

Challenges Encountered by Private Schools in the New Normal Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the education system to transition from in-person classes to distance learning as an urgent response to maintain the quality of education. This phenomenological study focused on the challenges faced by private schools in Oroquieta City while implementing new normal education. The study included 14 participants, including administrators, principals, and teachers, who were selected through purposive sampling. This research identified two (2) core themes and seven (7) subthemes: first, challenges encountered in the new normal education, and the subthemes pertain to anxiety in the online delivery of learning, unaffordability and instability of Internet connection, difficulty in monitoring students' performance, and increase in teachers' activities. Second, coping strategies in the new normal education, in which the subthemes are organized priorities, teacher enhancement, and resourcefulness. Despite the challenges faced, private school leaders and teachers have developed coping strategies to adapt and operate successfully with the new normal education paradigm.

Keywords: Distance learning; Challenges; Coping strategies; COVID-19 pandemic; Learning delivery modalities; New normal education; Anxiety; Internet connection; Students' performance; Teachers' activities; Teacher enhancement; Resourcefulness.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented situations that altered people's lives (Rahiem, 2020). It has disrupted the traditional education system, leading to the emergence of a “new normal” education (UNESCO, 2020; Aytacı, 2020; Alea et al., 2020). In response to the highly infectious nature of the virus, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) for private and public schools, State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) offering basic education as defensible plan against the pandemic. The plan encompasses essential components like Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), multiple learning delivery modalities, activities for school administrators, teachers, learners, health standards in schools, and special activities.

The BE-LCP is made available for schools that have an interest and unfailing commitment to continue providing quality education (Department of Education, 2020; Gonzales, 2020). However, despite the efforts to adapt, many private schools faced enrollment declines as parents grappled with job losses and the challenges of home-based learning.

Private schools often adopted a combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching, which some parents found unfavorable for their children. Additionally, financial constraints hindered both teachers and schools from pursuing professional development, necessary to adapt to changes in the educational system (Weisenfeld, 2021; Zhou et al., 2021; Burgess et al., 2020; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2020). Statistical data from the Division of Oroquieta city indicated a decline in private school enrollment from the 2019-2020 school year to the 2020-2021 school year, with some schools temporarily closing (DepEd, 2020). This study aimed to explore the status and experiences of administrators, principals, and teachers in private basic education institutions in Oroquieta city amid these challenges.

1.1. Study Objectives

The following are the objectives of this study: (i) Explore the experiences of the teachers, principals, and administrators during the new normal education, (ii) Investigate the challenges encountered by the teachers, principals, and administrators during the new normal education, (iii) Determine the educational planning priorities of the teachers, principals, and administrators during the new normal education, (iv) Identify the coping strategies employed by the teachers, principals, and administrators to address the challenges in the new normal education, and (v) Identify the assistance provided by the teachers, principals, and administrators with each other in the educational planning in the new normal education.

2. Methods

The study used phenomenological research design. It followed Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology, which describes the universal meaning of the event, situation, or experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher collected the data through separate interviews with private school administrators, principals, and teachers while observing health protocols and maintained rigor throughout the interview. The data were transcribed and translated for analysis and interpretation with aid of the NVivo software.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Challenges Encountered in the New Normal Education

DepEd was decisive in continuing the schools' operations with some modifications in the education system. In the emergence of the new normal education, the school administrators, principals, and teachers have encountered challenges.

3.1.1. Anxiety in the Online Delivery of Learning: The conditions and limitations of distance learning in the new normal triggered anxiety among teachers. Many experienced teachers, trained for face-to-face instruction, felt like novices when they first taught online (Chandel, & Ratra, 2020; Aytac, 2020; Guidote, 2020; McQuiggan, 2007). As they shifted to technology, anxiety came to them (Lie, 2020). They now play a crucial role in addressing diverse learner needs and improving education quality in the new normal (Pentang, 2021). Participants also felt anxious with parents listening during online classes, *"I am uncomfortable having a class online because I am not used to discussing my lessons through virtual or synchronous, and I can be anxious sometimes in my online classes because I know the parents are listening too"*. The teachers' anxiety in online teaching corresponds to the school leaders' answers.

