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# Journal of School Research

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## Words from the Editor

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It is with great pleasure that we introduce this volume of our journal, a rich collection of articles that underscore the importance of addressing the holistic needs of individuals across diverse educational and social contexts. This volume extends traditional academic boundaries, weaving together research on pedagogical innovation, mental well-being, social issues, and literary analysis.

The research presented here highlights the critical interplay between creative education, psychological health, and cultural understanding:

- "Music and Movement as a Tool for Enhancing Early Childhood Music Education in the Philippines" by Sunglao offers a compelling exploration of kinesthetic learning in early years education. The paper demonstrates how integrating music and movement can significantly enhance a child's cognitive and motor skill development, providing a practical, research-backed model for Filipino educators.
- "Accepting the Concerns We Can't Change and Changing the Ones We Can: Coaching Teachers on Self-Awareness and Mental Health" by Beriña-Cruz, Cristo-Panday, and Pimentel addresses the vital, often-overlooked issue of teacher well-being. This study provides a model for coaching educators to improve their self-awareness and manage mental health, which is foundational to creating a supportive and effective learning environment for students.
- "The Role of Self-Disclosure and Empathy on Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction among Religious Sisters amid COVID-19" by Nhu offers a unique psychological perspective on a specialized community. This research provides significant insight into the coping mechanisms and psychological resources, specifically self-disclosure and empathy, that supported the life satisfaction and self-esteem of Religious Sisters during the profound challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- "Knowledge on Safer Sex campaign among young girls" by Ojarliza focuses on a crucial public health and social education issue. This article assesses the level of knowledge and understanding young girls possess regarding safer sex campaigns, providing essential data that can inform and refine future health education programs and interventions.

- "Love, Terror and Magic: The Influence of Romance and Horror as Mega-Story on the Narrative Structures of Fantasy in "The Farthest Shore: An Anthology of Fantasy Fiction from the Philippines" by Mina delves into literary and cultural analysis. This intriguing piece unpacks how globally recognized narrative genres (Romance and Horror) shape the structure and themes of local Philippine fantasy fiction, offering valuable insights for literary critics and cultural theorists.

This volume shows the wide range and high quality of research being done in many different fields. The articles help us understand how people grow, better ways to teach, social support systems, and cultural stories. We hope these discoveries will lead to real-world changes in schools and continue to inspire serious academic conversations.

We sincerely thank the School Administration for their strong support of research. They gave us the resources and the right environment to do scholarly work and publish these findings. We also greatly appreciate the hard work of all the contributors (the authors). They used their knowledge, time, and enthusiasm to do careful research and explain their results clearly and deeply. Finally, a huge thank you to the expert reviewers. Their helpful feedback, sharp insights, and commitment to maintaining high scholarly standards ensured that every article in this book is relevant and high-quality.

**Elen Joy A. Bruza**  
Editor-in-Chief

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# Music and Movement as a Tool for Enhancing Early Childhood Music Education in the Philippines

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## Abstract

Movements are crucial in early childhood education as it is when the child starts to develop gross and fine motor skills. Musical experiences on the other hand have a huge impact on a young child's musical development. International researchers have suggested the success of a child's learning and development when engaged in music teaching and learning in their early childhood years. However, there is limited literature on how music is being implemented in the early childhood education curriculum in the Philippines. This paper explored the principles of music teaching and learning in early childhood education and the importance of embedding scaffolding, music and movement, and musical instruments in the early childhood curriculum and compared them to what the early childhood music education in the Philippines currently have.

**Keywords:** early childhood music education, music and movement, early childhood music curriculum, scaffolding

## Introduction

The importance of music in education can be traced as early as in Plato's curriculum where it included math for mind development, physical education for body development, and music for spirit development – these three areas work together to constitute a well-educated individual. This multi-dimensional model is still

relevant in contemporary education where a child's developmental needs is supported by three key developmental domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective (LSME, 2019). In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner (2011) presented a similar multi-dimensional concept, the theory of multiple intelligences where musical intelligence is included among other intelligences. Feierabend (1995) argued that musical intelligence, like the other intelligences, is a separate intelligence that needs development.

In a curriculum review and critical analysis of early childhood education, Corpuz et al. (2016) stated that early childhood education sets the foundation for life-long learning and for the holistic development of a child. Having musical interventions is important in a child's development (Metz, 1989). Gordon (2012) asserted that from birth to eighteen months of age is a critical age for music guidance and that the sensitive age is sustained until approximately five years of a child's age. Further, Gordon (2012) suggested that children in the developmental music aptitude stage from birth to age nine receive music guidance before music aptitude stabilizes. Early childhood educators are constantly seeking effective learning experiences that can help enhance early childhood education and music educators are continuously exploring different tools for music teaching and learning for young children (Ko & Chou, 2014).

Scott (1991) asserted that it is difficult to know what music teaching approach to recommend having many choices such as Kodaly, Orff-Schulwerk, and Dalcroze. From my perspective, one concept that unites the body and mind which is present among all the music teaching approaches is kinesthetics. Feierabend (1995) affirmed that kinesthetics as another type of intelligence is an awareness of one's body and how movements created functions within a space. Numerous studies (Retra, 2010; Fox, 1991; Metz, 1989) have shown that music has a significant effect on the kinesthetic behavior of a child. Fox (1991) asserted that there have been studies that documented young children being able to discriminate sounds and create music responses through movements. More importantly, early childhood years are a time when children are beginning to explore sounds and movements (Scott, 1991).

In the Philippines, although the *Kindergarten Education Act* which integrated early childhood education as part of an existing elementary education system was approved in 2012, there have been limited studies conducted on early childhood education (Omaga, Alieto, 2019). Jacinto (2019) asserted that early childhood music education is still undertaking improvements.

*“Music is incorporated but only as a transitional and motivational material. Its use is mostly to help the students release excess energy and refocus them for other tasks. We have drums, maracas, mini piano, and bells but usually only used for free play.”*

*- Vi, Filipino preschool teacher*

Music and movement is an ideal tool for early childhood music education (Metz, 1989). With the intent of enhancing the early childhood music education in the Philippines, this paper aims to investigate to what extent music and movement are being implemented in the early childhood education curriculum in the Philippines.

### **Kinesthetic Representation in Music**

Kinesthetic as an intelligence connects the mind and body (Gardner, 2012). The mind controls the body, and the body responds to the expressive ability of the mind; this intelligence is evident in a range of activities from gross motor skills such as walking, running, and jumping to fine motor skills such as using the fingers and hands to control different objects (Gardner, 2012). Sutapa et al., (2021) posited that the early childhood years are the golden age where a child’s simulation of their motor skills are of utmost importance because these skills play a significant role in their life hence, the development of gross and fine motor skills in this age is necessary.

A form of kinesthetic representation happens when a child does movements as a response to music (Retra, 2008) and movements play a vital role in developing a child’s music aptitude (Woods, 1987). Further, Woods (1987) asserted that movement is more than just an instructional strategy in the music classroom; its emphasis varies from one music teaching approach to another, yet movement remains at the core of music education. Four music education teaching approaches (Dalcroze, Gordon, Kodaly, and Orff) have emphasized kinesthetic connections and the significance of music and movement in music education:

### **Dalcroze Approach**

The Dalcroze approach is widely used with young children in early childhood education (Juntunen, 2002). In the Dalcroze approach, music is felt, experienced, and expressed through body movements (Juntunen, 2016). It develops expression and a sense of rhythm with a kinesthetic awareness of sounds that encourages active involvement and concentration (Juntunen, 2002). Children walk, run, skip, and do other movements while accompanied by an instrument such as

the piano (McCullar, 1998). Moreover, in this approach, activities may include telling a story in movement, dancing, using props, and playing instruments (Juntunen, 2002).

### **Gordon's Music Learning Theory**

Woods (1987) posited that movement plays an important role in Gordon's Music Learning Theory and that both teachers and parents must encourage young children to engage in different activities involving music and movement. In a music class that uses this approach, movements are embedded in establishing steady beat and consistent tempo (Woods, 1987). Alongside singing, Grunow (2005) asserted that moving is one of the skills being measured and evaluated in Music Learning Theory, and by learning those skills, a child develops cooperation, discipline, and self-esteem which are essential in music education.

### **Kodaly Approach**

In a study about incorporating Kodaly into a preschool program by Entin (1990), game songs as a material are nested in the curriculum. Aside from being movement oriented, game songs encourage young children to use their imagination (Entin, 1990). Woods (1987) posited that children are invited to create movements using their feet, legs, hands, and arms with song materials; the combination of these movements set the experience needed for the formal games that are essential in the Kodaly approach. More importantly, while singing is the most important aspect of Kodaly approach, movement is always incorporated with singing activities (Woods, 1987).

### **Orff Approach**

The Orff approach is based on "elemental" music which refers to the natural music a child makes without training, and that natural musicking connects with movements (Mark & Madura, 2009). An important aspect of this approach is the Orff "instrumentarium," which comprises percussion instruments such as drums, xylophones, metallophones, and glockenspiels and where students are actively participating in ensemble playing that requires physical coordination (Mark & Madura, 2009). Four specific body movements are used in the Orff approach: clapping, stomping, snapping, and patting; these body movements are typically used to accompany rhythms (Woods, 1987). The rhythms then are transferred from body movements to percussion instruments (Mark & Madura, 2009).

Although each of the music education teaching approaches use movement in different ways, movement remains present in their pedagogical content. Table 1

summarizes the kinesthetic connections and how movement is presented in each of the approach's content.

**Table 1**

*Explanatory synthesis of the kinesthetic connection in different music education teaching approaches*

Music Education	Dalcroze	Gordon	Kodaly	Orff
Kinesthetic Connection	Music is felt, experienced, and expressed through body movements	Movement activities are used in establishing steady beat and tempo	Game songs where movement is incorporated with music	Four basic body movements: Clapping, stomping, snapping, and patting

### Foundations of Early Childhood Music Education

UNESCO emphasized four main areas by which the development of a child in early childhood education can be assessed: executive function, socio-emotional development, motor development, and early literacy and numeracy; these four functions can be developed through musical interventions (Barret et al., 2019). Gordon (2012) posited that children are born with a distinct level of music aptitude that is their musical potential, and these potential changes depending on the quality of music environment a child experiences. Further, Gordon (2012) argued that musical experiences at the early childhood years have a huge impact on the child's musical understanding and music appreciation. More importantly, young children who receive musical experiences show a better achievement in music (Runfola et al., 2012).

In this paper, I use scaffolding, musical instruments, and music and movement as foundations of early childhood music education. Scaffolding (Spreeuwenberg, 2016; Gillespie & Greenberg, 2017), musical instruments (Nelson, 1976; Artan & Balat, 2003; Süner & Ünlü, 2013), and music and movement (Metz, 1989; Fox & Liu, 2012; Juntunen, 2016) as foundations are essential to be present in the early childhood classroom.

### Scaffolding

Scaffolding involves adjusting the teacher's support strategies to align with the child's developmentally and age-appropriate needs, as children need a specific level of support to progress to the next stage of development (Spreeuwenberg, 2016). Gillespie and Greenberg (2017) asserted that scaffolding requires important

considerations such as understanding a child's overall development, individual learning approach, learning objectives, and strategies. By understanding these processes, teachers become more sensitive to the foundations of early childhood education (Gillespie & Greenberg, 2017).

### **Musical Instruments**

A child must be exposed to various musical instruments where they can explore and create through music (Nelson, 1976). Artan and Balat (2003) posited that musical instruments are great elements to use in music classes for young children, as they allow children to create their own music. Moreover, musical instruments provide opportunities for teacher-student cooperation such as using the drums to foster student cooperation and tambourine to practice making steady beats. More importantly, musical instruments support other aspects of a child's development such as hand-eye coordination and two-handed coordination which are necessary to develop in the early childhood years (Artan & Balat, 2003). Süner and Ünlü (2013) asserted that teachers and students can make their own musical instruments from recycled materials as it provides the children a unique learning experience and is significant in their cognitive, psychomotor, and auditory development. For these reasons, the use of musical instruments in early childhood education is highly suggested as it promotes musical training to young children (Artan & Balat, 2003).

### **Music and Movement**

Because the concept of movement has a natural link to music, music and movement is an ideal tool for early childhood music education (Metz, 1989). Bautista and Ho (2022) posited that music and movement is a fundamental component of early childhood education around the world. It enables children to use their creativity and self-expression by engaging their senses, muscles, and intellect through motor activities (del Barrio & Arús, 2024). Moreover, del Barrio & Arús (2024) asserted that numerous studies about music and movement have highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of the concept and its consideration for curricular integration. Table 2 presents three sample music and movement activities. Juntunen (2016) used bending, jumping, walking, and clapping to experience steady beat through movements, Fox and Liu (2012) used the movements stretching and crouching to supplement the song "Sometimes I'm Very Tall" as an introduction to high and low sounds, and Reynolds et al. (2020) used slow locomotor movements and galloping while listening to the song "Slow and Go" as an introduction to slow and quick tempo.

**Table 2***Exemplar music and movement activities*

<b>Juntunen (2016)</b>	<b>Fox and Liu (2012)</b>	<b>Reynolds et al. (2020)</b>
Realize and experience the beat in movement (e.g., by bending the knees, jumping, walking, bouncing a ball, clapping in various ways, etc.) while keeping a steady beat	The teacher invites the participants to copy the movements as they listen/sing the song “Sometimes I’m Very Tall.”	Caregivers or parents sit with their child on their lap or beside them. Teacher will sing the song “Slow and Go” and in the A section, demonstrate and then invite participants to do a slow locomotor movement while in the B section, demonstrate and then invite participants to gallop swiftly along the song.
Music element: Steady Beat	Sometimes I’m very tall (stretch up high) Sometimes I’m very small (crouch down low) Now tall (stretch, hold) Now small (crouch, hold) Now I’m a tiny ball (tuck yourself into a tiny ball).	Music element: Tempo
	Music element: Pitch	

**Eastman Community Music School and Early Childhood Music Classes**

The Eastman Community Music School (ECMS) is presented in this study to serve as a framework for the review of scaffolding, musical instruments, and music and movement as foundations of early childhood music education. ECMS is well known for providing a quality early childhood education. Their program attracted attention throughout the United States and abroad. Donna Brink Fox, Ph.D., a nationally recognized authority on early childhood music education arrived at the Eastman School of Music as a new faculty member and was asked to design an early childhood music program. The developed program is divided into four classes according to a child’s age: MusicTIME, Music Times Two, Music Makers, and Clef Club (ECMS Early Childhood Music Program, 2022).

In table 3, the programs offered by the Eastman Community Music School developed by Dr. Fox and their focus are presented. MusicTIME is intended for children ages 4 months to 2 years old. Its focus is on musical activities experienced by a child while being assisted by their parents or guardians. In continuation for children ages 2 to 3 and a half years old still assisted by their parents or guardian, Music Times Two focuses on a child developing rhythmic and vocal skills because of a more independent music making. Music Makers for children ages 3 and a half to 4 years old participates in this program without the assistance of their parents or

guardian. This is where music vocabulary is emphasized and with the opportunity for a child to play percussion instruments. For children ages 5 to 6 years old or those who are enrolled in preschool or first grade, individual music skills such as singing, rhythmic activities, moving to music, musical concepts, musical games, and playing small percussion instruments are the focus.

**Table 3**

*ECMS Early Childhood Music Program*

Program	Music TIME	Music Times Two	Music Makers	Clef Club
Age	4 months – 2 years	2 – 3 ½ years	3 ½ years and 4 years	5 to 6 years
Focus	Musical activities that include songs, rhymes, bounces, tickles, moving and listening to music. Children are assisted with them parents and/or guardian.	Continuation of MusicTIME where children with assistance of their parents and/or guardians develop rhythmic and vocal skills as they engage in more independent music making activities involving singing, movement, and playing instruments.	Designed for children without parental participation in class develop skills in singing and listening. Musical vocabulary is also emphasized and with opportunities to play classroom percussion instruments. Visiting musicians also demonstrate different instruments to the children.	Intended for children enrolled in preschool or first grade where the focus is on the individual musical skills that include singing, rhythmic activities, moving to music, musical concepts, musical games, and playing small percussion instruments. Children will also have foundational activities in reading and writing music.

*Source: Eastman Community Music School (2022). ECMS Early Childhood Music Program.*

In terms of scaffolding, ECMS designed their teaching and support strategies to fit to the developmental level and age of a child by separating the programs into four catering music teaching and learning to different ages. The programs bridged the focus of the existing knowledge by adding more learning competencies and music interventions while decreasing the assistance as they progress to a different program. Moreover, the use of musical instruments as part of the musical learning is evident. Lastly, music and movement in the form of singing, listening, and other musical experiences are nested in all programs.

## Discussion

### Music in the Early Childhood Education in the Philippines

The *Early Childhood Care and Development Law* enacted in 2000 recognized the importance of early childhood education in the Philippines (Omega, Alieto, 2019). In 2002, the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) was introduced, and the development of language literacy and fluency and scientific-numerical competency were the focus (Jacinto, 2019). A curriculum reformation happened in 2011 that shifted the 10-year BEC to a 13-year enhanced basic education curriculum called K-12 Curriculum that aimed to provide every student the opportunity to have a globally competitive and quality education and where early childhood education became mandatory (Jacinto, 2019). The early childhood education was mandated in 2012 when the *Kindergarten Education Act* under the Department of Education was approved by the Philippine government, and it promoted the development of a child across all aspects prior to the formal primary education (Omega & Alieto, 2019). In response to the effectiveness concerns of the K-12 curriculum, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the MATATAG curriculum in 2023 (Kilag et al., 2024). The learning domains introduced in 2012 were revised in 2013, 2016, and 2023. Table 4 presents the changes of the kindergarten learning domains.

