

Understanding Emphatic Management Through the Professional Journeys of Educational Psychologists Working with Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Angelica L. Solomon¹

¹Laguna College of Business and Arts

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Abstract: This research examined the perspectives and meaning-making processes of educational psychologists in supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in selected schools in the Philippines., specifically in South Luzon and the National Capital Region. It employed a qualitative research design utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological framework. Ten (10) licensed educational psychologists were selected through purposive sampling, each with a minimum of two years of experience in school settings. Data were gathered through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability. Transcriptions were thematically analyzed to interpret the psychologists' lived realities.

This study was anchored in the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, aiming to uncover the subjective meanings and rich personal narratives of the participants. From the analysis, ten (10) superordinate themes emerged: Emotional Challenges, Holistic Adversities, Adaptive Communication and Strategies, Resilience in Students, Professional and Personal Boundaries, Emotional Resilience, Purpose-Driven Accomplishments, Emphatic Management, Role Clarity, and Role Fulfillment. These themes capture the dynamic, multifaceted experiences of educational psychologists as they navigate the complexities of their roles in supporting students with EBD.

The study highlighted the central role of emphatic management in fostering inclusive, supportive, and trauma-informed environments for students with EBD. Grounded in Resilience Theory and Figley's Compassion Fatigue Framework, the findings underscored the importance of institutional support, psychological safety for professionals, and collaborative practices among stakeholders to mitigate burnout and sustain well-being. As a key output, the BEACON Program (Building Empowered and Compassionate Advocacy through Ongoing Nurturing) was developed—a holistic intervention designed to support school psychologists across five areas: role clarity, emotional well-being, professional growth, stakeholder collaboration, and passion reinforcement. Ultimately, these experiences underscore the critical importance of sustained support systems to empower educational psychologists in their vital work.

Keywords. Educational Psychologist, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Lived Experience, Resilience, Emphatic Management.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Mental health is just as important as physical health, and deserves the same quality of support."

– Kate Middleton

Mental health challenges among children and adolescents continue to rise worldwide. The World Health Organization (2021) reported that one in seven adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 experienced a mental health disorder, with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD) being among the most common. These included conditions such as anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and conduct-related issues, all of which significantly affected a student's ability to concentrate, form relationships, manage their emotions, and participate in the learning process. The school environment, where children spent a substantial portion of their formative years, played a critical role in either supporting or compounding these challenges. As these concerns grew, there was an urgent need for comprehensive and accessible mental health services within educational environments that not only addressed these conditions but also fostered a culture of understanding, acceptance, and resilience.

In response to this need, many countries recognized the value of integrating psychologists into school systems. These professionals, although not always formally designated as “educational” or “school” psychologists, served as mental health advocates and interventionists. Their work included psychological assessments, individual and group counseling, consultation with school staff and families, and the development of programs tailored to students' socio-emotional and behavioral development. Psychologists helped create safer and more inclusive schools by promoting empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills. They also contributed to crisis intervention and trauma-informed care, particularly in communities affected by socio-political unrest, poverty, or disaster. International studies showed that schools with embedded psychological services reported improvements in school climate, student behavior, and academic outcomes. However, access to these services remained unequal, often limited by economic constraints, policy gaps, and regional disparities, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

In the Philippine context, the role of psychologists in schools continued to develop. The country faced a significant mental health burden, with the Department of Health (2020) estimating that more than 3.6 million Filipinos experienced mental, neurological, and substance use disorders, many of whom were school-aged children and adolescents. Despite the passage of Republic Act No. 11036 or the Philippine Mental Health Act, which mandated the integration of mental health services in schools and the employment of qualified mental health professionals, implementation remained limited. Many public schools still lacked full-time psychologists, leaving one professional to handle multiple campuses or thousands of

students. Often, psychologists took on hybrid roles as guidance counselors or part-time consultants due to unclear job definitions and a shortage of trained staff. While RA 11036 represented a progressive step toward prioritizing mental health in education, actual practice faced challenges due to resource limitations, weak infrastructure, and ongoing stigma surrounding mental health concerns.

The work of psychologists in schools remained crucial, but was also fraught with challenges. They often faced overwhelming caseloads, limited access to resources, and unclear job descriptions that restricted the scope of their work. Many schools lacked the infrastructure and institutional support needed to sustain mental health programs, particularly in rural or underserved areas. Compounding these difficulties was the cultural stigma associated with mental health in the Philippines. This stigma led to hesitation in seeking help, delays in intervention, and additional stress for the psychologists themselves, who had to navigate societal attitudes while advocating for students' needs. As Punzalan (2020) explained, the use of generalized behavioral strategies in schools often failed to adequately address the nuanced nature of emotional and behavioral disorders. Moreover, many educators and school leaders had limited mental health literacy, making collaboration with psychologists more difficult and less effective.

