

CHALLENGES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THE NEW NORMAL MODE OF INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Responses made worldwide in an attempt to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic like community lockdowns and community quarantines have caused disruption in the delivery of education. With the goal to sustain and provide quality education despite educational institutions being closed, the educational sector implemented the new normal educational policy. In the context of the new normal mode of instruction, with the teachers as key persons in its successful implementation, issues on whether they are facing problems and challenges in the process or not are triggered. The present study used the Phenomenological Analysis (PA) to explore challenges faced by early childhood educators in the new normal mode of instruction. Five early childhood educators teaching kindergarten from private and public schools were identified as key participants using purposive sampling and snowball technique guided by the following criteria: (a) have at least three years of experience as an early childhood educator; (b) have passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET); (c) currently teaching, and (d) willing to participate in the study. Researchers were guided with phenomenological analysis which includes playing of the recorded transcript, encoding, re-reading of the encoded transcript, developing emergent themes, and looking for patterns across cases. After reading and analyzing of data, four major themes emerged from data: (1) Teaching Modalities Difficulties (2) Time Management; (3) Insufficient Support of Parents in the Implementation of the New Mode of Instruction; and (4) Difficulty in the Assessment of Learners.

Keywords: Early Childhood Educators, New Normal Instruction, Challenges, Distance Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought drastic changes to the lives and activities of people around the globe in an unforeseen and inconceivable way. The coronavirus brought about varying effects on the different sectors of society and continually poses challenges to people in coping up with the difficulties of the present situation. In the education context, classes have interfered and the educational system has been disrupted. In particular, educational institutions have been closed in connection with the measures implemented by the governments in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus (UNESCO, 2020).

But even with the limited physical interactions due to strict quarantine protocols, the Philippine Government through the Department of Education (DepEd), ensured continuity of education amidst the pandemic. With this, the mission to uphold quality education by the educational sector paved the way for different learning delivery modalities, predominantly on the implementation of distance learning with blended learning approaches. As defined by LLego (2020), distance learning is a learning modality wherein learning takes place between the teacher and the learner who are remote from each other during the actual period of instruction. And as stated by Briones (2020), there are different learning modalities that suit the situation of every learner's household and with distance learning with blended learning learners may learn from different outlets such as the internet, television, radio, or printed materials. Thus, with DepEd's countermeasure to implement these new adaptive learning methods, education will still continue to press on.

But we need to take into consideration that whenever there is an implementation of something new, the question of whether we can cope with the new process or not arises. And in terms of the new normal mode of instruction, with the teachers as key persons in its successful implementation, issues on whether they are facing problems and challenges in the process or not are triggered. And with students learning from home and utmost with their parents, they would both most likely have to share the burdens in the execution of the new normal mode of instruction (Erden, 2010).

The curiosity of the researchers on how it is to handle learners who are considered beginners or in their early stage of schooling in this present time made it possible for this research study to be crafted. The present study was conducted to investigate the challenges experienced by early-childhood educators under the new normal mode of instruction. The results of the present study can be used by the Department of Education (DepEd), concerned government agencies, and local government units in crafting a plan to better improve the delivery of new adaptive learning methods amidst the pandemic. Moreover, data provided by the present study can be used to come up with strategies and programs to help early-childhood educators.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative using a phenomenological approach as a methodology to answer the research question. Qualitative research aims to examine phenomena that impact the lived reality of individuals or groups in a particular cultural or social context (Mills & Berks, 2014); and phenomenological research attempts to recapture and express in a language such experiential meanings as lived through before

conceptualizing, abstracting and explaining them (Manen& Adams, 2010). More so, qualitative research study according to Corbin and Strauss (2015), enables the researcher to connect with their participants and to see the world from their viewpoints. A one-on-one interview with the selected participants enabled the researchers to gather data presented in this study. A thorough analysis of written notes and transcription of recorded interviews revealed the different challenges of early childhood educators in the new normal mode of instruction.

With purposive sampling and snowball technique and being guided by the following criteria: (a) have at least three years of experience as an early childhood educator; (b) have passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET); (c) currently teaching, and (d) willing to participate in the study, five (5) early childhood educators from different schools in the Municipality of Diffun in Quirino province were selected to participate in the study. According to Palinkas and his colleagues (2015), qualified participants for a certain study can be identified using purposive sampling. With purposive sampling, the focus of the study remains on individuals with specific characteristics in a targeted population group of interest. Moreover, is advantageous in giving researchers an opportunity to develop as much insight as they possibly can into whatever key point is under observation or examination while still maintaining the foundation of a definite focal point/s. The selected participants had different backgrounds and teaching environment, so differences in modalities used in the implementation of the new normal mode of education is an excellent source of data for the present study since they were able to narrate varied experiences and perspective with regard to the focus of the present study.

