

Exploring distance learning in rural private schools in the Philippines: Challenges, coping mechanisms, and model development

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to the educational landscape, impacting not only public schools but also private learning institutions. This study explores the experiences of private schools at the administrative and faculty levels, focusing on the challenges encountered and the coping mechanisms employed in implementing distance learning. A descriptive phenomenology research design was used, emphasizing the subjective experiences of private school administrators and teachers. The researchers applied phenomenology to understand the core structure of their experiences in remote teaching and learning, with the goal of informing best practices and guiding potential changes in policies, theories, or responses to distance learning. Private schools faced a range of challenges due to this sudden shift, including insufficient professional preparation for teachers and inadequate technological infrastructure, both of which significantly affected the quality of distance learning. Despite these constraints, school leaders and teachers collaborated to propose strategies for mitigating the impact of these challenges. Key recommendations include prioritizing internet connectivity as a basic project for IT infrastructure with the support of school personnel and community leaders. Additional strategies involve offering diverse teaching modalities, conducting learner assessments, establishing effective communication and feedback systems, practicing efficient time management, fostering positive relationships, demonstrating professional integrity, advocating for ongoing training and simplified instruction, and recognizing the unique value of each learner within their academic environment.

Keywords: *Coping mechanisms, Distance learning, Educational challenges, Phenomenology, Remote teaching, Rural private schools.*

1. Introduction

The removal of space and time constraints in distance learning has driven an increasing demand for lifelong learning and distance education programs. To meet this need, schools aim to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) effectively into their educational programs. However, the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines has faced significant challenges in delivering quality, accessible, relevant, and liberating education due to the public health emergency brought about by COVID-19. Recognizing similar challenges in private schools, DepEd permitted them to implement distance learning modalities and encouraged them to utilize DepEd's resources to support teaching and learning (Briones, 2020a). In response, DepEd developed the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to ensure that learning opportunities are provided safely through various learning delivery modalities (Briones, 2020b). Additionally, as Briones (2020c) emphasized, DepEd remains committed to the uninterrupted delivery of basic education services to learners and communities. To achieve this, it adopted multiple learning delivery modalities, including distance

learning, to ensure continued education while protecting the health and safety of both personnel and students.

The changes brought to the educational landscape by the COVID-19 pandemic affected both public and private schools alike. Teachers in both sectors expressed a degree of resistance to remote teaching, as it diverged from their traditional teaching experiences. The extent of this resistance often depended on how well the new modality aligned with their personal lives, perceptions, experiences, and beliefs. According to Kagan (1992), when introduced to a new teaching modality like distance education, teachers tend to interpret and implement it in ways that align with their past experiences and beliefs. This is supported by Zhao and Czikowski (2001), who noted that teachers often adopt technology in a manner consistent with their established pedagogic perspectives, without necessarily adapting their core teaching philosophies.

Distance learning remains a relatively new experience for elementary education. Initial discussions with private school administrators and teachers revealed several significant challenges: course preparation is demanding and time-consuming, limited internet connectivity hinders effective student interaction, and technical difficulties with teaching platforms make it challenging to engage students meaningfully, thus hampering effective and efficient lesson delivery. These initial findings align with Yildiz and Selim (2015), who highlighted that the absence of the familiar physical classroom environment, lack of teaching materials, technical issues, and insufficient equipment all contribute to the challenges of implementing distance education.

This research aims to deepen the understanding of private schools' experiences, focusing on the challenges and coping mechanisms at both the administrative and faculty levels in implementing distance learning. Ultimately, this study seeks to identify strategies to enhance this learning modality, fostering a more conducive, engaging, and effective environment for both teachers and students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Impact of Public Health Emergencies on Education*

To gain an overview of the circumstances reshaping the educational landscape, the literature points to how global health crises like COVID-19 have dramatically influenced educational systems. The novel coronavirus, identified as COVID-19, led to emergency measures worldwide (Guo, et al., 2020). Efforts to control infections included isolation and other preventative measures, with the Philippines declaring a state of calamity under Presidential Proclamation No. 929 s. 2020. This caused nationwide lockdowns, business closures, restricted movement, and WHO-recommended health protocols, such as social distancing and self-isolation (WHO, 2020).