In light of these issues, this study explored the lived experiences of psychologists working in Philippine schools, particularly in their efforts to support students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. By examining their challenges, strategies, and the impact of their work, this research shed light on the vital role they played in student development. Understanding the realities faced by these professionals was essential to improving school-based mental health services, informing policy decisions, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for students with emotional and behavioral needs.

II. METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of educational psychologists supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in the Philippines. Guided by Resilience Theory and the Compassion Fatigue Framework, the research utilized a validated semi-structured interview instrument consisting of ten questions reviewed by experts, with a CVR score of 1.00. Five licensed psychologists with at least two years of experience working in various educational settings across South Luzon and NCR participated through purposive sampling. Data were gathered via face-to-face interviews, recorded and transcribed verbatim, with member checking done for accuracy. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, supported by QDA Miner Lite software for organizing and interpreting data. Ethical standards were strictly upheld throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, and debriefing.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of educational psychologists in supporting students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in selected schools in the Philippines. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), ten key themes emerged that illustrate the emotional, professional, and systemic dimensions of their work. These themes offer deep insights into the personal and professional world of school psychologists and their adaptive strategies amidst daily challenges. Below, each theme is introduced through an interpretive paragraph followed by the related interview question and a synthesis of participant responses.

A. Theme A: Emotional Challenges

- *Interview question 1:* What emotions do you face during stressful situations in your work with students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)?

Educational psychologists often encounter intense emotional experiences in their work. These include managing crises, witnessing student suffering, and coping with the emotional contagion that comes from constant exposure to others' pain. This theme captures how psychologists must consistently engage in emotional labor, which, if unmanaged, can lead to burnout.

Participants reported experiencing sadness, frustration, and anxiety. They frequently described moments of helplessness when students displayed violent outbursts or emotional breakdowns. Emotional regulation strategies such as mindfulness, breathing techniques, and compartmentalization were employed to cope.

B. Theme B: Holistic Adversities

- *Interview question 2:* What are the challenges you faced in supporting students with EBD?

This theme captures the broad and interconnected difficulties faced by educational psychologists—not only emotional, but also institutional, logistical, and physical. It represents the full weight of the profession, especially when support systems and structures are inadequate.

Participants described a range of holistic adversities, encompassing emotional, physical, administrative, and institutional challenges. These included insufficient staffing, limited access to mental health resources, lack of training among teachers, and bureaucratic obstacles that impeded timely interventions. One psychologist highlighted the challenge of addressing multiple crises in a single day, often without breaks or emotional decompression. These adversities extended beyond school walls—affecting relationships with families, systemic barriers to referrals, and the overwhelming need for individualized interventions. Many felt isolated in their roles, especially in schools without other mental health professionals.

The results reflect how personal resilience is tested not just emotionally, but across systems. These findings indicate that support must also address systemic and institutional reforms, not only individual coping.

C. Theme C: Adaptive Communication and Strategies

- *Interview question 3:* What coping strategies do you use to stay motivated and focused when you encounter challenges in supporting students with EBD?

This theme centers on the practical and creative ways educational psychologists adjust their methods to effectively support students with complex needs. It reflects the necessity of flexibility and innovation in a field where no single strategy fits all.

Psychologists described adaptive communication and behavioral strategies as essential tools for effective practice. These included using visual aids, social stories, behavior reinforcement systems, and individualized behavior intervention plans (BIPs). Participants often modified their approach based on students' emotional states, learning preferences, and sensory sensitivities. They also relied on collaborative partnerships with teachers and parents to ensure continuity of care. Staying motivated was linked to a solution-focused mindset, reflecting on student growth, and attending professional development. This theme highlights the dynamic and responsive nature of their work, emphasizing that strategies must evolve as student needs shift. The ability to flexibly adapt interventions helped psychologists remain hopeful and engaged despite obstacles.

D. Theme D: Resilience in Students

- *Interview question 4:* How do you support students in overcoming setbacks or difficulties they face in their academic or emotional development?

This theme highlights the psychologists' role in fostering student resilience and emotional recovery. It acknowledges students' capacity for growth and adaptation when given consistent support and encouragement.

Participants observed that students with EBD often exhibit tremendous resilience when given the right support structures. Psychologists emphasized building trusting relationships, setting achievable goals, and reinforcing even small behavioral improvements. Interventions focused not only on correcting disruptive behavior but also on helping students understand their emotions, build coping skills, and develop self-regulation. One participant described a student who learned to manage classroom outbursts through consistent coaching and positive feedback. These findings align with Resilience Theory, which underscores the importance of protective relationships and environments in fostering student growth. Psychologists viewed each setback as an opportunity for reflection and redirection. The students' ability to bounce back reinforced the psychologists' belief in the transformative impact of their work.