**Table 4.** 2013, 2016, and 2023 Kindergarten Developmental Domains

2013 Developmental Domains in Kindergarten	2016 Developmental Domains in Kindergarten	2023 Developmental Domains in Kindergarten
<p><b>1. Values Education</b> - Children are expected to show positive self-concept, respect and concern for self and others, how to follow and behave appropriately in various situations and places, manifest love of God, country and fellowmen.</p>	<p><b>1. Socio-Emotional Development</b> - Children are expected to develop emotional skills, basic concepts pertaining to her/himself, how to relate well with other people in his/her immediate environment, demonstrate awareness of one's social identity, and appreciate cultural diversity among the school, community, and other people</p>	<p><b>1. Literacy, Language, and Communication</b> - Learners are expected to develop communicative skills in their first language. They are also expected to develop more positive attitudes toward reading and writing, and to view themselves as effective users and learners of the language. This domain provides opportunities for early literacy learning for self-expression through language using the mother tongue or the child's first language as a literacy resource.</p>

**2. Physical Health & Motor Development** - Children are expected to develop both their fine and gross motor skills to be able to engage in wholesome physical and health activities.

**3. Socio-Emotional Development** - Children are expected to develop emotional skills to relate well with others and appreciate cultural diversity among the school community and other people.

**4. Social Development** - Children are expected to develop basic concepts pertaining to her/himself and how to relate well with other people in his/her immediate environment and demonstrate awareness of one's social identity.

**2. Values Development** - Children are expected to show positive attitudes, self-concept, respect, concern for self and others, behave appropriately in various situations and places, manifest love of God, country, and fellowmen

**3. Physical Health & Motor Development** - Children are expected to develop both their fine and gross motor skills to be efficient and effective movers when engaging in wholesome physical and health activities. They are also expected to acquire an understanding of good health habits and develop their awareness about the importance of safety and how they can prevent danger at home, in school, and in public places

**4. Aesthetic/Creative Development** – Children are expected to develop their aesthetic sense and creative expression through drawing, painting, and manipulative activities. Aesthetic development involves the love and pursuit of beauty in art, music, and movement, and creates opportunities for the creative expression of emotions, thoughts, feelings, and ideas

**2. Socio-Emotional Development** - Learners are expected to develop emotional skills, basic concepts pertaining to themselves, how to relate well with other people in their immediate environment, demonstrate awareness of one's social identity, and appreciate cultural diversity among the school, community, and other people.

**3. Values Development** - Learners are expected to demonstrate positive attitudes, self-concept, respect, concern for self and others, behave appropriately in various situations and places, and manifest love for our creator, country, and fellowmen. These learning expectations are to be taught with the integration of Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC) as stipulated in Republic Act 11476.

**4. Physical Health and Motor Development** - Learners are expected to develop both their fine and gross motor skills to be efficient and effective movers when engaging in wholesome physical and health activities. They are also expected to acquire an understanding of good health habits and develop their awareness about the importance of safety and how they protect themselves from harm at home, in school, and in public places.

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**5. Language, Literacy and Communication** - This domain provides opportunities for self-expression through language using the mother tongue. Children are expected to develop communicative skills in their first language.

**6. Mathematics** - Children are expected to understand and demonstrate knowledge in identifying numbers, as well as concepts of length, capacity, mass, time and perform simple operations using concrete objects.

**5. Mathematics** - Children are expected to understand and demonstrate knowledge, thinking skills, and insights into patterns of mathematics, concepts of numbers, length, capacity, mass, and time through the use of concrete objects or materials, and to apply these meaningfully in their daily experiences. Children are provided with varied manipulative activities to help them see relationships and interconnections in math and enable them to deal flexibly with mathematical ideas and concepts

**6. Understanding of the Physical and Natural Environment** - Children are expected to demonstrate a basic understanding of concepts pertaining to living and nonliving things, including weather, and use these in categorizing things in his/her environment. They are also expected to acquire the essential skills and sustain their natural curiosity in their immediate environment through exploration, discovery, observation, and relate their everyday experiences using their senses (touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing)

**5. Aesthetic/Creative Development** - Learners are expected to develop their aesthetic sense and creative expression through drawing, painting, and manipulative activities. Aesthetic development involves the love and pursuit of beauty in art, music, and movement, and creates opportunities for the creative expression of emotions, thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

**6. Cognitive Development** - Learners are expected to develop thinking skills, and insights into patterns of mathematics, concepts of numbers, length, capacity, mass, and time using concrete objects or materials, and apply these meaningfully in their daily experiences through the provision of varied manipulative activities to help them see relationships and interconnections in math and enable them to deal flexibly with mathematical ideas and concepts. Moreover, learners are also expected to demonstrate a basic understanding of concepts pertaining to living and nonliving things, including weather, and use these in categorizing things in their environment. They are also expected to acquire the essential skills and sustain their natural curiosity in their immediate environment through exploration, discovery, observation, and relate their everyday experiences using their senses (touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing).

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<p><b>7. Understanding of the Physical and Natural Environment</b> - Children are expected to demonstrate basic understanding of concepts pertaining to living and non-living things including weather and uses these in categorizing things in his/her environment.</p>	<p><b>7. Language, Literacy, and Communication</b> - This domain provides opportunities on early literacy learning for self-expression through language using the mother tongue or the child's first language. Children are expected to develop communicative skills in their first language. They are also expected to develop more positive attitudes toward reading, writing, and to view themselves as effective users and learners of language</p>
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*Source: Department of Education (2013 and 2016). Standards and Competencies for Five-Year-Old Filipino Children, p 5.*

As presented in Table 4, there were 7 developmental domains in 2013: Values Education, Physical Health & Motor Development, Socio-Emotional Development, Social Development, Language, Literacy & Communication, Mathematics, and Understanding of the Physical and Natural Environment. Music was not in the 2013 developmental domains but was mentioned in the 2016 and 2023 developmental domains under the Aesthetic/Creative Development Domain. Moreover, the domains in 2016 and 2023 were in a different order and Mathematics was removed in the 2023 revision (Department of Education, 2013, 2016, 2023). In the new K-12 curriculum, music as a subject is only introduced beginning in Grade 1 (Jacinto, 2019) while only exposure to different music and art processes or experiential learning is only developed in the early childhood level as indicated in Figure 1. Furthermore, while the new MATATAG curriculum was introduced in 2023 to address the effectiveness issues with the K-12 curriculum, music as a subject is now only taught from Grade 4 to 10 leaving early childhood education without music instruction, as indicated in Figure 2.

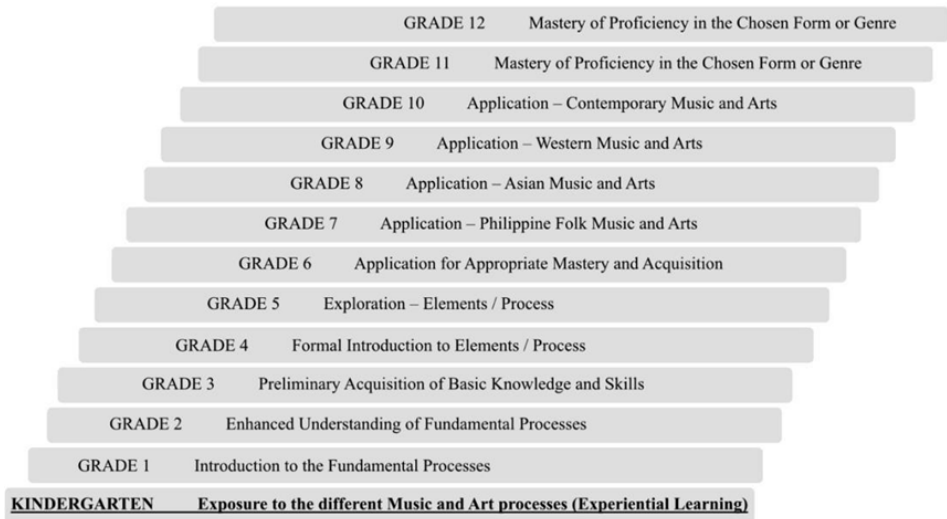


Figure 1. Contents of Music and Arts per Grade Level in the K-12 Curriculum

Source: Department of Education (2016). *K to 12 Music Curriculum Guide (Grade 1 to Grade 10)*, p. 5

<b>Grade 4</b>	The learners produce creative works of their geographic and cultural community using conventional concepts, processes, and practices in music and arts.
<b>Grade 5</b>	The learners produce creative works using conventional and contemporary processes and practices in music and arts, in relation to historical and cultural influences (Pre-Colonial to Spanish Colonial Period).
<b>Grade 6</b>	The learners produce creative works using conventional and contemporary concepts, processes, and practices in music and arts reflecting their local, cultural, and national identities (19th-20th century).
<b>Grade 7</b>	The learners produce creative works using relevant conventional, contemporary, and emerging concepts, processes, techniques, and/or practices in music and arts, informed by customs and traditions of the Philippines and selected Southeast Asian countries within the context of Filipino cultural identity and diversity.
<b>Grade 8</b>	The learners produce creative works that integrate relevant conventional and emerging concepts, techniques, processes, and/or practices in Music and Arts of selected Asian communities within the context of Filipino cultural identity and diversity.
<b>Grade 9</b>	The learners produce creative works using relevant conventional, contemporary, and emerging concepts, techniques, processes, and/or practices in music and arts of the world in the context of Filipino cultural identity and diversity.
<b>Grade 10</b>	The learners evaluate individual capabilities by innovating creative works using relevant contemporary and emerging concepts, techniques, designs, processes, and practices in music and arts industries in preparation for their career plan.

Figure 1. Contents of Music and Arts per Grade Level in the MATATAG Curriculum

Source: Department of Education (2023). *MATATAG Music and Arts Curriculum Guide (Grade 4 to Grade 10)*, p. 21

## Conclusion

Music education approaches such as Dalcroze, Gordon, Kodaly, and Orff are proven effective teaching approaches in the early childhood music classroom. Although the Department of Education in the Philippines includes music and movement in the aesthetic/creative development domain, an independent domain for Music is essential for Filipino children to learn music, develop their musical potential, understanding, appreciation, and achievement. Furthermore, this paper highlights a noticeable disconnect between the other two foundations of early childhood music education discussed, particularly scaffolding and the use of musical instruments. Scaffolding is insufficient in the Philippine's early childhood music curriculum, as the learning competencies do not progress to a different level as indicated in the 2016 K-12 curriculum and more so in the 2023 MATATAG curriculum, where music is only taught formally starting in Grade 4. The removal of music in the early childhood level in the MATATAG curriculum completely misaligns with Gordon's (2012) emphasis on the importance of exposing young children to musical experiences to develop their musical potential. Additionally, the use of musical instruments as highly suggested to be a fun and effective way to learn music in the early childhood education is as well missing. Lastly, the current early childhood curriculum in the Philippines is designed only to meet the standards and competencies of a five-year-old Filipino child, whereas a high-quality early childhood curriculum as developed and used at the Eastman Community Music School includes programs designed for a child as young as 4 months old, which aligns with the critical and sensitive age for music education. Every child is born with a music potential, and every Filipino child is deserving to have access to a quality early childhood music education.

## Recommendation

Metz (1989) argued that training programs designed to guide young children with musical experiences should be included in collegiate music methods courses for future early childhood music teachers. This paper investigates early childhood music education in the Philippines and examines the extent to which music is being implemented into the music education of young Filipino children. To make an informed effort to the expansion of the curriculum of early childhood music education in the Philippines, it may be necessary to include early childhood music teacher training programs and early childhood music methods courses in collegiate music schools in the Philippines.

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# Accepting the Concerns We Can't Change and Changing the Ones We Can: Coaching Teachers on Self-Awareness and Mental Health

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## Abstract

The ongoing effort to teach and learn has highlighted two key problems for teachers at Antipolo NHS: their self-awareness and their mental health. Self-awareness refers to “the ability to see ourselves clearly—to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world around us” (Eurich, 2017) while mental health refers to the state of a person to cope, address his abilities, work, and contribute to his community. It is determined by a variety of social, psychological, and biological factors at any given time (World Health Organization, 2018). The current study focused on purposively selected 12 teachers (F=11; M=1) in the English Department of Antipolo National High School, a junior high school, which is one of the biggest schools in the Philippines with more than 12,000 students enrolled for SY 2021-2022 and more than 400 teaching and non-teaching personnel. Data were gathered using a questionnaire through Google Forms and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results revealed that the emerging themes on the frustrations of teachers are communication, non-teaching tasks, the system, time, and work-home balance. The concerns of teachers that they

thought they couldn't change involved the system, health, and the New Normal while the ones that they hope could be changed include mindsets, checking, and management. The researchers recommend a Learning Action Cell session that will empower teachers to improve self-awareness and nurture mental health.

**Keywords:** self-awareness, mental health, learning action cells

## Introduction

Teachers remain to be the driving force that make teaching and learning happen even in a pandemic. With Department of Education (DepEd) Order 12, s.2020, also known as "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 in the light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency," teachers continue their monumental tasks to make a difference in the lives of the students. Communicating and enrolling learners, preparation and sorting of modules, providing assessment and feedback, continuing professional development, and many more are tasks that are placed on each teacher's shoulders.

Teachers at Antipolo NHS faced two big challenges related to their own well-being: self-awareness and mental health, as they continued to teach and learn. One of these concerns was self-awareness. Eurich (2017) defines self-awareness as "the ability to see ourselves clearly—to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world around us" (p.3). How often do teachers reflect and how do these reflections help them grow professionally and improve their performance in teaching is worthy of investigation since teachers are the primary implementers of the curriculum. Based on research, reflection is an integral component of effective teaching.

The second concern of teachers involved mental health. Mental health refers to the state of a person to cope, address his abilities, work, and contribute to his community. It is determined by a variety of social, psychological, and biological factors at any given time (World Health Organization, 2018). When a person's mental health is stable, it can help the body to function well and avoid physical or mental sickness (Shimizu, 2017). In the Philippines, the Mental Health Law emphasizes that people who promote or maintain mental health should be valued, those with mental health problems should be treated, and its services should be public and protected (R.A. 11036). Various webinars on mental health have already been un-

dertaken at Antipolo NHS. However, to the researchers' knowledge, there are very few ones that come in the form of Learning Action Cells (LAC) where teachers can share their insights and engage in professional dialogue. It is not only knowing but reflecting on how knowledge can turn into action that is another important concern.

Accepting the concerns that teachers cannot control and changing the ones that they can may empower teachers to do their jobs more efficiently. This may also drive them to pursue professional development and view it with a growth mindset. In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going*, Sonia Nietto (2003) suggested the importance of professional development:

Excellent teachers don't develop full-blown at graduation; nor are they just "born teachers." Instead, teachers are always in the process of becoming." Given the dynamics of their work, they need to continually rediscover who they are and what they stand for through their dialogue and collaboration with peers, through ongoing and consistent study, and through deep reflection about their craft. They also need to understand the nature of their work and its life-and-death potential in the lives of their students. They need to understand that teaching is neither missionary work (although it may be a mission), nor just another job. (p.125)

In 2017, DepEd developed the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) (DO 42, s. 2017). PPST "articulates what constitutes teacher quality through well-defined domains, strands, and indicators that provide measures of professional learning, competent practice and effective engagement across teachers' career stages" (RPMS Manual, 2018). At present, teachers are still rated using modified classroom observation tools. Although teachers are submitting development plans and Results-Based Performance Management System (RPMS) portfolio and technical assistance (TA) providers coached teachers within the rating period, it is also interesting to note what teachers think on how they performed and how else they can improve their work in a circle with no holds barred. It is important to note that self-rating or self-reports have high threats on social desirability. Getting data with less threats on social desirability may offer significant data for policy development.

The challenges brought by the pandemic are burdens that teachers carry, and these may affect how they perform their jobs at present and in the future. How

these concerns are addressed distinguishes ordinary teachers from passionate teachers. Fried as cited in Nieto (2003) defines passionate teacher as “someone in love with the field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day—or captivated by all of these (p.51).”

With all these concerns, the researchers aimed to determine opportunities for promoting self-awareness and mental health in a crucial time where teachers can accept what they can't change and change what they can.

In her ethnography, Arzadon (2017) analyzed the sentiments of public school teachers posted on a secret Facebook (FB) group with more than 60,000 members consisting of public school teachers from all over the Philippines. Public school teachers lament on too much paper work, power tripping, student-teacher ratio, lower salary compared to other professionals, heavy workload, red tape, shark loans, and politics in the workplace. Nevertheless, the teaching profession was not easy even during the health pandemic. Various projects have already been undertaken, including action research, capacity-building, learning action cells, continuous improvement, and more, to address these dilemmas. An important consideration is to find out whether teachers' sentiments are controllable or uncontrollable, and whether it's the former or the latter, what teachers could do to address these concerns make the difference.

Because of the challenges in the pandemic, few teachers considered leaving the public school system or teaching entirely. How then can teachers stay on track? Kohl as cited in Nieto (2003) reminded teachers to reflect on the images they have in teaching, and they “have an obligation to work to sustain hope and to resist giving up on young people. One way to do this is to remember why one decided to teach in the first place. What images and metaphors come to mind when teachers think about the original inspiration they felt and their desires to spend their lives working with young people (p.49).” Go et al. (2020) pointed out that teachers' compartmentalization ability and emotional intelligence are positively significant to their performance. Kasalak and Dagyar (2020) argued that there is a relationship between teacher self-efficacy and teacher job satisfaction.

In a qualitative study among 120 teachers at Antipolo NHS, Reynoso et al. (2021) reported that teachers struggle in promotion in terms of qualifications, preparation and requirements, process in Human Resource Department, and the pandemic.

In terms of teacher training, Dela Cruz et al. (2020) suggested that teacher training and technical assistance to teachers should really focus on learning. Many trainings have been conducted in DepEd every year, and during the pandemic, webinars have been spearheaded more often than during pre-pandemic years. Nevertheless, the challenges on the effectiveness of these trainings need to be examined.

Pimentel and colleagues (2022) investigated English teachers' job satisfaction in public schools using a case study research design and the bioecological framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner. Data were collected from purposively selected 14 newly-hired English teachers (0-5 years teaching experience) in a public school in Antipolo during the second quarter of SY 2021-2022 through questionnaires, focus group discussion, and document analyses. Results indicate that (1) the newly-hired English teachers are young in the teaching profession; (2) the newly-hired teachers were satisfied with their job with an overall rating of 3.16; (3) the factors where the teachers expressed the highest level of satisfaction were in superior support ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ) and collaboration with co-teachers ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ) while the outcome of the teachers' level of satisfaction in terms of the physical environment, adequate resources, superior support, workload, collaboration with colleagues, opportunities for professional development, opportunities for promotion, gender equality, and DepEd's mandate fulfillment were all highly satisfactory; (4) the following factors received the lowest satisfaction levels: pay and benefits ( $M=2.93$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ), work-family life balance ( $M=2.86$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ), and student's performance ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ); and (5) the experiences of the participants from their previous schools and the impact of the pandemic in their work set-up had the greatest contributions to their satisfaction levels.

