

ADDRESSING THE DEMANDS OF DISTANCE LEARNING: PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the demands of distance learning being addressed by the public high schools in the Division of Bulacan in terms of the schools' learning resources, learning delivery modality, internet connectivity, and ICT skills. In addition to that, the study aimed to determine the respondents' management of the school, the prevailing challenges encountered, and the best practices being utilized by the school principals that may be shared with other public high schools in addressing the demands of distance learning.

The researcher purposely selected secondary schools in SDO Bulacan which consist of twelve (12) public secondary high school principals considered as best schools based on the report on performance ranking of the delivery units on the Enhanced Basic Education Information System (E-BEIS) handling basic education in the school year 2020-2021 and three (3) DepEd leaders. Data were collected for a period of one trimester of the academic year 2021-2022. Thematic analysis was used in the interpretation and coding of data.

Themed-based findings revealed that public high school principals are greatly challenged in terms of having poor internet connectivity, insufficient learning resources, and continuous upskilling and reskilling of school leaders on ICT posed by the pandemic. As a result, the researcher proposed a management framework for distance learning as a commendable framework that will serve as a guide to other public high schools in addressing the demands of distance learning and for us to achieve good to great educational institutions as our response in this great era of change brought by the COVID- 19 pandemic.

Keywords: Demands, Learning Resources, Best Practices, Learning Delivery Modality, Internet Connectivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an investment that will pay off for many generations. Hence, education is significantly important in the holistic development of a nation. It is the key agent that will propel the development of the country. That is why education is very important. Undoubtedly, Filipinos take education with high importance. The Philippine Education system has always been in the classroom set-up. Teaching happens within the classroom where the students and the teacher are physically present and there are opportunities for active engagement, immediate feedback, and the socio-emotional development of learners.

Even before, the education crisis is already an issue among public high schools, with overcrowded classrooms, lack of facilities, shortage of teachers, and poor learning outcomes. Things have been the same until the Covid 19 pandemic emerged. This dramatic shift led to a great challenge for various sectors including education. The Philippines is greatly affected by this crisis. To meet the challenges of the New Educational Landscape, teaching and learning methodologies

have undergone a major change, the roles of all public high schools have transformed, and school principals found and implemented some alternative solutions. No matter how challenging one's life circumstances are, an adage stressed the value of education in one's life, saying that "Education is the only inheritance that no one can take from you."

Distance learning is a learning modality in which students learn outside the classroom and instruction is done through the use of the available technology (Simonson, 2020). During the pandemic surge, several challenges and issues in the Philippine education transpired. To address this, the Department of Education (DepEd) has considered distance learning as an alternative mode for continuous learning. this involves technology, learning materials and internet connectivity.

On the onset of the pandemic, all public secondary high schools in the Philippines ceased to operate. Literally and figuratively, learning has to take place outside the typical classroom and parents serve as home learning facilitators. Public High Schools were forced to take alternative roads as an immediate response to continue learning despite the epidemiological threat. A big adjustment from traditional face-to-face learning to remote learning was made. The pandemic transformed the education system dramatically because of the advent of distance learning modality where teaching and learning processes are taken remotely or digitally (Li and Lalani, 2020). However, with the concerted efforts of everyone, things started to fall into place.

Distance learning has been considered to respond to problems concerning geographical distance and other factors that hinder face-to-face classes to take place. As such, the DepEd issued D.O. No. 12 s.2020 or the Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) that emphasizes learning opportunities to students provided through distance learning modalities to avoid face-to-face interactions (Department of Education, 2020). The DepEd conducted Learning Enrollment and Survey Form (LESF) on the school opening, and it was revealed that modular learning which includes the use of highly convenient Self-learning modules is the most considered by the typical Filipino learners. In addition, it can be conveyed that most parents and guardians prefer this learning modality.