E. Theme E: Professional and Personal Boundaries

- Interview question 5: How do the demands of your work influence your personal relationships or life outside of your profession?

This theme examines how psychologists manage the boundary between their professional obligations and personal lives. It highlights the importance of separating emotional investment in students from private life to prevent burnout.

Participants acknowledged that the emotional demands of their role often extended into their personal lives, making it difficult to disconnect after work. Some experienced difficulty sleeping, emotional fatigue at home, or limited time for personal relationships due to work responsibilities. To manage these spillover effects, they practiced setting clear work-home boundaries, avoided bringing case files home, and engaged in leisure activities. One psychologist mentioned the importance of saying “no” to non-essential tasks in order to protect personal time. These experiences reflect the risk of boundary blurring common in emotionally intense professions. Establishing firm boundaries emerged as a proactive strategy to reduce burnout and preserve mental health. The theme reinforces the need for both personal strategies and institutional support for well-being.

F. Theme F: Emotional Resilience

- Interview question 6: What coping strategies do you use to manage feelings of emotional exhaustion, reduced empathy, or detachment when working with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD)?

This theme captures how psychologists consciously build their own emotional strength in the face of chronic stress and emotional labor. It reflects their internal resources and ongoing efforts to remain effective in their roles.

Psychologists demonstrated strong emotional resilience by using reflective practices, supervision, faith-based coping, mindfulness, and peer support. They acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining empathy in every session, especially after emotionally draining days. However, they used intentional strategies to “recharge” emotionally, such as journaling, spiritual practices, or structured breaks. Emotional resilience was described not as an inherent trait, but as a skill honed over time. The findings resonate with both Resilience Theory and the Compassion Fatigue Framework, illustrating how protective routines can mitigate emotional depletion. Participants noted that resilience-building activities not only protected their well-being but enhanced the quality of their work with students. The psychologists expressed pride in their growth and emotional maturity over time.

G. Theme G: Purpose-Driven Accomplishments

- Interview question 7: What aspects of your role give you a sense of accomplishment or purpose, even amidst challenges?

This theme reflects how the sense of purpose derived from helping students drives psychologists to persist through difficulties. It focuses on meaning-making as a central component of motivation and job satisfaction.

Despite numerous challenges, psychologists derived deep meaning from their work. Witnessing student breakthroughs—whether in self-regulation, academic engagement, or socialization—was described as the most fulfilling aspect of their role. They emphasized the joy of being part of a child’s emotional transformation, even in small moments of growth. Participants also found purpose in mentoring teachers, shaping school systems, and advocating for student welfare. One psychologist stated that “seeing a child smile after weeks of distress makes everything worth it.” This sense of meaning acted as a protective factor against burnout and disillusionment. The theme supports the idea that a strong sense of purpose can sustain professionals through adversity, aligning with intrinsic motivation theories and compassion satisfaction principles.

H. Theme H: Empathic Management

- Interview question 8: How do you manage empathy for students’ needs with maintaining professional boundaries to protect your own well-being?

This theme explores how psychologists manage their deep empathy toward students while maintaining professional distance. It reflects the delicate emotional balancing act between care and over-involvement.

Participants consistently expressed high levels of empathy for their students, often internalizing their struggles. However, they also learned the necessity of empathic management—balancing compassion with objectivity. Techniques included reframing student behavior through trauma-informed lenses, grounding exercises before sessions, and debriefing with colleagues after emotionally intense interactions. One psychologist described the process of “holding space for students without carrying their burdens home.” The findings show how empathy, if not managed well, can lead to secondary trauma. Empathic management helped maintain emotional presence without compromising personal well-being. This theme complements the Compassion Fatigue Framework and emphasizes the value of professional boundaries as acts of self-preservation.

I. Theme I: Role Clarity

- Interview Question 9: What challenges do you believe are unique to educational psychologists in supporting students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, and how do you navigate them?

This theme emphasizes the need for psychologists' roles to be clearly defined within the school system. It reflects the challenges of professional misidentification and underutilization.

Participants highlighted role ambiguity as a significant stressor, especially in schools with limited understanding of psychological services. Misconceptions about their roles led to overburdening, unrealistic expectations, or being assigned unrelated tasks. However, psychologists actively clarified their scope by educating stakeholders, creating role-specific outputs, and engaging in policy discussions. One described conducting orientation seminars to help administrators and teachers understand her function. Establishing role clarity helped them prioritize tasks, advocate for proper referrals, and reduce role-related stress. This theme underscores the importance of clear institutional definitions and administrative support for psychological services in schools.