The title of this research is based on the famous quote by Reinhold Niebuhr: *"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."* In the context of this research, the things were identified as concerns, which pertain to the issues and circumstances that teachers confront in their profession. The only qualifier is that these concerns are affecting teachers in fulfilling their duties in teaching.

Thus, the researchers aimed to determine opportunities for promoting self-awareness and mental health. The study addresses the questions:

1. What are the frustrations of teachers?
2. What are the concerns and actions of teachers in terms of the following:
  - a. concerns that they can't change

- b. concerns that they can change
- 3. What are teachers' coping mechanism in the New Normal?
- 4. What areas for technical assistance do teachers need to enhance their self-awareness and mental health?

**Action Research Methods**

**Participants and/or Other Sources of Data and Information**

The current study focused on purposely selected 12 teachers (F=11; M=1) in the English Department. Antipolo National High School, a junior high school, is one of the biggest schools in the Philippines with more than 12,000 students enrolled for SY 2021-2022 and more than 400 teaching and non-teaching personnel. Table 1 summarized the profile of grade level and number of years of the participants.

Regarding experience, the participants represented a wide range of service years. Nearly half (41.67%) of the teachers had six or more years in service, indicating a strong core of experienced educators. Conversely, 33.33% of the participants were relatively new, having served for one to three years. Specifically, one teacher had one year of experience (8.33%), three had two years (25%), and one had three years (8.33%).

**Table 1a**

*Number of Years in Service*

Number of Years	Number	Percentage
1	1	8.33%
2	3	25%
3	1	8.33%
4	1	8.33%
5	1	8.33%
6 and above	5	41.67%

The participants were fairly evenly distributed across the grade levels they taught. The largest groups were those teaching Grade 7 and Grade 9, each represented by four teachers (33% for both). Three teachers taught Grade 8 (25%), while only one teacher was selected from the Grade 10 level (8.33%). This selection profile ensured that the study captured perspectives from across the junior high school curriculum.

**Table 1b***Grade Levels of Participants*

Grade Level	Number	Percentage
Grade 7	4	33%
Grade 8	3	25%
Grade 9	4	33%
Grade 10	1	8.33%

**Data Gathering Method**

In this study, the researchers used qualitative research design. The researchers gathered data using Google Form from October 27 to 29, 2021. Their responses were the basis of the crafting of the LAC proposal. To answer the research questions, the researchers asked both closed- and open-ended questions. Specifically, the following questions were asked: (1) What are your concerns in terms of the things that you can't change in the new New Normal?; (2) What are your concerns in terms of the things that you can change in the new New Normal?; (3) What are your frustrations as a teacher now?; (4) What are conditions at work do you think you are incapable of changing?; (5) What are the overwhelming conditions at work do you want to change now?; (6) What are your coping mechanisms at work in the New Normal? (7) Do you reflect on your teaching experiences? Why or why not? If you do, how do these reflections affect your performance of your work? If not, how do the absence of reflections affect your performance of your work?; (8) What kind of assistance do you think do you need in terms of self-awareness?; (9) What kind of assistance do you think do you need in terms of mental health?; (10) If you are going to meet with your colleagues, what topics do you think are worthy of discussion? (name anything under the sun); (11) What topics on self-awareness do you want to tackle in a LAC session?; and (12) What topics on mental health do you want to tackle in a LAC session? The questions were content validated by an expert in educational psychology.

Qualitative data gathered from the participants were systematically organized and analyzed using the rigorous process of thematic analysis. To begin this process, the researchers first encoded the data by printing the spreadsheet containing all the participants' open-ended responses, allowing for close, manual interaction with the text. They then moved into the crucial phase of coding, where they carefully read the answers provided for each column or research question and assigned descriptive labels to meaningful segments of the text. Once the data was thoroughly coded, the researchers grouped these individual codes together to identify broader, significant emerging themes—these patterns represented the

common experiences, perspectives, or ideas shared by the participants. The final step of thematic analysis involved defining and naming these themes to provide a rich, interpretative narrative that accurately captured the essence of the qualitative data.

## Results

### Frustrations of Teachers

The emerging themes on the frustrations of teachers are communication, non-teaching tasks, the system, time, and work-home balance. Table 2 presented the themes on the frustration of teachers alongside with the exact statements of teachers.

**Table 2**

*Frustrations of Teachers*

Theme	Teachers' Responses
Communication	"To constantly respond and communicate to all my students." (Teacher B) "I am frustrated when I can't reach the other students especially to those who can't access on the internet." (Teacher E) "Lack of gadgets Students that cannot cope with the lesson Anything that has something to do with the internet connection Students who are not attending classes due to some reasons and yet they won't answer messages." (Teacher G) "Students and parents are oblivious to the need of respecting the teacher's time." (Teacher I) Communicating with my students is one of my frustrations. It's hard when you can only reach them once in a blue moon because of lack of gadgets and other reasons." (Teacher J)
Non-teaching Tasks	I am frustrated with things not related to teaching that we teachers repeatedly do." (Teacher D) "There are a lot of paper works." (Teacher I) "Tons of paperworks." (Teacher H)
The system	DEPED SYSTEM." (Teacher A) "I don't teach" and "class size" (Teacher H)
Time	Not enough time to discuss all things that I need to discuss." (Teacher C)
Work-home balance	Time, because you have the idea or plan in your mind but the time to execute/implement it is very limited and given that a teacher has a lot of things to do. (Teacher L)
None	None (Teacher F) None (Teacher H)

Most of the teachers reported that the change in teaching circumstances and the need to teach from home was difficult for them. More specifically, participants noted the technological difficulty of the abrupt change in terms of communication. Since teachers had to communicate to students via social media and other

learning applications that needed internet connection, students with no access to gadgets and online connectivity became a struggle. The lack of communication between teachers and students during the New Normal learning set up has created teaching and learning frustration. In addition, concerns in the area of non-teaching tasks are reported as contributors to teachers' workplace stressors. Participants stated that performing numerous clerical works that teachers are routinely required to undertake has taken a toll in their wellbeing. Furthermore, concerns related to the public school system were stated, particularly the class size which participants pointed as a problem in the New Normal. The struggle of handling a huge class size amidst the sudden shift from face-to-face to distance learning had a negative impact on the participants. This echoes the heavy workload that teachers experience in the public school system ( Arzadon, 2017).

Moreover, the transition to work from home set up has led to various consequences such as the lack of adequate time to discuss lessons and accomplish other tasks. Given this situation, a participant reported the blurring boundaries between home and school due to the challenge of managing time between work and personal space.

The factors that teachers have noted undermine their safe space in the teaching environment, thus it suggests that the sudden move to distance learning due to the pandemic has created substantial challenges for teachers such as limited communication and engagement of students and the struggle to balance work responsibilities with their home lives.

## **Concerns and Conditions of Teachers That They Can't Change**

### *Concerns*

The concerns of teachers that they thought they couldn't change involved the system, health, and the New Normal. Selected participants believed that they could not change the system. Specifically, the following were the exact statements of teachers: "DEPED SYSTEM" (Teacher A) and "I can't change the system in education in this new normal." (Teacher E).

Selected participants also cited the New Normal conditions as unchangeable. In particular, teachers mentioned, "Mental health of both teachers and students" (Teacher I); "Health concerns are still the first thing for me. Since there are a lot of things that I cannot really change in the new normal, somehow it still adds up

to stress which may lead to health problems" (Teacher J); and "meet, talk and eat with colleagues with social distancing" (Teacher B).

Meanwhile, selected teachers pointed out some concerns that pertain to students. According to Teacher C, "'Students who are very lazy. Students who are submitting just for the sake of submission.'

Of all the participants, they highlighted the most number of concerns. For Teacher H, "(1) The New Normal itself (modular printed modality) - This is the reality that I cannot change, the challenges a teacher/adviser is facing. Imagine, until now half of the quarter, there are some students/parents who haven't submitted their report card yet. (2) The fact that I have to accept students even without credentials but at the end it is I who will be noted as "'with error "' if these students/parents will not comply. (3) Another reality that I can't change is that it would still be my fault as a teacher if a student failed because of incomplete outputs especially the summative & performance tasks even with so many extensions & reminders given. (4) The reporting in school (whole day) even though it's still pandemic."

On the other hand, Teacher H claimed "none" and Teacher F mentioned, "Things that I think I can't change for me are stressful. Since they are unchangeable I decided to just leave those and focus on the things that really matter and I can change."

As a result of the pandemic, teaching and learning has shifted to distance education which has intensified various pedagogic dilemmas bringing negative consequences for mental and physical health among teacher participants. As observed from the responses of the participants, it is evident that the system in the New Normal is described as unchangeable which refers to the work from home arrangement and remote learning of students.

As teachers confront the challenges of unexpected distance education, concerns on health conditions were raised by participants as they suffer a higher load of stress due to these changes in the educational landscape that they have no control over. Participants described the emotional and professional confusion and challenge that they had to deal with. More specifically, issues regarding students' performance were highlighted. Students struggled with the lack of face-to-face interaction which resulted in laziness and decreased engagement; hence submission of activities has become a form of compliance and not of learning.

In the light of the changing reality, concerns regarding the system's regulations were brought up particularly unfamiliar challenges that teachers had to act on such as becoming lenient to give students ample time to accomplish their tasks at the same time caring for students' well-being. While teachers are expected to accommodate the significant changes, they are also faced with several problems such as students who are non-compliant, lack of parents' cooperation, and health concerns as they report physically to school. Furthermore, accepting a certain organizational system of allowing moved-in students without credentials and failing students of non-compliance have brought dilemmas between personal and professional decisions since it will be marked as a teacher's error. Thus, these conditions that participants perceived as unchangeable brought stress to them. This confirms that teachers are dissatisfied with students' performance during the New Normal (Pimentel et al., 2022)

Meanwhile, one participant felt that focusing more on matters that can be changed is much more beneficial to his personal and professional well-being. This indicates that teachers should maintain boundaries between the controllable and uncontrollable factors to cope with the dramatic changes and dilemmas confronting them. Consequently, teacher's emotional intelligence impacts their performance (Go et al., 2020) which suggests that experiencing high levels of stress is detrimental to their personal and professional well-being.

### *Conditions*

One of the conditions that teachers feel they could not change is the system. Teacher A specifically mentioned the "DepEd system" and Teacher H identified "managerial concerns. Teacher I was worried about the return to face-to-face classes: "We are still not gonna shift to face to face classes because the cases in our area won't drop low" and Teacher I expressed: "We are still not gonna shift to face to face classes because the cases in our area won't drop low." Another condition included the paperworks: "Writing in form 137 and card because my writing is not so good" (Teacher C), "More on external conditions. There are things at work that are really beyond my control such as the current situation/educational set up" (Teacher J), and "I'm incapable of changing the fact that teachers have a lot of things to do" (Teacher L).

As described above by the participants, the educational system is one of the unchangeable conditions such as paperwork and class size (Arzadon, 2017). Moreover, management concerns contribute as well to the heavy workload in the New Normal as teachers handle students' issues in remote learning and are ex-

pected to provide support.

Furthermore, the shift in the educational landscape which is perceived as uncontrollable has presented participants with additional challenges as they are forced to face the new reality in their educational practices. As the school immediately transitioned to distance learning, teachers had to make swift and unforeseen changes in their traditional practice and were challenged to plan for new ways to conduct their classes.

In addition, new regulations during the pandemic have challenged participants' personal and professional decisions such as returning to school for face-to-face classes due to the concerns of students' and teachers' health.

Finally, the heavy workload has been associated with teaching careers as one participant perceived it as unchangeable. Thus, teachers have to find a variety of ways to manage excessive workload which interfere with personal time hence confirming the teachers' low satisfaction on work-family life balance. (Pimentel et al., 2022)

## **Concerns of Teachers That They Want to Change**

### *Concerns*

The participants had varied concerns that they identified that they could change. The following are the specific items that they would want to see:

"face to face to virtual meetings/trainings/LAC sessions." (Teacher B)

"Sometimes being not motivated to do a task especially when there are too many things to be done and the deadline is short." (Teacher C)

"Our systems and processes should be changed." (Teacher D)

"I can change the perception of the students using the technology or different platforms in communication like Facebook page and messenger." (Teacher E)

"I am just thankful because things happen the way I want it to be." (Teacher F)

"That they might not be motivated or cooperative to do the activities I provided for them.

improve system." (Teacher G)

"The school could hold more seminars on stress management for students and teachers, as well as for parents." (Teacher H)

"Sudden changes. Though I know that I can do something about changes (in schedule, in system, in certain processes) it still concerns me because it

is hard to adapt in a blink of an eye. It's quite frustrating. But since I can do something about it, I just try until I can accept these changes." (Teacher I)

"I can't think of anything but my attitude and of course seek God's guidance more" (Teacher K)

"Time, because you have the idea or plan in your mind but the time to execute/implement it is very limited and given that a teacher has a lot of things to do." (Teacher L)

Teacher A disclosed that she intended to resign.

Findings revealed the concerns that teachers want to change includes the technological, pedagogical and educational system. Without any advance preparation, the reality of education had changed drastically, and teachers had to learn, unlearn and relearn teaching strategies and reinvent themselves in the virtual sphere as a response to the distance education. Thus, participants claim that they had to cope with technological knowledge and skills to support the continuity of education. This problem is also faced by students, as they engage a new learning environment abruptly. Teacher E viewed students' attitude toward social media platforms as changeable to encourage learning progress. Moreover, students' motivation toward distance learning is another challenge that teachers face. Alongside with the pedagogical content aspect, students' emotional capacity to accomplish tasks at home given the existing global health concern and their home environment contribute to their motivation to cooperate in the new learning system resulting in learning frustration. Furthermore, participants express that they experience difficulty in managing their time to accomplish their tasks due to the heavy workload which adversely impacts their motivation. Hence, reduction in workload is perceived as a positive change that they want to see.

The changing reality of the educational system has not only brought pedagogical and technological changes but also emotional overload among participants as they viewed the sudden change as frustrating, thus wanting to change the system is among the responses. These difficulties involve working with unfamiliar technologies and dealing with complex emotional issues among students, parents, and teachers hence the need of seminars in stress management to adapt to unexpected changes that are difficult to accept in a blink of an eye. The participant suggests that the educational system has to strengthen the psychological support to reduce the emotional discomfort that the teachers, students as well as parents are experiencing.

Finally, it also reported that this increased stress during the pandemic has influenced teacher's intention of leaving the profession.

### *Conditions*

Some of the participants want to change how teachers are managed. Specifically, teachers expressed "DEPED SYSTEM" (Teacher A), "the systems and processes, mindset of my colleagues, my students and their parents" (Teacher D), "accomplishing of tasks, retrieving of outputs, distribution of materials, attending seminars and webinars which happen at the same time, you don't know which one to finish first" (Teacher E), "the amount of paper works. Since this is also a Work-from-Home setup, it is also hard for me to separate work responsibility and doing "household" (Teacher F), and "system" (Teacher G).

Another condition that teachers pointed out was the number of students. In particular, teachers expressed "number of students per section" (Teacher B) and "the number of students in one section" (Teacher E).

As described above, the issue regarding the public school system is the condition that they want to change are the heavy workloads, time constraints, unbalanced work-life integration, and managing innovation and change leading to emotional distress. Specially, as reported by the participant, the mindset of colleagues, students and parents. One participant described in detail the unpleasant working environment faced by teachers as an adverse consequence of abrupt school closures such as excessive workloads that leads to exhaustion that makes it more difficult to manage the instant change in their traditional teaching practice. The process of distributing materials and retrieving output along with attending online meetings and accomplishing other related tasks has been perceived negatively by the participant due to the limited amount of time given to complete these duties. The lack of adequate time has added to the work-related stress that teachers need to overcome. Furthermore, in the new context of educational landscape, working from home has its disadvantages as it creates further work stress with the blurring boundary between work and home. Physical and occupational stress associated with work from home has intensified with the work-family conflict since teachers had to manage family obligations and work responsibilities which overlapped during this period.

It is also important to note that Teacher A answered the DepEd system. The same teacher confessed that she would eventually resign. Thus, it suggests that with the variety of work stressors including high job demands, poor working condi-

tions, and role conflict, teachers' job satisfaction is adversely affected leading to the intention to leave the teaching career. The association of teaching jobs to negative responses such as resigning from a profession is alarming. Teacher A characterized the DepEd system as chronic workplace stress which reduces the participant's job satisfaction due to the feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to cope with internal and external factors involving the system leading to the decision to leave the job.

### Teachers' Coping Mechanism in the New Normal

The common teachers' coping mechanisms in the New Normal include mantra, lifestyle, focus, social group, acceptance, and spiritual engagement. In particular, Table 3 are the themes with specific responses on how they cope with the challenges in the profession.

