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ACCENTUATING THE HEART OF TEACHING: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT-CATECHISTS

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc., Philippines, has been actively involved in the community through the catechetical ministry. It is henceforth, the purpose of this study to accentuate the heart of teaching by exploring the lived experiences of the student-catechists. This employed qualitative research specifically phenomenological design. The researchers used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The participants of the study were chosen through purposive sampling wherein participants were selected based on some pre-inclusion criteria. The participants were student-catechists from our school. The responses were gathered through audio recordings. Coding and thematic analysis of participants' responses were used to extract answers. Results of the investigation revealed that student-catechists view catechism as inspires students and exemplifying good role models. It gives positive experiences by students' constructive responses, co-catechists shared experiences, and learning from interactive activities. The challenges faced include lack of provision for instructional materials, attitude towards catechism, lack of knowledge, and difficulty in managing responsibilities. Despite these factors, participants learned to cope by lesson planning, proper classroom management and respecting beliefs of others. The results of this study imply that there is a sense of fulfilment on being a student catechist.

KEYWORDS: *Education, student catechism, college students, phenomenology, coding, and thematic analysis, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

For God so loved the World that He gave His only begotten Son so that who so ever believe in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. (Jn 3:16).

Jesus, the Word Incarnate, the visible presence of the invisible God, in perpetual and perfect obedience to the will of the Father instituted the wondrous gift, the Holy Church. The Church, the living witness of Jesus' life and ministry; the visible presence of Jesus, the mystical body of the risen Lord and the sacrament of God's Compassionate love to humanity. Cleansed by his own blood, Jesus commanded his disciples, the Church, the Good News to the whole world and to baptize them in the name…† (Mt. 28: 18-20).

It is for this sacred mandate that this humble research has been conceived in response to the continuing and ever changing challenges which the Church thru her Catholic Educational Institutions has ever confronted with. The need for an honest and sincere witnessing has always been called upon and challenges all catholic educational institutions to be even more introspective and innovative in facing the signs of the times in which their students are very much involved and vulnerable.

It is important, at this very juncture, to emphasize the fact that the child's first catechetical experience must begin at home and so to accentuate the necessity of the presence of parents and god-parents (during the child's baptism) and to re-catechize and remind them of their sacred role to be the first catechists of the child as she/he grows under their care and guidance. The moment the child reaches schooling life, she/he must have already her/his natural notion about the reality of the Divinity, of Christ, and of the Church and her (church) prayers and rituals. By then, the school's catechetical instructions may lead and guide the child's relationship with the Divine into a deeper sphere and wider realms achieving maturity of her/his faith. For it is with maturity of faith, with the help of the Holy Spirit, which will ignite the child's spirit to catechize others when the proper time comes for her/him to do the same. The same maturity of faith would eventually be necessary to support and assure her/him in responding to the invitation which more often than not would be tough and challenging.

Thus, according to the Declaration on Christian Education written by Pope Paul VI (1965), he said and I herein quote: "since all Christians have become by rebirth of water and the Holy Spirit a new creature so that they should be called children of God, they have a right to a Christian Education. A Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person, but has as

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its principal purpose this goal: 'that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth," thus maturity not only of age but more so of and in faith. Moreover, in fulfilling its educational role, the Church, eager to employ all suitable aids, is concerned especially about those which are her very own. Foremost among these is catechetical instruction, which enlightens and strengthens the faith, nourishes life according to the spirit of Christ, leads to intelligent and active participation in the liturgical mystery and gives motivation for apostolic activity.

The challenges of catechetical apostolate are so enormous and seem insurmountable to deal with, however this venture is undoubtedly rewarding and fulfilling for those whose spirits are open and responsive to the urging of the Holy Spirit as it happened to the disciples in the so called 'upper room' during the Pentecost. For indeed, catechetical apostolate being a part of the God's plan, would mean simply a passing on of the Good News of salvation from generation to generation, thus it is an apostolate.

Henceforth, catechetical instruction must provide clear doctrinal continuity and unity of faith handed down by Christ, the Divine Teacher. This continuity is expressed by what the Church calls the "deposit of faith," that is, what Christ handed down to his Apostles and their successors and to us the catechists of the modern times.

