

EMBRACING THE NEW GEN ED CURRICULUM: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GE TEACHERS

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Abstract: The continuously changing educational landscape and the demands of 21st century education call for curricular reforms. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued CHED Memo#20,s.2013 which revised the General Education curriculum in tertiary education and standardized its implementation. And in any changes in the curriculum, the roles and responsibilities of the teachers as curriculum implementers will have an impact in its successful implementation. Given this premise, this phenomenological study looked into how the teachers implemented the New General Education curriculum (NGEC) in School Year 2021-2022, three years after its implementation in 2018. The study answered this central question: How do teachers describe their experiences in teaching the new GE curriculum and their perceived influence/effect of general education courses to the students? The participants of this study were NGEC teachers for not less than 3 years. This phenomenological study is anchored on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) and employs thematic analysis. The themes emerged were the use of different teaching strategies, adaptability of the curriculum, enrichment of teachers' personal values, cultivation of students' soft skills and their application of concepts to daily life. In conclusion, NGEC according to the participants has positive effects or impacts in their work as GE teachers and they perceive that it positively affects the values/skills gained by the students. The results of this study contribute to the field of curriculum implementation and assessment in as much as it attempts to know the experiences of curriculum implementers which will be useful for the revision and improvement of the GE curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum, General Education curriculum, curriculum implementation, phenomenological study

Introduction

The continuously changing educational landscape and the demands of 21st century education call for curricular reforms (Tamayao *et al.*, 2020, #209). This is also a time when globalization, due to enhanced integration and interconnectedness, drives education to focus more on strengthening and developing knowledge and skills necessary for “social and economic transformation” (UNESCO - Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2014). It is therefore essential that students learn competencies which will enable them to adapt and to live successfully in this generation of continuing technological, societal, economic and cultural transformations.

The GE Curriculum in Tertiary Education

On the subject of GE in tertiary education, all higher education institutions (HEIs) firmly believe in the importance of the general education curriculum in tertiary education. HEIs globally include the

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general education courses in undergraduate programs. It is accepted that through the help of general education courses, students can develop skills such as critical thinking skills, communication skills, and skills to adjust in life in general (Aldegether, 2015; Nababan, 2014; Nelson Laird and Garver, 2010; Vander Schee, 2011). Even in the history of American tertiary education, the growth of societal transformations prompted the birth of the general education curriculum. The primary goal of general education is “to provide a broad, yet focused survey of courses that will promote critical thinking and increase students’ awareness of the world around them” (*General Education in Higher Education*, n.d.).

The K-12 Basic Education Program

In the Philippines, the K-12 Basic Education Enhancement Program took effect in 2016. The additional two years for the Senior High School program, namely Grade 11 and Grade 12, made the country’s basic education curriculum align with the criteria of ASEAN nations. The Commission on Higher Education, on the other hand, also revised higher education curricula and standards. And in these contexts of economic and educational changes, the New General Education curriculum in the country’s tertiary education was conceptualized, designed and implemented.

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The GE Curricula in the Philippines.

It must be remembered that prior to the official implementation of the New General Education curriculum in 2018, the Philippines is implementing two general education curricula - GEC-A and GEC-B. *GEC-A* stemmed from CHED Memorandum Order #59, s. 1996 which was initially implemented as the minimum requirements for the mandatory General Education Curriculum (GEC) in tertiary education. According to the memo, all students of any tertiary programs - leading to undergraduate degrees - shall take the mandatory sixty-three (63) GEC units which were distributed as follows: Language & Literature (24 units); Mathematics & Natural Sciences (15 units); Humanities & Social Sciences (18 units) and mandated subjects (6 units) (Commission on Higher Education, 1996).

The following year, the commission issued another memo - CHED Memo #4, s. 1997 entitled “Guidelines for Implementation of CHED Memorandum Order #59, s. 1996” which revised GEC-A. This was referred to as *GEC-B*. According to Torres & Goingo (2011), this memorandum stipulated

that undergraduate students who are not majoring in the fields of Humanities, Social Sciences and Communication may take 51 units only of the GEC requirements. There was a 12-unit reduction which was the following: 3 units in Filipino, 3 units in Literature, 3 units in Humanities and the removal of the 3-unit Philippine History course.

