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## **Education and the Pandemic: Examining Students' Remote Learning Experiences in the Philippines**

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**Abstract:** The global outbreak brought about by the Covid-19 not only affected the economic and health sectors but also hardly hit the education sector. The need for schools to temporarily shut down their face-to-face classes has resulted in educational institutions, particularly the Philippine Department of Education, to rethink the way they adapt to the current educational context. The implementation of distance learning modalities through its learning continuity plan paved the way for Filipino learners to resort to various learning modalities to address students' learning needs in this time of emergency remote education. Hence, this study aims to investigate the lived experiences of Filipino senior high school students who have been immersed in emergency remote learning during the school year 2020-2021. Interestingly, there were three themes that were revealed to deeply understand the experiences of the participants: digital technology divide, independent study and sense of learning responsibility, and financial capabilities and resources. Each of these themes presents underlying issues and concerns that are noteworthy to be listened considering that the current Philippine education system is still struggling to adjust with the current new normal context of education. Therefore, the voices of the participants in this study provide a reflection of their untiring learning journey in this time of the pandemic crisis that requires understanding and appreciation towards having a safe and inclusive space to make education attainable for all.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 education, Digital divide, Emergency Remote Learning, Learning modalities, Pandemic education

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## **Introduction**

The outbreak of coronavirus disease or the Covid-19 virus alarmed people worldwide. It resulted in limitations of physical and social mobilizations of both the public and private sectors that include school operations. In fact, one of the major sectors affected by the pandemic is the education sector which severely impacted all aspects of the education system, particularly the lives of poor and marginalized students (Ferri et al., 2020; Reimers, 2020).

In the Philippines, the curriculum designers grabbed this opportunity to rethink and to revise the curriculum in order to create an essential road map to achieve the target objectives of various learning modalities (Cahapay, 2020). The Department of Education (DepEd) mandated the implementation of blended and remote learning programs as learning modalities while face-to-face setup is still not allowed (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Codamon, 2020). Additionally, the DepEd created an immediate response to continue education through a learning continuity plan in the form of different learning platforms to address the issues and concerns in the teaching-learning process (DepEd Order No.12, s. 2020).

Recently, most of the schools from different countries have reopened for face-to-face classes. However, Magsambol (2021) reported that by the end of September 2021 the Philippines is among the two countries whose classes are still in emergency remote education. This education setup prolongs the agony of various school stakeholders with regard to the current educational situation in the country. Given this context, this study, specifically, intends to take a closer look at the emergency remote learning experiences of senior high school students in the Philippines that is timely and relevant considering the Philippines's present policy to still close temporarily the schools due to uncontrollable surge of Covid-19 cases in the country.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Distance Learning Modalities***

Since the start of the pandemic, various alternative learning modalities have emerged to continuously deliver education to students. In the Philippines, DepEd implemented Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) so that the learners can access learning in a different situation (Quinones, 2020). BE-LCP covered essential requirements of education during the pandemic. One of the requirements is the utilization of multiple delivery modalities for teachers.

The absence of face-to-face instruction gave way to use emergency remote distance learning modalities (Alvarez, 2022; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021b). Distance learning is a democratic form of education wherein all has an access to education despite constraints of place and time (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). It becomes the immediate solution to deliver the instruction to students amidst quarantine protocols. Given this, there were three distance learning modalities used especially in remote areas: Modular Distance Learning (MDL), Online Distance Learning (ODL), and TV/Radio Based Instruction (Quinones, 2020).

Malik (2012), for instance, emphasized that MDL is about self-learning activities wherein the teachers prepared specific learning activities or modules and the students were tasked to learn on their own. On the other hand, the instruction in ODL was done online. Students were required to attend synchronous classes for them to learn. At the same time, the TV/Radio Based Instructions were given to those who do not have internet access. Students were tasked to watch TV or listen to the radio to aid learning. Regardless of their learning modalities, the Self-Learning Modules (SLM) were given to students. The SLM was printed

lessons and activities that the students have to learn answer on their own within the time frame given.

Anzaldo (2021) reiterated that the implementation of various learning modalities have their own risks based on the geographical location and level of the students. Thus, blended learning is adapted in some areas specifically for those students who are living in rural areas where there is lacking of internet connectivity.