School leaders mentioned that their teachers were unfamiliar and needed training in online teaching and were anxious when the parents were listening during online classes because it happened that parents came to school to complain about the teachers' performance, *"they struggled in online classes because they were not accustomed and trained to conduct classes virtually and they were anxious because they knew that the parents listened to them when discussing and came to school to complained about the teacher's performance"*. The abrupt shift to distance learning caused anxiety among some teachers (Aytac, 2020; Fawaz & Samaha, 2021; Stachteas & Stachteas, 2020; Alea et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Downing & Dymont, 2013) and introduced many challenges (Rasmitadila, 2020).

However, other studies (Arrieta, 2020; Xie, Siau, & Nah, 2020) found that many teachers had a positive attitude towards this change, becoming adept with technology and online platforms, which improved teaching efficacy. Additionally, in the study of Farkas et al. (1999) they found that teachers viewed parental involvement positively, with parents and teachers collaborating respectfully for the learners' benefit.

3.1.2. Unaffordability and Instability of Internet Connection: The Philippines has one of the most expensive and unstable internet connections in Asia (Ookla, 2020; Akamai, 2017). This instability disrupts administrators, principals, and teachers, while high costs prevent some parents from subscribing. Despite schools upgrading their internet, they still experience frequent interruptions, even in city centers. Many parents cannot afford to install internet connections, further hindering online classes. *"Most of us here in school have issues with the connection; despite being in the center of the city, still we experienced slow connectivity, and there were times that it hindered us from connecting to our students because the internet was too slow to connect us with the students using apps and social media". "We mentioned in the meeting that online learning would be convenient for the teachers to access the students easily. However, the parents could not afford it, and also the internet connectivity is not always stable"*. Administrators and principals emphasized the challenge of unstable and costly internet. Despite installing and upgrading internet at schools for online transactions and conferences, the connection remained slow and unreliable.

One participant noted that online learning was introduced to parents, but many couldn't afford it, and mobile data was insufficient for sustained online classes. *"We initially wanted to do online learning delivery modality, but the parents could not afford it and the internet connection is unstable. Cellular data will not be enough to sustain online classes."* These findings align with Salac & Kim's (2016) comparison of global ICT, showing the Philippines lagging behind other developing Asian countries. Ookla's (2020) survey confirms the Philippines has one of the slowest and most expensive connections globally. Additionally, Andarwulan, Fajri, & Damayanti (2021) found that only 54% of teachers have easy internet access, indicating many still face connectivity issues.

3.1.3. Difficulty in Monitoring Students' Performance: The sudden shift to distance learning made it difficult for teachers to monitor students' performance due to the lack of direct contact (Agayon et al., 2022; Khlaif et al., 2021; Aytac, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2020; Lansangan, 2020; Tarkar, 2020; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2020). *"Then, because of our chosen learning delivery modality, the enhancement of skills of the learners became a challenge also because I didn't get to see the actual performance of the learners, and at the same time, I did not get to see and observe how they behaved and responded to the learning activities". "We are offering skills, which means that our students need to be assessed on their skills development. It was a challenge to assess the students' performance because we could not see firsthand the entire process of their development."* School administrators and principals confirmed that teachers struggle to monitor students' performance.

One participant noted that teachers must prepare and check two sets of activities for blended learning, while another highlighted the difficulty of monitoring learners in distance learning. *"My teachers are also struggling with the assessment. They have more to check now than they had before because of the blended learning modality". "The learning of the learners is also a challenge, a concern brought to my office by my teachers. It is*

difficult for them to monitor learning in this distance education." The participant's experience echoes findings by De Villa & Manalo (2020), Gonzales (2020), and Lansangan (2020). Monitoring student performance in distance learning poses dilemmas for teachers untrained in this method. They worry about the quality of learning, as students work independently with limited teacher guidance. Teachers face challenges in efficiently monitoring and assessing learners, especially as traditional paper-and-pencil methods decline in the new normal education.

