LEARNING AT HOME: PARENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN ASBANG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ON MODULAR LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

May Rose Quilab Carlon[1]

[1]Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.

ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, face-to-face schooling could not be performed continuously, and alternative ways of learning had to be organized. Parents had to act as their children's home schooling tutors while working from home, and schools had to deal with various alternatives to distance education. Since parents are by all means both important school users and partners, their perceptions of schools can be considered a central indicator for assessing school quality. In this respect, during school lockdown, parents' school satisfaction may reflect schools' ability to adjust and react to fast social changes with almost no time for preparation. Schools across the globe closed their doors to decrease the spread of the viral outbreak during the COVID -19 pandemic. This physical closure led to a rapid shift to remote learning which placed more responsibility for learning on parents and guardians. As one of the major stakeholders in the education process, experiences of parents with their children during remote learning are worth examining to inform future policy decision making. This study aimed to investigate parents' experiences and struggles during school closure using an online survey. Thematic coding was conducted to analyze parental responses regarding their greatest educational struggle experienced during the COVID school closure. The results indicate parents agreed with the school closure policy and were generally satisfied with the level of support provided by school districts whilst describing some areas of struggle. Parents described having difficulties with balancing responsibilities, learner motivation, accessibility, and learning outcomes. The results of the study suggest some important implications and recommendations for educators and policymakers.

Keywords: COVID-19, modular learning, pandemic, parents, challenges, perspectives

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, all schools were closed following the imposition of the government on a total lockdown in March 16, 2020 known as Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). The Department of Education (DepEd) developed a framework termed as the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BELCP) which provides guidance on how the country deliver education during the time of crises while ensuring the health, safety, and the welfare of learners, teachers, and DepEd personnel (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020a). The DepEd set guidelines on management of COVID-19 situation; policies on classroom assessment; working at home and attending webinars for teachers; moving up/graduation/recognition rites; and various alternatives for delivering distance learning during the periods of class suspension and similar circumstances (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020b).

Meanwhile, President Rodrigo Duterte gave the approval to the recommendation of DepEd to defer the public school opening to October 5, 2020. This delay provided relief to the logistical limitations faced by the areas placed under modified ECQ (MECQ); while for the areas outside MECQ, continuous school orientations, dry runs, and delivery of learning resources in preparation to the opening of the classes were carried out (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020c). This decision was made in consideration of socio-economic factors such as the need to: 1) Avoid prolonged school disruption, which was associated to a range of social risks for the youth; 2) Encourage education-related economic activity; and 3) Resume school-managed support systems (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020d). As the opening of classes run in the extraordinarily school year, the DepEd adopted the BE-LCP which permits multiple learning delivery modalities including modular distance learning (MDL), online distance learning (ODL), TV/Radio-Based Instruction (TV/R), and Blended Learning – a combination of different distance learning modalities. The MDL involves the use of self-learning modules (SLMs) either in print or digital format/electronic copy and various learning resources like learner's materials, textbooks, activity sheets, worksheets, study guides and other study materials. The ODL allows live synchronous instruction which requires stable internet connection but is more interactive than the other types of distance learning. The TV/R utilizes SLMs converted to video lessons for Television-Based Instruction as well as radio script for Radio-based instruction. To help learners, parents, and teachers successfully adopt these learning delivery modalities, SLMs are made available in print and offline/online digital formats (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020d).

Among the distance learning modalities, this study focuses on modular distance learning as: 1) Applied in a broader coverage in the case country; 2) More inclusive with low- to middle-income families as well as those located in remote rural areas with inaccessible internet connectivity; 3) The most preferred modality by the learners' parents (Republic of the Philippines' Department of Education, 2020a) who are the participants of the study.

This qualitative research collected self-report from the parents or guardians of the learners and applied Inductive Content Analysis. This study finally aims to provide a basis for more inclusive educational policies that consider the perspective of the learners' parents during and beyond the pandemic.

This study was undertaken in Asbang Elementary School in Matanao, Digos, Davao del Sur to determine the parents' perception on the printed modular distance learning modality, the challenges involved, and eventually provide suggestions and insights for parental roles and responsibilities through educational policies during and beyond the pandemic.

This study determined parents' perception on modular distance learning modality. Specifically, the research answered the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of parents about modular learning during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges dealt by parents in modular learning during the pandemic?
3. What are the perspectives of parents about educational policies during and beyond the pandemic?

The importance of parental involvement in the education of their children were affirmed in various empirical studies. Research from the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education shares that "no matter their income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school" (Brooks, 2019).