Meanwhile, the theories of autonomy and independence can be applied in the study since distance learning made the students learn on their own. Learning autonomy and independence are the essential components of being an independent learner (Moore, 1973). In Wedemeyer's study (1981), it was identified the essential elements of independent learning as greater student responsibility, widely available instruction, effective mix of media and methods, adaptation to individual differences, and a wide variety of start, stop and learn times (Association for Educational Communications and Technology [AECT], 2001).

### ***The Emergency Remote Education Implementation in the Philippines***

In his literature review, Manire (2021) emphasized emergency remote education as supervisory intervention during this trying times. He also highlighted the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous mode of learning as the result of pandemic crisis. Circumstances such as those is inevitable since immediate solution is needed. Several researches have been done to analyze the implementation of emergency remote education in the Philippines (Aksan, 2021; Alvarez & Palmero, 2022; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021; Dargo & Dimas, 2021; Salayo et al., 2020).

In the study conducted by Salayo et al. (2020), they investigated the perceptions of teachers and students in terms of remote emergency teaching and learning. Specifically, it aimed to understand the readiness, attitude, and competence of 147 teachers and 409 senior high school learners in a particular Catholic university in Manila with regard to the current education setup. Interestingly, the respondents show their readiness, positive attitude, and competence towards online teaching. However, the student's attitude in engaging in online instruction was affected due to the discomfort and ineffectiveness of this learning modality. Despite the negative effects of this modality, the study further proved that the respondents remained positive and resilient in dealing with academic challenges in the new normal education system.

Furthermore, Aksan's (2021) descriptive research determined the perceptions of 178 Grade 11 STEM students regarding the use of modular distance learning approach (MDLA) in MSU-Sulu Senior High School. It aimed to identify challenges of the students, effects of MDLA, perceptions of students when grouped according to profile, and levels of academic performance of the students in Mathematics subject. It showed that the students have positive perception and effect to their academic performance, and agreed on using MDLA despite having experienced various challenges. Additionally, there was no relationship between the perception and academic performance of the respondents which concluded that these would not affected each of the variables. Besides, it helped the student to improve their mathematical ability. Therefore, MDLA is recommended to continue whether the face-to-face instruction is back.

However, Dargo and Dimas (2021) mixed-method study investigated the effects of MDL whether there is a significant difference in the academic performance of learners before and after implementing the learning approach. Likewise, it intended to hear the recommendations of selected parents and teachers regarding the implementation of MDL. Based on its findings, the positive effects of this approach were strengthen the family bonding, encouraged independent learning, and saved financially. On the other hand, the general

weighted average (GWA) of the students in their academic performance decreased up to 2.25% after MDL implementation, which revealed significant difference. In addition, some of the negative effects of MDL were additional workload to parents, limited teacher-learner interaction, lacked of student and peer socialization, lessen relevant school activities exposure, and exposed to various distractions at home. Hence, some supplementary learning materials and constant monitoring through home visitation are needed for learning improvement.

Like many different educational institutions in the Philippines, the schools in northern Cagayan implemented two types of learning modalities such as Modular Distance Learning (MDL) and Online Distance Learning (ODL) to address the needs of the learners who are both geographically away from each other. The learners were given Self-Learning Modules (SLM) as well; however, the teachers required them to send some of their outputs and take quizzes on various social media platforms such as email, google forms, and messenger. Additionally, they were also using a zoom application to do virtual conferences to defend their research proposals and research outputs.

Although the distance learning modalities were known and implemented decades ago in several institutions in the Philippines even in other countries, the school year 2020-2021 is the most crucial academic year in which all types of teaching and learning platforms are mandatorily implemented depending on their suitability to the respected areas. Hence, this is interesting to figure out how the senior high school learners dealing with the implementation of Distance Learning Modalities (DLM) in remote areas, particularly on the island.