3.1.4. Increase in Teachers' Activities: Distance learning, the new approach in education, has required teachers to redesign learning resources, platforms, and strategies, increasing their workload. One teacher mentioned preparing and checking two sets of materials for blended learning. Another noted that distance education is complicated due to learners' lack of home support and some parents' inability to teach their children. Additionally, some parents delayed returning modules, further increasing teachers' responsibilities. *"I prepare learning materials for those who are online, and I also have to prepare learning materials for those who are in modular. Hence, our work has been doubled. In addition, the preparation of assessment and the checking of activities are doubled because we have different assessments and activities for those who are online and those who are in modular."* Administrators acknowledged the increased workload for teachers, who now have to prepare and mark modules and create presentations for online classes. They noted that teachers are working harder to keep up with their responsibilities. *"The nature of the teachers' work now has doubled because they have to do modules and at the same time prepare presentations for the online classes". "Well, it was quite stressful for our teachers because other than doing modules, they are checking them, too. Now they need to double time because they would not be able to catch up their works"*. The finding aligns with De Villa and Manalo's (2020) study, showing increased teacher activities in the new normal education.

Teachers must prepare new materials based on MELCs, differentiate activities for modular and online classes, and address learner diversity. It also supports Niemi and Kousa's (2020) findings that teachers spend more time planning activities in distance education, ensuring materials suit learners during the pandemic. This confirms Stone and Springer's (2019) earlier study, highlighting the greater effort required for distance teaching compared to face-to-face instruction.

3.2. Coping Strategies in the New Normal Education

The Department of Education (DepEd) implemented the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) in the Academic Year 2020-2021. This plan encompasses comprehensive educational interventions aimed at protecting schools from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic while transitioning to distance education. Despite the shift to the new normal education, schools faced unforeseen challenges. However, school administrators, principals, and teachers devised coping strategies to manage the situation, including prioritization, teacher training, and resourcefulness.

3.2.1. Organized Priorities: As schools shifted from traditional classrooms to flexible learning approaches, teachers and school leaders assumed significant roles in the transition. Organizing priorities emerged as a sensible strategy to meet the demands of the new curriculum. Interviews with teachers highlighted their focus on prioritizing learning plans in educational planning. They emphasized designing meaningful learning experiences

through well-crafted materials, ensuring alignment with educational goals. *"As a teacher, my priorities are mainly designing learning materials and conducting online classes for my students. So, what I do is I make sure that my learning materials will facilitate meaningful learning, and that my prepared learning materials like my learning plans and lesson plans are aligned with the MELCs and 2016 curriculum guide."*

Interviews with school leaders showed a focus on prioritizing the creation of a Learning Continuity Plan (LCP). They emphasized the importance of complying with the LCP, considering it non-negotiable for school operation during the pandemic. To ensure timely submission and alignment with school needs, adjustments were made as necessary. The LCP has become the top priority for school leaders, ensuring continued operation amid the pandemic. *"I identified my educational planning priorities by attending to the urgent deliverables. So, I complied with the LCP for this year and made some changes. From purely modular, I change it to blended learning we based on previous experience when we first implemented the new normal education"*. *"As a principal, the LCP is the top priority, especially in the first year of implementing the new normal. So, I studied the guidelines and determined which among of those areas that we had or needed to improve and areas that we didn't have yet."* The study's findings, supported by Arrieta and Sudarsana (2021) and Lansangan (2020), highlight the importance of teachers focusing on designing learning materials aligned with the MELCs and current educational conditions. School administrators prioritized compliance with and enhancement of LCP components, ensuring schools provide a safe learning environment and adapt to educational norms. However, this contrasts with Aytac's (2020) study, indicating teacher reluctance toward distance learning and inadequate emergency action plans among half of the administrators.

3.2.2. Teacher Enhancement: Efforts towards distance learning in education are crucial for delivering quality education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers received webinars and training from school leaders to enhance their skills for effective functioning in the new normal. These initiatives are essential as most teachers are unfamiliar with distance learning. *"As a teacher, I also prioritize developing myself and learning new things, especially in this new normal education. However, I attended webinars like INSET together with my co-teachers"*. *"I attended webinars like INSET in facilitating teaching and learning in this new normal education, especially on those that will help the teacher design their modules or their learning plans and how to assess students"*. School leaders echoed teachers' sentiments, emphasizing the importance of training and webinars to enhance teachers' readiness for distance education. They encouraged teachers to attend sessions focusing on designing learning materials and facilitating teaching in the new normal.