**Table 3**

*Teachers' Coping Mechanism*

Theme	Specific Statement
Mantra	"One step at a time." (Teacher A)
Lifestyle	"When burden, I'm eating food that I want, watching videos, talking with friends and going out at night." (Teacher B) "Work out during free time to release some endorphins - a happy hormone. Listening to music and watching movies in Netflix and Vivamax." (Teacher C) "Time out if needed. Sleeping." (Teacher G)
Focus	"Focus on things that matter. Stay away from people and tasks that waste my energy." (Teacher D) I need to be focused on the goals as teacher in the new normal for the students." (Teacher E) "I just realize that nobody will do this except me so I should do it." (Teacher F)
Social group	"Joining care group" (Teacher H)  "Eating and talking to my loved ones are two of my coping mechanisms." (Teacher I) "My family" (Teacher L)
Acceptance	"Acceptance is one of my coping mechanisms. I accept the challenges I face and if I can do something about it, I willingly do it. I also accept the fact that there are things I cannot change and move forward. I also learned that less complaining will somehow lighten the heavy load. It eases my mind whenever I think less of complaining, and do what I can do instead." (Teacher J)
Spiritual engagement	"Well, as much as possible I start my day with a devotion or at least a prayer to energize & empower me to cope up within the day and to stay positive because I am not just a teacher, I'm also a wife & a parent." (Teacher K)

Results indicate that teachers used a variety of strategies to cope with the high demands of the teaching profession, especially in the context of the pandemic. In order to care for his emotional well-being, Teacher A noted the use of mantra or motivating words to uplift his spirit amidst the overwhelming workload which is accomplishing one task at a time as he tries to balance work and family life. Several participants also reported the need to divert their mind to other activities that would release the happy hormones or endorphins such as spending time outside, exercising, eating, watching videos, listening to music and sleeping. Hence, engaging in leisure activities enable the teachers to cope with psychological distress brought by drastic changes and adoption of remote learning. In addition, becoming more focused on the things that matter helped teachers overcome negative work-related emotions in order to maintain their well-being and professional efficacy. Thus, it suggests that teachers perceive the need to strengthen their mental health to focus on the goals that they have set rather than wasting energy on things that they cannot change. Furthermore, seeking emotional and social support and joining self-care groups are common coping strategies that teachers have done to continue their job amid a series of circumstances and stressors that may have had during this period to care for their mental health state.

Another reported coping strategy is acceptance. As described by Teacher J, accepting the fact that there are things he cannot and can change is important in order for him to move forward rather than complain over uncontrollable changes that might impact his mental health negatively. Despite the heavy work load, he chooses to stay focused on things that could do to cope with the dilemmas brought by the sudden shift of the educational landscape.

Lastly, seeking spiritual guidance is another coping mechanism to overcome challenging times and being aware that they also have personal responsibilities and lives that exist beyond work, thus subjecting themselves beyond what is required is detrimental to their mental well-being.

### **Technical Assistance Teachers Need to Enhance Their Self-Awareness and Mental Health**

#### *Assistance*

Teacher A, Teacher F, and Teacher H mentioned that they have “none” for self-awareness while Teacher D and Teacher L said that they did not know yet. On the other hand, the kind of technical assistance that teachers need on self-awareness include:

“focus on something positive when in a negative situation.” (Teacher B)

“Maybe a seminar that can tackle this issue.” (Teacher C)

“I need to be checked by someone.” (Teacher E)

“Guide on answering forms? Also the rules if there are any I missed out.”  
(Teacher G)

“All I need is someone to listen to all of my work-related complaints. (That's  
my husband )” (Teacher I)

“I think I need more assistance in terms of learning resources.” (Teacher J)

“I would really love to have someone (co-teacher) praying for me as well as  
be my mentor in life and in our profession.” (Teacher K)

Teacher A, Teacher H, and Teacher I mentioned that they have “none” for mental health. On the other hand, the kind of technical assistance that teachers need on mental health include:

“emotional disorder” (Teacher B)

“Seminar or lecture about mental health” (Teacher C)

“Financial assistance ” (Teacher D)

“I give myself a time to relax especially during weekend.” (Teacher E)

“Just an ample time to breathe and rest is enough for me to take care of  
my mental health.” (Teacher J)

“The “real/true” compassion for teachers, not in words but in  
deeds.” (Teacher K)

“Maybe a social support system” (Teacher L)

Responses revealed that teachers haven’t received assistance on self-awareness while others claimed that they have no idea at the moment. While in order to cope with work-related stress, the technical assistance they need on self-awareness is redirecting their focus to something positive when in an unpleasant working situation. One teacher reported that he needed a seminar to discuss self-awareness and lastly several mentioned about having someone to guide and provide emotional and social support is what they need. This suggests that teachers are in need of help in developing self-awareness to support teachers in managing work-related stress and mental health needs.

On the other hand, the technical assistance that teachers’ need on mental health is to help in overcoming emotional stress that they are experiencing and a seminar that promotes safeguarding the mental health of teachers. Whereas, one teacher viewed financial assistance could help in reducing the work-related stress, this somehow echoes the perception of teachers having low salary despite the heavy work load (Arzadon, 2017). Lastly, giving teachers enough time to relax and

unwind during weekends free from worries of work-related matters is vital to replenish their energies spent during working days. Moreover, Teacher K claimed that real compassion towards teachers should not be only through encouraging words but also in action. Lastly, a social support system that cares for teacher's physical and mental well-being is needed to maintain the positive mental health state of teachers, hence with positive mindset teachers can perform their job well and accomplish quality works (Go et al., 2020)

### *Suggested Topics*

When asked about any topic teachers wanted in LAC session, teachers responded "How we can give grades to students with incomplete outputs or those not complying to their missing outputs" (Teacher B), "Good vibes like travel, future plans, investing, best places to hang out. Anything which are not related to work" (Teacher C), "Mental Health and dealing with stress" (Teacher D), "Accuracy and honesty of answering the module by the students not by someone" (Teacher E), "advocacies" (Teacher H), " Food, Travel, and our hobbies" (Teacher J), "Compassion to co workers" (Teacher K), and "food or travel plan or life experiences" (Teacher L).

When asked for specific topics for self-awareness, teachers suggested "How to be positive when in a negative situation?" (Teacher B), "Anything about self-awareness" (Teacher C), " "Motivation" (Teacher D), "psychological needs that drives our behavior" (Teacher E),

"Of your capability and how far you can go not just being a teacher but you as a whole" (Teacher G), "Self-worth of a teacher" (Teacher I), "Hows and Whys of self-awareness" (Teacher J), "Self worth and self care" (Teacher K), and "a topic that could boost our self-awareness" (Teacher L). Meanwhile, Teacher F suggested, "There is nothing I have in my mind, I will just be willing to listen to any LAC session that the school will offer."

When asked for specific topics for mental health, teachers suggested "How to overcome emotional disorder" (Teacher B), "Anything about mental health" (Teacher C), "Stress management" (Teacher D), "Mindfulness" (Teacher E), "On how to cope with pressure" (Teacher G), "Stress management" (Teacher I), "Effective strategies to avoid mental diarrhea" (Teacher J), and "Having the true peace of mind amidst the pandemic and how to make things easier for teacher/ adviser" (Teacher K). On the other hand, Teacher H did not give any suggestion while Teacher L mentioned any topic.

Teachers regularly have to juggle many competing demands. As a result, they can easily prioritize other matters ahead of their own mental health and well-being needs. However, for their benefit and the whole school community, it is important for teachers to prioritize their mental health. Hence, teachers were asked about LAC session topics that they want to participate in to discuss their needs. Most of the participants reported topics that are not work related such as foods, travel, hobbies and life experiences. This suggests that they are already overwhelmed with job related topics and would want to focus more on the topics that would lighten their moods and topics where they can share their experiences, interests and hobbies. Whereas, some stated topics on managing stress and students' behavior and performance.

In addition to the topics on teachers' well-being, self-awareness topics that they raised are about self-worth and self-care. Hence, teachers perceive that teacher self-care matters and they need to practice it to continue working under a stressful environment. Because teaching is an intensive job, teachers can experience overwhelming stress thus practicing self-care is a must which will not only benefit them but also the entire school community. Another topic mentioned is about the limitation of a teacher's role, going beyond what is required and expected of them might impact their mental well-being. This suggests that teachers get so involved with school related tasks that they also have sacrificed their time and energy to foster their own growth and learning.

Whereas, the majority of the teachers mentioned stress management strategies as a topic for mental health. Since the well-being of teachers are compromised by issues inherent to the school system, teachers need to safeguard themselves with coping strategies that will help them overcome emotional overload. Another topic mentioned is mindfulness which refers to the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment. Since teachers experience high levels of stress due to the demands of the profession, participants perceive mindfulness as an intervention to help them reduce stress and improve their self-efficacy and performance. Hence, mindfulness-based practices are associated with overcoming job-related stress.

Lastly, as teachers dedicate their lives in delivering education amidst the pandemic and are tasked to accomplish excessive workloads, teacher K mentioned the importance of finding peace and practices that will create a safe workspace which will help make things easier to manage.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following are the conclusions: Teachers are potentially threatened to be frustrated by concerns that would intensify their workload. These include issues of communication, non-teaching tasks, the system, time, and work-home balance. This boils down to the reality that teachers are human too. These issues affect not just their daily lives as a teacher but also their personal spaces. Having experienced the full-blown effects of the pandemic on the academe, they were not able to reflect on and process their emotions as fast as their environment is changing which resulted in frustrations. In addition to teacher emotions' having a significant influence on the quality of education, they can also impact teachers' well-being and health (Huang et al., 2020). It is alarming that teachers are on the edge of their frustrations which can severely influence teachers' in-class instruction performance and job satisfaction and can ultimately lead to burnout (Sutton, 2007).

The concerns and conditions of teachers that they can't change are external factors. External factors include non-teaching tasks and the system amplified by the pandemic. Although these factors can limit teachers' effectiveness and efficiency inside the classroom, these issues are non-negotiable and uncontrollable considering the gravity of its scope, unless there are real circumstances that would change how the "system" can be more lenient towards the needs of the teachers. Teachers felt that the Department of Education is over-mandating with overly ruled demands and tasks that require additional time, effort and resources that could be used and diverted to other important areas. The increased demands and obligation to do outside teaching forfeit significant time in making teachers do their primary task, teaching.

Although teachers' level of uncertainty during the pandemic regarding how they are managed and their dissatisfaction raised-up, they still want their concerns and conditions regarding the matter to be addressed appropriately. As much as students' needs are being addressed, equal treatment should also be given to the teachers. Focusing on teachers' well-being which includes their mental, physical, and psychosocial health while minimizing unnecessary tasks and changing teacher management could help increase satisfaction and retain teachers. A supportive work environment will help teachers navigate the uncertainty of yet another school year in the pandemic.

Teaching, in reality, is one of the most stressful professions given their typi-

cally heavy workloads, time pressures, and difficulties juggling roles (MacIntyre et al., 2019). The sources of teacher stress have multiplied with the advent of Covid-19. But that is inevitable given the circumstances we are facing right now. Thus, teachers who are considered one of the most flexible workforces managed to redirect this negative impact of the pandemic into positive indicators such as resiliency, growth, perceived health, relationship engagement, and having a new purpose in life. Their coping mechanisms revolve around how they will transform and help themselves pass through these tough times and accept the fact that there are certain things in life which are uncontrollable, and that we cannot change.

The technical assistance teachers need to enhance their self-awareness and mental health revolves around prioritizing their well-being by providing a comprehensive overview of the higher risk of stress, burnout, depression, and other mental health challenges among teachers. Teachers suffer in silence due to the perceived stigma that they should provide more for their students, and they should be the ones providing for their needs. Often, teachers forget to think of themselves and neglect that in this cycle, they are also important. Having said that, a greater support system from the government, administration, and other stakeholders is needed.

### **Recommendation**

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend the following:

1. As teachers go through this career phase in their profession, reframing their perspective and turning frustrations into a challenge to be bravely overcome is necessary. Teachers can educate themselves on how these frustration patterns affect them to lay the importance of the groundwork for understanding and change. Also, challenging your thoughts and replacing them with positive ideas can help you see the 'gift' in those trying moments. Reframing can change the way you see stressors as a challenge rather than a threat.
2. Setting standards in this time of pandemic is difficult. Hence, teachers should not be too hard on themselves in setting so many standards and end up frustrated if not met. Acceptance is the key to things that we can't change. Teachers don't have to feel positive to accept things that can't be changed. The moment that they acknowledge that there is something one step forward. To accept something which can't be changed means you have come to terms with it and are willing to do every possible way to re-

solve it. Furthermore, instead of dwelling on things that can't be changed, teachers should be more focused on their strengths. Focusing on a teacher's best qualities can help teachers overcome their perceptions and find fulfilment in their profession.

3. It is important to address the concerns appropriately. Addressing these concerns and bringing awareness to the educational environment that teachers face daily can help improve teacher retention, student success rates, and the overall quality of education in schools. Teachers can employ realistic professional solutions to concerns that can be changed. Furthermore, teachers can also reinforce change in commitments through collaborations with students, colleagues, administrators and other stakeholders in order to bring change in the school premises, community and the lives of both the students and the teachers.
4. As the world moves forward, teachers should also adapt to what is presented to them. To do this, teachers should re-balance work and life beyond teaching. Find effective ways that suit them to lessen the burden and strengthen their mental, physical, emotional, and psychosocial well-being. It can be either emotion-focused strategies and/or solution-focused strategies. Emotion-focused coping mechanisms include humor and cultivating optimism. Start visualizing situations on a more positive note. On the other hand, solution-focused strategies include time-management strategies, building relationships and diverting their attention to a more fruitful endeavor. The more teachers see that when situations don't change, their perception does. Through this, the process of coping will be much easier.
5. School administrators may involve teachers in the development and reform of educational policies and programs. They must consider approaches for overcoming the threats to mental health by implementing evidence-based interventions and organizational measures to help protect and support the mental health and well-being of the teachers.
6. Future researchers may cater different ideas and concepts. They may gather more information from the teachers. The voice of the teachers is very important in continuing this research as time passes by so quickly and change is just around the corner.

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# The Role of Self-Disclosure and Empathy on Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction among Religious Sisters amid COVID-19

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## Abstract

This research explores the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction of religious sisters, focusing on the mediating roles of self-disclosure and empathy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the research involved 284 young nuns from various congregations in Vietnam. Key instruments included the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale, and structured interviews. The findings indicate that while self-esteem significantly predicts life satisfaction, self-disclosure, and empathy ( $p < .05$ ), the latter two do not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, as they do not significantly predict life satisfaction ( $p > .05$ ). The study recommends further research to investigate additional variables, employ alternative designs, and examine different populations for more comprehensive insights.

**Keywords:** life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-disclosure, empathy, religious life, COVID-19

## Introduction

The religious nuns face significant challenges regarding self-esteem and life satisfaction, particularly when transitioning from secular life to a religious community (Ngoc, 2024). The hierarchical structure and demands of religious vows can lead to self-doubt and hinder open communication. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, impacting mental health, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships (Dolan & Sanchez, 2020; Brodeur et al., 2020). Notably, self-esteem is crucial for motivation and life satisfaction, while effective communication skills and empathy are essential for building meaningful connections (Du, King, & Chi, 2017; DeVito, 2016). Therefore, this study is interested in exploring the mediating roles of self-disclosure and empathy on the relationships between self-esteem and life satisfaction among young nuns, highlighting their importance for psychological well-being (Ngoc, 2024). Despite the significance of these factors, there is limited research on their interplay in religious contexts.

A review of the literature confirms that there is extensive research on the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Life satisfaction stems from a cognitive and optimistic evaluation of one's life (Yang & Srinivasan, 2016; Veenhoven, 2012). While happiness and life satisfaction are related, they are not identical; happiness does not always equate to satisfaction. According to Diener (1984), life satisfaction, a key component of subjective well-being, involves assessing the quality of life based on personal criteria and encompasses overall conditions and aspirations (Sousa & Lyubomirsky, 2001). Strong family support and positive self-esteem significantly enhance life satisfaction (Schnettler et al., 2017; Diener & Diener, 2009). Unlike life satisfaction, self-esteem, influenced by childhood experiences and parental relationships, varies across cultures and genders, typically increasing from adolescence to adulthood (Orth & Robins, 2014; Körük, 2017). High self-esteem is linked to greater life satisfaction and happiness, while low self-esteem correlates with dissatisfaction. This relationship is crucial across different life stages and contexts, including cultural and religious settings, impacting overall well-being and quality of life.

The interaction of self-esteem is extensive and impacts various aspects of life. Factors such as self-disclosure and empathy in interpersonal communication are significantly influenced by self-esteem. High self-esteem leads to more confident and open self-disclosure, while low self-esteem results in hesitation and defensive behaviors (DeVito, 2016). Those with high self-esteem use more expressive and considerate language, improving communication and building stronger rela-

tionships (Powell, 2015). Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem struggle to express themselves, leading to social anxiety (Rill et al., 2009). Beyond communication, empathy, the ability to understand and share others' feelings, is also related to self-esteem (Manczak et al., 2016). High self-esteem enhances one's capacity for empathy, improving interpersonal interactions (Cone, 2016). Thus, it can be concluded that effective communication involves both self-disclosure and empathy, which are crucial for maintaining positive relationships (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). Therefore, fostering self-esteem can improve communication skills and interpersonal relationships.

Thus, it can be seen that interpersonal communication is very important for life satisfaction and especially for building relationships with others (Beebe et al., 2014). Humans begin interacting with their environment and others even before birth, emphasizing the fundamental role of communication in human development. However, do essential skills such as self-disclosure and empathy significantly predict life satisfaction? According to Sprecher and his colleagues (2013), self-disclosure helps build closer and more satisfying relationships, while empathy improves relational outcomes, such as in patient care, where it enhances satisfaction and well-being (Hojat et al., 2015). Therefore, effective interpersonal communication skills are necessary for creating and maintaining fulfilling relationships, thus contributing to overall happiness and life satisfaction.

Specifically, for consecrated life, the interaction between self-esteem, self-disclosure, empathy, and life satisfaction has attracted the attention of only a few researchers. This is because religious life is a special vocation where individuals respond to Christ's call by living without marriage, fame, or wealth. These individuals dedicate their lives to serving God through community life, often joining a religious order (Pope Paul VI, 1965). For example, Dominican Sisters in Vietnam undergo stages of formation including postulancy, novitiate, and juniorate, preparing them for perpetual profession (Constitution, 95-98). Among the researchers, Eze and his colleagues (2016) suggest that self-esteem plays an important role in effective communication within religious communities, affecting relationships and the ability to self-disclose and empathize. Additionally, strong interpersonal communication skills and high self-esteem are associated with higher life satisfaction among those living a consecrated life (Rubin et al., 1993).

Overall, research on the mediating role of interpersonal communication and empathy in the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction is limited. Most existing studies focus on university students, including nursing and pre-

school teacher students (Marham, 2015; Gurdoga et al., 2016). Moreover, interpersonal communication competence and empathy play essential roles in psychology and therapy, as they significantly influence the development of positive relationships between individuals, such as professionals and their clients in the business field (Adigwe & Okoro, 2016). This competence is necessary for establishing and maintaining connections in any group or society. However, specific research on the mediating role of self-disclosure and empathy in the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction remains scarce. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by exploring how these dynamics function in the context of religious life and further investigating the effects of communication behavior on self-esteem and relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic (Luster, Nelson & Busby, 2013). Additionally, it will contribute to the field by introducing a new sample and offering concrete methods to enhance self-esteem, self-disclosure, and empathy, as well as ways to build a happier life when facing unexpected crises or difficulties.

