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SCHOOLS IN THE NEW REALITY: ASSESSING THE NOW, LEADING BEYOND

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Abstract
The global COVID-19 outbreak impacted negatively on school administration at all levels. To effectively and efficiently meet current demands, school leaders and other key stakeholders must collect data as the foundation for re-designing learning continuity plans. This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to describe the status of schools during this pandemic brought about by Covid-19. This nationwide study was participated by 24 school administrators, 227 teachers, 3,111 students, and 1,206 parents from 16 schools in the Philippines. The result showed that the mode of learning delivery in the country was drastically affected by this pandemic. It shifted the traditional physical classroom to the new virtual classroom. All stakeholders in the education sector faced the challenge of intermittent internet access, difficulty navigating the online platform, and adjusting to the new reality factoring in financial limits. This study presents lessons learned and avenues for moving forward and thriving in this new reality.
Keywords: schools, new reality, COVID-19, pandemic, Philippines

1.0 Introduction
The pandemic of COVID-19 had reshaped the educational landscape. During this time, schools were thriving in their efforts to maintain high quality standards in all aspects of their operations. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted negatively on education systems around the world, affecting approximately 1.6 billion students in over 200 nations. More than 94 percent of the world's student population has been touched by school, institution, and other learning facility closures. This has resulted in significant changes in every part of our life. Traditional educational techniques have been considerably disrupted by social distancing and limited movement policies. Reopening schools when restrictions have been lifted is another problem, as many new standard operating procedures have been implemented. Also, Pandey and Solank(2021), mentioned that the COVID-19 epidemic has altered humanity in a variety of ways that the world has never seen before. This pandemic primarily not only affects people's health, but also has an

impact on people's livelihoods, nations' economies, job position in the country, and the education sector. There is no industry that is completely devoid of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of these events, the entire world is confronting severe challenges. As the COVID-19 epidemic continues to cause problems on all aspects of global society, governments in many nations are putting in place a variety of measures to prevent and control its spread, including home quarantine and social distancing protocols, lockdowns, and surveillance (Clare, 2020 &Kharpal, 2020 cited in Tanucan&Uytico, 2021). COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the majority of the world's industries. In most places around the world, education is among those that has transitioned to an online method. During the epidemic, online learning was the best option for continued education (Mahyoob, 2020). Because of the Corona pandemic and its impact on education, the usage of Blended Learning (BL) has expanded dramatically at all levels around the world over the last decade. The fact that BL incorporates both online and face-to-face training is a significant shift in the way technology and instructional approaches are used. The COVID-19 Era will be a success in terms of teacher and staff development, learner development, material development, and other relevant criteria. It might then provide the variety needed for a successful and enjoyable learning experience (Albayati, 2021). Further, the use of digital technology to help teaching and learning in schools has been growing for years, but when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of practically all educational institutions globally in March 2020, it became the only choice (Scully, et al, 2020).

The school leaders are disturbed with the current situations of the schools in all levels. But according to Singh et al. (2021) that seamless leadership is an inspiring technique that looks for the origins of the leadership traits that enable leaders to accomplish what others might believe impossible. It emphasizes positive energy, engagement, respect, adaptability, humility, listening, status quo challenge, accountability, and creativity. The increasing demands in the schools during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitate advanced thinking, risk-taking, and emotional maturity on the part of the leaders. All areas of school leadership, including governance, curriculum and instruction, financial and material resources, had to be adjusted. The learning continuity plan must contain the most critical priorities.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, managing and leading schools is a new reality. A lot of activities that functioned successfully during face-to-face contacts are no longer relevant in addressing the needs of the pandemic's peak. As a result, this study explores how these schools re-engineer their learning continuity plans and other areas to thrive in the current context, which is ensuring their operations' stability.

Research Objectives

This study described the status of the schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically, it ascertained the answers of the following problems:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of:

1.1gender,

1.2religion,

1.3school,

1.4type of stakeholder,

1.5grade level,

1.6type of learning management system utilized, and

1.7type of gadgets used?

