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RETURNING THE FAVOR: THE RETURN SERVICE OF SCHOLAR-GRADUATES

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A B S T R A C T

Little literature is known with emphasis on the lived experiences of the scholar-graduates in their return of service, hence to contribute in bridging the gap, this study was established. The study explored the lived experiences of the DOST scholar-graduates while rendering their return or service obligation. The participants were the three-engineering scholar-graduates, purposively selected and currently taking the role of special science teachers in a secondary public school in the Division of Sagay City. A phenomenological research design was employed in the study wherein an in-depth interview was conducted to each participant. The lived experiences of the participants were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed three emergent themes: feeling at lost, from engineers to teachers, and findings ways and means. The support system for these scholar-graduates were also examined and revealed three themes namely, pedagogical trainings, alignment of subject taught and scholars' specialization, and technical assistance. With these findings, it is highly encouraged that concerned government institutions need to reassess the effectiveness of the return service obligation of the scholars and to provide appropriate intervention to the issues and concerns. Furthermore, it is recommended that these scholar-graduates should be provided with professional development trainings in the field of teaching so that they can effectively deliver their roles as teachers.

Keywords*: Lived Experiences, Scholar-Graduates, Return Service Obligation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Visualize the old world where there are no digital devices and other modern gadgets and people just rely on whatever the environment can give to them. Was it worthwhile living in those primitive times? Was it a better place to live in? Definitely, a modern man will answer a big "no". With the modernization of the world through Science and Technology (S&T), the world has changed a lot. A new technological era is born wherein the urge for its sustainability is rapidly increasing over time. According to the US National Science Board (2018), the global landscape of science, technology, engineering, research, and education has undergone dramatic changes since the onset of the 21st century, since most regions and countries around the world have been continuously investing in S&T. In the Philippines, the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and Science Education Institute (SEI) is in pursuit to excel and produce workforce in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). One of the pathways to achieve the mission is by strengthening the teaching of STEM in secondary and higher education and by providing scholarship grants to those deserving students who have the potential to succeed in the S&T institution (Republic Act 10612, 2012). The scholarship allows students to pursue their undergraduate, graduate, and even post-graduate education in the STEM fieldOn the contrary, scholarship grantees seem to have a different case as compared to regular college students (Bulusan & Esperanza, 2020). The DOST scholar-graduates must render a return service obligation to the government and private sector in the Philippines after the completion of their degree. Also, the return of service allows the scholar-graduates to put into practice immediately in the actual setting the knowledge and skills they have acquired from their education. The return service of the scholars is considered to be their payback time to the government.

Looking into the return of service obligation of the DOST scholar - graduates especially engineering graduates to the field of education may bring some issues. According to Almutairi (2018), scholar-graduates may experience culture shock, bureaucratic and unchanging academic atmosphere, and other work-ethics related issues. The idea that scholar-graduates who do not have relevant and sufficient training or educational background on the teaching and learning process take the role of a classroom teacher and accomplish other teaching-related activities has made the researcher decide to conduct the study. Another important point has been realized in the study which is the literature on the experiences of the scholar graduate while rendering their return of service obligation.

Although the literature and studies on the scholarship grantees are plenty, a literature gap on the return service of the scholars has existed. Little is known on the experiences of scholar-graduates in their return of service. For the aforementioned reasons, the researcher developed a desire to explore the lived experiences of the DOST scholar-graduates in their return of service as teachers and their ways of managing their new duties and responsibilities. Likewise, the study aimed to provide a support system for the effective delivery of instruction to the students.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) in the Philippines has been continuously producing quality science and technology professionals through the R.A. 7687 or S&T Scholarship Act of 1994 and the R.A. 10612 known as An Act Expanding the Coverage of the Science and Technology (S&T) Scholarship Program and Strengthening the Teaching of Science and Mathematics in Secondary Schools. These Republic Acts mandate to undertake efforts on accelerating the production of the country's S&T human resource capability through the grant of scholarships in STEM. Section 2 of R.A. 10612 emphasizes the importance of Science, Technology, and Engineering for national development and progress, thus priority to S&T education, training, and services must be given.