These measures identified educational settings as high-risk, prompting school closures and restrictions on face-to-face learning (UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, teachers and students transitioned to online learning modalities where possible, with the academic calendar adjusted to accommodate continuity planning (Crawford, et al., 2020).

2.2. *Challenges in Distance Education Implementation*

As teaching shifted online, educators encountered numerous challenges. Kearns (2012) highlighted concerns about the equality and validity of assessments in distance learning, where monitoring students' work was challenging. De Villa and Manalo (2020) reported that many teachers lacked pre-service training in distance learning, adding to the difficulties in assessment and instruction.

Furthermore, adapting established pedagogies, like inquiry-based and hands-on learning, proved challenging in a remote format, raising concerns about digital competencies and technological support (Lichorom, 2015; Nilson & Goodson, 2018). De Villa and Manalo (2020) also noted the financial and technical constraints, such as inadequate internet and limited resources, which impact both teachers and students. This issue is particularly acute in the Philippines, where internet speeds remain below global averages (Ookla, LLC, 2020; Alvarez, 2020). Additionally, the digital divide has exacerbated inequities in access, hindering the inclusivity of flexible learning (Habibu, Al Mamun, & Clement, 2012).

2.3. *Adaptability and New Modalities in Educational Practices*

Educational leaders introduced flexible learning strategies globally to maintain educational continuity. For instance, DepEd's Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) offered varied modalities like modular and blended learning, with decongested curricula focused on essential competencies (DepEd Order No. 12, 2020).

Teachers, however, faced the complexity of designing learning experiences that address students' diverse needs. Papas (2015) and Dywen (2013) argued that effective learning designs must consider students' varied backgrounds and learning needs, which are challenging to meet in online settings. Further complicating matters, material limitations often hindered collaborative and interactive learning. Even when blended learning was recommended, availability and appropriateness of resources posed significant barriers to implementation (Downing & Dymont, 2013; Musingafi et al., 2015; Rashid & Muhammad, 2012).

2.4. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

To manage the challenges of the "New Normal," educators developed coping strategies, such as fostering positive mindsets, prioritizing time management, and maintaining support networks. Loveless (2020) found that teachers benefit from a positive disposition, healthy lifestyles, and stress reduction strategies. Raines (2011) emphasized that time management helps teachers balance their varied responsibilities, with tools and technology providing further assistance.

Support from communities and stakeholders also played a vital role. DepEd's Brigada Eskwela and Oplan Balik Eskwela programs highlighted community partnerships to support BE-LCP's implementation. Parents' active involvement further enhanced this support, leading to an organized, shared approach to learning (Okai-Ugbaje, Ardzejewska, & Imran, 2020). As teachers adjusted their methodologies to meet changing needs, peer mentoring and collaboration proved effective for building confidence and resilience (Christenbury, 2011; Linton, 2017).

3. Methods

3.1. Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenology research design. Creswell (2013) describes phenomenology as a qualitative approach that explores the shared experiences within a particular group, aiming to describe the essence of a phenomenon as lived by its participants. This design enables researchers to challenge preconceived notions by delving deeply into subjective experiences to gain insights into people's actions and motivations. In this study, the focus was on the lived experiences of private school administrators and teachers in the context of remote teaching and learning. Through phenomenology, the researchers sought to understand the core structure of their experiences, ultimately informing best practices and guiding potential adjustments in policies, theories, and responses to distance learning.

3.2. Sampling

The study's key informants included five (5) school administrators and ten (10) teachers from each participating school. Teacher-participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) diverse demographic backgrounds, including sex, age, civil status, and educational attainment; (2) a minimum of one year of experience at their current school; and (3) willingness to participate in the study. Criterion sampling was employed, as it enabled the researcher to select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon, who could offer meaningful insights into distance learning in the context of private education.