Thus, public high schools need to adjust to a new learning situation, which they consider a big challenge. Considering the existing problems in the education system, the pandemic just aggravated the situation. Secondary school principals had to think of ways to address the demands to continue the education or the teaching-learning process despite the physical setbacks caused by the current predicament. Thus, a possible solution to continue learning is by means of distance learning modality.

Distance learning emphasizes the lack of physical meetings between the teacher and students. It is a viable option to continue education amidst the pandemic. With modular distance learning, learners learn on their own as they are accompanied by SLMs in print or in digital format. A module is a particular kind of lesson that contains knowledge about the subject, focuses on learning activities, and concludes with a certain form of evaluation to demonstrate comprehension (Cahapay, 2020).

Considering the technology infrastructure of the school, availability of learning resources, internet connectivity, and the ICT skills of the school principals are very necessary and important factors in making the implementation of distance learning a success. Technology infrastructure such as the presence of desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and internet connectivity is essential to pave the way for distance learning for both teachers and learners. Just as technology and infrastructure are important in the usual education setting, they are also equally significant for the effective delivery of distance learning. And so, internet connectivity is extremely necessary to

facilitate distance learning, thus, access to this is needed by both teachers and school principals. However, internet connection is challenged by other factors such as the school principals, teachers, and learners' location, where a signal is interfered by the quality of the connection.

Thus, resorting to modular distance learning can fill in such economic shortcomings. The majority of public high schools preferred to have this kind of modality because of the unavailability of gadgets and connectivity. Partial results of the Learner Enrolment and Survey Form (LESF), which was issued during the enrolment period revealed that more than 8.8. million parents considered modular learning as an alternative distance learning delivery of instruction for the school year 2020-2021 (Department of Education, 2020).

It is essential to prove that public high schools have to respond to this compelling task in this great era of change to deliver distance learning and to work in unity to achieve the success of the New Normal Education. For that reason, demand for a quick shift to virtual realities became significant to achieve good to great education institutions because of the rapid changes in technology, increased globalization, and digitization. As technology evolves, school principals' ICT skills must change to remain current. With the constant advancement of technology, ICT skills of school principals must also remain current at par, so as to cope with the trends of digital technologies (Beytekin, 2018). Hence, if school principals lack a comprehensive understanding of ICT capabilities and skills, they will not be prepared to assist their school needs to maximize student learning (Zheng et al., 2018).

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has made a drastic change all public high schools. The transition of education structure from traditional face-to-face learning to virtual learning has laid bare deep educational inequalities, as many Filipino learners are not even able to access online classes or much-needed resources. With the sudden events, most of the learners from different areas face the new system of education through online platforms or printed modules to continue their education in spite of the health crisis underway.

The need for the so-called schools' transformation, adaptive, proactive, and resilient leaders has become an essential element in educational institutions in pursuit of effective delivery of distance learning. Thus, public high school principals are ought to strive to create positive change under the present condition of the country. Leaders should demonstrate the importance of building resilience to face the threats of COVID-19. School principals should have shown compassion and even humaneness. In addition, public high school principals and teachers work hand in hand to look for ways to make our learners productive and fine-tune their Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA); teachers' teaching styles are adjusted to meet and/or suit the needs of the students in producing the necessary skills needed for the unknown future.

Addressing the demands of distance learning is a major concern and a top priority of all educational institutions in order to achieve good to great education institutions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Though, education in the dire time of the pandemic is a very challenging task for public high school principals to address the call of distance learning.

Hence, the goal of the study is to analyze the demands of distance learning being addressed by the public high schools in the Division of Bulacan in terms of the schools' learning resources, learning delivery modality, internet connectivity, and ICT skills. In addition to that, the study aims to determine the respondents' management of the school during the implementation of distance learning and be able to identify the prevailing challenges faced by the school principals in addressing the demands of distance learning. Moreover, the study would like to know the best

practices being utilized by the respondents to cope with the transformation and respond to these educational changes.