According to Hater (2008), a catechist's faith is the basis for his or her love of God and one another. It invites them to share God's word with children, adolescents and adults. Smiling and laughing are good symbols for catechesis. Catechists help people smile when they share Jesus' joyful message."

Furthermore, Fitz (2014) added that great teachers in any subject have a passion for their topic. Thus, the most important prerequisite for being a catechist is having that passion for Christ. In that way, students who aren't coming to class out of their own personal desire to know and follow Jesus can at least find themselves caught with amazement on the instructor's passion. It might be enough to ignite a full-fledged personal conversion, or it might be just enough to open the student's mind to at least learning a few things that will prove helpful down the road.

Again, according to Burke (2000), there are difficulties in catechesis that need to be addressed and one of it is the need for catechists to understand catechesis as a school of faith which deepens Christian life in all of its aspects like knowledge, prayer and worship and witness.

Vatican Declaration on Christian Education has this instruction for Catholic School teachers: 'Teachers must remember that it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose. They should therefore be prepared for their work with special care, having the appropriate qualifications and adequate learning both religious and secular. They should also be skilled in the art of education in accordance with the discoveries of modern times (Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, #55; 28 October, 1965).

Specific example of these difficulties was shared by Madrilena de la Cerna from Cebu City, narrating her experience as a catechist in teaching High School students in Public High School. According to her, it was very challenging because many students in the classroom are older than her and few Protestant students would question and argue about certain doctrinal/theological issues discussed in class.

Almost similar sentiment was shared by the student-catechists of St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc. When she was assigned in a Public School, she described the instances in which she found it difficult to continue with her prepared lessons because protestant students tend to raise question just for the sake of questioning for mostly they don't accept answers, aside from the fact that she herself is not always prepared to answer questions outside the prepared topic.

Student catechist of batch 2017 also has observed the students' inability and lack of attention to the lessons in the class may be due to several factors one of which would be electronic gadgets. Most of the public schools do not have any mechanism which controls the use of electronic gadgets.

Deprivation or lack of religious text books or any religious material from the school, according to another catechist of batch 2016, which accordingly, would often result into his failure to make attractive visual and audio aids that would win and stimulate the imagination of his students. Additionally, since he also has subjects to deal with being a student himself, he often lack of time to prepare for his catechetical classes. In short, time management.

Summative diagnoses based on the aforementioned four (4) difficulties or challenges of Student catechists, truthful as they are, taking them collectively as whole would always lead us on the issue of 'maturity of faith.' For, as what was stated, maturity of faith, would bring forth the passion to share ones lived faith experience which would naturally begot the innovative potential of the catechist. A spirit that is moved by the Divine Spirit knows no obstacles. The beautiful and glorious experience of the apostles and Mary during the Pentecost would serve as summative imagery.

An undetermined number of researches have already been conducted on the effect of Catechesis to the recipients; to the school children, to the youth and even to the adults, and yet, very rarely do we make an intensive studies on the influence and impact of catechism to the ones doing the catechesis themselves especially on their intellectual and spiritual preparedness, a holistic preparation that would showcase their maturity of faith on the sublimity and sanctity of their task to their apostolate area, these we believe to be even more crucial, relevant and absolutely

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necessary and for these purposes and intensions that this study have been conceived and to hopefully be able to cope and fill in the gap of studies that address these very concerns and issues.

For more than a decade, St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc. had been sending student-catechists for the Catechetical Ministry of Christ the King Cathedral, this would need a thorough re-evaluation for the sake of those who are sent.

The findings of this study will be significant for the students, teachers of the faith (catechists), the Teacher Education Program, Catechetical Apostolate Club of the entire institution.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of the student catechists.

This sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the participants' perceptions on student catechism?
2. What are the participants' positive experiences on being a catechist?
3. What are the challenges that the participants faced in teaching catechesis?
4. How do the participants cope with the challenges encountered?
5. What are the participants' realizations out of their experiences?