Interviews were started by obtaining basic demographic information from the participants. After this, the participants were asked to answer an open-ended question by stating the challenges they have experienced or currently undergoing in the implementation of the new normal mode of instruction as early childhood educators. By doing this, the researchers were able to obtain the necessary information needed and asked follow-up questions for clarification.

Prior to the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the present research. More so, they were asked for their most convenient time and place for the interview and preferred mode of administering the interview - whether to have it one-on-one with a researcher or if it would be alright to have it with the group. So far, all the participants have agreed to take the interview with the group of researchers. The researchers administered the interview in such a way that participants were able to freely speak and express their experiences. While one of the researchers do the interview, the other member of the group took notes of the important details. And with

the consent of the participants, the conversations were recorded for transcription purposes.

When the interviews were already done, the recorded conversations were transcribed, printed, and photocopied. Copies of the transcripts were distributed among the researchers. After the distribution of transcripts, the researchers once again listened to the recorded interviews while reading along the finished transcripts for verification and corrections. After this, the data analysis was started by reading the transcripts a number of times to immerse themselves in the data. While reading, the researchers also took notes of the important remarks and highlighted particular information that was found significant in answering the research question.

After multiple times of reading the transcribed data, taking down notes, and re-reading the said notes, significant statements that form a common idea after analysis was categorized into individual emerging themes. A textural description of the experience was then written for each theme that arose, and the essence of the phenomenon was constructed. Researchers have included quoted participant answers or expressions to describe the phenomenon more. The participants were coded as P1 to P5, wherein P is referred to as participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pandemic crisis has caused the Education system in the Philippines to abruptly shift from face-to-face learning to a new mode of teaching as a response to the call for continued education despite the global health threat. Teachers around the globe are challenged in finding new strategies to educate their learners. This study is focused on the struggles of early childhood educators in this new normal mode of instruction. Analyses of the findings of this research led to four themes identified as teaching modality difficulties, time management, insufficient support of parents in the implementation of the new mode of instruction, and difficulty in the assessment of learners.

Teaching Modalities Difficulties. All the participants of this study adopted a distance learning approach wherein learning takes place between the teacher and the learners who are geographically remote from each other during instruction. This modality has three types, namely: Modular Distance Learning, Online Distance Learning, and Television/Radio-Based Instruction. The distance learning approach is the most viable for independent learners, and learners supported by periodic supervision of parents or guardians (DepEd, 2020).

Four of the participants of this study utilizes online platform such as zoom and messenger application to cater to online or synchronous learning in addition to the modular approach. Mailizar and co-researchers (2020), stressed that the use of electronic learning (e-learning) has been considered the best possible approach to continue the teaching and learning process during a pandemic. However, learners who are living in remote areas in the locality have no internet connectivity so they only rely on a modular approach. P3 said that *"Sa amin, walang signal ang internet so we only implement modular teaching, tumatawag lang kami samagulang para imonitor ang status ng kanilang modules, patirin mobile call connectivity mahina"*. (We only implement the modular mode of instruction due to poor signal and poor internet connectivity in our place that even phone calls to the parents or guardians for monitoring is difficult.) Asia Society (2021), cited that on a certain level, the reach and accessibility of data providers is a technological barrier beyond the control of teachers, students, and even school districts. Turvey and colleagues (2020), supported this claim that countries without such advanced digital technology policies have 'left many children without the tools they need to access and benefit from e-learning'. P1 also said when asked on her struggles in internet connectivity, *"Galingsasarilingbulsanamin ang load nakelangansa messenger. At times sagitnanaklase, nawawalan ng connection, 'yon pala expired na ang promo for internet, nakakatawaminsanpero ang hirap."*. (We use our personal money to buy data for video calls. There are instances that the data for video calls are not enough resulting to interrupted connection.) Asia Society (2021), stated that in public and private schools nationwide, the basic barrier to hurdle is students' and teachers' access to gadgets and data. For most, these are funded personally. They either already had or bought their own equipment, and are paying for their own data plans. Some had to acquire laptops with higher specifications to handle the expected load and requirements of online classes. P2 further supported such a claim stating that *"Internet connectivity is one of the biggest problems since we got disconnected in the middle of a discussion and sometimes, the learners who got disconnected no longer want to log in and throw tantrums"*. Preschool children learn best through play. They can concentrate better and be found active when doing hands-on activities. But with the online mode of teaching, hands-on activities are limited. Kim (2020), emphasized that it is critical for teachers to think ahead so that they can plan and consider the limitations of the online mode of teaching.