As a result, the researcher developed a management framework that will serve as a guide to other public high schools in addressing the demands of distance learning and for us to achieve good to great educational institutions as our response in this great era of change caused by the COVID- 19 pandemic. The findings of the study may present helpful ways leading to more crafted school programs and relative guidelines on distance learning delivery. In addition, the study will help policymakers to formulate more relevant and adequate policies and instructions to assist school principals as better distance learning facilitators.

2.METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of coming up with comprehensive findings on the demands of distance learning in public high schools as addressed by the school principals, the researcher made use of a convergent mixed method design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. In this design, the researcher typically collects both forms of data at the same time and then integrates the information into the interpretation of the overall results.

The convergent mixed method approach is a design in mixed methods that is probably the most familiar of the core and complex mixed method approaches. It is a one-phase design where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed, then the analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data are compared to see if the data confirms or disconfirms each other (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

The study employed a survey questionnaire with quantitative problems and ended up with interview guide questions to explore the qualitative strand and to serve as techniques in data collection.

In the quantitative part, the study assessed the School's Learning Resources, Learning Delivery Modality, Internet Connectivity, and ICT skills of the school principals. Also, the researcher determined the school principals' management of the school during the implementation of distance learning.

The qualitative part of the research discussed the perceived challenges being encountered in the implementation of distance learning modality and best practices that school principals may share with other public high schools in order to address the demands of distance learning. The researcher used the validating quantitative data model because the study wants to validate and expound on the quantitative findings from a survey conducted by including some open-ended qualitative questions. In this model, the researcher collected both types of data within one survey research instrument.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The general problem of the study is: How may the demands of distance learning in the Public High Schools in the Division of Bulacan as addressed by the principals during the pandemic be analyzed? The researcher made use of mixed methods that generate answers to this main problem and the hereunder enumerated specific problems.

1. How do the school principals address the demands of distance learning in terms of:

1.1 Learning Delivery Modality

The high preference for the printed modular learning modality is a reflection of the lack of access to other modalities. Public high school principals were able to address the demands of distance learning. They worked together as a team to ensure the continuity of education to achieve its goals and vision of providing excellent education to every Filipino learner in response to the changing educational landscape.

1.2 Learning Resources

Meeting the demands of distance learning in terms of learning resources, it is being addressed that public high school principals were capable of resolving the problems in the reproduction and releasing of Self-Learning Modules. Thus, they have prepared all necessary budgets for the reproduction of SLMs. Links for SLMs were available anytime for downloading. Furthermore, the schools have sufficient financial support and material resources, and it is properly utilized to sustain the massive reproduction of Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) through the help of the Local Government Units (LGUs).

1.3 Connectivity/Internet Access

Having a verbal interpretation of Moderately Addressed, manifests that respondents are resilient to manage the changes caused by the pandemic. But some school problems are beyond our control like having slow interrupted internet access. Having this situation, school leaders must continue to modify their approach to leadership, and they must be resilient to the changes as the pandemic continues to emerge. To address the poor internet connectivity, school leaders devise other means or catch-up plans to accomplish the learning objectives as prescribed in the Curriculum Guides of the DepEd. It is important to provide excellent education to the learners despite the lapses mentioned. Strong collaboration and good communication channels have been used as the key to achieve a quality education amidst the pandemic.

1.4 ICT skills

With a verbal interpretation of Fully Addressed, it can be assumed that school leaders' professional development is therefore essential to help them gain knowledge on the latest information regarding ICT and technology use since it is noted that rapid innovation in technology poses a challenge of constant new knowledge and skills in which school leaders need. Thus, School leaders' ICT skills should be enhanced through the development and implementation of a vision and technology plan for the school, and continuous ICT upskilling including the school heads' role as technology leaders. School leaders are expected to spearhead all the school improvement changes.

2. HOW DO THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS MANAGE THE SCHOOL DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTANCE LEARNING?