Another study narratively examined the value of scholarship grants to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students. The scholarship recipients were able to establish their sense of value in autonomous and committed ways while promoting their welfare and seeking the common good of others. All of these important considerations contribute to the national and international literature relating to diversity, higher education, STEM careers, and the power of scholarship grants to transcend instrumentalism privileging workforce demands (Li, et al, 2021).

Returning Filipino scholars who received the Japanese Grant for Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS) apply what they have learned in their work to contribute to Philippine development as part of their return service obligation (JICA Press Release, 2020).

According to the DOST TRACER (Tracking of Actual Career Experience Report) study (2017), of the 2,091 DOST-SEI scholar-graduates tracked from June 2015 to January 2017, the majority (78.5%) of the tracked scholar-graduates are employed in the S&T field. Most (29.2%) of the scholar-graduates are employed in the field of Natural Sciences, followed by Engineering and Technology (24.2%), and Education (23.4%). The Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences field (0.9%) and the Medical and Health Sciences field (0.6%) have the least. The statistics prove that majority of the scholar-graduates have rendered their return of service obligation which implies commitment and dedication of their chosen career pathway.

A quantitative case study by Bulusan & Esperanza (2020), found a significant relationship between the exposure of stressors and the extent of use of coping mechanisms among college scholarship grantees. When faced with a particular stressor, they tend to use specific coping mechanisms. For instance, when their career choice or vocation stresses them, they tend to use denial as a coping mechanism. It has also found out that college scholars have the greatest extent of exposure to personal social and academic stressors, as they are obliged to maintain their good academic standing to sustain their scholarship.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following questions.

1. What are the lived experiences of the DOST scholar-graduates in their return of service as senior high school teachers in the Division of Sagay City?

2. What support system is needed for the DOST scholar-graduates to cope with their present responsibilities in a school?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a phenomenological research designs since the primary purpose is to explore the lived experiences of the DOST scholars while rendering their return of service as teachers. The participants of the study were the three (3) DOST scholar- graduates who are rendering their return of service in the Division of Sagay City. There were one male and two female participants. Two of the participants were graduates of BS in Mechanical Engineering, while the other one was a graduate of BS in Electronics Engineering. All participants were newly appointed as Special Science Teacher 1 this school year 2020-2021 The research instrument in a form of an interview protocol was utilized as the research instrument of the study. The protocol was consisted of some personal information of the participants, and open-ended questions focus on their lived experience. Follow-up questions were included as well for the researcher to probe more for an in-depth investigation. The qualitative data analysis used in the study was in a form of thematic analysis. The audio data from the interview were transcribed verbatim. The ideas were organized and reviewed. Relevant ideas were retained while irrelevant were omitted. Data were reduced by chunking the data into meaningful units and they were clustered according to their similarities. Coding was applied to the meaningful ideas. Several codes were initially generated until the usable codes which comprised the whole raw data were established.

Similar coded ideas were clustered and analyzed. Themes were created out of these clusters which can answer the research questions. Once the result was discovered, it was presented according to themes.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the thematic analysis on the lived experiences of the participants yielded significant three themes namely, feeling at lost, from engineers to teachers, and finding ways and means while two themes emerged on the support system needed by the participants which are pedagogical trainings and technical assistance. Each theme was generated from the point of view of the participants to the open-ended questions posed to them.