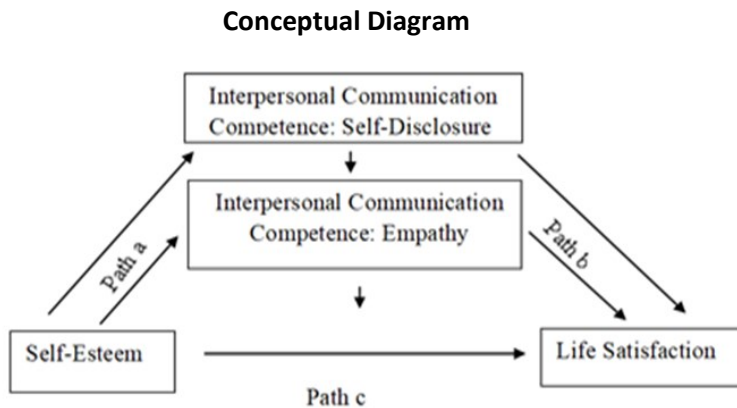


Figure 1: *Moderating Role of Self-Disclosure, Empathy on Relationship between Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction*

**Statement of the Problem**

1. What are the means of variables of religious sisters in terms of:
  - a) Self-esteem
  - b) Life satisfaction
  - c) Interpersonal communication competence
  - d) Self-disclosure
  - e) Empathy

2. Are there significant predictive relationships of the following:
  - a) Self-esteem and self-disclosure dimension of ICC
  - b) Self-esteem and empathy dimension of ICC
  - c) Self-esteem and life satisfaction
  - d) Self-disclosure dimension of ICC and life satisfaction
  - e) Empathy dimension of ICC and life satisfaction
3. Does self-disclosure moderate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction?
4. Does empathy moderate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction?
5. How did COVID-19 affect the community as qualitatively reported by the religious?
6. What are the nuances of the role of self-disclosure and empathy in self-esteem and life satisfaction amid the Covid-19 context as perceived by the religious sisters?
7. What adjustments did the religious sisters do in their community amid COVID -19?

### **Hypotheses**

The researcher hypothesized the following:

1. There are significant predictive relationships among the following:
  - a) Self-esteem and self-disclosure dimension of ICC
  - b) Self-esteem and empathy dimension of ICC
  - c) Self-esteem and life satisfaction
  - d) Self-disclosure dimension of ICC and life satisfaction
  - e) Empathy dimension of ICC and life satisfaction
2. Self-esteem significantly predicts life satisfaction after the inclusion of self-disclosure as a moderating variable.
3. Self-esteem significantly predicts life satisfaction after the inclusion of empathy as moderating variable.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. In this research, self-reports were used to assess the relationships between self-esteem, life satisfaction, and interpersonal communication competence, focusing on self-disclosure and empathy. After analyzing the quantitative data, the researcher conducted interviews to explore the impact of COVID-19 on these variables, aiming to

understand the role of interpersonal communication during the pandemic and support the initial findings (Creswell, 2014).

## Participants

A total of 284 Vietnamese junior sisters aged 20-35 participated in the survey, with an average age of 28.87. The most common ages were 28, 30, 27, and 29. Junior sisters are members of religious congregations in the final stage of their formation before taking perpetual vows. This period follows their initial novitiate phase and focuses on deepening their spiritual, emotional, and professional development. During this time, they prepare for lifelong commitment and greater responsibilities in various ministries. The majority came from the Dominican Sisters of Tam Hiep (77 participants), followed by other congregations like the Dominican Sisters of Rosa Lima (48) and the Dominican Sisters of Phu Cuong (39). Of the participants, 240 were theological sisters (85.5%), and 40 were practicum sisters (15.5%). In terms of duties, 127 taught in schools (44.7%), 64 served the poor (22.5%), and 93 worked in parishes (32.7%).

## Instruments

Each variable was measured using adapted versions of three scales: (1) Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale, (2) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and (3) Satisfaction with Life Scale. The instrument also gathered demographic data and included some questions about COVID-19. Individual interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to explore the effects of COVID-19 on self-esteem, life satisfaction, self-disclosure, and empathy. All materials were translated into Vietnamese and back translated by experts.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener et al. (2009), measures life satisfaction with five items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores range from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. In this study, scores ranged from 9 to 35, with a mean of 26.218, suggesting high life satisfaction among participants. The scale's reliability is  $\alpha = 0.87$ .

Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS) by Rubin and Martin (1994) measures ten dimensions of communication competence. This study used a 30-item version focusing on self-disclosure and empathy, with total scores ranging from 30 to 150. Self-disclosure scores averaged 8.602, and empathy scores averaged 9.377, indicating moderate to high levels. The scale's reliability is  $\alpha = 0.86$ . Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) measures global self-esteem with ten items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Scores between 15 and 25 are

average, with higher scores indicating more positive self-esteem. In this study, scores ranged from 7 to 30, with an average of 18.222, reflecting moderate self-esteem levels. The scale's reliability is  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

Interpersonal communication, including self-disclosure and empathy, plays a crucial role in any group, including religious communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these skills have been linked to self-esteem and life satisfaction. To explore these concepts further, participants were invited to qualitative interviews to discuss their experiences with communication, self-disclosure, empathy, self-esteem, and life satisfaction during the pandemic.

Participants with low scores on the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale were selected for follow-up interviews. These participants came from various major Vietnamese congregations, sharing similar training stages. Interview questions, based on mediation analysis results, were sent to five participants initially and ten subsequently. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, then transcribed and translated into English. Here are questions guide:

1. Could you describe your attitude in the community from the time COVID-19 happened until the present in terms of:
  - a) communication with your community members
  - b) interpersonal relations with your community members
2. Besides, how was your capacity for self-disclosure and empathy in those relationships?
3. Give the current situation; what can you say about your self-esteem at present? Would you say you are satisfied with your life now? Can you kindly explain this to me?
4. What problems have you encountered in the community amid COVID-19 related to "interpersonal relations/ communication"? Furthermore, what did you do to adjust/ cope with the problems?
5. How is Covid-19 impacting upon you and your community?
6. How often do you talk with members of your community during the pandemic?
7. What adjustments if any have you had to make in your communities?

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

Research Question 1 (RQ1) investigated the means and standard deviations of self-esteem, life satisfaction, interpersonal communication competence, self-disclosure, and empathy among junior sisters. Table 2 shows that the mean scores are generally high, indicating positive responses from the participants. The junior sisters demonstrated moderate levels of self-esteem ( $M=18.222$ ), suggesting a balanced view of self-worth. Their interpersonal communication competence ( $M=92.271$ ) was also moderate, indicating effective social interaction skills. Life satisfaction was high ( $M=26.218$ ), showing a positive perception of their circumstances. Self-disclosure ( $M=8.602$ ) and empathy ( $M=9.377$ ) were above average, suggesting moderate tendencies in both areas. Overall, the junior sisters exhibit healthy emotional states with moderate self-esteem, strong life satisfaction, and adequate communication skills.

**Table 1:** Mean Scores of Variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Self-esteem	7.0	30.0	18.222
ICC	58.0	121.0	92.271
Life Satisfaction	9.0	35.0	26.218
Self-Disclosure	3.0	13.0	8.602
Empathy	3.0	14.0	9.377

Using Barron and Kenny's (1986) method, the analysis revealed that self-esteem significantly predicts interpersonal communication competence, with a correlation of  $R = .226$  and a  $p$ -value  $< .01$ . Self-esteem also has a notable impact on self-disclosure ( $R = .140$ ,  $p = .018$ ) and empathy ( $R = .202$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Regression analysis showed a significant, positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction ( $R = .313$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, self-disclosure and empathy did not significantly predict life satisfaction, with respective  $p$ -values exceeding 0.05.

Thus, the ability to communicate through self-disclosure and empathy did not substantially affect the sisters' overall life satisfaction. Consequently, the mediation analysis found no significant indirect effect of self-disclosure and empathy on the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. The Sobel Test con-

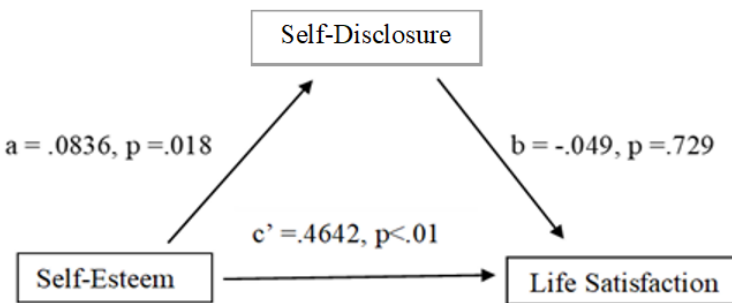
firmed that neither self-disclosure nor empathy mediated this relationship. This aligns with updated mediation analysis techniques, such as Hayes' (2018) PROCESS model, which also showed self-esteem as a significant predictor but did not support mediation by self- disclosure and empathy.

**Table 2:** *The Prediction of Self-Esteem on Self-Disclosure, Empathy*

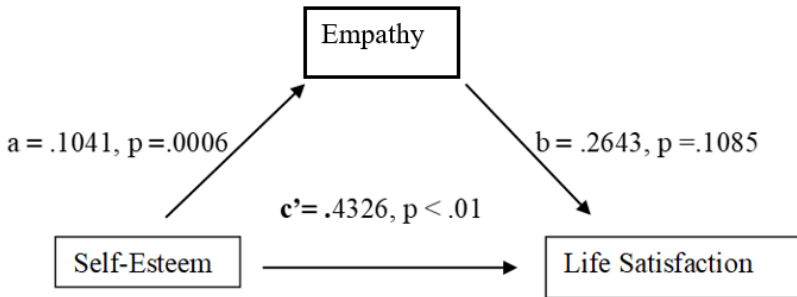
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
Self-Disclosure	.1403	.0197	3.3235	5.6639	1.0000	282.0000	.0180
Empathy	.2018	.0407	2.4379	11.9728	1.0000	282.0000	.0006
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	10.8561	.6495	16.7156	.0000	9.5777	12.1346	
Self-Disclosure	.0836	.0351	2.3799	.0180	.0145	.1528	
constant	9.8692	.5316	18.5656	.0000	8.8228	10.9156	
Empathy	.1041	.0301	3.4602	.0006	.0449	.1634	

Note: P-value of self-disclosure and empathy is insignificant ( $p > .05$ )

**Figure 2.** *The Mediation Analysis Result of Self-Disclosure*



**Figure 3.** *The Mediation Analysis Result of Empathy*



**Qualitative Findings**

The quantitative study's mediation analysis did not support the hypotheses (H1d & H1e), indicating that self-disclosure and empathy do not significantly mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among religious sisters during the COVID-19 pandemic (H2 & H3). Therefore, the researcher conducted a qualitative study to further explore the impact of the pandemic and religious life on this relationship. Therefore, the researcher incorporated the qualitative study to explain why self-disclosure and empathy of interpersonal communication competence did not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. The qualitative study emphasized the influence of COVID-19 on these variables in religious life, suggesting factors that might influence the mediating role of self-disclosure and empathy (Research Questions 5 & 6). However, quantitative study results showed that self-disclosure and empathy could not predict life satisfaction. Hence, the reasons why self-disclosure and empathy could not serve as mediators needed further investigation. To validate the quantitative results, the researcher collected additional data through the qualitative study.

Five sisters with low scores in self-disclosure and empathy participated in answering these questions. The researcher distributed the questions via email, and participants responded in the same way. After data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted following steps such as familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing the report.

**Effect of COVID-19 on Religious Sisters' Community.** Based on the interviewees' statements, COVID-19 impacts the self-esteem, life satisfaction, self-disclosure, and empathy of the religious sisters. The decrease in confidence and loss of dignity are evident through feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the

future for themselves and their loved ones. This is even more apparent with limited communication and a lack of connection within the community.

**Self-Esteem.** The impact on self-esteem, related to decreased confidence and loss of dignity, is evident from shared experiences. One interview participant stated, "At first, I was afraid and confused, not for myself, but for my sisters, family, and those I love the most." This indicates a lack of confidence in one's ability to protect oneself and others. Another dimension of how COVID-19 affects the sisters' self-esteem is the loss of self-value. The halt in schools and service work, along with limited conversations and exchanges among community members, indicates a loss of dignity and personal worth when unable to engage in important activities and interact with the community.

**Life Satisfaction.** The life satisfaction index during the COVID-19 era may plummet for many individuals, particularly for religious sisters. Life satisfaction often reflects factors such as mission experiences and religious rituals. Therefore, the cessation of religious activities essentially means halting personal endeavors, which constitutes a significant loss, leading to a sense of dissatisfaction with life. Another issue is the lack of resources and income, as religious sisters often rely on educational institutions. Consequently, the quality of life has decreased, and there is a looming concern for future economic and health prospects if COVID-19 prolongs.

**Self-Disclosure.** The impact of anxiety and uncertainty has affected the ability of some individuals to self-disclose. When feelings of stress and fear dominate, some may find it challenging to share their emotions with others due to concerns about judgment or relational instability. The sudden changes in daily life, such as lockdowns and communication restrictions, have instilled worries about the future and mental well-being. A sense of loss of control and uncertainty about the future can diminish confidence and the ability to self-disclose for some, leading to changes in life and increased stress levels.

**Empathy.** COVID-19 affects all aspects of human life, including the empathy of religious sisters. The limitation in face-to-face communication has reduced the ability to express empathy within the community. Reduced direct interaction and conversations often veering towards other topics to adapt to the pandemic situation have contributed to this. Furthermore, restrictions on contacting those outside the community have diminished access to information and support from external resources. This has impacted understanding and empathy towards various situa-

tions and experiences, reducing social support and interaction. These impacts have created a challenging environment for emotional self-disclosure and empathetic expression, influencing how individuals cope and navigate the pandemic's effects.

The study, supplemented with new data from extended interviews, provides fresh insights into how this pandemic continues to affect their self-esteem, life satisfaction, self-disclosure, and empathy. The new data highlights that feelings of stress and anxiety persist, especially in the current phase of the pandemic. Maintaining silence and avoiding direct communication may decrease confidence and lead to concerns about the loss of personal value. However, solidarity and concern for each other's health have helped the sisters overcome these challenges and create a more positive interaction environment.

**Self-Disclosure and Empathy in the Relationship of Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction Amid COVID-19.** In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, self-disclosure and empathy indirectly impact the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that self-disclosure is influenced by self-esteem. Individuals with good self-esteem are more likely to interact and share information with others. Sharing emotions and thoughts through self-disclosure can reduce stress and create a sense of support. When individuals open up about their worries, fears, or difficulties, they can receive empathy and support, strengthening self-esteem and reducing loneliness, thereby positively impacting life satisfaction.

However, during COVID-19, the sisters maintain an optimistic attitude despite challenges in self-disclosure. Some sisters encounter difficulties in sharing their emotions and thoughts due to communication apprehension or limited communication opportunities. They may feel hesitant to articulate their thoughts, and communication limitations lead to constraints in self-expression, reducing the ability to share emotions and opinions. Additionally, the empathy aspect reveals a lack of depth and awareness. Although empathy exists, its depth is not profound, indicating a surface-level understanding of others' difficulties.

Despite barriers and limitations in communication that may diminish the ability to self-disclose and empathize, the sisters gradually regain a more positive outlook on life during this COVID-19 period. Factors of faith and love for God help them uphold their self-worth through acts of charity and prayer. Adaptation and positive perception in new circumstances turn the COVID-19 period into a time for

personal reflection. This positive outlook alleviates worries and fears about the future. Thus, the intrinsic value and life satisfaction of the sisters remain positive despite reduced interpersonal interaction and mutual understanding due to limited face-to-face interaction.

**Adjustments of Religious Sisters Amid COVID-19.** Another aspect expressed by participants is the adaptation to circumstances caused by COVID-19. When facing initial difficulties and limitations, participants' awareness of people and religious life aims at a positive and loving lifestyle. They quickly adapt to life circumstances, trusting God through prayer and being flexible in mission and work, such as sewing masks and extending assistance to those in need.

In summary, the sisters have shown great adaptability during the pandemic due to their training and spiritual life. This adaptability helps maintain their self-esteem and life satisfaction despite numerous challenges and limitations.

### ***Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Finding***

The researcher employed an explanatory sequential mixed method, beginning with a quantitative study followed by qualitative interviews, to integrate findings effectively. Both studies revealed that sisters maintained their self-esteem despite the pandemic's challenges, with a mean score of 18.2 on the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Qualitative findings confirmed that initial fear, anxiety, and insecurity impacted their self-esteem, leading to stress and depression. However, interpersonal communication competence, including self-disclosure and empathy, did not significantly predict the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Digital communication during COVID-19 initially reduced self-disclosure and empathy, but this improved as the sisters adapted. Qualitative data highlighted that adjustment played a crucial role in linking communication and life satisfaction. This adjustment explained why self-disclosure and empathy could not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. The religious context and the pandemic's impact were significant factors in these findings.

## **Discussion**

To analyze this discussion section, it's crucial to revisit the foundational concepts explored in the research. Previous studies highlight the importance of self-esteem in shaping life satisfaction among sisters. This study builds on that understanding by examining the interplay between interpersonal communication competence, self-disclosure, empathy, and life satisfaction among religious sisters, partic-

ularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to deepen our comprehension of how self-disclosure and empathy influence the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Research questions and hypotheses guide this inquiry, positing that self-esteem is linked to interpersonal communication competence and that these factors significantly relate to life satisfaction. However, the results indicate that self-disclosure and empathy do not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction as hypothesized.

The mean scores reveal moderate levels of self-esteem, interpersonal communication competence, self-disclosure, and empathy among the sisters. These findings suggest that while self-disclosure and empathy are important, they do not directly influence the link between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Despite this, self-disclosure and empathy remain crucial for fostering emotional support and resilience. The study's findings offer significant insights into the psychological well-being and life satisfaction of religious sisters, particularly within the pandemic context.

