

Navigating Change: Exploring the Challenges and Coping Strategies of Elementary Teachers in the Transition from Modular to Face-to-Face Classes

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ABSTRACT

Implementing modular classes in basic education to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic offered flexibility and ensured continuous learning. However, shifting back to face-to-face classes has posed new challenges for elementary school teachers. This study explored their challenges during this shift and their coping strategies to navigate the evolving educational landscape. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine elementary school teachers who were purposefully selected. The study performed thematic analysis to identify and analyze significant themes within the collected data. Findings revealed several key challenges teachers face in the transition, such as lack of district support, individual stressor, pupils' poor school engagement and readjustment, health and safety concerns, and poor parental support. Despite these challenges, the findings also illuminated the coping strategies employed by elementary teachers, such as innovating teaching for better pupil engagement, reinforcement of discipline and values reorientation, and conducting remediation classes. The results give elementary school teachers a concise overview of their challenges in shifting from modular to face-to-face classes and practical coping strategies to facilitate their successful adjustment. In addition, this research provides valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers seeking to assist elementary school teachers in navigating the transition successfully, thereby fostering an effective learning environment for learners.

Keywords: challenges, coping strategies, face-to-face classes, modular learning, shifting

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted world leaders to implement extreme protocols worldwide, including lockdowns that have forced the closure of establishments and schools to contain the spread of the virus. The pandemic has had a profound impact on education globally in recent years. School closures have put over a billion students at risk of falling behind academically (UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, distance learning has replaced face-to-face classes as an alternative form of education, involving virtual or modular self-directed learning where students and teachers do not physically interact. In the Philippines, modular distance learning was implemented in basic education.

After nearly two years of modular distance learning, the Department of Education announced the resumption of face-to-face classes on November 2, 2022. However, numerous challenges arose at the start of the reopening. The limitations of face-to-face classes have significantly affected the performance of both teachers and learners (Cabello et al., 2022). Poor reading ability has been observed throughout the transition, affecting the instruction's effectiveness. Additionally, teachers encountered difficulties during reading sessions as learners' abilities lagged, comparable to kindergarten learners. Malipot (2022) reported that the shortage of facilities, such as classrooms, learning materials, handwashing facilities, and chairs, among others, posed challenges in the face-to-face setup. Furthermore, the lack of human resources in schools has

made teachers overworked. Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) further reported that many teachers experienced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress when schools were reopened.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing teachers' teaching effectiveness. Therefore, exploring the challenges teachers face in transitioning from modular to face-to-face classes is essential, as only a limited number of studies have been conducted on this topic. The main objective of this study is to examine the challenges elementary teachers face in shifting from modular to face-to-face classes and identify their coping strategies. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on educational transitions and provide valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers seeking to support elementary teachers in successfully navigating this shift.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. According to Lambert and Lambert (2012), a qualitative descriptive design aims to provide an extensive description of events experienced by individuals or groups. It is suitable when seeking a straightforward understanding of a phenomenon. This design is appropriate for this research as it aims to identify, describe, and examine the challenges teachers face in returning to face-to-face classes and their coping strategies.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were nine teachers purposefully selected based on the following criteria: (1) teachers teaching in the upland area of Goa, Camarines Sur, Philippines; (2) teachers at the elementary level; (3) with a minimum of three years of teaching experience; and (4) having prior experience with modular distance learning.

Research Instruments

This study utilized interview guide questions and an audio recorder to gather the necessary data. The researchers developed an open-ended question to elicit responses from the participants regarding the challenges they face upon returning to face-to-face classes and their coping strategies. Experts evaluated the interview questions to ensure they adequately addressed the research objective. Additionally, the researchers used an audio recorder to capture the conducted interviews.

Data Gathering Procedure

This study followed the necessary procedures to gather the required data. Firstly, the researchers sought permission from the school head to conduct face-to-face interviews. Once permission was obtained, the researchers approached the target participants, provided them with a consent form, and sought their approval to participate. After obtaining participant consent, the researchers proceeded with the interviews, ensuring accurate documentation by recording them. Subsequently, the recorded interviews were transcribed to facilitate analysis. Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the qualitative results, the researchers requested secondary data, specifically students' records, from the school head for triangulation purposes.