As much as the new normal educational policy which includes the implementation of distance learning and its corresponding modalities greatly helps in the delivery of continuous education despite the present situation, the response of the participants with regard to the adaptation of the distance learning modalities showed that they would still prefer the face-to-face interactive learning. P4 supports this claim stating that *"The learning quality during this time of pandemic and the presence of the*

different modalities cannot compare to the face-to-face class, where teachers and learners stay in the classroom, discussing, learning, and interacting together." P5 explained that *"The module alone is not enough to facilitate learning, especially in teaching reading."* P4 also believe that, *"Ang mga pre-school kasi, talagangkailanganmosilangi-meet sana face to face"*. (In preschool, there is really a need for a face-to-face class).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to persist, and it is but expected that educational institutions shift to the new normal mode of instruction like distance learning and its different modalities for the continuity of education. So, there is no time but now, that we had our time to settle in and process the situation, it's time to learn to push ourselves in this "new normal" environment and new normal mode of instruction (Mayzenberg, 2021).

Time Management. To address the challenges brought about by the pandemic, The Department of Education (DepEd) has issued DepEd Order No. 012, s2020 addressing the challenges in basic education for the school year 2020-2021. The participants of this study adopted distance learning as a learning delivery modality. As a consequence, the struggle of managing time between preparing of video lessons, and instructional materials and meeting the learners is experienced by the participants. The struggles in time management can be illustrated in the statement of Participant 4 (P4), *"In this new normal, even if there is no face-to-face learning, much has been done to prepare all the needed materials to be given to learners to support their home study. But sometimes, the preparations of these materials are much more time-consuming and difficult to prepare. In addition, it must be well documented to be included in the needed reports. For instance, a single video lesson for a single competency takes about two to three days of preparation and yet, there are still more competencies that are also needed to make."* This statement is in contrary to the study of Bubb and Jones (2020), that teachers during this pandemic have much more time to plan and create relevant tasks because less time was spent on class management.

P1 also struggled with time management in her online class and quoted that the maximum attention span of kindergarten during online class is around 30 minutes to one hour and she had to do everything she can to catch their attention. *"Nandiyannasumasayaw ka at kumakanta para makuha ang attention nila during online activities, Ang hirapicondense ang time para maturuansila unlike kapag face to face mas madalinaminmakuha ang kanilang attention and unlike samga readers na like sa high school and college. Super challenging maging teacher ng kinder especially ngayong new normal nahindinaminsilanakikita physically."* (There are instances that I have to sing and dance during online activities just to get their attention. It is difficult

to compress the time unlike in a face-to-face mode where you can easily catch their attention as compared to the readers in high school and college. It's challenging to be a preschool teacher, especially in this new normal without seeing them physically.) P2 quoted that *"During online class, madaling madisrupt ang attention nilasa akin, kaya as much as possible, one hour lang naturuan ko nasila"*. (During the online class, they are disrupted which is the reason why the duration of the online class should be taught for an hour.) The screen time set by the participants of this study is in accordance with the DepEd reminder that teachers and parents who will be attending online distance learning (ODL) classes must be limited to one hour for Kindergarten (Manila Bulletin). As such, teachers are faced to learning new strategies to engage their learners in online classes.

Insufficient Support of Parents in the Implementation of the New Mode of Instruction. All the participants admitted that the modular approach alone is not enough for preschool children and that parents play a vital role in this mode of teaching. Without the parents or guardians to facilitate learning at home, the child's learning is greatly affected. Participant 1 (P1) stated, *"Yong ibang parents, hindinarinkinukuha ang modules ng kanilanganak, kapagtinatawagansa cellphone, unattended"*, (Some parents are no longer getting the modules of their child and even when given a phonecall, they can be reach) and P3 quoted *"Late nanilakinukuha ang mga modules nila kaya naman naiipunan ang mgabata ng gagawin"*. (They are late in getting their modules which will then result in the bulk of activity work). In addition, P2 stated, *"We need to adjust to online class schedules because some parents are working and they cannot guide their children when they are not around"*. The modular approach situates Filipino students to learn in the comfort of their homes. Limited contact of teachers will place parents or guardians as the learner's model. In a statement of Lourdes Servito (2020), he said that parents are partners in education. They serve as home facilitators during the modular learning approach. And according to Hoover-Dempsey and his colleagues (2005), the factors that influence a parent's ability to actively contribute to a child's education are influenced by the parental role construction which is shaped by the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of the parent, the invitation of parents by the teachers and schools to be active participants in the education of their children, the socioeconomic status of the parent which influences the skill, knowledge, energy and time availability of the parent and the self-efficacy and confidence derived by the parent from being an active participant. Moreover, Mapp and Handerson (2020), also emphasized that parental involvement in their child's education improves their educational achievements from early childhood and it causes them to stay longer in school and encourages overall positive development in the child.

Difficulty in the Assessment of Learners. In the Philippines, Kindergarten has a curriculum guide given to all teachers as a guide in teaching their lessons.