With this educational phenomenon, it is important to know and explore the learners' experiences and point-of-views toward the new normal education system. The implementation of DLM is set continuously while the pandemic is still affected globally. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the lived experiences of senior high school students in learning remotely amidst the pandemic crisis. Basically, it serves to determine the impact of distance learning modality on the lives of students' learning experiences in this time of the pandemic crisis.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

We utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of senior high school students with regard to their learning journey in this time of emergency remote education. The use of a phenomenological research study paved the way in looking at the experiences of participants who experienced a particular phenomenon (Espineli, 2021). In fact, this provided us to deeply understand the participants' lives through understanding and analyzing different layers of their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2012). More importantly, it helped us to facilitate and grasp the shared meanings from the participants (Creswell, 2009), which gave them the opportunity for an in-depth understanding in picturing out their remote learning experiences.

### **Participants and Locale**

The locale of this study was conducted during the second semester of SY 2020-2021 in one of the schools in the Babuyan group of islands, specifically in Camiguin Island of extreme northern Luzon, Philippines. To illustrate, there is only one existing school in the said area that offers senior high school – General Academic Strand (GAS) track. There were 15 purposively selected senior high school students from different public and private schools on the island of Camiguin who participated in the study. The participants were chosen through the use of cluster

random sampling technique where eight of them were considered to be grade 11 while seven students were considered to be grade 12. Moreover, there were two learning modalities that the students were being exposed to – modular distance learning or MDL and open distance learning or ODL. The schools in the said locality offered both MDL and ODL as their response to the emergency remote education.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Since there was existing community quarantine restrictions in the entire archipelago, we observed proper health protocols to ensure the safety of both the researchers and the participants. All necessary communication letters were prepared and sought the approval of school authorities to ensure that institutional policies were being followed. During the data collection process, we thoroughly explained to the participants the overview, rationale, and the flow of the interview. We also emphasized that all information to be shared by the participants will be treated with confidentiality and privacy.

Moreover, the use of a semi-structured interview questionnaire served to gather more information by allowing the participants to express their thoughts, insights, and viewpoints about the phenomenon being investigated (Gaskell, 2000). This also helped them to grasp and make sense of the meanings they have shared, hence, all collected information was transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis. We read and re-read the transcripts in order to understand the shared meanings from the participants. This also facilitated the initial coding process where chunks of expressions were elicited to make codes of representations. The initial codes that emerged from the findings were presented back to the participants as well as sought for the feedback of peers to ensure the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). From these sets of categories, it was revisited and refined towards coming up with themes.

### **Findings**

The present health threat situation in the country brought about by the Covid-19 paved the way for schools to temporarily close down and shift to emergency remote teaching and learning. This phenomenon resulted in the Philippines' Department of Education implementing various learning modalities to address issues and concerns in this time of the pandemic crisis. Based on the analyzed data, three themes emerged: digital technology divide, independent study and sense of learning responsibility, financial capabilities, and resources.

The first theme talks about the notion of the *digital technology divide*. The Philippines characterized as an archipelago has no escape with the problems of lack of digital infrastructures, scarcity, and affordability of technological devices and resources for online and distance learning. To illustrate, the context of distance learning in remote areas such as in the locale of this study has a big impact on the learning process of senior high school students. Based on the learners' responses, the participants emphasized their insightful experiences and perceptions towards digital and technological division. For instance, P5 shared the idea of having poor internet connectivity that resulted as a hindrance for worthwhile remote learning experiences.

“It's difficult to understand the lesson. There was [a] time that I don't understand my lessons and [was] not able to do [the] same learning engagement with my classmates due to [the] geographical problem of having [a] poor internet connection.” (P5)

This was also supported by some students where they emphasized other technological hindrances which made it difficult for them to understand well the lessons. To wit, P12 expressed:

“For me, the implementation of distance learning here on our island gives disadvantages. There is not enough technology to be used and [there is the presence of] poor internet connection. These are the reasons why sometimes the learning activities in the modules are not properly answered because there is not enough source of ideas and technological resources to be utilized so we can understand the lessons better.” (P12)

In fact, P14 and P15 also raised the idea of hoping to go back to face-to-face education since some of them were struggling to adapt to the current approach in education because of the digital and technological division they were experiencing. The educational disparity made them rethink that they can no longer survive their learning engagement with this kind of learning setup.