On the Lived Experiences of the DOST Scholar-Graduates:

Generally, the participants described their experiences in the first three months of their return of service as hard times. They shared the same personal struggles in relation to their new roles as teachers. Such struggles identified were teaching the subject matter, preparing lesson plans, classroom observation, and learning activity sheets, adjusting to the new environment, teacher and student interaction and self-doubt. All three participants responded that they experienced difficulty in teaching the subject given to them since they lack the pedagogical background and training. One participant emphasized in her statement, "It is really hard since we don't have proper training in education and the subject I am teaching is not related to my course or field." Another participant seconded, "It is difficult especially when it comes to the subject taught. Although we have the same subject in college, but it was only minor. Like in Philosophy, we have it before but our focus in on Logic."

Aside from the difficulty in teaching the subject matter, preparation on the lesson plans, learning activity sheets and classroom observations were found to be a worry of the participant since they are engineers by profession and do not know how to. Also, all the participants experienced social adjustments as one expressed, "I find it hard because of my attitude which I am not used of accommodating other people." Self-doubt was also manifested in the way the participants answered the questions, as one participant declared, "I cannot imagine myself teaching the subject in a face to face set up."

Moreover, they are adjusting to the new environment, the culture of an educational institutions especially the way they interact with the students and teachers. It was revealed that they are not comfortable at first in dealing with students and other teachers. One participant shared, "I realized and differentiated between a school setting and an engineering industry especially when it comes to work ethics. In engineering, you need to do your individual job. If a boss has an instruction, you need to obey and do it without questioning your boss, which is opposite to what is happening in the school setting wherein teachers are keep on complaining about their works." With the personal struggles experienced by the participants, a theme of feeling at lost was generated as quoted by one of the participants during the interview which he accentuated, "We feel at lost because we don't know whom to follow because it seems everybody has his own stand. We feel that there is no unity as if it is not a team. So, we just go with the flow of the majority, and we really adjust to the system of each teacher."

Another theme emerged from the interview data was the shift in identity of the participants. By profession, the participants are engineers and should be in an engineering industry, however because of their return of service as part of the conditions of their scholarship program, they do not have the choice but to adhere to the instructions given to them until the end of their contract. Because of this circumstance, they have to adjust and embrace their current standing. All the participants stated that there was a shift in their identities, that is from engineers to teachers.

Not only they taught the subject matter but they also intervene in terms of students' concerns and personal problems. They became also supervisors and even counsellors. They were responsive to the queries of the students and they even gave counsel to those students who are at risk of dropping out. One participant stressed, "I responded to the questions or queries of my students anytime of the day as long as I am active online." Another participant expressed, "I reply immediately to the questions of my students since I have an advisory section. It is different when you have an advisory section. It is not only the subject matter taught which is your concern but also you have to monitor the submission of modules and LAS of the students. If students missed some LAS, you have to contact them and ask the reasons for the non-submission of modules." Though their return of service is good only for three years, they all faced great responsibility in their current roles. On the contrary, they felt a sense of achievement every time they brought back students at risk to school, as one participant expressed, "I was able to convince him to go back to school and I was happy and satisfied about it."

Despite the hard times experienced by the scholar-graduates in their return of service, they are doing their best to cope up with the difficulties and demands of their current roles. Thus, a theme of finding ways and means emerged. In terms of managing the subject taught, the participants took time and effort in learning the subject matter through reliable sources in the internet and other instructional resources. Besides, they asked assistance from the experienced teachers who were former teachers of the subject area on how to address the queries of the students and how to prepare lesson plans, classroom observations, and other paper works. One participant quoted, "I was not fully knowledgeable about the subject matter but I am trying my best to do so by asking assistance from other teachers and searching the things to do in the internet." Another said, "I was challenge in making the lesson plans and LAS, and preparing on the classroom observation. I don't know how to. So, I have to learn everything about it." Though they are not educators by profession, they made sure that they deliver their new roles being teachers accordingly.