Method Moreover, White (2018) reported the results of two researches which showed the positive effects of parental involvement in school of their children. One study found that parental involvement helps give children attention and praise which, in turn, helps them recognize their education is worthy of adult interest. As children tend to model adult behaviors, when parents are actively involved with their schooling, children will learn the importance of education and try to emulate those behaviors from their parents. Another study was conducted by the National Education Association which showed that family engagement in school improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism, and restores parents' confidence in their children's education. Students with involved parents or other caregivers earn higher grades and test scores, have better social skills, and show improved behavior.

There are theories, principles and concepts which are worthwhile to consider in encouraging parents to actively involve themselves in the education of their children. According to Larson (2019), schools have made great strides in increasing the frequency of communication with families, taking advantage of digital tools to give parents more visibility into their child's day. However, as the challenges listed above indicate, the proliferation of tools has now fragmented communications to the point of leaving parents overwhelmed and unsure what to do with the information they receive. Parents appreciate the school's effort to communicate, but if they can't act on the information and the school isn't sure if it was even received, nobody achieves the desired results.

With this in mind, the next level of innovation is required: rather than concentrating simply on parent-teacher communication, there is a need to instead design ways to improve the whole-school focus on communications, simplifying the process for all stakeholders and promoting consistency in communication between educators and families. This includes giving teachers fewer tools to manage, reducing the number of places parents need to look for information, and making information more clearly actionable. By ensuring parents have an easier time receiving communications from the school, it will help school leaders gain buy-in for goals and initiatives, help teachers foster the parent engagement desired in the classroom, and help students get the support they need from their families.

Teachers should focus on building relationships with parents to establish trust and foster those relationships throughout the year. Schools should also ensure that parents have opportunities to build rapport with their child's support network, which can include a whole team of people, including learning specialists. School should share accountability with parents. All faculty members are expected to participate in the school's communications efforts.

By providing clear guidance on this expectation, along with the proper tools and protocols to make it actionable, leaders can make it a reality. Administrators should also lead by example, demonstrating that they are equally accountable for executing the plan. Parents must also invite parents to be partners. If educators do not already know the school's parent body, they should be sure to reach out and learn more about them. Teachers should invite parents to share information about their child's strengths and weaknesses, what type of support system they have at home, and whether anything going on in the child's life may impact classroom behavior. Information like this can be essential in equipping teachers to meet students' needs. Design opportunities where parents can opt in (or out) of certain information or updates that are relevant, or irrelevant, to their child.

Obstacles or Challenges of Parents There are important obstacles that constrain parents' ability to become actively involved in their children's education include teachers' attitudes and family resources. These obstacles, however, can be overcome by schools and through teacher training. Teacher attitudes may be one obstacle to parental involvement. For example, teacher beliefs about the impact of their efforts to involve parents in students' learning predict their efforts to encourage family involvement. In a study by Epstein and Dauber, they found that as compared to middle school teachers, elementary school teachers more strongly believed that parental involvement is important for students and provide more opportunities and help for parents to be involved in their children's education. Low levels of parental involvement at some schools may be the result of the staff's perceptions of parents or the degree to which they feel parental involvement is important for their students (Education State University, 2019).

In the Philippines, parenting is important because family is viewed as a center to one's social world. But, social contexts in which Filipino families are embedded have changed rapidly over the past ten years (Ochoa & Torre, n.d.). Children's learning is increasingly moving toward a broader vision of the 21st century learning. As children's educations increasingly occur across a range of settings, parents are uniquely positioned to help ensure that these settings best support their children's specific learning needs. Thus, parental involvement researches remain misrepresentative of parents and the involvement that they have with their children's education.

In the "new normal' in education due to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 crisis, the Department of Education (DepEd) underscores the important role of parents and guardians in making sure that the learning of their children will continue amid expected disruptions. DepED came up with a Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) as a response to changes in the basic education sector amid the public health emergency. DepEd is also scheduled to submit its recommendations to the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on school opening and other related matters. The DepED Undersecretary Sevilla said that the cooperation and support coming from parents will be very important as the entire basic education system braces for the so-called "new normal" (Hernando-Malipot, 2020)

Modular learning is defined as an educational system that helps teachers organize and manage learning and teaching processes and enhances teachers' communication with learners, regardless of place and time, through the use of electronic or print media (UNESCO, 2002). Amer (2013) explains that modular learning is a group learning system open to all without the restrictions of time and space or the group of learners; this type of education is appropriate for the nature and needs of all members of society. Awad and Hilles (2015) explain that modular learning comprises a set of electronic educational systems that allows learners to interact freely with resources related to topics and courses important to them, whether through mobile learning, classrooms, blogs, or other mediums.