2. What challenges were experienced by the respondents in the new normal?

3. What suggestions were given by the respondents to address the challenges encountered?

4. What formation programs were suggested by the respondents in the new reality?

2.0 Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The demographic profile of the respondents was described using the quantitative research method. The data on their demographic profile was shown using percentages. The qualitative research approach was utilized to characterize the respondents' issues, their solutions for addressing the challenges, and the training programs that could be implemented in the new reality, as recommended by the respondents. The qualitative responses of the respondents were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for detecting, analyzing, organizing, characterizing, and reporting themes found in a data set, according to the authors. The study also looked at its credibility, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined as "credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability." After the themes had been determined, they were presented to school consultants in a nationwide assembly to evaluate their accuracy considering the data set. 24 school administrators, 227 teachers, 3,111 students, and 1,206 parents from 16 schools around the country participated in the study. Pre-elementary, elementary, junior high, senior high, and college students were among those who responded. The questionnaire was created by the researchers. It was shown to the school's director and superintendents to ensure that the content was accurate. After obtaining permission from the school owners, it was distributed to the respondents using a Google Form. The entire study was also conducted with ethical considerations in mind. No section of the paper revealed the respondents' identities, ensuring anonymity.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The 24 school leaders who responded to the survey are the school owners, members of the board of trustees, principals, academic heads, support staff and those designated to do administrative functions. There were 24 leaders who responded to the survey where 62.5% are school principals, 25% served the

school as administrators for 1 – 3 years and another 25% who served for 4 – 10 years. The age of the participants ranged from 40 – 49 years old (37.5%) and 50 – 59 years old (33.3%). Most of the school administrators are females (62.5%), married (79.2%), Roman Catholic (87.5%), and 58.3% lived within the municipality/city where the school is located.

The school leaders reported that the schools have a learning management system (95.8%) which is managed by a staff (87.5%). Google Classroom (62.5%) is dominantly used. The school also trained the teachers on how to use the LMS (95.8%), provided orientation to parents (95.8%), students (95.8%) and 100% of the schools conducted a survey to find out the available gadgets used by faculty and students. There are 54.2% of the schools who used blended learning and 33.3% are purely online.

There were 227 teachers who responded to the survey. 35.7% percent were from the JHS, 30.8% from the Basic Ed, 18.1% from the SHS, and 15.4% from the Higher Ed. Among these teachers, 54.6% are in probationary status, 60.8% has served the school for at least 3 years, 75.8% are 20-29 years old, 74% are females, 74% are single, 85% are Roman Catholics, and 66.1% are residing within the municipality where the school is located.

There are 90.7% of the teachers who said that the school has a Learning Management System (LMS) managed by a staff (76.7%) and 69.2% of them are using Google Classroom. The schools provide training to teachers on how to navigate the LMS (90.7%) at 1 – 10 hours of training (70%). Orientation on how to use the LMS was provided to the students (82.4%) and parents (79.7%). The schools also conducted a survey on the availability of gadgets among the faculty and students (93.8%) where 54.2% used laptops and 30.8% on desktop computers. Blended learning (76.2%) is adopted by the schools.

A big number of students, 3,111, answered the survey on the impact of the new normal to the schools. They were coming from 16 LASSO schools. The highest number of respondents was from Academe of Donna Christine, followed by Naga College Foundation. It can also be noted that many of the respondents were from Senior High School (36%), Junior High School (29%), and College (25%). There are few respondents from elementary.

The student-respondents were mostly female and Roman Catholics. Half (49%) of the student-respondents are residing in the center of the town/city while a good number (36%) are from the remote barangays where their school is located. Moreover, 18% are from outside the city/municipality.

It can also be deduced from the data that the learning modalities adopted by the schools are blended Learning (49% of the schools), purely modular (34%), and online (17%). Almost all of the schools are using a learning management system. Almost 50% are using Google Classroom, 29% are using LMS which cannot be identified, 13% are using Moodle, 7% are using Blackboard,

and the rest are using Neo LMS, Canvas, and Brightspace.

Student-respondents admitted that they were given an orientation on the LMS that their school is using. Moreover, a few schools (14%) did not conduct a survey on the availability of gadgets. A little more than half (56%) of the student-respondents are using smartphones, around 38% are using laptops and desktops, and very few (6%) are using computer peripherals.

