges of the pandemic, highlighting the need for policies that ensure the well-being of educators in future health crises.

Recommendations

The study on educators who survived Covid-19 underscores the importance of adaptability, resilience, and the need for institutional support during health crises, leading to several recommendations for school administrators and educational institutions. It highlights the necessity of enhancing health and safety measures within schools, such as promoting frequent handwashing, ensuring the availability of hand sanitizers at key points, and adhering strictly to safety protocols to mitigate the spread of infections. Moreover, the study advocates for the integration of positive psychology interventions to bolster teachers' well-being in both challenging and normal times, thereby fostering a supportive and positive educational environment. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of providing professional development opportunities to empower educators with the skills needed for high-quality instruction, regardless of the circumstances. The findings also encourage educational institutions to consider these insights when formulating comprehensive policies aimed at supporting educators during health crises, including the adoption of the proposed policies that focus on medical/health insurance, wellness programs, and continuous health monitoring. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can better support their faculty and staff, ensuring their well-being and effectiveness in the face of health challenges.

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