Ethical Considerations

During the data-gathering procedure, ethical considerations were upheld. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, ensuring their understanding and voluntary participation. The researchers also prioritized the participants' well-being by observing minimum health protocols during the interviews, such

as wearing face masks and maintaining physical distance. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the process, with any identifying information kept secure and participant identities protected in reporting the findings. The researchers handled the recorded data carefully, ensuring its security and privacy.

Data Analysis

The data gathered underwent thematic analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006) described, thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. The 6-step thematic analysis process outlined in their paper was employed in this study: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining themes; and (6) writing up the findings. This study employed the reliability and validity procedures outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) to guarantee the accuracy and credibility of the study findings. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the researchers employed intercoder reliability checks involving three independent coders who reviewed and examined the coding process. This helped to establish agreement and consistency in the coding process. Once the themes were finalized, the researchers sought validation from the study participants. The researchers shared the results with the participants, allowing them to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings, adding to the credibility of the analysis. Additionally, triangulation of results was conducted by obtaining secondary data from the respondent schools, such as students' records, to validate further and support the identified themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data gathering regarding the elementary teachers' challenges and coping strategies in the shift from modular to face-to-face classes are discussed in this section.

Challenges faced by the teachers in shifting from modular to face-to-face classes

The thematic analysis revealed several prominent challenges faced by elementary teachers during the transition from modular to face-to-face education. Five main themes emerged from the data: lack of district support, individual stressors, pupils' poor school engagement and readjustment, health and safety concerns, and poor parental support.

Lack of District Support

Quality teachers, supported by competent school leaders, are crucial for producing effective educational outcomes. However, the absence of support from the school district can have a negative impact. According to the participants, while training and seminars are available, they primarily focus on the primary grades and neglect the intermediate grades. As stated by Teacher M, "There are no seminars specifically targeting the intermediate grades as the primary grades receive more attention." Morallo and Abay (2019) found that teachers in upland schools in Goa, Camarines Sur, strongly expressed the need for training in various teaching domains, particularly content and pedagogy. They sought to acquire effective teaching strategies to meet the demands of 21st-century learners. In addition, the participants reported a shortage of books, particularly in upland areas. Only the remaining books from central schools are provided, but they are insufficient and cannot be distributed to all students. Teacher M mentioned that "books are scarce." The result aligns with Alcuizar's (2016) study, highlighting inadequate science laboratories, facilities and limited availability of textbooks and reading materials in upland areas.

Individual Stressor

Individual-level stressors encompass the stress teachers encounter in their personal and professional lives. The study participants expressed their experiences with anxiety, the impact of professional pressures, and work obligations as stressors during the academic year. The transition from modular distance learning to

face-to-face classes was reported as particularly challenging. Teachers described it as stressful, risky, and exhausting, requiring significant adjustments, especially regarding instructional materials. Many teachers expressed feeling unprepared for the reopening of in-person classes. As Teacher J stated, “We don’t really go out of the classroom because it’s really stressful.” Additionally, Teacher S mentioned, “At the beginning, I would say that we were not yet ready.” Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) found that many teachers experienced symptoms of worry, stress, and sadness when schools and universities reopened. Similarly, Villar et al. (2022) demonstrated that teachers encountered much stress when transitioning to a face-to-face setup. The participants in this study were candid about the evident struggles during the transition, recognizing that the pedagogical challenges and inevitable stressors had detrimental effects on the lives of both teachers and learners. Acknowledging and addressing these individual-level stressors is crucial for supporting the well-being and effectiveness of teachers in their roles.

PUPILS’ POOR SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND READJUSTMENT

A pupil’s engagement refers to the performance, attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion students demonstrate during their learning process. Poor school engagement and readjustment can be categorized into (1) Stagnant Learning and (2) Behavioral Adjustment.