On the Support System Needed by the DOST Scholar-Graduates:

Studying engineering for five years is not that easy but landing a teaching job in the return of service is more challenging. This is the point of view of the participants with regards to their experiences as teachers. One participant said, "We haven't undergone trainings since we are on a pandemic. Supposedly we will be having a training but it was canceled." Pedagogical background is essential to being a teacher for this is a guide for each teacher to teach effectively. Though the participants will not be long-term teachers, still it is appropriate to give them proper trainings related to teaching. Despite the pandemic, DOST together with DepEd need to empower their scholar-graduates deployed in schools by exposing them to further trainings in teaching STEM subjects. These trainings can be done in a virtual setting. One participant strongly stressed, "If only we have undergone trainings or seminars in teaching, at least the difficulties we are carrying right now will be lessened".

A person can work at its best if he or she is interested on what he is doing. A high school teacher has its own area of specialization to focus on, the same thing with engineers. It is expected from engineers that they are inclined in STEM subjects. The reason they are deployed in a senior high school offering STEM strand. However, the opposite of what is supposed to be properly done is experiencing by the participants. They are actually expecting to have teaching loads which has something to do with Mathematics and Science. Due to shortage of teachers in some learning areas, they do not have any choice but to accept those subjects who do not have teachers to teach. They are teaching subjects which they do not really expect and not related to their area of specialization. One participant blatantly complained, "The subject I am teaching is not related to my course or field like UCSP (Understanding Culture, Society and People). My students are asking about it and I really have to search on it. I cannot imagine myself teaching the subject in a face to face teaching. And if students going to ask me I can't seem to answer their questions." This is one of the major concerns of the participants, for they really want to teach Math and Science subjects. They are really hoping that for the coming school years they will be given such subjects to teach so that they can contribute their knowledge and skills to the STEM students especially to those who will be taking engineering

courses. One participant expressed, “We can at least feel ease with the subject that we are teaching if it is related to our course and we can teach what we have learned in college”.

Last theme that emerged from the interview data on the support system needed by the participant is the technical assistance. Since their current roles are teachers, it is must for them to know how to prepare the lesson plans and instructional materials needed for the teaching and learning process. They are expected also accomplish necessary school forms. Since they do not have the ideas on these things, it expected from them to ask assistance from the experienced teachers in the workplace. But because of some personal reasons like they are shy or intimidated to ask assistance from other teacher, they just observed what these teachers are doing and learn on their own. One participant shared, “I was challenge in dealing with senior teachers, making the lesson plans and LAS, and preparing on the classroom observation. I don’t know how to. So, I have to learn it on my own.” With this scenario, it is only right to provide technical assistance for these scholar-graduates.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The lived experiences of the scholar-graduates in their return of service paved way to a new paths and opportunities in the personal and professional life of the graduates despite the difficulties they have encountered. Though their return of service is just a part of their scholarship contract, yet they can acquire meaningful experiences that can help them to grow professionally in the future. Another point is, the shift in their identity can contribute to the flexibility of their personality which is very essential in any workplace. By the time their contract ends, and move on to the next environment where they should be, they can carry the good attributes they have acquired during their return of service.

It can be concluded also that there is a need to empower and to encourage the DOST scholar-graduates to passionately deliver their current role especially those deployed in the Department of Education. Providing them with appropriate trainings and other-teaching related interventions that can support them while rendering their service is highly encouraged. In such ways, they can effectively deliver their roles and can achieved a sense of achievement in their work.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

DOST scholar-graduates especially those assigned in the Department of Education are highly encouraged to take seriously their roles as teachers since they became agents of change in the lives of the students. They are also encouraged to express whatever their concerns and ideas so that proper actions can be taken to address the problems.

For the participating schools of where these scholar-graduates are deployed, it is recommended that they must empower these professionals by providing pedagogical trainings and technical assistance in term of lesson planning, preparing of instructional materials and even innovations to solve classroom problems.

To the Department od Science and Technology, it is recommended to assess the effectiveness of the return service obligation of the scholars especially those assigned in the public schools. They are encouraged also to provide further trainings and seminars with regard to the new roles of the scholars before deploying the them to the workplace.

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