"I am hoping that the face-to-face class will resume in our school. It's really hard to undergo modular learning especially to us who do not have proper gadgets to use for our online class." (P14)

"In Camiguin Island, distance learning is not good enough because we cannot understand their lessons well. The internet connection is sometimes poor. We will not survive if this will continue." (P15)

The next theme which points out *independent study and sense of learning responsibility* presents the notion that despite the odds that the students faced in this time of the pandemic crisis, some were able to develop their skills to become independent learners and learning to value the essence of remote learning by taking the responsibility for the learning tasks. Despite experiencing the previous challenges that have been mentioned, some of the participants claimed that distance learning modality helped them to develop their independent learning abilities and skills. P3 verbalized that remote learning allowed him to develop his independent learning skills and his research capability to navigate his learning process in this emergency remote education set-up.

“This has helped me to challenge my mind to learn independently about our lessons. It also gave me the opportunity to develop new learning strategies in focusing and learning the topics by doing my own research about the subject.” (P3)

Moreover, some participants expressed that learning at a distance developed their capability to think critically and engaged in the self-reflective learning process. This only presents that despite the difficulties they experienced, they were still enabled to cope with various academic challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“This learning modality allowed me to have me time which resulted for me to think wonderful and creative ideas about our lessons. Aside from that, it helped me to learn to become independent which gave me as well the chance to develop my critical thinking skills in accomplishing our school assignments.” (P11)

“It made me stronger and developed my self-confidence in accomplishing our school tasks. It also helped me to widen my ideas about certain topics, thus, enhanced my learning strategy skills, I guess, and developed as well my self-

understanding about our class lessons since I am doing the learning tasks independently.” (P10)

The last theme highlights *financial capabilities and resources* which were described as having positive and negative effects on the participants learning engagement in emergency remote education. While it is true that because of the flexibility characteristic of the distance learning approach in the teaching and learning process that creates space to maximize their financial budget, it is also no wonder that the costs of internet and technological devices in the Philippines bring as well huge disparity among the learners. To illustrate, P4, P7, and P13 pointed out that since they were not physically reporting to their school, it resulted in their family to save money and allocate school fees to their other household expenses.

“It has been more than a year since the pandemic crisis was declared, and I could say that this situation gave our family the chance to somehow save money from school fees that I usually pay like my daily allowance, school materials, and so on. I guess, this set-up is okay for us because we don't need to go to school and it will really help for [the] family to save money.” (P4)

“I don't need to rent for a boarding house in the mainland. The 100 peso is enough for me for the whole week for my cellphone load. It is less expensive compared to the face-to-face class because I don't need to ask for allowance.” (P7)

“This learning modality is really good for me because I can save some money from my allowance. It is not costly unlike before. I think distance learning is one of the most financially affordable forms of education.” (P13)

On the other hand, some participants expressed their concerns over the emergency remote education setting where they claimed to be spending a lot of money for internet connectivity just to attend synchronous classes. Many of them have to avail internet data since there is a lack of reliable internet infrastructures, thus, make it more expensive.

“I think this learning set-up is very costly for us. We need to buy internet loads because we have school assignments that require research activities. My parents cannot afford a 100 peso per week as my internet allowance. It is expensive in terms of cell phone load.” (P12)

“My internet load is sometimes not enough for me. I spend more money to buy internet data for school requirements and sending assignments and projects through email and messenger. I also need to buy gadgets since we are in [an] online learning set-up and to keep me as well to the current learning pace or mode of learning.” (P14).

## Discussion

The results of this paper highlight the lived experiences of Filipino senior high school students amidst a pandemic crisis. It particularly determined the impact of emergency remote learning modality on students' learning experiences through phenomenological study. Interestingly, there were three themes that emerged in the analysis of the data collected: digital technology divide, independent study and sense of learning responsibility, and financial capabilities and resources.

Technology became the getaway solution of most of the educational sectors when Covid-19 disrupt the normal functioning of the schools. However, the digital technology

division is one of the unavoidable circumstances encountered considering the subject of study's geographical location. To define, digital technology division is limited or lacks access to digital infrastructures, technological devices, and online resources. Kos-Łabędowicz (2017) emphasized this kind of division in rural areas as compared to urban areas. In a larger sense, these technological challenges result in educational inequality (Alvarez, 2020; Alvarez, 2021; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021a; Ferri et al., 2020).