Stagnant Learning

Stagnant learning is when a pupil remains in the same grade for over a year. It is considered a sign of stagnation when a pupil takes over a year to complete a course. Stagnant learning can be attributed to several factors, including reading difficulties, poor reading comprehension, unmastered foundational math skills, and knowledge and skills gaps. According to the study participants, many pupils struggle with reading and have difficulty even with simple Filipino words, which also impacts their comprehension. Understanding the teachers’ lessons, even when not in English, poses a challenge for them. Consequently, participating in class discussions and cooperating with their peers becomes difficult. The students also face difficulties in mathematics, such as writing numbers from 1 to 20. Skills gaps among pupils pose a significant challenge for elementary teachers since the reopening of face-to-face classes. Many pupils struggle to catch up with the lessons in the textbooks, with most of them having stopped learning at the grade level they were in before the pandemic. As one participant expressed, “We are having difficulties teaching the pupils, especially when we are starting to have lessons from a book. They can’t even catch up with the lesson if it is from a book.” Another teacher mentioned, “Their learning is inaccurate for their grade level.” This finding aligns with the study by Yaseen (2013), which highlighted the continuum of reading challenges among students. While some students with learning disabilities have been identified, a larger group of students who have not been diagnosed yet require substantial reading support.

Secondary data from the 8-week curriculum in the Reading Literacy Assessment further support the findings revealing that among the 79 learners assessed in Central Bikol, only 6.58% were at a grade-ready level. Similarly, out of the 50 grade 2 learners assessed in Central Bikol, only 5.56% were at a grade-ready level. For the other 50 grade 2 learners assessed in Filipino, only 6.25% were at a grade-ready level. Furthermore, among the grade 3 learners assessed in Central Bikol, only 3.33% were at a grade-ready level, and for the 50 grade 3 learners assessed in Filipino, only 2.77% were at a grade-ready level. Lastly, out of the 50 third-grade learners assessed in English, only 4.55% were at a grade-ready level. These data from the 8-week curriculum indicate that primary-grade learners face significant difficulties after reopening face-to-face classes, particularly in reading.

Behavioral Adjustment

As identified by Kazak and Koyuncu (2021), undesirable student behaviors include disrupting the class, lacking preparation for lessons, falling asleep during class, being easily distracted, impoliteness, conflicts

with peers, breaking the rules, and arriving late. The implementation of distance learning gave rise to behavioral issues among learners while transitioning back to face-to-face classes presents several behavioral challenges for pupils (Paterno, 2023). For instance, the participants in this study reported significant difficulties in managing their pupils' behavior. Teacher J specifically highlighted the presence of disruptive behaviors, such as fighting, shouting, and a lack of respect, even using traditional Filipino terms of respect like "po" and "opo." These findings suggest that there is a need for effective behavior management strategies to address these challenges and promote a positive and respectful classroom environment.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS

As the nation recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing the health and safety of learners, teachers, and families has become increasingly important. According to teacher M, students with mild symptoms such as coughing and fever are not allowed to attend school. This prioritization of health is likely due to concerns about the potential worsening of symptoms or the risk of infection. Hatami et al. (2021) found that most students knew about the disease's etiology, transmission methods, and common symptoms such as dyspnea and cough. They acquired this information mainly from social and visual media. The teachers expressed the importance of maintaining physical distance, isolating when symptoms arise, avoiding unnecessary in-person interactions, and implementing lockdowns if necessary.

POOR PARENTAL SUPPORT

Parental involvement is a crucial factor in ensuring the success of students' education. When parents are actively involved, students are more likely to perform academically, develop socially and emotionally, and have higher self-esteem. However, according to teacher M, parents in upland areas lack support for their children's education, with some parents lacking their education. Teacher M stated, "Some parents, especially here in the upland area, told us, 'Ma'am, we don't know how to read, so how can we teach our children?'" Additionally, Teacher J mentioned that some pupils could not attend school due to a lack of rice for meals. These responses from the participants highlight the impact of parents' lack of support on their children's education. Lara and Saracosti (2019) found that children whose parents are less involved in their education tend to have poorer academic achievements, revealing disparities in academic outcomes based on parental participation profiles. Addressing these challenges and supporting parents in upland areas can contribute to narrowing these gaps and fostering better educational outcomes for all students.

Coping Strategies by the Elementary Teachers

The thematic analysis revealed several coping strategies employed by elementary teachers during the transition from modular to face-to-face education. Three main themes emerged from the data: innovating teaching for better pupil engagement, enforcement of discipline and values reorientation, and conducting remediation.