Theoretical Lens

This study is seen through the Social Action Theory of Max Weber (1864-1920) which argued that social action occurs as a result of cooperation and struggle between the individual and wider society. Talcott Parsons stated in his Structural Functionalism that society functions as the institutions like education and religion interact each other (Norwood, 2003).

We also make use of Lawrence Kohlberg on his theory of Moral Development which is a basis for ethical behavior. This is the assumption that humans are inherently communicative, capable of reason, and possess a desire to understand others and the world around them. He understands values as a critical component of the right. Whatever, the right is, for Kohlberg, it must be universally valid across societies, a position known as moral universalism.

Wade (2001) also stated that social action is at the heart of teaching of all student learning. It only means that social action can be integrated with different subjects and much more in religious education which will clarify values of the students. Nelson, Beaudoin, and Maro (2010) further articulated that communication theology bridges education and catechesis. The creation of "common living space" serves as an avenue of teaching and learning just like in liturgy. In academic setting, we can build common living space through the classroom where there is preaching and sharing God's word.

Raths, Harmin, and Simon (1978) in their Value Clarification Model provides an educational solution. They said that through valuing process, which can be done in the teaching-learning process, it helps to reduce the symptoms of values confusion.

It was also supported by the Social Action Model of Newmann (1975) which recommends community involvement. The model suggested four different roles of teachers in the Social Action: General Resource, Counsellor, expert resource, and activist.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research is qualitative in nature. This is basically a type of phenomenological research. As stated by Waters (2000), phenomenological research is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understanding of a particular situation or phenomenon.

Research Participants

In this study, the participants were the selected ten (10) student-teachers of St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc. Further, the participants of this study were based from the following criteria: they must be a student of the Teacher Education Program and who have taught catechesis in Tagum City National High School regardless of grade levels either male or female and must be willing to participate in the conduct of the study.

Research Instruments

Interview was the primary source of data in this study. Aside from writing responses of the participants, the researchers used a phone recorder to ensure that their responses was not altered or misinterpreted. The written or recorded responses were analysed carefully.

The sampling method used is the nonprobability sampling which is Purposive Sampling Technique. In this type of sampling, participants were selected or sought after on pre-selected criteria based on the research questions stated in the above mentioned paragraph.

The in-depth interview (IDI) had five (5) participants. Focused group discussion (FGD) also was used as a means for us to gather sources and information about our participants. Five (5) key-participants were accommodated for FGD.

Moreover, this study was conceptualized, carefully planned and authentically established by the researchers. The information gathered especially the background of the study and the reviews of related literature were with citations.

Data Gathering Procedure

In gathering the data, the researchers used interviews to capture the responses of the participants which help us in accentuating the heart of teaching and to find out the lived experiences of the student-catechist. Interviewing is a method of qualitative research in which the researchers ask open-ended questions orally and

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record the participant's answers. It is typically done face-to-face, but can also be done via other communication devices such as online interview and the like. The open-ended questions enable the participants to answer in their own spontaneous words (Babbie, 2001).

Aside from the in-depth interview, we also used focus-group discussion (FGD) wherein the participants were gathered together. It was one way of capsulizing a free conversation. It was a benefit for us to obtain a free conversational relationship with our participants. It led us to know them better that enable us to really accentuate the heart of their teaching.

Firstly, the researchers provided the participants consent forms informing them about the purpose of our study.

Secondly, after the approval, we gave them short information about the main core of conducting the study. Along with this, we also provided them the scope and limitation for the participants to be guided as to where this study evolved and also for them to share and give only what is necessary with the help of our questionnaires.

Thirdly, we had an in-depth interview among our participants. We conducted an interview with the participants individually.

After the in-depth interview, focus-group discussion followed. We gathered all the participants together for us to have a free conversational relationship with the participants in order to capsulize and generalize the students-catechists responses.

In addition, the responses of the participants were recorded as it is without alteration of words to obtain accurate responses as the basis for interpretation and analysis.

Lastly, findings were discussed.

Data Analysis

According to Taylor and Gibbs (2010), qualitative data analysis is the range of processes and procedures whereby we move from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating.

Before the data was analyzed, all in-depth interviews and documents were transcribed into written form for a closer study. The transcription process help the researchers to have a deep understanding of data as it encompasses what were in the transcript.