Al-Najem (2019) adds that modular learning is a way of learning in which learners receive knowledge by using applications and various means of communication that may include simple printed materials or more advanced materials sent over the Web. Al-Smadi (2020) stresses that modular learning is a learning method where the learner uses modern communication means such as computers, networks, research engines, Internet portals, and multimedia such as pictures, sound, and graphics. In sum, the current study's researchers found that the definitions of modular learning terms have focused on specific aspects affirmed by Amer (2013). First is the physical separation of the teacher from the learner: the communication between the teacher and the learner becomes indirect, which helps students learn at their own speed, in any place, and at any time that suits their circumstances and needs. Second is the role of effective modern media and communication tools in transferring learning to students using multiple educational media, whether through printed, electronic, recorded, or visual materials.

Despite the positive benefits of modular learning in facilitating learning and teaching, many challenges contribute to limiting the effectiveness of its application in an optimal way. Some of these challenges include the following. First is the challenge of designing educational content; teachers face obstacles when preparing digital or printed educational material in ensuring that they will be sufficient for learners achieve learning goals with high efficiency. Further, teachers face hardships in choosing teaching strategies and methods that take into account students' different learning needs and patterns, as well as in choosing appropriate tools to measure student learning (Al-Mukhaini, 2017; Al-Rawadiyah et al., 2014; Al-Sajini & Khalil, 2017). Second is the difficulty in implementing modular learning. Some teachers face difficulties in monitoring, following up with, and evaluating students; in appropriate time management; and in working with learners who are not engaged with the learning process, which improves the feeling of more prevalent isolation in this learning environment (Al-Sharman, 2015). Third is the availability of resources. Some difficulties faced include providing devices, applications, and technical support; the efficiency and speed of one's Internet connection; and teachers' and students' insufficient skills in using these technologies and applications (Lever-Duffy & McDonald, 2018). Fourth is administrative responsibility: this includes all administrative problems that occur during modular learning, such as administrators' and officials' lack of awareness of several factors, such as the importance of this type of learning, its requirements, and how it works (Al-Areifi et al., 2016).

This study's researchers drew on their interpretation of the modular learning process based on Holmberg's (1983, 1995) ideas and assumptions. Holmberg (1983) explains that modular learning (a) supports the learner's motivation and enhances their enjoyment of learning; (b) links individual learners with their subjectivity and their diverse needs, which includes a distinguished relationship between learners and the educational institution that provides modular education supports such as teachers, counselors, and assistants; (c) helps learners deal with educational content and integrates the learner in various educational activities, discussions, and decision making; and (d) helps strengthen real communication and assumptions between the system and all its components and students. Holmberg (1983) observed that his theory of modular learning had an interpretative value in linking the effectiveness of teaching to the influence of feelings about cooperation and affiliation, especially when questions, answers, and discussions are exchanged across different communication media.

Holmberg (1995) presented his theory of modular learning through "interaction and communication theory," which is based on seven basic assumptions and principles. First, teaching revolves around the interaction between the two sides of learning and education. That is, the interaction occurs through the learning of content presented in previous courses; learners interact with these curricula by offering views and presenting different solutions using various methods of thinking. Second, the emotional involvement in learning and the involvement of feelings in personal relationships between the parties to the learning and teaching process contribute to increasing pleasure in learning. Third, enjoyment in learning contributes to increasing the learner's motivation. Fourth, participation in learning decisions can also increase the learner's motivation. Fifth, motivation facilitates learning. Sixth, the harmony of the learning process with the content contributes to increasing the fun of learning and supporting the learner's motivation to learn. Seventh, the effectiveness of teaching is demonstrated by students' learning of what has been taught.

Schlosser and Simonson (2015) assert that earlier assumptions are seen as the basic principles of effective modular learning, which makes it easier for students to learn concepts and solve problems by organizing and implementing them in a way in which they are encouraged to research and criticize and appreciate their potentials.

This study attempts to learn more about the implications of the interaction and communication theory by uncovering the perceptions of parents who observe their children's interactions with modular learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to investigate parents' perceptions, as observers of this new learning experience and its impact on their children.