2.1 Leading Strategically

The respondents affirm that they have a strong commitment to a strategic course of action consistent with institutional goals towards maximizing organizational performance. However, it was found that it is quite challenging to determine data-driven and evidence-based research findings that can help school principals effectively achieve/attain the successful implementation of distance learning amid COVID-19 Pandemic. Through strategic leadership, a school has found a solution to the problem. Thus, the respondents exhibit a realization of continuous monitoring and evaluation to achieve and improve the school organization even if they do encounter this kind of crisis

2.2. Managing School Operations and Resources

Regarding the understanding of the Public High School Principals in terms of managing school operations and resources effectively, it was ascertained that they are capable of managing their school operations and finances.

Nevertheless, school principals have knowledge and understanding of the guideline and policies which pertain to acquisition, recording, utilization, repair and maintenance, storage, and disposal in managing school safety for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and resiliency in ensuring continuous delivery of instruction amid the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals lead the organization with a purpose. He/She is committed to working towards the realization of the organizational goals with focus.

2.3 Focusing on Teaching and Learning

As an agile leader in this New Education Landscape, it was found in the study that school principals have a strong commitment to instructional leadership towards improving competence among teachers and outcomes of learners as it is supported by the interpretation of outstanding. In fact, in demonstrating the knowledge and understanding of the integration of career awareness and opportunities in the provision of learning experiences aligned with the curriculum, it can be gleaned that school principals have an understanding of how to integrate career awareness and opportunities in the provision of learning experiences of learners. However, the proper integration of career awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic was very limited.

2.4. Developing Self and Others

The respondents exhibit best practices in the implementation of professional development initiatives. Also, public high school principals' understanding to intensify their practice skills is highly achieved in this time of the pandemic. The school principals manifest a strong commitment to achieving excellence in education institutions. In addition to this, school principals provide other means for the elf and professional development such as opportunities to learn, reflect, lead, and progress in their profession based on the PSSH as it is supported with the verbal interpretation of outstanding.

2.5 Building connections

Having a verbal interpretation of outstanding. This proves that public high school principals have a strong commitment to advocating education as everyone's responsibility. It also shows that they are accountable for inculcating a deeper understanding of the vision, mission, and core values, and directions of the school to relevant entities. Thus, school principals have the ability to build a relationship with individuals and organizations anchored in mutual trust, honesty, openness, and commitment towards sharing the same vision for the attainment of institutional goals even in the unprecedented challenges faced in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN ADDRESSING THE DEMANDS OF DISTANCE LEARNING?

Every school principal has his or her own way and style in adopting the current challenges he/she faced in addressing the demands of distance learning in order to achieve good to great education institutions despite the daunting circumstances. The implementation of distance learning in SDO Bulacan is not perfect and is a very challenging process because there are still a lot of aspects to be improved. Having poor internet connectivity, insufficient learning resources, and continuous upskilling and reskilling of school leaders on ICT are the major challenges encountered by public high school principals. This new normal setting in Education though very crucial tasks for school principals and DepEd leader provides opportunities for them to test their management

skills, especially in making decisions. Henceforth, school principals demonstrated the importance of building resilience and synergy to address the demands of the so-called new education landscape. School principals work hand in hand to find ways to make their learners productive and fine-tune the KSA and embrace transformational leadership style in order to achieve good to great educational institutions. Challenging situations can be managed in many by school principals who are adaptive, flexible, and proactive leaders who can solve problems through collaboration, adaptation, and continued learning and applying the shared leadership responsibilities.

4. WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICES OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS THAT MAY BE SHARED TO OTHER PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS IN ADDRESSING THE DEMANDS OF DISTANCE LEARNING?

School Principals develop best if they examine others' change stories, as well as their own challenging situations. In order to understand change, they identify specific challenges, diagnose the needs of the organization and carry out and learn through actions. Given these points, becoming a technological leader, Strengthening School Synergy and continuous professional development are the best practices shared by the respondents and effective ways to handle the current challenges in the new educational landscape. These are the key players that are needed to achieve good to great educational institutions in fulfilling national development goals and carrying out plans to contribute to nation-building.