These differences in the number of GE units to be taken depending on the program raised problems for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Torres and Goingo (2011) pointed out in their paper those concerns. And just like students from other parts of the world, Filipino college students did not see the relevance of the general education courses to their professional courses and to their daily lives. Therefore, Torres and Goingo (2011) concluded that GEC failed to do its expected outcomes.

Consequently in 2013, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued CHED Memorandum Order #20, s.2013 which provided the “framework and rationale of the revised GE as a program shift and in the context of the K-12 curriculum based college readiness standards.” The memorandum explicitly stated what the New GE curriculum (NGEC) is, its goals and context, the specific outcomes that the undergraduate students should achieve and the standard curriculum descriptions for each course under NGEC.

General Education (GE) as described in the memorandum is the *common curriculum*, with common and required courses for all college students and a mandatory part of any undergraduate program (Commission on Higher Education, 2013). GE is different from specialized learning (SL) or the specialization that undergraduate students are taking. GE is focused more on the broader nature of learning while SL focuses on a particular discipline and the particular skills and knowledge it entails. The New General Education Curriculum (NGEC) is also concrete in the goals it wants to achieve such as to develop Filipinos (1) who are ready to face the challenges of the 21st century; (2) who are competent, humane and moral who can adopt to the changing landscape of the global world; and (3) who are confident to assert themselves and take pride in their sense of identity in the global scenario. Specifically, NGEC develops the intellectual competencies, the personal and civic responsibilities of the students and the practical skills they need to acquire.

The Roles of Teachers in the Implementation of Curriculum.

As an accepted definition, *curriculum* is the totality of all learning experiences and the intended learning outcomes that are offered to the learners by the academic institutions (Obilo and Sangoleye, n.d.). The successful implementation of any curriculum is highly dependent on the training received and confidence of teachers to carry out the requirements of the curriculum (Thompson et al., 2013).

Another key point in curriculum implementation is what Kirkgoz (2008) in her study about curriculum implementation posited, that to successfully implement a curriculum change or innovation, it is imperative that the teachers’ beliefs and understandings should be changed first. It is important that teachers understand the need for the changes, their roles and responsibilities as curriculum implementers and the positive impacts of these changes to the classroom experiences of the students.

In this study, the experiences of teachers in the implementation of the New GE curriculum was explored. This paper is important because it studied how teachers understood and implemented the curriculum, thus exploring an area where the curriculum can be evaluated. Furthermore, since the

curriculum’s implementation in 2018, there were very few studies conducted regarding this topic. It is in this light that this study regarding the New GE curriculum implementation is needed.

Objective of the Study

In line with the aforementioned discussion, this paper explored the experiences of teachers in the implementation of the New GE curriculum. Moreover, this study answered this central question: How do teachers describe their experiences in teaching the new GE curriculum and their perceived influence/effect of general education courses to the students?

Materials and Methods

This paper utilized the descriptive phenomenological approach wherein the participants were interviewed and they described their experiences in teaching the new GE curriculum and their perceptions on the influence or effect of general education to the students. According to Nelson and Cutucache (2017), phenomenological study engages an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon from a representative number of participants. Furthermore, this study focused on the significance of human experience being described by the participants of this study (Bilal *et al.*, 2020; Ochada and Gempes, 2018, #319; Penner and McClement, 2008) that is why phenomenology is the best approach to use.

The participants of this study were full-time faculty members of a private university handling/teaching both specialization courses and general education courses for at least three (3) years. Table 1 is the Profile of the Participants. They were chosen through a purposive sampling method where the researcher identified the criteria according to the need of the study. Participants were requested to join the study through a personal email. There were initially five (5) participants invited. Out of five, four (4) participated and were interviewed but only the first three participants were included in the study. All the participants were asked the same questions to gather data for this study.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Years in full-time teaching	New GE Courses Taught	Specialization	Teaching Specialization Courses
P1	Female	3 years	Understanding the Self; Contemporary World; Art Appreciation; Gender & Society	Psychology	Yes
P2	Male	21 years	Math in the Modern World	Computer Engineering	Yes

P3	Male	18 years	Understanding the Self; Contemporary World	Psychology	Yes
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The interview questions were the following:

1. What are the purposes of the New GE curriculum?
2. How do you teach the New GE courses?
3. How do the New GE curriculum develop or strengthen the intellectual, personal/civic competencies of the students and the 21st century skills of the students?