Although the participants of this study engaged themselves in self-learning modules, there is still a need to use internet access in order to submit some of their requirements and to further understand the lessons given the non physical presence of the teachers. The undeniably observable roadblock phenomenon, specifically to less fortunate learners, is that lack of access to digital tools impedes them to learn and to engage actively into this present educational context. The notion of inequity must be properly addressed since technology in education is pivotal in enhancing 21st-century learning skills. Thus, it is seen as an essential program for both the government and educational institutions to invest with various digital infrastructures to address educational needs and reach the underprivileged members of society. After all, education is the right of everyone that must be attained by all regardless of circumstances.

Despite the digital technology division that the students are experiencing, there were also two positive impacts of using the emergency remote learning modality to students. These are the development of independent study and a sense of learning responsibility. The pandemic led the students to be responsible for their pacing and learning. The notion of learning autonomy is vital during these trying times with the absence of face-to-face classes. Indeed, Wedemeyer's study in 1981 still reflects the characteristics of student's independent study. This enables the students to learn by themselves and develop their skills and capabilities with minimal interaction with the teachers. Limniou et al. (2021) claim that highly self-regulated students can focus and engage during the pandemic. Knowing what to study, when, how long, and where to study creates a positive impact on student's performance (Tullis & Benjamin, 2010).

Furthermore, the setting of a schedule for every school task provides a guiding parameter to balance and to prioritize the important matters that need to accomplish ahead of time. Looking at this phenomenon, some students were able to grasp the lesson, develop their critical thinking skills, and engage in a self-reflecting learning process. This is a clear indication that they have also developed a sense of responsibility towards studying and completing their learning tasks. The same sentiment were provided on the literature review of Betlen (2021).

Interestingly, although some students are appreciative of emergency remote learning modalities, the participants emphasized both the positive and negative effects with regard to their financial capabilities and resources. Since there are no face-to-face classes, it can be noted that some tend to use school fees as additional sources of the household budget. This provides a beneficial opportunity for some learners to allocate their supposed school budget to other household expenditures considering the current economic status and unemployment rate in the country.

Meanwhile, this is not true for all since some have to secure money to avail internet data and gadgets for their online classes given the lack of reliable internet connection and infrastructures in their area as well as the lack of funds of the government agencies to support the emergency remote online class of the students. This reflects a problematic scenario for some Filipino households where they have to save an extra income to support the educational needs of their children (Ferri et al., 2020; Karpman et al., 2020; World Bank Group, 2020). It presents that this kind of teaching and learning context is considered to be a burden for some. Practically, they have to allocate internet expenses just to ensure that their children will not be dropped out from class.



True enough that the pandemic affects every aspect of life. Emergency remote education is a challenging set-up not only in the global context but particularly in the case of remote areas in the Philippines. Several nuisances brought by the pandemic affect the educational performances of the learners, but the Filipino's resiliency attitude and resourcefulness provide hope that there is light despite the odds they faced in this time of the educational setting in the country.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that no one was excluded from the effects brought about by the pandemic crisis. Unfortunately, the education sector was one of the most hardly hit by this phenomenon where marginalized learners especially in the far-flung areas have so much suffered due to the additional burden of the pandemic situation plus the pre-pandemic educational challenges they experiencing. Interestingly, although this study does not aim to make any generalization of the results, it is a good attempt to investigate the experiences of senior high schools learners in the Philippines with regard to their immersion in emergency remote education.

In fact, it was conspicuous that the largest percentage of the entire population in the Philippines belonged to families with economically challenging status. No wonder that there are numerous Filipino learners who are suffering from financial and economic problems resulting to compromise quality education most especially in this time of health crisis. Despite these disadvantages, Filipino learners still find positive impacts of remote learning modality, which is to practice self-paced study and have a sense of learning responsibility to complete and submit their learning tasks.

Therefore, we recommend that the implementation of emergency remote learning modalities, particularly in the remote areas, should be addressed properly through having a cooperative and collaborative process with school stakeholders. In this way, the needs of the students will be properly addressed and the school officials could look into the possibilities of providing flexible learning options to its students. Likewise, the public and private agencies should work together in creating plans for digital infrastructures and investments to ensure digital inclusion for all. Lastly, it would be good for other researchers to conduct empirical studies that highlight the issues and concerns of emergency remote learning modality to other remote and vulnerable areas to understand as well the cases of experiences into this type of educational set-up.

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