2. METHOD

This study was conducted in the Philippines, between September and October 2023, during the re-opening of classes for the new school year. The study was designed to describe the phenomenon of the parents' or guardians' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative research is the most appropriate design of the study as it seeks to have a contextual understanding of phenomena, explain behavior and beliefs, identify processes, and understand the context of participants' experiences (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020).

The participants of this study included 20 parents and guardian of learners with ages 30-50. All of the participants were employed during the pandemic and all of them solely raised the family. The participants were parents of elementary school pupils. All of them were residents of the locality. Purposive sampling was employed according to the following inclusion criteria: 1) Parent or guardian of K-12 student for the school year 2022-2023; 2) Children used modular learning during the COVID-19 pandemic; and 3) Voluntary participation in the survey.

Data were collected using interview technique. The questionnaires explained the purpose of the study, anonymity of responses, confidentiality of the data, and instructions. The participants were asked to describe the COVID-19 crisis and the government's response through educational policies during the pandemic; and the parents' experiences and challenges in dealing with distance learning with their children during the pandemic. The survey form incorporated encryption codes tT anonymize the participants.

The collected data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. This method is used when a qualitative study has an inductive starting point or when the data collection approach is open and follows loosely defined concepts (Kyngäs, 2020). Its main advantages include content-sensitiveness, application in highly flexible research designs, and wider application in analyzing various types of qualitative data. The researcher followed several steps as suggested by Creswell (2009).

3. RESULT

Schools across the globe closed their doors to decrease the spread of the viral outbreak during the COVID -19 pandemic. This physical closure led to a rapid shift to remote learning which placed more responsibility for learning on parents and guardians. As one of the major stakeholders in the education process, experiences of parents with their children during remote learning are worth examining to inform future policy decision making. This study aimed to

investigate parents' experiences and struggles during school closure using an online survey. Thematic coding was conducted to analyze parental responses regarding their greatest educational struggle experienced during the COVID school closure. The results indicate parents agreed with the school closure policy and were generally satisfied with the level of support provided by school districts whilst describing some areas of struggle. Parents described having difficulties with balancing responsibilities, learner motivation, accessibility, and learning outcomes. The results of the study suggest some important implications and recommendations for educators and policymakers.

Parents are worried their children are exposed to the pandemic. Parents' perceptions of distance learning at this time of crisis were mixed. It was challenging to find a strong statement between agreeing or disagree, like and dislike. Parents generally do not have negative views or resistance to distance learning. Parental actions and support for children's learning activities at home. Switching from actual perception to parental action, it was informed that many of them always check or monitor the student worksheet from the school. Over one half of parents' support children's learning activities at home by providing internet packages; help explain and complete the learner worksheet.

The researcher identified four themes as to the challenges of parents to modular learning: struggle to balance parent employment demands and learner needs, struggle assisting multiple children in the home with learning, lack of personal balance and parent feels overwhelmed.

Most parents do not want this distance learning extended and expect the government to reopen schools for the rest of the school year. They hope that if distance learning is still going on for some time to come, there needs to be attention and support from the school. Parents were likely to demonstrate high satisfaction if schools implemented more online-based teaching formats (e.g., interactive online courses or learning software) during the school lockdown than before; this seems to have been done by most schools. Our study implies that parents' perspectives during the lockdown were affected by their prior knowledge about teachers. Educational policy should therefore focus more on improving framework conditions for schools to develop high standards in the use of modern technology.

Analysis

Successfully moving forward with remote learning will require that districts and teachers understand the continuum of home lives and concerns (or lack thereof) that parents are experiencing and work to meet the needs of each family. While this is not an easy feat, it is similar to the best practice of building relationships with each student. Recent research in a virtual high school underscored the importance of intentionally building online learning communities, just as teachers do in physical classrooms.

The researchers concluded that interactive, flexible, and supportive online learning environments had the capacity to fight social isolation and increase social presence, however, teachers needed continued support to learning how to do this and maintain the practice (Linton, 2016). The practice of building relationships with students needs to continue, as does building relationships with parents, so as to understand their current trials. Likewise, educators should continue to differentiate their practices for families; some of which are experiencing significant struggles, while others report no struggles. This practice parallels differentiating instruction for students, a practice that has been shown to increase student success.

Teachers seek to differentiate instruction on a daily basis, often building certain supports into the classroom and lesson plans. Attention, at the district level, must be paid to the wide variety of family situations. Families that are struggling to make it through the day need different types of supports and resources than families who are thriving and report no struggles. Prior to COVID school closures, many districts engaged in implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum to reduce the risk of learning failure for students. During the shift to remote, online, and blended learning, districts will need to review the defined guaranteed and viable curriculum and develop a plan to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum through alternative modes.