The answers of the participants were documented in a tabular form. We transcribed their answers from specific questions to follow-up questions.

Another column was for coding followed by thematic analysis where we got the main themes and core ideas of the responses in order for us to capsulize it. Analysis and interpretation was made after.

According to Saldana (2009), a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.

In coding, we looked for distinct concepts and categories in the data, which formed the basic units of our analysis. In other words, we break down the data into first level concepts, or master headings, and second-level categories, or subheadings. It is from specific to general categories to have a comprehensive set of themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as"a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data."

After coding, we extracted the main concepts and proceed to thematic analysis. We put together the concepts to come up with a major theme.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In qualitative research, using Guba's constructs, four issues of trustworthiness demand careful attention: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This paper considered the criteria in detail.

Ethical Considerations

According to Kimmel (2007), ethical aspects of a study must be addressed in the following manner: informed consent of the participants were obtained before involving them in the study, members of the sample group were not subjected to coercion in any ways, privacy of the research participants was ensured so that no personal data were collected from the participants, research participants were debriefed about the aims and objectives of the study before the primary data collection process.

The researchers considered certain research ethics to ensure quality, validity and integrity of the study, by using consent forms that were given to the participants. Before doing the interview, the participants were informed that they have the right to refuse to be a subject of this study, and all of their personal information and data were kept confidential.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' Perceptions about Student Catechism

Table 1

Major Themes and Core Ideas on Participant's Perception about Student Catechism

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Channel of Faith	• It is an opportunity to share knowledge • A tool to inspire students • Satisfying if we can share
Exemplary Action	• A student catechist is seen as a good role model • A student catechist is living the action he teaches
Attributes of a Catechist	• Commitment and dedication • Passionate and responsible • Patient and understanding • Knowledgeable

As cited by Hater (2008), a catechist's faith is the basis for his or her love of God and one another. It invites us to share God's word with children, adolescents and adults. As for the participants, they find catechism as a medium for them to inspire students and an opportunity to share knowledge. Second theme highlights that catechism is an exemplary action wherein student-catechist are viewed as a role that lived with the words they teach. Many of them also pointed out that a certain catechist must possess values like committed, dedicated, knowledgeable, passionate, responsible, patient, and most of all understanding.

Participants' Positive Experiences on being a Catechist

Table 2

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Participant's Positive Experiences on being a Catechist

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Students Influence in Teaching Catechesis	• Students positive response to catechism and warm welcome • Looking at the eyes of the students eagerness to learn • Learning from the students as well
Co-catechist Shared Experiences	• Collaboration with co-catechist to come with certain teaching strategy • Sharing of individual experiences
Learning from Interactive Activities	• Open-forum • Group sharing • Bible sharing • Reflection time • Seeing students' full cooperation and participation

Fits (2014) mentioned that great teachers in any subject have a passion for their topic. The most important pre-requisite for being a catechist is having that passion for Christ. In that way, students can at least find themselves caught with amazement on the experience and on the instructor's passion. With this, the participants have mentioned experiences that struck them on their catechism journey. One theme highlighted the positive experience of some of the student-catechists as students heartedly welcome them. It was also viewed that one of the positive experience that they encounter is to see the eyes of the students eagerness to learn, where they can also learn from them and vice versa.

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Challenges that Participants' Faced in Teaching Catechesis

Table 3

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Challenges that Participant's Faced in Teaching Catechesis

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Encountered Problems	• Classroom's electronic concerns • Instructional materials • Conflict between academic and catechism responsibilities • Students act of disrespect
Diversity of Students' Belief	• Attention span of non-Catholic students • Dealing with non-Catholic students
Student-Catechist Ignorance of the Doctrines of the Faith	• A need to deepen understanding of the Christian faith • Inability to answer queries of students

We also gathered a lot of real-life problems encountered in the catechism journey. Some of the participants experienced difficulty in setting up the classroom because of electronic concerns, instructional material concerns and students act of disrespect. Students are known to be diverse individual who came from different backgrounds. This has become also an encountered problem from most of the participants because of their lived beliefs; they had problems on dealing with non-Catholic students whose attention span runs only in couple of minutes and tend not to be attentive.