A pure online interview as the data gathering technique was used. The participants allowed the researcher to record the online interview which was conducted during their most convenient time. They were given a copy of the recording as well. Questions asked gave the participants the opportunity to deeply explain their thoughts and experiences.

In analyzing the data gathered, the study employed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an analytic method used in qualitative research and is appropriate to use when the study is about “understanding a set of experiences, thoughts or behaviors across data,” according to Braun and Clarke (2012) as mentioned in the study of Kiger and Varpio (2020). Because thematic analysis is designed to understand experiences from shared data, this becomes a method suited for this study. Kiger and Varpio (2020) also posited that this is a good analytic method to be used by novice qualitative researchers like the researcher herself. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that may also be used with any theoretical perspectives.

This research followed Clarke and Braun’s thematic analysis method as discussed by Kiger and Varpio (2020) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017): (1) familiarizing oneself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report or manuscript.

Furthermore, this study employed the deductive approach/top-down approach to thematic analysis. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) explained that a deductive analysis is driven by the research question/s and the analyst’s focus rather than driven by the data gathered. Another thing, this study used semantic themes where the researcher focused on explaining or interpreting what was said by the participants (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Results

After following Clarke and Braun’s thematic analysis method (Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) the thematic map, as shown in Figure 1 below, was developed:

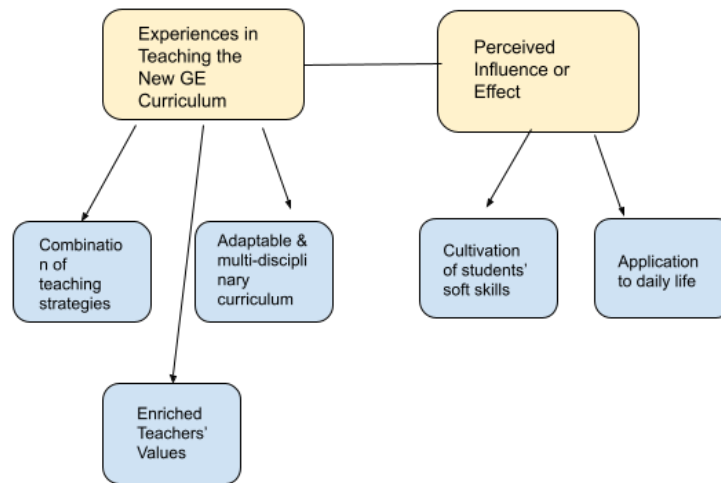


Figure 1: The thematic map shows the themes which emerged as to the experiences of the participants in teaching NGEC and the perceived influence of NGEC to the students

Discussion

A. Experiences in Teaching the New GE Curriculum

After the participants shared their experiences in teaching the new GE curriculum, the following themes emerged: combination of teaching strategies, adaptable and multi-disciplinary curriculum and enriched teachers' values.

Combination of Teaching Strategies. Basic to effective teaching is the use of effective teaching strategies. With the use of different teaching strategies, students can become more engaged in learning (Tejero, Tejero, Sr. & Giray, 2012, p. 34). But it is also accepted that in the teaching and learning process, there is no “one size fits all” strategy. There are considerations in choosing one’s teaching strategies such as educational objectives, the nature of the curriculum or the course in particular, the kind of students and the teachers themselves. In the same way, teaching strategies used by the GE teachers/participants vary and which they observed have significant effects on the learning process, thus, the theme - combination of teaching strategies - emerged.

The participants revealed that they saw the need to become updated with information that they share with the students. They believed that it is important for teachers to be updated with new or latest information. They also believed that the internet is a good source of updated information. As one participant put it, “...importante na as a teacher, nagse-search ka din ng mga additional information from the internet, so madami namang makikita sa internet for updates.” (It is important that as a teacher, you are also searching for additional information from the internet, and there are a lot of updates from the internet.)

From their descriptions, the researcher assumed that the participants were using “flipped classroom” as one of their strategies in online teaching. In a flipped classroom strategy, the teacher will give the online resources to be read or watched at home and then discussion will be in the classroom. The use of internet and online resources in this kind of teaching strategy is very useful. One of the participants said, “*So I choose the latest material and feed it to them. I ask the students to watch, pagkatapos nagbibigay ako ng learning assignment.*” (*I ask the students to watch, then after that I give learning assignment.*)

One participant mentioned that he uses Kahoot in giving quizzes. “*Kahoot... kinarir ko sya,*” the participant said. (*Kahoot, I studied it and use it often.*) Kahoot, as an online, game-based learning platform is primarily used by teachers in giving quizzes in lieu of pen and paper tests. It is a user-friendly platform and easy to use or navigate, both for teachers and students.