3.3. Instruments

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, personal or online interviews using an 8-item interview guide developed by the researcher after a review of relevant literature. Three education experts validated the guide, yielding a content validity index (CVI) of 1.0, which meets the satisfactory level of content validity as recommended by Polit and Beck (2006) and Polit et al. (2007). Semi-structured interviews are advantageous for obtaining large amounts of in-depth data quickly, allowing

participants to share their perspectives, assign meaning to events, and highlight site-specific details and unanticipated issues. Additionally, interviews provide opportunities for immediate follow-up and clarification, enhancing the accuracy and richness of the data collected.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method was used to analyze the data, providing a systematic and sequential approach that enhances the reliability and validity of the results. Unlike other phenomenological methods, Colaizzi's approach includes participant validation to ensure the credibility and accuracy of findings. The steps in Colaizzi's method include:

1. Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain familiarity with the data,
2. Identifying significant statements relevant to the phenomenon,
3. Formulating meanings from these significant statements,
4. Grouping meanings into theme clusters and overarching themes,
5. Developing an exhaustive description capturing the essence of the phenomenon,
6. Constructing a fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and
7. Validating findings by seeking participant feedback.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld to protect participant confidentiality and ensure data privacy. The identities of participants were kept anonymous to prevent any future repercussions based on readers' interpretations of the study. To maintain confidentiality, all identifiable information was withheld, safeguarding the participants and the affiliated university. The researchers adhered strictly to ethical guidelines, prioritizing data security and participants' rights throughout the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Challenges in Distance Learning Implementation

The participants shared diverse perspectives on the challenges they faced in implementing distance learning. These insights are organized into the following themes:

4.1.1. Teachers' Challenges

4.1.1.1. Difficulty in Directing and Supervising Students

Although distance learning can be effective, participants generally viewed it as less impactful than face-to-face classes. Monitoring students' engagement and providing guidance proved challenging, as teachers were often unable to confirm whether students were truly attentive or simply passively looking at their screens. Teachers expressed concerns as follows:

"I find distance learning effective but not as effective as face-to-face classes. I can see progress in some students, not only in the knowledge they acquire but also in their willingness to perform tasks, especially in virtual meetings. However, communication is key in this new learning setup. Without it, guiding and monitoring students becomes difficult. We conduct virtual meetings to check in on students and say hello, but it's still challenging to maintain oversight." – P2

"One of the main struggles with this learning modality is communication. Some students don't have social media, others have poor connectivity, and as a result, they miss important announcements and can't attend virtual meetings. I now have more work than in face-to-face teaching—preparing modules, conducting virtual meetings, monitoring students, checking assignments, and participating in school activities. Sometimes, it's overwhelming, and I don't know what to prioritize." – P2

4.1.1.2. Erratic Internet Connectivity

Distance learning, reliant on internet access and modules, posed significant challenges for both students and parents due to unstable internet connections. Teachers frequently struggled to communicate effectively with students and parents in areas with poor connectivity. They shared:

"Communication is tough, especially with unstable internet. It's hard to reach parents and high school students, and maintaining effective communication is difficult." – P1

"There are numerous issues, like poor internet connections for students. I wish I could do home visits, but health risks due to COVID make it challenging. Internet issues are less problematic in cities, but here, even using group chats (GC) to share additional notes and messages is sometimes unreliable." – P3

"There are so many problems with distance learning in our country, like poor connection and a lack of devices." – P4

"Yes, we struggle a lot. Many students have excuses for not completing tasks due to internet issues or lack of gadgets. As teachers, our workload has also increased—we have to prepare modules, which is a lot more work compared to preparing daily lesson plans for face-to-face classes. If I rate it, the workload for distance learning is about twice that of traditional teaching." – P7

"Yes, I've had issues with unstable internet connectivity." – P8

4.1.1.3. *Disengaged Learners and Parents*

Due to connectivity issues and the lack of direct interaction, teachers observed disengagement and limited cooperation from both students and parents. Many felt that the challenges of distance learning left students and their families feeling dissatisfied and pressured. The participants noted:

"Some students don't join our online meetings, and others don't join on time." – P5

"There are many issues with distance learning. Creating learning activity sheets with tight deadlines causes stress, and I worry because some students don't seem to understand the content. Some just leave their work incomplete, especially with subjects they find challenging, like Filipino and ESP." – P6

4.1.2. *School Administrators' Challenges*

4.1.2.1. *Limited Internet Connectivity and Reduced Personal Interaction*

Distance learning has allowed students to continue their education without the need for school visits, a precaution many appreciated during the pandemic. However, this model relies heavily on internet connectivity, primarily through platforms like Messenger, Google Meet, Zoom, and the distribution of online and printed learning activity sheets. In Biliran Province, poor internet connectivity in many areas limits the effectiveness of distance learning and reduces personal interaction with students and parents, which many administrators see as a critical element of effective education. They shared:

"The most common problem is slow internet connection, which limits learning effectiveness. Some students are simply not interested in attending virtual classes." – P9

"Yes, we have issues with poor internet connection, late submissions of learning activity sheets, and less personal connection." – P11

"Based on my experiences, it's quite tiresome. Our students come from various municipalities, and with inadequate internet connectivity across the province, it's difficult to ensure smooth virtual sessions. In fact, there were only a few meetings where, according to our teachers, all students were able to attend." – P12

4.1.2.2. *Delays in Task Completion and Feedback*

Distance learning also brings challenges related to delayed task completion, including the late submission of learning activity sheets, lagged monitoring of student progress, and deferred feedback for both students and parents. Additionally, providing individualized support for students with specific learning difficulties has been challenging. Administrators noted:

"We face multiple issues—assessing student learning, reproducing learning activity sheets, and a lack of teacher supervision all contribute to students' lack of knowledge." – P10

"Yes, we've encountered struggles, especially in monitoring student learning, providing timely feedback on assessments, and delivering individualized support for those facing learning difficulties." – P12

Many students also lacked motivation to attend virtual classes and were unprepared for the unexpected shifts required by distance learning. Technical issues, especially related to internet connectivity, further exacerbated these challenges. Studies support these observations, emphasizing the

need for improved technical infrastructure. Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) argue that governments should provide low-cost internet packages for students, and telecommunications companies should support this effort. Similar findings in other studies, such as Birişçi (2013), highlight how poor connectivity and technical issues adversely impact distance education. Inadequate infrastructure and limited interaction during distance learning also contribute to negative perceptions of this education model (Arslan & Şahin, 2013).

Research by Bakioğlu and Çevik (2020) identified hardware, software, internet connection issues, and a lack of technical knowledge and devices as common problems in distance learning. Students and teachers alike faced significant obstacles due to insufficient devices, particularly tablets and computers, which hindered live course participation. Additionally, connection problems during live sessions caused disruptions due to time constraints (Bayburtlu, 2020). According to Külekçi, Akyavuz, and Çakın (2020), interruptions in distance education were primarily due to technical deficiencies, limited internet access for teachers, insufficient infrastructure near schools, and a lack of devices among both students and teachers.

4.2. Coping with the Demands of Distance Learning

Participants shared various strategies in response to the question, "How do you cope with the challenges experienced in implementing distance learning?" Their answers are organized in the following themes:

4.2.1. Teachers' Coping Mechanisms

4.2.1.1. Understanding Learners and Engaging Parents

Teachers employed various strategies to address the challenges of distance learning, focusing on understanding each student's internet connectivity situation, staying connected with parents, and ensuring access to learning materials. Strategies included identifying students with reliable internet, communicating with parents or guardians, posting resources like videos online, providing printed materials, and using both online messages and phone calls. Their responses include:

"To adjust to the struggles, I learned that I need to know which students have stable internet and which don't. I let parents choose if they prefer a fully modular setup or a mix of online and module-based learning." – P1

"When parents come to pick up learning activity sheets (LAS) for their children, I personally inform them of schedules and important announcements so they can relay the information. With time management, I am also able to finish school requirements and take breaks to plan better." – P2

"I cope by speaking with guardians or parents when they visit the school. I also use group chats (GC) to follow up on students' questions and activities, even though responses can be delayed due to internet issues." – P3

"I ensure that whatever is posted online or discussed virtually is also printed so my students can still read and learn from it." – P4

"First, I reach out to students via personal message or call. If they don't respond, I contact their parents." – P5

"If the internet isn't working well, I switch to a fully modular approach and provide students with LAS and supplemental video materials." – P8

4.2.1.2. Positive Attitude and Effective Time Management

Teachers emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, flexibility, and a cooperative approach. They also practiced effective time management to complete school requirements while allowing time for personal relaxation. They shared:

"In dealing with the challenges of distance learning, I stay positive, flexible, and understanding toward my learners and their families. I adapt my teaching methods to reach each student and appreciate the support from co-workers and parents." – P6