A guaranteed and viable curriculum gets at the heart of accessibility. It is recommended that districts consider ways to mitigate the known issues of accessibility, including special learner needs, lack of technology access, support with learning tasks and resource navigation, and the need for the presence of a learning coach. Specifically, a guaranteed and viable curriculum should address the need for a learning coach, a person present in the remote learning location—family member or other--or a school district employee, that can support the learning process throughout the school day. Increasing parent pedagogical and content knowledge is one approach to increasing accessibility. Providing district-assigned learning coaches to support students throughout the process of learning and completing assigned tasks has the potential to mitigate this accessibility issue.

Similarly, districts may reallocate staff so that some teachers focus on building the online content while others support students in navigating content, clarifying learning tasks, responding to learning struggles, providing feedback, and problem-solving issues that arise for learners. This approach in which a district employee would provide supports to

help learners organize and manage schedules, motivate learners, and provide responsive instruction as necessary would align with Borup's (2016) findings of scaffolds that were helpful to virtual learners. In addition, there is a need to address the lack of supports for students with special learning needs. More frequent and regular virtual check-ups and check-ins with the IEP team and parents would be worthwhile to provide needed support.

4. DISCUSSION

Schools may need to account for students' interpretation of modular learning and pass/fail grading systems when considering how to plan modular learning in the future. Students are less concerned with learning and more concerned with a pass/fail grade. If the goal of learning is truly to learn (and not earn a particular grade), then additional support and education need to be provided to students so they do not lose sight of the importance and the true goal of remote learning activities. Special attention must be paid to learning outcomes that are based on socialization, interpersonal relationships, and interpersonal problem-solving. Young learners, especially, engage in play-based learning and learn skills such as turn-taking, group work, and developing positive relationships with peers. These types of interactions and learning activities require interaction with classmates and are unique to the lower grades.

Parents need the right kind of support from teachers and schools. They need teachers and schools who realize they are barely able to make it through each day and are doing their best to support students. Without support and even acknowledgment of their feelings, they will not be able to maintain a healthy mental and emotional status or support their children to do the same. The results of this study call for some future training programs for parents. Educators and policymakers should organize some training programs on effective remote learning at home for parents considering their struggles indicated in this study. Many districts required teachers and other school personnel to contact families for the purpose of discovering what supports each needed. The efforts to provide supportive resources and tools to parents were predominantly reactionary. Educating parents about the system and platforms for remote learning, including the tools, key pedagogical concepts, and teacher-student-parents communication options, is essential for future remote learning efforts.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

In conclusion, school closures caused some issues regarding remote learning at home among parents even though parents supported the school closure policy. This preliminary study highlighted the need for scrutinizing parents' concerns on remote learning. We need to equip parents with effective strategies to care and protect the future of the world. Research and discussions considering the voices of parents on the impact of a pandemic would help educators and policymakers with future academic planning. Future research should hence focus not only on the parents' perspective, but also analyze students' and teachers' perceptions and activities. For example, a focus on factors assessing school quality during challenging times can shed light on the question of what crucial features schools need to get through a crisis well. On behalf of families, future research could focus on the satisfaction and situation of special groups who probably face higher challenges to maintain the learning progress of the students at home (e.g., families with a lower socioeconomic background or a migrant background). In addition, longitudinal analyses should analyze changes in parents' satisfaction with school before, during, and after the school lockdown.

Appendix
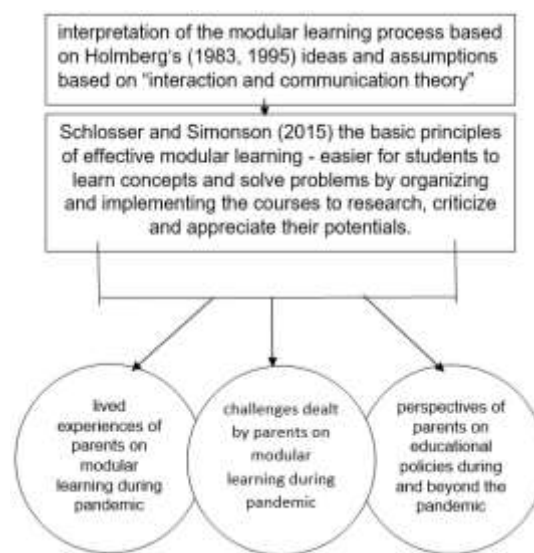
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

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