Participants' Way of Coping with the Challenges Encountered

Table 4

Major Themes and Core Ideas on How the Participant's Cope With the Challenges Encountered

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Lesson Planning	• Planning when it comes to instructional materials • Proper preparation through research
Act of Advice	• Respect students' respective beliefs • Let students know about our different perceptions • Emphasis on our differences and commonalities
Classroom Management	• Giving class activities and tasks

There are ways that the participants had shared as to how they cope with the challenges they encountered. One theme extracted was for them to plan. These employ the participants' way of planning in terms of their instructional materials and do an in-depth research on the topics on their manuals. They also mentioned that one of coping with those challenges is a need to respect students' respective beliefs, let students know about their different perceptions and put emphasis on each of our differences and commonalities.

Participants' Realizations of their Experiences

Table 5

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Participants' Realizations of their Experiences

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Room for Improvement	• One must be ready at all times • Feeling of wanting to have a deeper connection and relationship to God • A need to be knowledgeable • Provide variety of teaching strategies • Avenue to apply today's experiences to future teaching
Sense of Fulfilment	• Satisfaction • Gratitude • Enlightenment

According to Burke (2000), there are difficulties in catechesis that need to be addressed and one of it is the need for catechist to understand catechesis as a school of faith which deepens Christian life in all of its aspects like knowledge, prayer, worship and witness. This thought of Burke greatly highlights to the response of the participants as to their realizations based on their

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experience. Most of the participants shared that there is always a room for improvement wherein they added that one must be ready at all times and provide variety of teaching strategies. They also realize the need to have a deeper connection and relationship to God. Thus, an avenue to apply today's experiences to future teaching. They also feel the sense of fulfilment, satisfaction, gratitude and enlightenment with this spiritual endeavor.

CONCLUSION

As we analyzed the result in these research questions, we came up with the following conclusive findings: (1) catechetical instruction opens wider opportunity for the catechized to share events in their lives that are spiritual in nature and in a venue that is suitable for them to see the spiritual dimension of their experiences; (2) catechetical instruction allows them to get out from their own shelves for them to see and realize the amazing truth that their own pains and suffering are the same pains and sufferings won by Jesus on the Cross. That Jesus may become their source of Hope and comfort in the lives; (3) catechetical instruction may highlight the invitation of the ministry of Jesus through proper guidance for the catechized to find their respective vocations in life; (4) for the student-catechists to do primarily a continuity of Jesus' mission and above all for them to assimilate the values, culture and language of our Divine Teacher.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

For Teaching Practice

Catechetical apostolate serves as our institutional response to the invitation of the ministry of Jesus, the greatest teacher. As future Ignacian Marian teachers, we must be fully equipped with the knowledge of the faith in order for us to be effective in doing the mission entrusted to us.

Thus, a holistic preparation for maturity of the faith is deemed necessary. This research may lead to us to create the following program:

1. Series of seminars that would highlight on Jesus's life and mission. Christological discussion would help the student-catechists to realize that what they are about to do is primarily a continuity of Jesus' mission and above all for them to assimilate the value, culture and language of the Divine Teacher. 'Christification' of the catechists is what the signs of our time is called us to do.
2. Recollections that are solely for catechists, if possible, to spiritually prepare them for this sacred task.
3. It is also seen as necessary to modify and intensify our mode of selection of the would-be catechists to ensure preparedness and readiness to face any challenges that may come along the way, a set of criteria and qualification may be followed.
4. A new and updated catechetical lesson guide and module must be used to facilitate ease in doing catechesis.
5. The use of the electronic equipment; televisions and even gadgets like phones and the likes may also be utilized for the good use instead of making them as obstacles and source of destructions.

For Future Research

Since the findings of this study were limited only on the views, opinions and experiences of the participants, the implications of this study suggest that further research study should be made to validate all the answer of the students using larger sample size and/or greater number of participants for us to have a wider view about this catechetical endeavor. We may also suggest that further research be performed on the inner beauty behind SMCT catechetical classes to the recipients especially in TCNHS to confirm its influence of this missionary venture.

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