J. Theme J: Role Fulfillment

➤ Interview Question 10: What do you find most rewarding about your work with students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders?

This final theme affirms the psychologists' sense of personal and professional satisfaction derived from their work. Despite systemic and emotional challenges, they find meaning and fulfillment in being part of students' journeys.

Participants reported feeling a deep sense of role fulfillment, grounded in their identity as change-makers in the school community. Their contributions—whether through assessments, interventions, or capacity-building—were viewed as life-giving and socially impactful. One psychologist expressed joy in being “the voice that understands the child when no one else does.” Despite the emotional and systemic challenges, they believed their role held unique power to influence positive outcomes. The findings suggest that a sense of purpose, identity alignment, and acknowledgment from stakeholders reinforced their passion. This theme closes the loop on professional resilience—revealing how fulfillment acts as a sustaining force amid adversity.

These results underscore the interplay of emotional labor, professional identity, systemic support, and personal coping in the experiences of educational psychologists. The integration of Resilience Theory and the Compassion Fatigue Framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand their journey, illuminating pathways for systemic reform and individual support mechanisms.

IV. CONCLUSION

- Educational psychologists encounter a wide spectrum of emotions while working with students with EBD. These emotional responses, although difficult, reflect their deep commitment and sensitivity to students' needs.

Understanding and managing these emotions is central to sustaining their effectiveness in emotionally demanding settings.

- The psychologists face not only emotional but also institutional, physical, and systemic challenges. These adversities hinder the delivery of sustained interventions and highlight the need for systemic support. Addressing holistic adversities requires cross-sector collaboration and adequate resource allocation.
- Psychologists utilize flexible communication techniques and personalized intervention plans to support students. These strategies improve student outcomes and foster collaboration with families and educators. The use of adaptive strategies is key to tailoring support in diverse and dynamic educational settings.
- Students with EBD demonstrate notable resilience when supported appropriately. Educational psychologists play a crucial role in recognizing and nurturing this resilience. Promoting protective factors and emotional skills enhances long-term student success.
- Maintaining clear boundaries helps psychologists protect their well-being and prevent burnout. It also fosters professionalism and emotional sustainability in their roles. Institutional policies should support healthy boundaries for mental health professionals.
- Emotional resilience enables psychologists to withstand the emotional toll of their work. It is built through reflection, support systems, and continuous learning. Strengthening emotional resilience should be a professional priority.
- Psychologists find deep meaning in small student progress and milestone achievements. This sense of purpose sustains their motivation despite systemic limitations. Purpose-driven work contributes to long-term career satisfaction.
- Managing empathy allows psychologists to remain connected yet objective. Balancing emotional connection and professional detachment prevents emotional fatigue. This skill is essential in long-term practice.
- Clear role expectations reduce frustration and enhance service delivery. Role clarity ensures psychologists can focus their efforts strategically. It also supports productive relationships with other school stakeholders.
- Despite challenges, psychologists find fulfillment in advocating for and supporting students. A strong sense of purpose and impact anchors them in their profession. Fulfilling roles empower them to stay committed and resilient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In consideration of the themes that emerged from the study, the researcher came up with the following recommendations:

- Educational psychologists may enhance their professional development by pursuing specialized training in trauma-informed care, particularly when supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This training should

emphasize emotional regulation techniques, adaptive communication strategies, and resilience-building practices to better address the diverse needs of students.

- Schools and educational institutions may adopt a more holistic approach to supporting students with emotional and behavioral challenges by implementing regular family engagement initiatives. These efforts can include providing educational resources and conducting workshops for families to help them understand and respond to their children's emotional needs, thereby strengthening home-school collaboration.
- Educational policymakers may consider increasing resource allocation toward the development and implementation of school-based mental health services. Priority should be given to creating accessible, sustainable programs that focus on early intervention, emotional resilience, and effective coping mechanisms to support positive academic and behavioral outcomes.
- Educational psychologists may also advocate for the implementation of the BEACON program (Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive Support for Optimal Navigation) within schools. This integrated framework blends behavioral management, emotional regulation, and cognitive-behavioral strategies to equip students with essential coping skills and resilience. The program can be effectively utilized in both general and special education settings for individualized support.
- Future researchers may focus on evaluating the effectiveness of integrated school-based interventions that address mental health and emotional resilience. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term outcomes of these interventions on students' academic performance, social development, and emotional well-being, especially within diverse student populations.

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