The second question explored the relationships between variables like self-esteem, self-disclosure, empathy, and life satisfaction.

**Self-Esteem and Self-Disclosure.** The correlation between self-esteem and interpersonal communication is crucial for community harmony, including in religious groups. Effective communication fosters understanding and empathy among members. Religious sisters, influenced by hierarchical structures, often prioritize obedience, affecting openness and empathy in interactions. Previous research shows that self-esteem shapes interpersonal communication. Self-assessment impacts behaviors and moods during communication.

The study confirms self-esteem significantly predicts self-disclosure through quantitative result. This prediction, though not very strong, is significant (H1a accepted). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how low self-esteem affects communication competence, potentially increasing suicide risk. However, religious sisters showed resilience, supporting each other, which boosted self-esteem. This highlights the importance of addressing self-esteem for effective communication.

**Self-Esteem and Empathy.** The relationship between self-esteem and empathy among religious sisters during the pandemic is crucial. Data show a significant positive prediction of self-esteem on empathy, indicating that higher self-esteem boosts empathy. Huang et al. (2019) also highlight self-esteem's role in fostering empathy in various contexts. The pandemic's stress underscores this rela-

tionship's importance, suggesting that enhancing self-esteem in religious sisters can improve their empathy. In conclusion, higher self-esteem is linked to greater empathy, offering valuable insights for supporting religious sisters' emotional well-being during crises.

**Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction.** The study found a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. This supports Diener's (1984) Bottom-Up Theory, asserting that self-esteem is crucial for life satisfaction. Research shows self-esteem predicts life satisfaction and influences emotional well-being. For religious individuals, self-esteem mediates life satisfaction and religious beliefs, influenced by community status and participation in religious activities. High self-esteem helps individuals navigate challenges and maintain joy, while low self-esteem reduces life satisfaction (Park & Yang, 2017). Self-esteem fluctuates with life transitions (Orth & Robins, 2014), affecting satisfaction. The pandemic's challenges highlight that high self-esteem contributes to a positive outlook and adaptability. Overall, self-esteem significantly influences life satisfaction, fostering harmonious relationships and effective leadership.

**Self-Disclosure and Life Satisfaction.** The study used regression analysis to explore the role of interpersonal communication competence between self-esteem and life satisfaction in religious communities during COVID-19. Contrary to expectations, interpersonal communication competence did not predict life satisfaction ( $p > .05$ ), disconfirming the hypothesis. Mediation analysis involving self-disclosure also failed to show support, with the Sobel Test showing an insignificant effect. Despite literature suggesting self-disclosure positively influences well-being, this study found no direct effect on life satisfaction among religious individuals during the pandemic. Contextualizing these results within a broader psychological framework is essential, considering the complex nature of self-disclosure's impact on adaptation.

**Empathy and Life Satisfaction:** Empathy, the ability to understand others' emotions, has been linked to life satisfaction, especially among religious sisters during the pandemic. While some studies show minimal correlation, others, like Bourgault et al. (2015) suggested indirect associations. Empathy positively influences job contentment, self-regard, and psychological well-being, particularly in empathetic adolescents (Cho & Jeon, 2019; Hojat et al., 2015). Cultural factors significantly shape the empathy-life satisfaction relationship, with collectivist cultures valuing empathy more than individualistic ones (Matsumoto et al., 2016). However, recent research, including the Sobel Test ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicates empathy did not predict life

satisfaction among religious sisters during COVID-19, rejecting hypothesis H1e. Despite empathy's role in social harmony, its direct impact on life satisfaction remains inconclusive, warranting further investigation into the interplay between empathy, culture, and life satisfaction in religious contexts.

#### **Moderating Roles of Self-Disclosure on Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction:**

The study found that self-disclosure does not moderate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among religious individuals during COVID-19. This conclusion arises from the limitations of the Baron and Kenny method, which requires large sample sizes and doesn't assess the indirect pathway's significance. Alternative methods like bootstrapping are better suited for smaller samples. Despite some studies suggesting self-disclosure influences life satisfaction, these often involve broader populations with more social media access. The pandemic's restrictions likely hindered interpersonal communication among the study's junior sisters. Thus, self-disclosure doesn't significantly impact the self-esteem and life satisfaction link in this context.

**Moderating Roles of Empathy on Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction:** The study suggests a significant link between self-esteem and life satisfaction among religious sisters, with empathy potentially moderating this relationship. While empathy doesn't directly impact life satisfaction, its role as a moderator warrants further exploration. Initial findings indicate a straightforward relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, but deeper analysis could reveal how empathy interacts with self-esteem to influence life satisfaction. Comprehensive research is needed to understand these dynamics fully, which can inform strategies to enhance the psychological well-being of religious sisters by considering the critical roles of both self-esteem and empathy in their life satisfaction.

#### **Role of Self-Disclosure and Empathy in Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction.**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted social interactions, affecting psychological well-being. For religious sisters, self-disclosure and empathy play crucial roles in the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction.

*Self-Disclosure:* Sharing personal thoughts and feelings helps build self-esteem by allowing authentic self-expression and receiving validation. For religious sisters, self-disclosure reinforces self-worth and identity within their community. Emotional support from sharing fears and challenges boosts self-esteem, while reducing stress and loneliness. This fosters a sense of belonging and deeper connections, enhancing life satisfaction.

*Empathy:* Understanding and sharing others' feelings is key to building relationships. Empathy ensures that religious sisters feel understood and valued, strengthening their self-esteem. Empathic interactions provide encouragement and validation, contributing to self-worth. A supportive, empathetic community boosts life satisfaction and emotional resilience, vital during the pandemic.

*Challenges and Adaptations:* Pandemic restrictions limited traditional means of self-disclosure and empathy. Some sisters struggled with shyness or lack of private conversation opportunities, affecting emotional support. They adapted by using digital communication and body language to express empathy. The community's spiritual foundation helped sustain support despite reduced interactions.

*Maintaining Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction:* Strong faith and community bonds were crucial for maintaining self-esteem and life satisfaction. Prayer, reflection, and charitable acts reinforced positivity and fulfillment. The community's resilience mitigated the pandemic's psychological impacts, underscoring the importance of support and faith in preserving well-being during crises.

*Adjustment of Religious Sisters Amid COVID-19:* The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted social interactions and psychological well-being, particularly for religious sisters. The restrictions on face-to-face interactions and altered communication dynamics have necessitated substantial adjustments in how they maintain self-esteem and life satisfaction.

*Adapting to New Circumstances:* Religious sisters have shown remarkable adaptability by modifying their spiritual practices and communal activities to comply with health guidelines. They increased individual and communal prayer sessions, using digital platforms when necessary to maintain their spiritual needs and support.

*Maintaining Spiritual Practices:* To cope with the pandemic's psychological impacts, sisters emphasized prayer and reflection, holding smaller, frequent sessions and using online tools for communal worship.

*Modifying Community Activities:* They altered community events to ensure safety, focusing on smaller group activities like sewing masks and preparing food for those in need, highlighting their commitment to charity.

*Enhancing Communication:* With limited physical interactions, sisters turned to digital communication tools such as video calls and messaging apps to stay connected and support one another. They also used non-verbal communication methods like eye contact and nodding to express empathy.

*Psychological and Emotional Support:* Recognizing the heightened stress of the pandemic, sisters created safe spaces for expressing feelings and fears, emphasizing mutual support and regular mental health check-ins.

*Flexibility in Mission Work:* The sisters adapted their outreach efforts to the new reality by distributing masks, providing food supplies, and supporting local healthcare, reinforcing their sense of purpose during the crisis. The adjustments made by religious sisters during the pandemic underscore their resilience and adaptability. By modifying their practices and enhancing communication, they maintained their psychological well-being and continued their mission work, highlighting the importance of flexibility and communal support in navigating crises.

The study found that self-disclosure and empathy did not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among religious sisters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several factors might explain this. First, the pandemic's stress and social distancing likely influenced interpersonal dynamics, emphasizing collective responsibilities over personal expression. Second, the sample size of 284 may have been too small to detect subtle mediation effects in this specific group. Additionally, cultural factors in religious communities might suppress individual self-disclosure and empathy. Lastly, the traditional mediation models used may not fully capture the complex interpersonal variables in this context.

To address these limitations, promoting self-disclosure and empathy remains vital. Structured programs can be developed to enhance these skills, integrating long-term training into the regular curriculum. Personalized counseling sessions should be scheduled monthly, providing a safe space for self-disclosure and tailored guidance. Regular group sharing activities and workshops focusing on communication skills can promote mutual understanding and empathy. Leveraging technology, such as digital tools and online support groups, can maintain interaction and communication during social distancing.

Programs should be adapted to fit the cultural context of religious communities, emphasizing the value of self-disclosure and empathy within the framework of collective harmony. Integrating these skills with spiritual practices can highlight

their alignment with religious values. Ongoing evaluation and adaptation through regular feedback mechanisms and research can ensure the programs remain relevant and effective.

### Conclusion

Addressing the limitation that self-disclosure and empathy did not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction requires a multifaceted approach. Implementing structured programs, personalized counseling, group activities, leveraging technology, and maintaining cultural sensitivity can enhance these essential skills, improving self-esteem and life satisfaction and fostering a supportive and empathetic community, better equipped to navigate challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research should explore diverse populations, consider contextual factors, employ methodological innovations, and focus on religious communities to gain a clearer understanding of these dynamics. Despite the absence of a direct mediation effect, self-disclosure and empathy remain vital for fostering emotional support and resilience among religious sisters. Enhanced communication within these communities is crucial for maintaining psychological well-being and successful relationships.

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# Knowledge on Safer Sex Campaign among Young Girls

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the knowledge and perspectives of young girls aged 15-24 in Barangay Sto. Niño, Koronadal City, regarding safer sex practices. Using a qualitative case study approach and focus group discussions (FGDs), the research delves into the participants' sources of information, knowledge gaps, and preferences for acquiring information about safer sex. The findings reveal that while the participants have surface-level knowledge about contraceptives, there are significant misconceptions about their effectiveness. The participants are also aware of the general methods of contraception, including condoms and birth control pills, but often misunderstand how effective these methods are in preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They also demonstrate a preference for internet-based videos as an educational tool, with YouTube being the most commonly cited platform. However, they express concern over the reliability of online sources. The study highlights the importance of government intervention and community-based educational programs to address rising teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the Philippines. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and accessible educational resources that cater

to the diverse needs of young girls in the community, considering the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of the participants.

**Keywords:** safer sex campaign, safe sex practices, sex education

## Introduction

Adolescence is a period marked by significant physical, psychological, and social changes that can influence sexual behaviors. These changes can lead to confusion, curiosity, and experimentation, often without adequate guidance or knowledge. For many young people, especially those in rural areas or from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to comprehensive and accurate sexual health education remains limited. The lack of comprehensive education can lead to misunderstandings about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), contributing to a cycle of early pregnancies, STIs, and limited opportunities for future success.

In the Philippines, teenage pregnancies and STIs have emerged as serious public health concerns, with alarming statistics revealing the extent of the problem. According to the Department of Health (DOH), one in three young Filipinos engages in premarital sex, and many lack proper knowledge about safe sexual practices. These issues are compounded by cultural conservatism, which often prevents open discussions about sexual health in homes and schools. Moreover, with a strong emphasis on abstinence-based education in schools, young people are left without adequate resources to make informed decisions when it comes to contraceptive use and sexual health.

As the Philippines grapples with increasing cases of teenage pregnancies and STIs, understanding the sexual and reproductive health knowledge of young girls becomes essential in crafting effective interventions. This study aims to examine the level of knowledge about safer sex among young girls aged 15-24 in Barangay Sto. Niño, Koronadal City. It also explores the sources of information that shape their understanding, their preferred methods of learning, and how they perceive the role of government and community support in promoting safer sex practices. By understanding the challenges faced by young girls in this community, this study seeks to identify actionable strategies for improving sexual health education and reducing the rates of teenage pregnancies and STIs.

This study investigates the knowledge and attitudes of young girls in Barangay Sto. Niño regarding safer sex practices. With teenage pregnancies and STIs on the rise in the Philippines, particularly in rural areas, it is essential to understand the gaps in sexual education and communication. Previous research has pointed to the reliance on informal sources like peers and the internet for sexual health information, which can perpetuate myths and misconceptions (de Irala et al., 2009; Osorio et al., 2015). Young girls often turn to their peers for advice, but such advice is often unreliable and sometimes leads to further confusion.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge on sexual health education in the Philippines. By focusing on the experiences and perspectives of young girls in Barangay Sto. Niño, the study provides insights into the specific challenges faced by young people in rural communities, where access to formal education and healthcare services may be limited. It also underscores the need for more inclusive and comprehensive education programs that address not only the biological aspects of sexual health but also the emotional, social, and cultural factors that influence sexual decision-making.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of knowledge about safer sex among young girls in Barangay Sto. Niño, Koronadal City?
2. How do young girls acquire information about safer sex?
3. What additional information do they need to know about safer sex?
4. In what form and through which media do they prefer to receive information on safer sex?
5. How should the government intervene to provide accurate and appropriate knowledge about safer sex?

These research questions guide the investigation of the factors that influence young girls' understanding of safer sex, the barriers they face in accessing reliable information, and their preferred methods of learning.

## Method

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study methodology, which is particularly suited for exploring complex social issues in depth. The case study approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' knowledge, attitudes, and experiences, providing rich insights into the context-specific factors that influence

their understanding of safer sex. The case study methodology also facilitates the exploration of participants' perceptions in a holistic manner, taking into account the social, cultural, and educational factors that shape their views on sexual health. Additionally, qualitative case studies offer flexibility in capturing the nuanced perspectives of participants, making them ideal for investigating issues like sexual health that are often influenced by a range of personal, cultural, and environmental factors.

### **Research Participants**

The research engaged six female participants aged 15-24 from Barangay Sto. Niño. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the sample included a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. The participants included college students, high school graduates, and single mothers, providing a diverse representation of the target group. The socio-economic diversity of the participants allowed the study to capture different perspectives and attitudes towards sexual health education and safer sex practices. The participants' backgrounds ranged from those who had received some form of formal education to those who were less educated or had experienced early pregnancies, which highlighted the importance of tailored educational approaches for different groups.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data for this study were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), which are a popular qualitative research method used to gather data on participants' collective attitudes, experiences, and opinions. FGDs were chosen because they encourage interaction among participants, which can generate richer insights than individual interviews. The discussions were conducted in a confidential and supportive environment to allow participants to share openly without fear of judgment. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the discussions, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that key research questions were addressed.

### **Methods of Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the FGDs. This method involves identifying and interpreting recurring themes and patterns in the data, providing insights into the participants' knowledge and attitudes towards safer sex. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility in identifying a wide range of themes, which is particularly useful in exploring complex issues such as sexual health knowledge. The analysis was conducted in several stages, including data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. The

themes that emerged from the analysis include knowledge gaps in contraception, misconceptions about STI prevention, the role of family and peers in shaping attitudes, and the preferred modes of learning and accessing sexual health information.

## Results and Discussion

### *Knowledge on Safer Sex*

The findings indicate that participants possessed basic knowledge about safer sex practices, such as the use of condoms, withdrawal methods, and contraceptive pills. However, misconceptions about the effectiveness of these methods were common. For example, some participants believed that condoms were 100% effective in preventing both pregnancies and STIs, which reflects a gap in their understanding of contraceptive effectiveness. Additionally, some participants considered withdrawal to be as effective as condom use, which points to a lack of awareness about the risks associated with this method. These findings highlight the need for clearer, more accurate information on contraception to combat these misconceptions.

The participants also had limited exposure to long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as intrauterine devices (IUDs) and hormonal implants. While some expressed curiosity about these options, they had little access to information about how these methods work, their benefits, and their potential side effects. The misunderstanding of emergency contraception was also prevalent, with some participants perceiving it as a regular form of contraception rather than a backup method for contraceptive failure. This misunderstanding could lead to the misuse of emergency contraceptives, which is a significant public health concern.

### *Sources of Information*

The internet, particularly YouTube, was the most frequently mentioned source of information about safer sex. Participants expressed a preference for online videos due to their visual appeal and ease of access. However, they also acknowledged that not all information found on the internet was reliable, and some videos contained misleading or inaccurate content. School-based education was another important source of information, but participants noted that sex education in schools was often limited, focusing primarily on abstinence and avoiding discussion of contraceptives or sexual health in detail.

Peers also played a significant role in shaping participants' understanding of

sexual health. Some participants found peer advice helpful, while others mentioned that peers often shared inaccurate or incomplete information. Family members, especially older siblings, occasionally provided sexual health guidance, but these discussions were generally limited and focused more on warning against sexual activity than on providing comprehensive information about contraception and STI prevention.

### *Preferred Methods of Learning*

Participants expressed a strong preference for digital media, particularly internet videos, as the most engaging and accessible way to learn about sexual health. They also suggested the development of interactive platforms, such as mobile applications or forums, where they could receive personalized advice and engage in anonymous discussions. Participants felt that such platforms could provide a safe space for learning and addressing sensitive topics related to sexual health.

Interactive learning tools, such as quizzes or gamified educational content, were also suggested as ways to enhance engagement. These tools could make learning about sexual health more fun and less intimidating, encouraging young girls to seek out accurate information and take responsibility for their sexual health.

### *Role of Government*

Government intervention was seen as essential in addressing the gaps in sexual health education. Participants suggested that the government should implement more comprehensive sex education programs in schools, with a focus on contraceptives, STI prevention, and healthy relationships. These programs should be inclusive, culturally sensitive, and tailored to the needs of young girls in rural areas. Participants also emphasized the need for community-based seminars led by healthcare professionals to address local misconceptions and provide accurate information about sexual health.

### *Peer Education*

Several participants highlighted the potential of peer education in promoting safer sex practices. Training youth leaders as peer educators could facilitate more relatable and effective sexual health education. Peer-led discussions could help normalize conversations about sexual health and provide a supportive network for young girls seeking information or advice.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the critical need for comprehensive sexual health education among young girls in Barangay Sto. Niño, Koronadal City. The findings underscore the importance of accessible, accurate, and culturally sensitive educational resources that can address the knowledge gaps and misconceptions about safer sex. Internet-based platforms, particularly videos and mobile applications, offer a promising avenue for engaging young people and providing them with the information they need to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. However, these digital tools must be complemented by formal sex education in schools and community-based initiatives to ensure that all young girls have access to accurate, comprehensive, and age-appropriate sexual health education.