There were 1,206 who responded to the survey: 86.8% are parents while 13.2% are guardians. Almost one third (33.3 %) of the participants were parents coming from the tertiary level. It is followed by the parents coming from the Junior High School (25.3%) and the Senior High School (19.4%) respectively. The rest of the respondents are coming from the other grade levels. Most of them (46.1%) are in the age range of 40-49 years old, followed by 24.7% who are 30-39 years old and 20% who are 50-59 years old. Majority of them are females (83.9%) and are married (79.2%). Almost 92% of the participants are Catholics. More than half (55.9) are currently residing within the municipality/city where the school is located. It can be noted that 29.6% of them are residing outside the municipality/city where the school is located while 14.5% are residing in remote barangays of the municipality/ city.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of the respondents affirmed that their schools have a Learning Management System (LMS). Google Classroom (38.6%) is the commonly used LMS. Other LMS (31.6%) were not identified while 17.2% of the schools is using Moodle. 88.1% of the participants said that the school provided an orientation to the students on how to use the LMS and 88.6% said that the school conducted a survey on the availability of the gadgets used by the students. Majority of the students (55.3%) use smartphones in learning while the rest use laptops, iPads/tablets and other gadgets. The modes of learning delivery adopted by schools are pure modular (42.3%), blended (39%) and purely online (17.4%).

Challenges experienced by the school leaders, teachers, students, and parents

In the school, learning leaders make things happen. Their leadership abilities have an impact on the school's overall operations. In terms of school management and leadership, they faced numerous challenges. One of the key reasons why learning leaders must participate in development programs is for them to continue to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities (Quinco-Cadosales, 2019). In this study, school leaders mentioned the difficulties they faced in adjusting to the new reality, including: intermittent internet access; teachers and students having difficulty navigating the online platform; students having difficulty submitting assignments and performance tasks; teachers having difficulty providing academic counseling, preparing modules, and navigating the new learning modalities. They also faced difficulties in implementing the teacher and student formation programs, as well as adjusting to the new reality,

financial limits, and intermittent internet access. As one school leader mentioned that *"The most difficult aspect is students', parents', instructors', and administrators' adjustment to the abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face education to remote learning modalities. Students are not yet ready for the self-learning strategy. Also, take into account the internet problem, which is especially problematic in rural areas.* Another school leader claimed that *"The preparation of the modules is time-consuming and demands the teachers' and checkers' energies. Even though we are partially online, we still have an unstable internet connection. The budget for materials and supplies, as well as overtime pay for the workers printing the modules, has been greatly increased."*A school leader described similar difficulties, saying, *"The school has encountered concerns with bad internet connections, late module submissions by some students, and difficulty reaching out to children who are academically and emotionally struggling."* These challenges were also mentioned in the study of Scully, et al (2020). Their findings imply that leaders have a positive attitude toward technology and that, previous to the COVID-19 pandemic, digital learning practices were consistent with some best practice guidelines. Although schools attempted to continue providing services during the suspension of classes, problems were documented, particularly in rural areas and among schools serving underprivileged students. Teachers' digital competency, according to leaders, is an area in need of improvement, and the pandemic may have offered a push for this.

Currently, the teachers experienced the following challenges: managing the virtual classroom; preparing for assessment; choosing online pedagogy; preparing online lessons; navigating the Learning Management System; intermittent internet connections; using educational materials; collaborating with parents / students; experiencing personal struggles; and financial difficulties among families which were aligned with the study of Al Abiki (2021) among pre-service teachers teaching English in Saudi Arabia and Noor et. al (2020) among the education sector in Pakistan.

A large number of students have been affected by COVID-19 pandemic, but because the shift is ongoing, different techniques for different levels of students have been developed. Different tactics are used by educational institutions for their students, such as a different strategy for elementary students, secondary students, and higher education students (Pandey &Solank, 2021). In the implementation of the ways of teaching and learning during this pandemic, several challenges were encountered and more might be encountered in the coming months. The challenges that were encountered by the students in the use of new learning modalities were technical issues; unreasonable deadlines and many requirements; lack of finances to support use of gadget; adaptability struggles; self-paced learning & nature of subject; insufficient content in modules; unclear or ambiguous