On the other hand, another participant shared his teaching strategy using the traditional learning method in teaching new GE courses. He said, “*First, I have to discuss the content of a particular topic on a given subject. Second, I provide them with exercises, sufficient for them to apply those concepts or theories they have learned from our discussion. And of course, the assignment. And then reviews and then asking them questions if there are problems with our discussion. Another thing is, uh, providing them with consultation time.*”

The responses of the participants confirmed what Kolesnikova (2016) has proven in her experimental study - that the combined teaching method is highly effective. Although, with regards to teaching in higher education, it is accepted that instructors exercise freedom to decide for themselves what materials, teaching strategies, and modality they think would make the students learn efficiently and effectively (Hackathorn *et al.*, 2011).

Adaptable and Multi-disciplinary Curriculum. Critical in the teaching and learning process is a good curriculum. A good curriculum provides quality instruction, quality learning and is critical in the holistic development of the students (Stabback, 2016). Curriculum, Stabback (2016) further explains, provides “the bridge between education and development - and it is the competencies associated with lifelong learning and aligned with development needs... that spans that bridge.” In the light of this, another theme - adaptable and multi-disciplinary curriculum - emerged in this study.

Corresponding to this, the results revealed that the participants believed that the new GE curriculum is adaptable and that the knowledge gained through taking the courses are connected to real life situations and also provides understanding or awareness of concepts in various fields of specialization and/or disciplines (Elhassan, 2012).

The statement one participant shared, “*Contemporary World opens our eyes to the present society where we are in, so that kahit ano 'ng field yung matatapos mo (so that whatever field you would take or finish), it is still the same contemporary world that we will live and operate [in].*” He also added that, “*... even in the Gen Ed courses, ganon din, kasi yung body of knowledge, the discipline that they will acquire, they will apply it in the present, right now and in the future. Hindi sya body of knowledge that belongs to the past.*” (*...even in the Gen Ed courses, it is the same because the body of knowledge, the discipline that they will acquire, they will apply it in the present, right now and in the future. It is not a body of knowledge that belongs to the past.*)

The participants believed that there is an interconnection between the New GE courses and the specialized courses. One participant shared, *“May mga topics ang “Understanding the Self” na connected sa major subjects ko.” (There are topics in “Understanding the Self” which are connected with the major subjects that I teach.)*

Another one said, *“...kaya dapat yung General Education should be strong because foundation sya ng different field[s].” (That is why General Education should be strong because it is the foundation of different field[s].)*

The responses of the participants concur with what Wehlburg (2010) posited in her article regarding the positive outcomes of integrating the general education curriculum with specialized learning. She said that integrating the two important curricula will lead to a better appreciation of undergraduate students’ education experience. She further explained that interconnection between the two curricula can be used to better prepare the students for their future career and can lead to “increased retention and overall learning.”

As discussed by Stabback (2016), one of the criteria of a good curriculum is its ability to be relevant to the current and future lives of students, along with their experiences, contexts, environments and aspirations. In addition, the perceptions of the teachers also agree with the general education outcomes - intellectual competencies, personal and civic competencies and practical responsibilities (Commission on Higher Education, 2013).

Enriched Teachers’ Personal Values. A good and efficient teacher is enriched by his/her experiences in the classroom. Awareness of one’s personal values as his/her guiding principles in teaching (Barni, Russo & Danioni, 2018) will increase a teacher’s positive approach in the implementation of the curriculum. Furthermore, as mentioned in the same study of Barni, Russo & Danioni (2018), “teachers’ personal values have been found to be related to their academic goals and attitudes towards students’ activities.”

The participants shared that through teaching the new GE curriculum, they experienced personal values enrichment and that they were changed by the process, thus the emergence of this theme - enrichment of teacher’s personal values. The teachers-participants became more flexible, creative and innovative.

One participant shared that teaching GE, specially during the time of pandemic, made him see the need to be creative, *“Hindi mo agad-agad makukuha ang interest nila sa pag-aaral kung di ka gagawa ng tricks or pakulo.” (You will not easily make them engaged if you will not do interesting tricks or activities.)* This enriched personal value helped the participant to also improve how he handled the teaching and learning process.