## Recommendations

1. Develop age-appropriate sex education programs that start in Grade 7 and cover contraceptives, STI prevention, and healthy relationships. Interactive activities should be included to engage students.
2. Create engaging online content, such as interactive videos and mobile applications, that cater to the needs and preferences of young girls. Include gamification elements to sustain interest.
3. Organize barangay-level seminars with healthcare professionals to disseminate accurate information about sexual health. Ensure these programs are accessible to marginalized groups.
4. Provide parents with resources and training on how to discuss sexual health openly with their children. Workshops and community support systems should be established.
5. Allocate more resources to reproductive health education and ensure the consistent implementation of policies supporting youth education on safer sex. Include regular assessments of the effectiveness of these programs.
6. Train youth leaders as peer educators to facilitate discussions and provide relatable guidance on sexual health topics. Peer-led clubs should be established in schools and communities.
7. Regularly assess the impact of educational initiatives, using feedback to refine and enhance their effectiveness. Data-driven approaches should be used to measure outcomes.
8. Collaborate with local influencers and community leaders to normalize discussions about safer sex and promote positive behaviors. Storytelling can make the message more relatable and engaging.

By addressing these recommendations, stakeholders can work together to create a supportive environment that empowers young girls to make informed decisions and prioritize their sexual and reproductive health.

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# **Love, Terror and Magic: The Influence of Romance and Horror as Mega-Story on the Narrative Structures of Fantasy in “The Farthest Shore: An Anthology of Fantasy Fiction from the Philippines”**

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## **Abstract**

Fantasy has cast a wide net, both in terms of its popularity and the genres that orbit within its sphere. These genres range from children’s stories to magic realism to the epic high-fantasy that J.R.R Tolkien’s “The Lord of The Rings” solidified as the basic template of modern fantasy, at least as far as popular recognition and publishing categories are concerned. Despite the popularity of fantasy in literature, fantasy written by Filipinos is a much smaller and more niche genre. Part of the tension in the very idea of Filipinos writing fantasy is how it can distinguish itself as distinctly Filipino despite the fact that the mega-text of modern fantasy is very much rooted in Western narratives of the myth, the epic and even Western history.” The anthology “The Farthest Shore” is interesting in that it is stated clearly in the editor’s introduction that this collection of stories is meant “As a homage and a sign of our love for the genre [of fantasy,] we wanted to create worlds without any recognizable sign of anything Filipino on the horizon.” (Nacino, 2013) This paper examines these stories using the concepts of the mega-story and the mega-text, and points out that their narrative underpinnings are not the same as those of Western fantasy, but rather romance and

horror, and that the latter especially, has shifted the conflict from good versus evil to the tension between the restrictions and security of human civilization, and the powerful, uncontrolled wildness of the supernatural and primitive.

**Keywords:** fantasy fiction, Filipino fantasy fiction

### Introduction

The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature's blurb describes fantasy as "a creation of the Enlightenment" but once past the title page and table of contents, the reader is greeted with a chronology, and the very first text listed is *Beowulf*, written approximately 800 years after the birth of Christ, give or take a few hundred years, since the date is disputed. If nothing else, it serves to emphasize what the introduction says in its first few paragraphs, that the definition of fantasy is notoriously hard to pin down. Outside the concerns of the academe and within the far more pragmatic confines of publishing, however, the category of modern fantasy as it exists on the shelves of bookstores has its roots in the commercial success of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (James, 62) Thus, any story set in a vaguely medieval version of Europe with kings, wizards and dragons is instantly recognizable as belonging to the genre, no matter how disparate it may be in theme, tone and execution from Tolkien's work that set the template. One need look no farther than the equally successful *A Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin, which thanks to the HBO adaptation, is much better known by the title of the first book in the series, *Game of Thrones*. It is difficult to imagine two more different texts in a single genre, where the plot of one is kicked off by a hobbit setting out on a quest because of his discovery of the ancient evil embodied in a magic ring, while the other's inciting incident is a young boy being pushed out of a tower window because he stumbles on the queen's incestuous tryst with her own brother. Nonetheless, the influence of Tolkien's work on Martin's is unmistakable; in many ways, Westeros is the dark mirror of Middle-earth.

Fantasy has come to encompass a much larger scope of sub-genres than those recognizably derived from Tolkien, however, ranging from urban fantasy to paranormal romance to modern children's fantasy. In addition to these, the Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature also identifies the cluster of "Writers of Color," to which it devotes an entire chapter. The very idea of this category is

Western-centric, as the contributor, Nnedi Okorafor, points out, since it is a label used for fantasy written by racial minorities in the United States and Canada, or for fantasy written by foreign authors who may belong to the racial and cultural majority in their own countries, but are considered "minorities" in the America. (179) Ironically, it emphasizes just how dominant Western narratives are in modern fantasy, since a text that features a Chinese dragon or an African wizard merits a different label than just simple fantasy. It is also of note that the category is tied to the racial and cultural profile of the author – the logic it follows is that an ethnically Chinese author would be writing about Chinese dragons, not Western ones, and an ethnically African author would be writing about African wizards, not Western ones.

### *Filipinos Writing Fantasy*

It is within this context that Filipinos who wish to write fantasy have to operate. Because even if fantasy is not a genre usually associated with the Philippine literary scene, there are Filipino writers who, to paraphrase Tolkien "desire dragons." A book produced by that desire, *The Farthest Shore: An Anthology of Fantasy Fiction from the Philippines*, will be the focus of this paper. The inspiration for the anthology is explicitly Tolkienian; the two separate introductions from the editors, Dean Alfar and Joseph Nacino, both cite Tolkien's concepts of reality as the "Primary World" and the fantastic text as a "Secondary World." Joseph Nacino is also explicit in his desire to produce a fantasy anthology that does not follow the previously stated logic of ethnically non-Western authors producing fantasy "of color."

"I would make a guess that most Filipino writers of speculative fiction grew up reading secondary world stories in the vein of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Frank Herbert's *Dune* or modern door-stoppers like George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* or Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. These stories had fantastical settings, cultures, and nations only faintly similar to those from our reality, and populated by monsters that had absolutely no relation to the *manananggal* or the *tikbalang*.

Since we read speculative fiction, we couldn't escape this particular concept – and we didn't want to. As homage and a sign of our love for the genre, **we wanted to create worlds without any recognizable sign of anything Filipino on the horizon.** [emphasis added] (Nacino, 2013, xiv, originally from the Editor's Introduction of the 2009 Digital Edition)

This is a pivot, though not a complete one, from the prevailing attitude of Filipino writers in speculative fiction in the early 2000's, probably best encapsulated by Dean Alfar, a Palanca awardee and one of the more prominent authors in the group. "To find the fantastic" Alfar writes, "We [Filipino authors] must create the fantastic . . . We must write literature that unabashedly revels in wonder, infused with the culture of the imagination – **which means being Filipino** and at the same time, surrendering that very same limiting notion, being more than Filipino, unleashing the Filipino of our imagination, divorcing and embracing the ideas of identity, nationhood and universality." [emphasis added] (Alfar, D., 2012, first published in 2005)

The goal of this paper is not to measure the "Filipino-ness" of any of the texts subsequently produced, whether written under the umbrella of fantasy or speculative fiction, or whether written with the intention of "creating the fantastic" in a Filipino mode or to deliberately avoid doing so. Neither is it the goal of this paper to assess whether either intention was successfully executed. Rather it is the goal of this paper to point out that the stories collected in the anthology *The Farthest Shore* are different from Western fantasy, even though the editors cite Tolkien as an inspiration, and the title of the anthology is a direct reference to a novel by another Western fantasy giant, Ursula Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*, the final book in her *Earthsea Cycle*. It is possible to make an analysis of these differences in terms the various elements of the texts, but the focus here will be the narrative underpinning of fantasy, Christine Brooke-Rose's concept of the "mega-story" or "parallel-text," which was built upon by Damien Broderick and adapted to the concept of a "mega text" for science fiction (Broderick, 59)

### *The Mega-story and the Mega-text*

Brooke-Rose's concern was how a reader was able to understand and engage with texts involving unrealistic worlds, such as science fiction and fantasy. In her own analysis of fantasy, where she used Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as the primary template, she pointed out how a presumably alien world is illuminated by familiar and widespread discourses, such as geography and history. (Broderick, 57) According to Brooke-Rose, this connection to a mega-story, "doubles and illuminates [the narrative,] creating expectations on the line of least resistance through a test already known, usually as close as possible to the reader's experience. Exoticism is reduced to the familiar. This gives points of anchorage, allows an economy of description and insures a general effect of the real that transcends any actual decoding." (Brooke-Rose as quoted in Broderick, 57) In the *Lord of the Rings*, this is immediately obvious. Inside the front cover of the books is a map of Middle-earth,

and at the end of *The Return of the King*, the last book in the trilogy, the appendices include notes such as the family trees of imaginary royal houses, such as one might find in the appendices of history books. These features have become ubiquitous in much of modern epic fantasy, associating fantasy with the "mega-story" of history. This association has had an effect on the relationship between ethnically non-Western authors and the fantasy they produce. To expand upon the above-stated logic of ethnically Chinese authors writing about Chinese dragons, ethnically Chinese authors who bear the markers of Chinese history are expected to write about Chinese dragons, though notably, not necessarily to a Chinese audience.

The body of written work belonging to both science fiction and fantasy has grown to the point, however, that readers have become familiar enough with these "alien" worlds, that they no longer necessarily need a point of reference outside of the genre in order to understand the text. This has led to the idea of the "mega-text," originally a part of Brooke-Rose's critical analysis, where the reader conflates the unrealistic narrative of fantasy or science fiction with analogous reference points to wider, realist discourses, such as history and geography. Broderick argues however, that over time, science fiction has acquired a density and critical mass where new texts are embedded in a pre-existing web of association and meanings established within the genre, and are seen and understood in that light, rather than in the light of any reference to the "real world." (59) Broderick's "mega-text" originally referred to the mega-text of science fiction, but the concept readily applies to fantasy as well. The mega-text of fantasy certainly involves unrealistic concepts, such as elves and dwarves, whose fantasy stereotypes are well-established at this point. But there may also be more mundane images that are derived directly from the "real" world, such as kings, swords and castles, but within the context of the mega-text of fantasy, these concepts bear the added burden of layers of meaning and associations for readers who are immersed in the genre.

### *Contending with a "Filipino" Mega-text*

If we are to see the statements of Alfar and Nacino in the light of the "mega-text" of fantasy, essentially the former was saying "we must produce a Filipino mega-text for speculative fiction" while the latter was saying, "we will not avoid the Western-dominant mega-text of fantasy, and we will not try to produce a Filipino mega-text." And if we are to read the stories from the anthology *The Farthest Shore*, (which is edited by both Nacino and Alfar,) the texts are an eclectic mix, with Nacino's "Brothers-in-Arms," being clearly Welsh-inspired, with a protagonist whose name is Ludluth ys Faltha, and other more "generic" fantasy not coming from any clear cultural reference, such as Kate Aton-Osias' "Light," or Crystal

Koo's "Wildwater." There are also stories which are blatantly drawn from Filipino culture, such as "Queen Liwana's Gambit" or even set in alternate version of modern Philippines, such as Eliza Victoria's "The Just World of Helena Jimenez."

This is not to say that the stories conform to the idea of one editor or the other, since Alfar's introduction as editor to *The Farthest Shore* does align with Nacino's. But the texts themselves, due to the cultural influences they base their fantasy on, can be aligned either with the formation of a Filipino mega-text for fantasy or unapologetically drawing from the already present mega-text of Western-centric fantasy. No matter which camp the stories included in the anthology may fall in terms of their mega-text, however, it is notable that the mega-story or parallel-texts that underpin their narratives are not primarily those of geography, or more importantly, history. This is not simply because they are fantasy short stories, which are not published with maps or appendices, no matter who writes or publishes them.

### *History as Mega-story*

Starting with effect of post-modernism on historiography in the 70's propelled by Hayden White's groundbreaking work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, the academic perception of history from knowledge about the past based on an ideally neutral collection of data has been transformed into a primarily post-modern, very un-neutral construction of narrative. This, however, is not the common idea of history which could serve the function of a mega-story for a fantasy. The average reader's concept of history remains, for the most part, the traditional one, where history is the collection of facts about important dates and events and people that comprise our knowledge of the past, and any narrative that is formed rises naturally out of these facts. Adolf Hitler was responsible for the deaths of at least six million Jews in the Holocaust. This is a fact uncontested by everyone, with the exception of historical revisionists. The natural progression from this fact is that the man was evil, he led his countrymen into evil, and to oppose him and his ideals was to oppose evil; this is not strictly speaking a fact, but rather a narrative, albeit one that is also largely uncontested, with the exception of those for whom the murder of Jews does not count as evil. Problems arise, however, if and when the narrative develops to portray all those who opposed Hitler as "good," which would potentially include the likes of Joseph Stalin at the tail end of World War II. But this is not the concern of history in its traditional and more widely-recognized sense.

Traditional history, with its unbreakable association with fact, has limit on

the ambiguity it can contain. Taught as it is in schools, there are, if not always villains as clear-cut as Hitler, clear-cut heroes, whose names and deeds paint a black and white narrative which are idealized and pasted on the classroom walls for school children to memorize. No matter how dull students may find the subject matter, it is this paradigm which we see so clearly manifest in the good versus evil narrative at the core of Western fantasy. Both heroes and villains are easily recognizable in *The Lord of the Rings*, and even in the *Song of Ice and Fire*, where morality is decidedly more gray, it may be hard to label any character as unambiguously heroic, but it is still easy to label certain characters as unambiguously villainous.

In contrast, none of the stories in *The Farthest Shore* are actually about good versus evil. The tension in these texts rise more out of relationships with power, where the binary is actually between security and danger, civilization and the wilderness, social constraint and personal freedom. If there is any unambiguous good, it is not, with the exception of heroic. If there is any unambiguous evil in these stories, it is not so much villainous as it is monstrous – a villain chooses evil, but a monster is evil according to its nature. This directly ties in with the underlying mega stories of these texts, which this paper would argue is not history, but rather romance and/or horror.

#### *Romance as the Mega-Story in Texts from "The Farthest Shore"*

To be clear, the romance referred to here is not the romance which is readily associated with literature. Of the romance mode in Philippine literature, Solead Reyes traces its influence from the *awit* and *corrido* to the novels of Rizal and Paterno, and identifies the basic pattern at its heart as the hero's quest. "The quest is initiated as a way of answering a need or satisfying a desire. Hence, the motif of a journey into some unknown world – whether the idyllic or the demonic – frequently frames the narrative. The desire is often achieved through the help of another character, human or supernatural. The world is eventually restored to its original condition of peace after an arduous struggle." (Reyes) This description is one that can be easily transposed onto much of what is recognizably fantasy at present, and might have been a convenient bridge between Western fantasy and Filipino authors' output in the genre. But despite its long and substantial influence on Philippine literature, the fantasy in *The Farthest Shore* is, as previously stated, not heroic for the most part. One of the mega-stories that can be identified among these stories is of a different kind of romance – the contemporary romance novel.

If modern fantasy was significantly shaped by the forces of publishing and the market, contemporary romance was given birth by them. Janice Radway

writes:

“[publishers] reasoned that once they had identified an actual audience by inducing it to buy a specific kind of book, it would not be difficult to keep that audience permanently constituted and available for further sales by supplying it with endless imitations of the first success . . . in relying on repetitive formulas as a result of their primary interest in profit, the managed to create America’s first mass-produced fiction in book form. We will see that the contemporary romance is nothing more than a highly sophisticated version of this prototypical category literature . . .” (23)

By design, contemporary romance is made up of tropes and stereotypes that can be endlessly recycled, and a simple plot that can be replicated over and over again, with minor adjustments to suit particular demographics and to give the illusion that this is a different book from the last romance the reader consumed. That simple plot can be summed up thus: girl meets boy (this is, after all, a genre with a majority female audience,) they fall in love but either do not admit it or for some reason they cannot be together, shenanigans ensue and come to head, their love triumphs, and then they live happy ever after.

Note that this is distinct from the pattern of romance in young adult and paranormal fantasy that has been entrenched in those sub-genres by the success of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series. There, the plot is that girl meets boy, then girl meets another boy, and what stands between her and the happy ending is her choice of which boy will participate in it, de facto ensuring that the boy that she does not choose will be excluded from it. The appeal to a teenage audience is that in these stories, the choice of romantic partner is also a choice of identity, whether to be a princess or a commoner, a vampire or a werewolf. This is not the case with contemporary romance for older women. There, love is destiny. Everything that happens from the first page culminates in the establishment of the couple’s relationship on a permanent basis, and the fulfilment of desire is not manifested in a world “restored to its original condition of peace,”(Reyes) but rather in the lives of the characters fundamentally transformed by this relationship. Before, they were alone; now, they are together. Small wonder, then, that contemporary romance can become an “effective escape from psychological burdens” (Radway, 116) by providing “certain ‘end emotional benefits.’” (Radway, 117)

Out of the stories in the anthology, those that most clearly use this template of romance as their mega-story are “Spelling Normal” by Mia Tijam and

"Strange Weather" by Dean Francis Alfar. Romantic relationships play significant roles in "EmberWild" by Nikki Alfar, "Siege of Silence" by Paolo Chikiamco and the previously-mentioned "Brothers-in-Arms" by Joseph Nacino, but these are not the central pattern of the narratives, and there, the relationships are not consolidated, but rather dissolved by tragedy and death. The reasons for this reversed progression will be explored in the following section of this paper, but suffice to say for now that due to how they utilize the concepts of magic and power, the structures of horror are a much bigger player in those narratives than romance. Of the remaining stories, there is also a rather prominent romantic sub-plot in Vincent Simbulan's "In the Arms of Beishu," but the resolution of it occurs apart from the ending of the story, unlike the stories of Tijam and Alfar, where the romance is at the center of the narrative.