instructions; lack of discussion/interaction; unstable and unpredictable class schedule and deadlines; role of teacher; insufficient explanation; lack of teacher guidance; reliability of remote assessment; lack of motivation; physical and mental health issues; availability of functional gadgets; unfavorable learning environment; travel related problem; students' attitude; and inadequate class time. One student said that *"I have difficulties keeping my motivation to do well and pass on time since it feels like I am not learning at all, even though I try my best. I am concerned about how my classmates or batchmates act when it comes to schoolwork, but they do not contribute to the intended outcomes.* Further, *"As a student, I find it challenging to adjust to a new learning environment and new normal because I am not used to this new learning method."* as mentioned by another student. *"Internet connection problems with slow and sporadic connection prevented me from joining synchronous sessions, seeing attachments, links, and videos necessary by each subject, and passing quizzes and exams on time,"* a student added. Furthermore, a student stated that online classes created health issues, saying, *"I'm getting frequent headaches from staring at my cellphone for class, research, or answering," and that "I'm feeling eye strain from staring at my laptop screen for hours."* Similarly, Mahyoob (2020) discovered that most learners encountered issues during COVID-19 online learning, such as the fact that most students are from remote towns where the network is under strain due to the COVID-19 crisis, as all students, teachers, and most other sectors shifted to work online. Students reported that accessing online lectures, downloading materials, and administering online tests were among the most difficult challenges they faced.

The following challenges were experienced by the families in the new learning modality: poor internet connection, financial problems, providing support to children, difficulty in understanding the lessons, managing time properly, experiencing anxiety and frustration, access for clarifications regarding the lessons, dealing with distractions, unclear copies of the modules and difficulty understanding the LMS.

These results were aligned with the studies of Maucevic and Adler (2020), Richmond (2020) and Uwezo, (2020) on the nature and requirements of online teaching; Watson and Sottile (2020) and Kaur (2020) about the assessment issues; Boakye and Ampiah (2019) and Watson and Sottile (2020) on issues about students' interests as some may not be interested or need discipline.

Suggestions to address the challenges

The teachers suggested that: training on module writing and online modalities be conducted; issues on internet connection will be addressed; they will be provided with tools for online classes; hiring an IT expert to address concerns on the use of technology in teaching; addressing their concerns on lesson preparations; scheduling of activities; adopting mechanisms on how

to monitor students' progress; collaborating with parents and guardians; collaborating with the Department of Education; and managing students. Similarly, Ejercito and Cadosales (2011) stressed that teaching methods, assessment, instructional technology, ways of dealing with students, classroom management techniques, and ways of dealing with professional concerns were all mentioned as professional needs by the teachers. Recollection, health and hygiene support, computer literacy, and environmental activities were also found to be necessary. Also, teachers need to understand the diverse needs of their students (Quinco-Cadosales, 2010). Further, Quinco-Cadosales (2017) found that a faculty development program addressed the educational needs of instructors, which is supported by these comments from the teachers.

Students expressed the following suggestions to address the challenges encountered like a) for **government** to improve internet connectivity; b) for **school administration** to conduct limited face to face learning; academic break/freeze; increase class/instruction time; extend semester; organize schedule of class activities; find means to assist teachers in terms of internet connection; review school fees especially on charges for use of (unused) facilities; and conduct a survey on preferred learning modalities of students – online, offline printed modules, offline non-print modules (USB), etc.; 3) for **teachers and administrators** to review and evaluate the (online/offline) modules in terms of instructions/directions, activities, number of lessons, deadlines, assessment, distribution, etc.; adjust deadlines based on abilities of students; conduct a formation program for development of teacher's personal traits affecting instruction; follow the schedule of subjects and activities; provide opportunities for collaboration of teachers in terms of course requirements; utilize appropriate learning materials; reduce students' workload, more instruction time, & include essential topics only in the module; give more consideration to students who have difficulty with internet connection; no deduction of points for delayed submission of requirements; conduct examinations through Google Classroom; and conduct student consultation to provide students venue to raise their concerns; and d) for **students to** perform tasks immediately and do not wait for deadlines – good time management; be optimistic, and prepare a plan.

According to Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), further examination and analysis into successful pedagogy for online teaching and learning is an area to consider in planning. There is also a need in developing methods for authentic assessments and quick feedback. The affordability and accessibility of educational tools for all learners from all economic backgrounds has been noted as a difficulty, for which educational tool developers might concentrate on personalization. Intervention at the policy level is also critical. Given the current situation, education systems around the world must engage in teacher professional

development, particularly in ICT and effective pedagogy.