"Time management is critical. You have to stay organized because preparation is intense, and stress comes with it. With cooperation from everyone involved and support from the school administration, we've managed to overcome our struggles." – P7

4.2.2. Administrators' Coping Mechanisms

4.2.2.1. Provision of Online Classes

To address situations where students cannot attend school in person, administrators encourage teachers to offer online sessions as an alternative to onsite classes. Administrators shared the following strategies:

"We send ready-made video lessons for lesson discussions and make phone calls to assist and assess student learning." – P9

"To gather sufficient data for their assessments, our teachers monitor students almost daily through Messenger. Sometimes, they come to school even on weekends to meet deadlines. We also provide interventions, such as online classes, for students who need extra support." – P10

4.2.2.2. Facilitating Individualized Support

Given the diversity in learners' issues, needs, and circumstances, administrators emphasize the importance of individualized teaching assistance, tailored feedback, and responsive strategies to meet each student's unique needs. Teachers implement this approach in various ways, as administrators noted:

"Our teachers connect with learners via social media and set clear deadlines for submitting learning activity sheets." – P11

"We allocate time for each student based on their individual needs and continue to build our proficiency in educational technology and other resources." – P12

The government should support students by offering diverse courses that cater to both their immediate and long-term needs (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). Educational administrators have taken significant steps to ensure educational continuity, establishing distance learning platforms that are accessible and designed to support students in multiple ways (Özer, 2020).

A majority of participants agreed that online learning provides students with asynchronous access to learning materials at any time, supporting flexibility in learning. This finding aligns with research by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) and Gautam (2020), which notes that online learning enables learners to access materials around the clock, fostering independent study habits.

An analysis by Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) highlighted students' struggles to adapt to online courses, largely due to a lack of direct contact with faculty and reduced interaction, which affected students' academic achievements and personal development. These challenges were often exacerbated by inadequate communication channels (Külekçi Akyavuz & Çakın, 2020). Teachers noted that students' inability to attend school in person could result in social and psychological challenges, as well as a lack of social habits and values typically learned through face-to-face education (Duba & Şen, 2020).

Faculty members generally agreed on the need to keep online sessions concise. This recommendation underscores the importance of holding students' attention and ensuring comprehension. When online classes are excessively long, students may become bored and distracted. Additionally, faculty members recognized that preparing for online classes often requires more time than traditional classes, as confirmed by Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021).

Furthermore, the lack of interaction between students and instructors may contribute to lower performance. However, distance learning also encourages self-directed learning, prompting students to take a more active role in their education (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021).

The findings of this study also support those of Li and Lee (2016), which emphasize the need for computer competency among teachers, as IT skills are essential in a technology-driven learning environment. Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) echoed this sentiment, with faculty agreeing on the importance of keeping online learning sessions brief and focused.

5. Conclusion

The present study emphasized the holistic experiences of private school administrators and teachers in managing and facilitating distance learning most especially during disruptions in the educational system. The research participants' lived experiences revealed that with the onset of pandemic and sudden change in the educational landscape, private schools too were confronted by various challenges such as poor internet and personal connection, delayed tasks, late submission of activity sheets, tardy monitoring, and deferred feedback. Teachers provide online and modular classes to meet learners' needs based on survey and inventory results.

6. Recommendation

Prioritize internet connectivity as a foundational project for IT infrastructure, with collaboration between school personnel and community leaders. This improvement will support consistent access to online resources and facilitate smoother distance learning experiences.

Engage parents and learners in regular consultations to gather insights on how distance learning can be optimized within private schools. Such feedback will help tailor the approach to better meet the specific needs of families and enhance the effectiveness of the learning process.

Strengthen communication between teachers and parents to ensure timely delivery of essential educational services. Establishing clear channels for consistent updates and support will aid in addressing any emerging issues promptly.

Conduct an in-depth assessment of each learner's unique needs and conditions. By understanding individual circumstances, teachers can coordinate effectively with parents, manage time efficiently, and provide targeted support that fosters each student's learning progress.

Offer a variety of learning modalities, including online, modular, and other distance learning options, to complement limited in-person classes. This flexibility will allow schools to address diverse learning preferences and adjust to any ongoing restrictions effectively.

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