Included in the curriculum guide were different assessment approaches and activities that could be used in teaching. The assessment tools available allow teachers to assess kindergarten pupils across the different developmental domains which include physical health and well-being, motor development, mathematics, language and literacy, sensory-perceptual, physical and social environment, character and values development, and socioemotional development (DepEd,2013). During the assessment, the teacher has the freedom to choose or add the assessment approach and activity to use which will be based on the developmental stage of the child (Sarmiento &Dimalanta, 2017). In the present situation, teachers solely doing the assessment is not possible especially since learners spend most of their time with their parents while studying at home. With this, shared responsibility between teachers and parents takes place in doing the assessment. However, the effectiveness of the assessment used without any proper guide will not be an assurance in measuring the precise development of the child (Roach et al., 2010).

The participants stated their struggles in the assessment of learning outcomes in the new mode of teaching. P1 stated, "*Sabali lang ti face to face talaga, ta ma assess monganalaingtiubbing, makitamtimaududi ken sinotiumununa. Tattaketawanen.*" (Truly, face to face mode is incomparable. Presently, we cannot be able to distinguish or asses who among the students are performing and those that are not). The learners are assessed through a checklist wherein parents mark the activities that their child can perform. However, P5 stated "*Hindi naminalamnga, dahilwala ng face to face, kung how well they can perform samga activities katulad ng artworks, kung nagagawangabanilatalaga ang kanilang activities, parents' role is very important. Parents should be honest enough and inform us of the child's difficulties so we can facilitate them.*" (We don't know how well they are in performing their activities, and whether or not they are doing their activities, especially in their artworks because of no face-to-face learning. Parents' role is very important. Parents should be honest enough and inform us of the child's difficulties so we can facilitate them.)

P2 struggled in her statement on online assessment "*Umapalagiti parents na non-readers ang mgaanak, kung pinaglalaman ko naman ng pansin through online coaching, nagseselos ang ibang parents*". (The parents with non-reader children are envious, but if I coach them online some parents again are jealous.) P3 also struggled as she said in her statement "*Ang mga portfolios kung saan kami nagbabasesamga activities nila, mahahalatamonggawa ng parents and not the child himself*". (It can be noticed in the portfolios where we base their activity that it is not the child's output but their parents). P4 also supported this claim by stating that, "*The development of the learners cannot be seen in the result of the modules, and even in the summative tests, especially when parents are hesitant to cooperate. More so, parents who answer*

their child's written works are rampant and we cannot avoid that." These challenges that arise regarding the difficulty in the assessment of learners may post a bigger challenge in the future, especially that "kinder education and the school readiness assessment are vital for the holistic development of a Filipino child (Lustro, 2013). The result of the assessment is a critical input for the Grade 1 teachers because they will be provided with children's readiness profile which is crucial in addressing the pupils' specific learning needs. On the other hand, the assessment also serves as a basis to improve the instructional skills of early childhood educators (DepEd, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORKS

Findings from the study raised four challenges that early educators faced in the new normal mode of instruction.

a) The participants struggle with the distance learning modalities which include modular distance learning and online distance learning. Key areas of concern are the insufficiency of using only one type of distance learning modality and issues related to internet availability and connectivity. Participants attested that the modular approach must be supported with online discussions and vice versa.

Also, time management is difficult during online classes as learners in early childhood education has limited attention span. Top of this is the time-consuming preparations of needed materials and visuals to support learners with their home study and allotment of time to be able to accommodate all learners for scheduled online classes.

b) With the new normal mode of instruction, the critical role of parents in the excellent and successful implementation of distance learning was also highlighted. All aspects with regard to the new mode of instruction whether it be modular or online distance learning show the need for the active participation of parents or guardians. Also, they are expected to partner with early childhood educators in the proper and accurate assessment of the learning process of the learners. Particularly, the present new normal mode of instruction – distance learning modalities, has made it difficult for early childhood educators to assess the progress, development, and learning of their pupils by themselves.

c) It is important to note that the challenges of the participants are true to their experiences in the new mode of instruction and cannot be reflected as a generalized reflection of early childhood educators in the entire country.

d) The pandemic has given an opportunity to rethink education and focus on the 'what, how, and where of learning' (Zhao, 2020) including the relationship between teachers and parents (Wrigley, 2020).

The result of this study highlights some potential priorities for future research in this field.

1. Parents play a vital role in the new mode of instruction. The school should focus on building ties with the parents or guardians to facilitate the new mode of teaching. Orientation and capability enhancement for parents as partners in the implementation of the new normal mode of education should also be taken into consideration.

2. Department of Education together with the different concerned agencies in the National Government should invest in the new normal mode of instruction to include opportunities for enhancing teachers' quality and lifelong professional development.

3. Lastly, the national government should issue a policy that would lead to the improvement of the country's digital infrastructure, especially beyond the urban centers to cater to more learners engaging in online learning.

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