5. WHAT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK MAY BE PROPOSED/DEVELOPED AS A GUIDE IN ADDRESSING THE DEMANDS OF DISTANCE LEARNING?

The management framework for distance learning is essentially centered on how DepEd leaders and school principals handle issues and are able to adapt to the pandemic's unprecedented dilemma. By focusing on the four (4) areas, themes were established and highlighted on which the framework was built. In order to address the demands of distance learning during the pandemic, the first area serves as the school principals' overall goals and/or mission in the educational institutions. This area takes into account the schools' modes of learning delivery, learning resources, internet access, and ICT skills. The successful implementation of distance learning must take this topic into consideration. Similar to what is emphasized in the Systems Theory, school administrators must assess the current state of the institution and prioritize all necessary components in order to meet its demands and, in turn, achieve the broader organizational objectives of educational institutions. The second area shows that the school administrators have a thoroughly established strategy for effectively and efficiently managing the institution during this time of institutional transition. Because of this, school administrators should be prepared to lead their institutions in addressing the demands of distance learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, in order to successfully incorporate these components into the workplace, school principals need to have a thorough understanding of them. The third area focuses on analyzing the issues raised by public high school principals when implementing distance learning. Without change, there would be no opportunities for growth and development, so we should value the changes that are taking place because they help us understand the best course of action to take in order to overcome these obstacles. Schools experience dynamic change. Change involves more than just implementing best practices; it also entails developing a culture that acknowledges strengths and weaknesses, promotes creativity and independent thinking, and incorporates best practices and ideas from other people. And last is the Achieved Good to Great Education

Institutions, wherein school leaders should be future-minded leaders to achieve good to great educational institutions, even though the COVID-19 Pandemic had an educational impact on public high schools in the Division of Bulacan. Developing as an agile leader, enhancing school synergy, and pursuing ongoing professional development opportunities through SLAC are crucial steps in creating good to excellent educational institutions. A school administrator should be knowledgeable about the use of technology in this Fourth Industrial Revolution in Education, be able to lead, and manage educational institutions and be a change agent.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the findings of the study, the researcher has made conclusions by analyzing the demands of distance learning as addressed by the public high schools during the pandemic. Hence, public high schools were able to address the demands of distance learning in terms of Learning Delivery Modality, Learning Resources, Internet Access, and ICT. Also, public high school principals were able to manage the school organization during the conduct of distance learning by Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations, and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and others, and Building connections. Sharing the best practices with other public high school principals is an excellent contribution that a school principal can provide in order to have room for collaboration in addressing the demands of distance learning. Thus, it is considered significant to propose a management framework of distance learning as a commendable framework to be used as a guide and can be shared with other public high schools to cater the needs of Filipino learners and successfully cope with the demands of the new educational landscape.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the foregoing findings of this study and drawn conclusions, the following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. Public high schools may solicit help from the LGU to provide reliable and consistent internet access.
2. Parents should support educating their children first at home. Children should be encouraged so that they will be guided properly. Parents should follow up on the status of the learning performance of children at home. Various means of reaching out to the students and parents may be strengthened.
3. The Department of Education shall allocate an additional budget for facilities and equipment needed for distance learning education. Investing in the facilities and equipment needed for distance learning is an excellent idea to enhance the institutions' capability in delivering distance learning to students.
4. Providing necessary resources and relevant training and skills development among public high school principals regarding the trends in ICT should be maintained to successfully deliver quality education.
5. There must be comprehensive training to be given by the DepEd for public high school principals to acquire knowledge and skills in facilitating data-driven and evidence-based innovations to improve the performance of school leaders and to be strategic leaders in the decision-making process.
6. Public high school principals and teachers find ways to be flexible and very creative in establishing policies and practices that are effective.

7. The DepEd should continue to undertake monitoring and evaluation of the distance learning.
8. Public high schools would benefit from the results of the study. They would be informed and provided with data on what their schools need. The said benefit can be in the form of faculty/ professional development, appropriate technologies, and training resource availability.

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