Another participant shared the need to be innovative, *“So itong pandemic has opened my eyes to a lot of innovations. Tapos, so teachers tayo, itong innovations na ito eh ishare natin sa mga students to excite them because it will be their future.” (This pandemic has opened my eyes to a lot of innovations. Then as teachers, these innovations we need to share with our students to make them excited because it will be their future.)* Realizing the importance of being innovative, the participant also improved on how he values innovative teaching techniques.

One participant also stressed the importance of lifelong learning, “*Kahit ako as I teach, madami pa akong natututunan. Natututo ako sa process...*” (Even I, as I teach, I still learn a lot. I learn from the process.)

These insights of GE teachers are parallel to what Chen (2018) cited that in teaching general education, teachers should be cognizant of the learning behavior of their students and adapt their teaching methodologies and strategies to the needs of their students. He continued that “teaching content is constantly changing and flexible” thus, a teacher should be adaptable and flexible as well. A teacher’s personal values or those values important to him/her, as concluded by the study of Barni, Russo & Danioni (2018), is important and may have an impact on quality teaching.

B. Perceived Influence of the New GE Curriculum to the Students

On the other hand, the themes that emerged regarding the perceived influence or effect of the new General Education courses to the student are *cultivation of students’ soft skills and application to daily life*.

Cultivation of Students’ Soft Skills. The results revealed that the teacher perceived that GE courses cultivate the soft skills of students. Soft skills should be taught by the schools not only for the students to be hired for a job but most importantly to do well as human beings and citizens of the country (Cimatti, 2016). The New General Education curriculum, though it teaches traditional courses, should include contemporary and emerging 21st century themes such as “civic literary, global awareness, financial literacy, health literacy and environmental literacy” (Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010).

The theme - cultivation of students’ soft skills - emerged from the analysis of data. One participant observed that GE courses teach students how to develop their soft skills, “*Well, in Mathematics we have to put diligence on understanding it. So they have to develop their patience...*” He also added that “*Kasi maraming madedevelop, una yung character ng bata, yung attitude nya. Pangalawa yung skills nya. Pangatlo yung critical thinking nya.*” (There are a lot that will be developed, first the student’s character, his/her attitude. Second, his/her skills. And lastly, his/her critical thinking skills.)

It is noteworthy to mention that cultivation of soft skills is very important for the success of students after graduation. And this was perceived by the participants. Soft skills should be “introduced, developed, refined, practiced and reinforced” (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.). This is also the goals of NGEC as stipulated in CHED Memorandum Order 20, series of 2013, which states that “General Education thus lays the groundwork for the development of professionally competent, humane, and moral person[s]. It also prepares the Filipino for the demands of 21st century life and the requisite abilities to anticipate and adapt to swiftly changing situations, to think innovatively, and to create solutions to problems.”

Application to Daily Life. Along with learning traditional courses and 21st century skills, NGEC develops the students’ ability to solve problems and to apply what they learned in and outside the classroom (Nababan, 2014).

For this reason, the theme - application to daily life - emerged. The participants perceived that knowledge from GE courses can be applied to the student's daily life. One participant shared, "Katulad ng Mathematics in the Modern World, it is a combination of different Mathematics in application to our environment and application to our daily routinary activities as well as in our daily living."

The teachers' perception regarding how skills from taking GE courses are applied to daily life is grounded on what literature says that GE should prepare students not only to excel academically but also to prepare them to live successfully, to work diligently and to practice active citizenship (Reich and Head, 2010; Saadeddine, 2013).

Conclusions

This phenomenological study showed that teaching the New GE curriculum is not an easy task. The curriculum is specific with the outcomes and it is expected that these outcomes are manifested by the graduates of this curriculum. In this respect, higher education institutions should give primary attention to how general education is taught and an assessment and continuous improvement of the curriculum is needed. Second, it can be seen that the New GE curriculum develops students' soft skills and/or their 21st century skills which are necessary for their success in the workplace and beyond. With this in mind, it is important that the teaching of the New GE curriculum become multidimensional and multi-disciplinary. Curriculum implementation should implement connected learning and/or integrated learning which would weave the sense or usefulness of general education curriculum with that of specialization curriculum. And lastly, students should also take part in assessing this new GE curriculum. Being the ones who experience the implementation of the curriculum, they should also be part of those who will evaluate this curriculum.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest whatsoever.

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