Innovating Teaching for Better Pupil Engagement

Teachers in the study acknowledged the significance of innovative teaching methods to promote pupil engagement. They implemented various strategies, such as creating instructional materials. Teacher R, for example, utilized tarpaper as a visual aid to enhance understanding of the content. Another strategy mentioned by Teacher M was contextualizing lessons in the students' local language to facilitate comprehension. These approaches align with the findings of Sambayon et al. (2023), which suggest that contextualized teaching and learning materials can enhance reading comprehension skills. Additionally, Nazand Murad (2017) emphasized the importance of skillful and comprehensive curriculum development to cater to the diverse needs of students. Teachers must adapt innovative teaching techniques that address the unique requirements of their students, including their abilities, disabilities, and special needs.

By doing so, teachers can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

Enforcement of Discipline and Values Reorientation

The study's results highlight the significant role of discipline and values reorientation in creating an effective learning process. Teachers recognized the importance of discipline in managing classroom behavior and fostering an environment conducive to learning. One-on-one conversations emerged as a preferred strategy for addressing misbehavior, demonstrating a more constructive approach than scolding. Additionally, the importance of communication with parents was emphasized by Teacher J, highlighting the need for a collaborative approach to discipline. Teacher M underlined the importance of balancing discipline with understanding, considering students' sensitivity towards strictness. These findings suggest that a holistic approach to discipline, incorporating open communication, individualized attention, and a balance between firmness and empathy, can create a positive and supportive learning environment (Tarman, 2016). Such an approach can help students develop self-discipline, values, and a sense of responsibility, ultimately enhancing their educational experience.

Conducting remediation

Remediation is a crucial strategy employed by elementary teachers to support students in improving their performance and catching up with their peers. It involves re-teaching and reinforcing fundamental skills that students may have struggled with. Teacher M mentioned the formation of a specific classroom for students who cannot read from grades 1 to 3, indicating the use of targeted remediation and support for students with similar learning needs. Teacher J discussed the implementation of an 8-week curriculum and the administration of a pre-test to assess students' abilities in areas such as phonics, letter recognition, and counting. This pre-test helps identify specific learning needs and guides the design of the remediation program. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of remediation strategies can vary depending on various factors. Reflier's study (2021) presented contradictory findings regarding the impact of classroom pull-outs for extra resources. This highlights the need to consider contextual factors and individual student needs when implementing remediation strategies. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of tailored interventions and targeted support to address students' specific learning needs and promote their academic progress. By employing remediation strategies, elementary teachers can help students improve their performance and bridge any learning gaps they may have.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, elementary school teachers faced multifaceted challenges during the transition from modular to face-to-face instruction, including a lack of district support, individual stressors, poor school engagement and readjustment among pupils, health and safety concerns, and inadequate parental support. Despite these hurdles, this study highlights teachers' coping strategies to navigate these difficulties. These strategies include innovating teaching methods to enhance pupil engagement, enforcing discipline and values reorientation to promote a positive classroom environment, and conducting remediation to address learning gaps. By employing these coping strategies, elementary school teachers have demonstrated resilience and flexibility in adapting to the new instructional landscape. The findings emphasize the importance of providing comprehensive support to teachers during transitional periods and underscore their role in fostering successful student outcomes. Future interventions should prioritize addressing the identified challenges and building a collaborative framework to strengthen teacher support and student engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that educational institutions and districts take immediate action to address the multifaceted challenges elementary school teachers face during the transition from

modular to face-to-face instruction. Comprehensive programs should be implemented to support teachers, including professional development, mentoring initiatives, and resources tailored to their specific needs. Additionally, fostering a collaborative framework that promotes communication and cooperation among teachers, administrators, parents, and stakeholders is vital for sharing best practices and addressing challenges collectively. By investing in teacher support programs, building collaborative frameworks, promoting innovative teaching methods, enhancing parental involvement, and implementing targeted interventions for learning gap remediation, schools can foster resilience and adaptability among teachers, leading to successful student outcomes in the evolving instructional landscape.

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