The leaders recognized these opportunities as crucial for equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills needed for developing materials and conducting distance learning. *"I let my teachers attend webinars conducted by the PEAC, which is the In-Service Training or INSET, for them to be updated with the new approaches in teaching, particularly in online teaching"*. *"We had training on the applications like zoom and google meet on how we can use them to conduct meetings and conferences and of course how the teachers can utilize these applications in their classes"*. Teachers need technology resources for effective education delivery in the new normal. They have prepared by attending webinars, exploring online platforms, and identifying key competencies (Arrieta et al.,

2020). This training helps teachers use blended resources, navigate platforms, design learning plans, and foster students' independent learning (Lansangan, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Dunnick, 2013). Studies emphasize the importance of ongoing technology training for teachers as part of the Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) to ensure quality distance learning (Arrieta & Sadarsana, 2021; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2020) which aligns with Gonzales (2020) findings that teachers see e-learning as a new direction.

3.2.3. Resourcefulness: The adoption of distance learning brings significant changes, with teachers adapting to various delivery modalities for the new normal education. School leaders also adjust educational plans to align with these demands, presenting challenges that require resourcefulness. Participants noted the value of video tutorials for online teaching and learning videos for student engagement. They emphasized the importance of collecting contact details for communication with parents and students. Social media is utilized for school promotion due to low enrollments, with challenges seen as opportunities for improvement, as expressed by participants. *"I do practice my discussion before I start my classes. I also watched a video tutorial and recorded a video discussion on facilitating teaching and learning online to help me have more ideas on how to teach online and what some useful learning applications are". "When I could not contact students using their internet, I called their mobile phones. The same thing for the students if they needed me, they could call me or text me because they have my number, too. If they could contact me through social media, much better because I have more access to them like their modules, I could see where they were having problems."* Despite challenges in the new normal education, teachers demonstrated resourcefulness by implementing synchronous and asynchronous learning methods using platforms like Google Meet, Zoom, and MS365, which offer materials and assessments (Hew et al., 2020), along with video lectures and lessons (Ispring, 2021; Caratiquit & Pablo, 2021) for flexible learning. This resourcefulness enhances teachers' self-efficacy and motivation, aiding in task completion and school performance (Tipon et al., 2021; Ali & Kaur, 2020). Similarly, interviews with school leaders revealed their resourcefulness in addressing challenges. They upgraded WiFi connections and provided gadget loans to teachers for purchasing laptops, essential for facilitating teaching and learning in the new normal education. *"Right now, the classrooms have internet connections. Our laboratories and offices have an internet connection. I provided gadget loans to my new teachers who do not have laptops yet." "So, I proposed a solution to the administration about this, and they approved. The administrators allowed the teacher to have a gadget loan payable for three years without interest. It was also my strategy of keeping the teachers in school and avoiding turnover at the end of the school year"*.

Upgrading WiFi, submitting documents online, and providing teachers with technology and training are key interventions by school leaders to adapt to distance education. Continuous enhancement of school facilities, services, and staff is crucial for consistent operation in the new normal. Resourcefulness is advantageous for school leaders (Andarwulan et al., 2022; Arrieta & Sadarsana, 2021; Alea et al., 2020; Guidote, 2020) and necessary for stakeholders in educational planning (Hodges et al., 2020). Studies by Millman (2020) and Rahiem (2020) emphasize that the goal of alternative plans is to provide immediate access to education. The Banghart-Trull Educational Planning model's fourth phase recommends resourcefulness in addressing educational challenges, considering stakeholders' physical, social, and economic factors.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results on findings of the study it is concluded that private school leaders and teachers experienced challenges despite the regulation by the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). Nevertheless, the unprecedented challenges did not debilitate the participants but rather engendered them to formulate strategies to cope with the challenging situation, which aided them in responding to the new normal education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It is suggested that school leaders and teachers continue to organize their priorities to effectively address the various demands of new normal education. Ongoing professional development is essential to equip teachers with the necessary skills for this evolving educational landscape. Additionally, nurturing resourcefulness among school leaders and teachers is crucial, as it encourages innovative solutions to address the challenges of new normal education. Future research could delve into leadership dynamics within the context of new normal education.

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Competing Interests Statement

The author declares having no competing interest with any party concerned during this publication.

Consent for Publication

The author declares that he consented to the publication of this study.

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