The parents and guardians suggested that teachers be available in case clarifications be asked, extending the deadlines of the activities, improving the internet infrastructure, lessening the activities in the modules, giving of support to children, providing content materials, delivering of modules/exams, effective communication channel, providing financial assistance and conducting face to face classes. Dalton (2018) mentioned in her study that the role of teachers are very important since they influence the quality of online teaching and the learning process. Challenges and Opportunities (2020) reiterated that psychological, technological, methodological support are very important to minimize the negative impact brought about by this pandemic and to assure that effective and efficient learning still occurs despite the new reality.

Suggested Formation Programs

Teachers expressed that formation programs focus on personal and spiritual enhancements, online pedagogy, integrating the Learning Management System, communicating with students/parents in an online platform, and developing values formation among students and social responsibility as they lead beyond the COVID – 19 pandemic in schools. Teachers' recommendations confirmed Miller's (2021) argument that teachers are asked to perform other school-related activities that overburden them. They need a support system to assist them in managing their own work-related pressures.

Students expressed the following formation programs that can be designed in this new reality like mental health program; stress/anxiety management seminar; webinar on improving students' motivation/engagement; spiritual and faith formation program & leadership formation; webinar on adapting to the new norm; psychological debriefing; webinar on blended learning and ODL; orientation program for students and parents on new learning modalities; skills development program; physical fitness program; virtual reality training; webinar on career pathing; webinar on building self- confidence; webinar on sign language; webinars on team building and time management; values formation; reading program; and seminar on how to sustain attention in class. Similarly, Miller (2021) emphasized that educational programs for parents and young children, home visits by nurses, and other interventions have been demonstrated to be beneficial in minimizing the influence of risk factors for mental health disorders. It also aids in the development of children's emotional and social skills. Schools and primary care are two of the most common places where mental health disorders in children and adolescents can be identified. The importance of parents as partners in providing mental health treatments to children and adolescents has also been acknowledged. Moreover, Ramachadran et al. (2021) emphasized that mental health is an important part of a child's overall health,

as it is linked to their physical well-being and ability to succeed in school, at work, and in society. As a result, preserving and developing the mental health of children is critical to the country's bright future.

For the parents, the formation programs may include health awareness, youth formation, reaching out and coping with challenges. Koskela et al. (2020) in their study revealed that from the perspective of parents, this new reality is very challenging and confusing and everybody must be prepared for the needed shift in order to facilitate the learning and well-being of the children.

Strategic Directions done by School Leaders

With the issues that the schools are facing, school leaders are developing their own learning continuity plans and determining the school's strategic directions. *"The school seeks to maintain its reputation as a holistic learning institution by utilizing various media platforms and other technological tools to be more engaged and collaborative with parents and students,"* a school leader stated. To thrive in the new reality, the school leaders identified some strategic directions like conducting surveys to identify the needs of the school; implementing the schools' learning continuity plan; training of the teachers; collaborating with school owners, parents, Department of Education, stakeholders, addressing the internet connectivity issues; and using printed/digital modules. The school's leaders took various steps to ensure that its operations were not disrupted. *"We reallocated funding to suit the needs of the new normal,"* one school leader explained, *"to have faster internet connection and printing of modules."* Further, the school leader stressed that *"Teachers and staff received technical, financial, and Covid-19 aid from the school. We continuously received input from students via online surveys in order to improve online instruction; we built/strengthened online infrastructures for easier/regular connection with parents and students; and we enlisted the help of other stakeholders, such as alumni."* These school leaders' responses to current needs backed up Quinco-Cadosales' (2019) findings, which stated that learning leaders' ability to set goals, empower people in the organization, forge linkages, identify opportunities for continuous improvement, set the tone of the school as a community, and practice leadership abilities needed to improve the school are all essential. Further, the strategic directions are measures for the schools to thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Elfaki and Zahran (2021) found that schools were successful in managing the crisis through measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis, such as the adoption of distance learning, remote work, and the implementation of various precautionary measures to limit the spread of the epidemic, and that media repercussions were present.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The COVID-19 Pandemic disturbed the academic institution at all levels. Numerous challenges faced school officials, teachers, students, and parents. As the school thrived

in the new reality, re-orientations in the school's operations were considered with the richness of the proposals, progress of formation programs, and creation of new strategic directions. According to the study's conclusions, these schools should be continuously watched and accompanied in order to preserve the quality of services given in the new reality.

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