Tijam's "Spelling Normal" is a romance with a setting that renders it as recognizably fantasy through its use of magic, technology masquerading as magic and vice versa. The jargon of this techno-magical framework is particularly dense.

"Later on, the Sorceress reluctantly messaged the all-knowing Elf for Fairy-Tale-Tricks, 'It's these damn rules! I can't seem to make my Fairy Tale operate! MydamnSAP.com refuses to be spelled into my ultimate Fairy Tale!'

The Elf advised, 'Have you tried the Walk-Along-Into-Epiphanly?'

The Sorceress sighed, "I'm constantly bugged in the Path." (Tijam, 95)

This is obviously language whose deciphering relies heavily on the mega-text of both fantasy and science fiction. Contrasted with a later exchange between the same Sorceress and Elf, the delineation between the mega-text and the mega-story comes into sharp focus.

"The Elf sent, *You smell good . . . Are you laughing at me?*

The Sorceress looked at him, saw his anxious and frowning face, and mouthed *No*.

And the Elf smiled again.

The Sorceress found herself blushing and liking making him smile." (Tijam, 97)

It is the mega-story of the romance that illuminates the jargon of the mega-text, which might be otherwise too dense for the reader. In this case, however, the romance remains unfulfilled. Ultimately, the Sorceress and Elf do not become a

couple, since the story is something of an allegory for relationships that develop online between people who already have romantic attachments in real life. Though her own romantic aspirations are dashed, by the end of the story, the Sorceress runs off to another reality “smiling (to find that mongoose and snake and likely turn them into lovers)” (Tijam, 101), to complete that romantic fulfillment and happy ending vicariously in those she aids.

The other tale which uses romance as its mega-story, “Strange Weather,” opens with the protagonist, Tenet, riding into a small, mostly-deserted village, and offers to work her magic to combat the drought in return for food and shelter. There are allusions to a tragic backstory for the main character, but these ultimately prove to not be terribly important. What is important is that there is another magic-user nearby, a man named Ven, an attractive individual if we are to go by Tenet’s reaction upon meeting him. “. . . she met his gaze, staring a moment too long into the man’s deep black eyes. When she felt her heart quicken in that moment, Tenet thought that her own Craft had betrayed her, finding the secret weakness of its own mistress.” (Alfar, D., 2013, 11)

The two of them are unwittingly manipulated by an amorphous evil entity hiding in the town’s well into fighting each other, and once the deception is uncovered, they combine their powers to defeat the monster. Evil dealt with, they are free to smile into each other’s eyes and ride off into the sunset. That this would be the ending was obvious from the moment that the two characters met, which helps to anchor the reader in a short story that manages to cram in at least two magic systems and their accompanying terminology, an implied tragic backstory, an evil well-monster with its own magic, brainwashed villagers, and the main character’s donkey telepathically communicating and saving the day. That is a lot of alien-ness to someone who does not read fantasy, while on the other hand, a lot of mega-text to someone who does. But because of the mega-story of romance at work, there is a clear line from point A to point B, starting from the scene where the characters meet up to the ending.

Although romance is the sub-plot in “In The Arms of Beishu,” as was already noted, the same expectation of the fulfillment of the romantic relationship is set-up and delivered for the reader. In all of these cases, however, it is notable that, just as in the contemporary romance novel, that though the love depicted is transformative, it is by and large, personally and individually transformative, mostly avoiding a larger social sphere. Again, this depiction of love is not world saving, is not about good versus evil, and is not heroic, but rather focused on personal fulfill-

ment.

These are not the majority of the stories in this anthology, however, nor is romance the only mega-story that functions in these texts. Horror is an even larger component in this anthology, and this is mainly because of how magic is conceived of and functions in these texts.

### *Horror as the Mega-story in Texts from "The Farthest Shore" Anthology*

In order to properly discuss horror as the mega-story for the stories in this anthology, it is first necessary to describe the Filipino relationship with the supernatural. This is essential in understanding the Filipino relationship with the concept which can be considered as one of its hallmarks, if not its outright distinguishing feature – magic. In some cases, magic is all that separates fantasy from science fiction, and vice versa. Magic in fantasy is, essentially, a set of rules by which the world of the fantastic operates, and which differs significantly from the rules of our own physical reality. A ring that grants invisibility, a dragon that breathes fire, a wizard casting a magic spell are all impossible by the laws of our reason and science, but they must obey their own laws. The ring of invisibility cannot suddenly cause flowers to grow, the dragon cannot arbitrarily spit water instead of flames. But aside from distinguishing the mode of fantasy from the mode of realism, the other function of magic within the text is that it determines the balances of power. This is particularly significant when we consider that the distinguishing mark of the Filipino relationship with the supernatural is fear.

Writing of the native pre-colonial beliefs persisting side by side with Christianity, Fe Susan Go paraphrases the distinguished anthropologist F. Landa Jocano on Filipino folklore and superstition thus:

"Filipinos . . . are from the very beginning of their lives taught to believe in a fearful 'pantheon' of supernatural beings and forces that can impinge on them at any time to bring sickness and death. From childhood to adolescence these beliefs, **invariably couched in fear**, [emphasis added] are reinforced by adult authority figures." (Go, 2022)

If we are to look for the most prominent mythological figures and the best-known native stories of the supernatural, these are largely populated by monsters. One of the most widely recognized of these creatures, the *aswang*, has its variations across regions and languages. Maximo Ramos categorizes these variations as belonging to one of five major groups, which he describes as, "(1) the blood-sucking vampire, (2) the self-segmenting viscera sucker, (3) the man-eating were-

dog, (4) the vindictive witch, and (5) the carrion-eating ghoul.” (Ramos) It is of note that there are no “good” *aswangs*, no benign variation. There are no good *tiyanaks*, no good *tikbalangs*. In contrast to this long list of monsters, there are hardly any benevolent supernatural figures, except perhaps the *diwata*, of whom Mariang Makiling is the most prominent. The body of myths that surround her are not unambiguously benevolent, however, since they also credit her with the disappearance of men she falls in love with and some have her meting out punishment to those who would either use her or harm her lovers. Additionally, in many of these tales, once Mariang Makiling inevitably encounters the iniquity of human beings, she withdraws from the human world, never to be seen again. At any rate, a disappearing *diwata* is not the kind of figure fueling the behavior of Filipinos when they say *tabi po* to an anthill, or refuse to stay outside in Capiz after dark. As Go so succinctly puts it, the primary tie between our present cultural practices and our native ideas of the supernatural is fear. “It all begins in fear, and it is mainly fear that continues to sustain the belief.” (Go, 2022)

This fear colors the way magic is depicted in the fantasy from *The Farthest Shore*, because by and large, this magic is in varying degrees, monstrous, dangerous, and lawless. It is obvious even from the quotations featured earlier in this paper that come from the stories centered around romance; Tijam’s Sorceress complains “I can’t seem to make my Fairy Tale operate! MydamnSAP.com refuses to be spelled into my ultimate Fairy Tale!” Dean Alfar’s protagonist, Tenet, even in a moment of romantic attraction, “thought that her own Craft had betrayed her, finding the secret weakness of its own mistress.”

The danger of magic and its uncontrollable nature is particularly obvious in Nikki Alfar’s “EmberWild,” Rodello Santos’ “Queen Liwana’s Gambit,” Kate Aton-Osias’ “Light.” In “EmberWild,” magic is called Wildness and those who have the gift for it are called the Wild, and right from the beginning of the story, both the Wildness and Wild are characterized by the danger they pose to civilization and the need for their restraint. “It was therefore generally agreed that reining in the Wild, particularly among the Families, was not merely a judicious course, but a necessary one in order to ensure the continuance of the Empire.” (Alfar, N., 2013, 34)

Though the plot centers around the forbidden love between a soldier named Nicolas and a Wild named Sorrow hiding under the guise of a courtesan in an expensive brothel, contemporary romance does not serve as the mega-text for this story. The narrator is a man, a patron of the brothel and a soldier himself, and

the ending is ambiguous on whether this could be Nicolas or some other customer of Sorrow. The central female character, Sorrow, is a prostitute. These are not the sort of characters with whom middle-class housewives, the target market for whom contemporary romance was engineered, would readily relate to for some relaxing, escapist reading. But at any rate, at the climax of the story lies not a confession of love or the couple finding their happy ending, but the death of Nicolas by soldiers who had discovered Sorrow's secret. Her grief and rage causes Sorrow to literally explode into flames, burning down not just the brothel, but the entire capital city where it is located. Sorrow, being a creature of magic, survives her own conflagration, and goes on to lead a rebellion, using her real name, Malaya. The story ends on this note of defiance, but despite her being portrayed as a freedom-fighter, Sorrow's destruction of the capital ironically justifies the Empire's treatment of and orders to suppress her kind – she is a danger and she is a monster, unless we believe that personal loss is sufficient grounds for burning an entire city's population to death. But to be clear, her monstrousness is her nature – she is the embodiment of the Wild, the "primitive" and the "uncivilized" that the Empire has tried to destroy because it cannot be controlled.

Aton-Osias' "Light" also features a magic creature run amok, but there is no ambiguity; Spark is a rogue spell, who resents that humans summon his kind into the world only to treat them as tools. Eventually, this resentment sours into outright violence against humanity, culminating in possessing the humans who try to cast him. The eponymous Light, another spell who is his "brother," tries to convince him to desist and then to subdue him, but to no avail. A relatively harmless spell, Light's relationship with humanity gradually deteriorates as his kind of magic falls out of use.

"In the Second Age of Creation, cantrips and rotes rose in popularity, not because they were powerful – they were extremely limited in use, not being sentient as we [spells] were – but because they were predictable. Humans in general had sensed the volatile nature of my kind. And though for the most part they still did acknowledge us, they had begun to avoid our incantations, learning their lessons from the wizards of old who had died unable to master the powers they had wielded." (Aton-Osias, 85)

Here it is clear to see that magic, once again, is not just power, but dangerous, lawless power that will do as it wills, and humanity has to pay a price for dealing with it. And as time passes and humanity finds safer, more controlled alterna-

tives, this wild magic is avoided and then forgotten. But not forever. At the end of the story, Light is summoned by humans once again, showing that this dangerous magic can never be truly suppressed.

If there was no ambiguity about the uncontrollable nature of magic and the harm it can cause in “Light,” Rodellio Santos’ story “Queen Liwana’s Gambit,” is outright about summoning demons and making bargains with them for power. In her youth, Liwana had made a pact with demons in order to gain power, and with it, she had slain monsters and kept her people safe. Now that she had grown old, the demons come to collect the only payment that they would consider valuable – her soul. She manages to trick them by selling her soul to not one, but four demons, who then proceed to fight over it. Two are killed, one is gravely injured, and the last cannot claim her soul because the time to do so has expired. The last one leaves, stating that he will find his vengeance some other way, while the one who is gravely injured proposes yet another bargain, one that Liwana ponders on as the story ends. It would seem that in this story, Liwana manages to succeed because of a legal loophole, as it were, but what spares her is not law, but greed – the demons refuse to divide her up and share her amongst themselves. And with the last demon threatening revenge, and the injured demon proposing a bargain, there is no guarantee that Liwana will really escape them. But this is the price of power, or as Liwana’s teacher puts it, “Nothing risked, nothing reaped . . . True power can only come to one who dares.” (Santos, 28) Those are the words not of one who is teaching a student a system of rules, but one who is instructing a neophyte gambler in his addiction.

In all these stories, there is the repeated theme of magic as inherently dangerous, inherently monstrous and to deal with it is to court disaster in exchange for power. On the opposite side of the binary lies not just law, but civilization. There are restrictions, even suppression and tyranny, but in exchange, there is the guarantee of safety and security. While the three stories previously analyzed emphasize the power and freedom that wielding this dangerous magic can grant, “The Just World of Helena Jimenez” by Eliza Victoria and “Wildwater” by Crystal Koo do the opposite. They are told from the points of view of characters who have thoroughly embraced the restrictions of civilized society because it grants them safety and shields them from the destructive forces coming from outside the bounds of law and civilization.

Victoria’s Helena Jimenez is the survivor of an assassination carried out on her whole family, leaving only herself and her brother alive and uninjured, while

their parents are dead, and their sister is a cripple unable to care for herself. In the Philippines of this alternate world, there is an agent of the law standing on every street corner, hiding in every room in every office or home. These agents are called Wardens, and they serve as judge, jury and executioner, killing transgressors of the law on the spot without mercy or discrimination. In the standard dystopian narrative, this would be depicted as unbearable surveillance and tyranny. But as has been stated, that is not the narrative structure at play here. Helena suffers from severe PTSD because of her trauma, and her fear colors all her perception, using the imagery of horror to describe her condition:

"She drew only one image over and over: two circles, one inside the other, the outer circle red, the inner one black. After coloring her drawing, only the black circle would remain looking like a circle. The red one always ended up looking more like a splash.

What does this mean, sweetheart? they would ask her, but Helena wouldn't answer. Wasn't it obvious what the red splotch was, what the black ball was? She would just continue to color, using up the black and red crayons, smudging her fingers, filling her nails with the smell of wax." (Victoria, 48)

Even the suggestion of having to meet someone who vaguely resembles her attackers is enough to cause an anxiety attack. Her fear stalks her at every turn, and it is only when she comes back to the Philippines where she knows there are Wardens watching over her does she find relief, even if her relief is in the delusion that her family is alive and well. She imagines that she is surrounded by her parents and siblings, eating a cozy family dinner while "In one corner of the room stood a Warden, his clothes ink-black, his weapon in plain sight. Helena looked at him and smiled at him too. She was safe now, she thought . . . She was home." (Victoria, 62)

This is probably the story where the horror is the clearest, resembling an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. The story where the horror is not immediately obvious, but dawns upon the reader slowly, is "Wildwater" by Crystal Koo. Essentially, the story is the confession of Huuri Imh, a man who hails from a small backwater tribe of fishing folk who are born with gills. Because of his ambition and his parents' desire that he be able to study and move to the more civilized and sophisticated city, Huuri never uses his own gills. Years later, when he has become a successful and respected scholar, his father dies, and he returns to his tribe for the

funeral. He attempts to wrestle with a giant sea creature in an attempt to convince his tribesmen to come with him to the city, but his untrained gills fail him, and his tribesmen decline his offer. He then secretly tries to sedate the other members of the tribe, so that he can bring at least a few of them with him, but he miscalculates the dosage and kills them all. At the end, he surrenders himself to the authorities, because as he describes himself, he is “a man of the law.” (Koo, 69)

In many ways, “Wildwater” turns the pattern that the other stories have set on its head; in the rest, magic and lawlessness are the causes of destruction, whereas in Koo’s story, the “magic” is very minor, and extremely harmless – fish gills growing on certain tribes of fishermen. It is civilization that is destructive, it is the man who associates himself with the law who turns out to be a monster. But still the tension between what is considered civilized and what is considered primitive is there at the heart of the story, and still, this is horror. This is the confession of a mass murderer, who is so deluded that he describes his actions as the attempt to “save” his own people from their ignorance and backwardness, and that he did it all out of love for them.

### Conclusion

As was stated early on in this paper, this analysis is not intended as an attempt to measure the “Filipino-ness” of these texts, but rather to clearly lay out that there are aspects to all these stories that are not merely copies of Western fantasy. Romance as a mega-story for at least some of these texts probably comes as no surprise, considering the popularity of contemporary romance novels, of both foreign and local publication, as well as romantic comedy films. But the influence of horror as a mega-story in these fantasy stories, as this paper has tried to demonstrate, is deeply rooted in Philippine culture’s relationship with the supernatural, producing stories that are more than just a Western fantasy template with Filipino trappings. Hopefully, this will serve as an encouragement to those Filipino writers who may be hesitant to take on not just fantasy, but also other Western dominated genres, because of the way they would need to grapple with the issues of identity and representation. Even when these stories are a deliberate homage to the Western-centric texts of fantasy, there is still a different spirit that animates them.

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**Peer Review:** Articles are sent to at least two external peer reviewers, using a journal manuscript review rubric. In using a blind-reviewing system, the identity of the reviewer is not known to the author and vice-versa. The editorial staff will notify authors of the peer review decision in writing, along with any recommendations necessary for publication or reconsideration.

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**Copy-editing and Proof-reading:** Upon submission of the revised article, the content editor will correct typographical and grammatical errors in preparation for publication. Before publication, the printing proofs of the article will be emailed to the author for final proof-reading for review/corrections and should be promptly returned via email to the JoSR chief editor.

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### Types of Submission

We accept action research, short reports (profile reports), classroom-based research (any form of inquiry done with the intent that the research will inform, improve, and/or change practices in the future), lesson studies, policy reviews, evaluative studies, and experimental studies.

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Original manuscripts from individual and multiple authors are welcome. The manuscripts should be original, not under review by any other publication and not published elsewhere. Submissions may be in English or Filipino. Inclusive language should be used with reference to human communities. "Man," "men," "he/his" are to be used when they clearly refer to male referents. "Person," "people," or "he/ she," "his/ her," are to be used for mixed or indeterminate referents.

Manuscripts should be 2,000 to 6,000 words maximum, excluding references. Any submissions that fail to conform to the submission guidelines will be returned.

To facilitate the reading and editing of articles, authors should make sure to:

- use Microsoft Word document, Times New Roman size 12 (or its equivalent)
- double-space the whole article
- cite sources using APA (7<sup>th</sup> edition) for all other works and MLA (latest edition) for Language and Literature, History, Philosophy, and related disciplines (consistency of citation format is needed)
- check that all in-text citations have their corresponding bibliographic citations
- Create an anonymized version and a version of the file with author details. Prepare these manuscripts both in Microsoft Word (doc) format and Portable Document Format (pdf)
- Soft copies of both files shall be created in letter size (8.5x11) document

Data-based articles must have the following sections:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Overview of the research (research topic, rationale for undertaking the research, context of the problem, brief discussion of relevant literature)
  - Research question and sub-questions
  - Research sample
- Method
  - approach used (qualitative, quantitative, mixed method)
  - data collection techniques
  - methods of analysis
- Results and Discussion
  - key findings
  - discussion of findings in terms of the research question
- Conclusion
- Recommendation

Table and/ or figures contained in an article should be incorporated into the document file. For special photos/figure and/or characters that cannot be incorporated in the document, a clean, clear copy should be provided for scanning.

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