



Learning Recovery : Teacher's Strategies and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the teachers' experiences in addressing the learning gaps during the resumption of in-person classes post-pandemic. Specifically, it sought to determine the learning recovery strategies implemented and the challenges encountered by the teachers. Six (6) teachers from DepEd Zamboanga City Division were involved in this study employing a qualitative-phenomenological research design. The participants were purposively selected based on the criteria defined in this paper. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with semi-structured interview questions. The findings revealed that the teachers employed a multifaceted approach to bridge the learning gaps. These include conducting remedial reading and pull-out sessions, integrating basic reading activities in all subject areas, and using differentiated instructions and materials. However, teachers also encountered challenges related to the limited availability of resources, the need for professional development to address pedagogical changes, the lack of parental support, and absenteeism among learners. The research finding suggests intervention at the individual and system levels to mitigate the learning gaps. Policy recommendations include upskilling and plans of teachers, particularly in teaching beginning reading, increasing funding allocation for basic education resources, reviewing implementation of the learning recovery plans, and improving collaboration with parents and community stakeholders to support learners' education.

Keywords : teachers strategies, learning gap, learning loss, in-person classes, challenges, post-pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 pandemic has forced the closure of schools, affecting over 1.6 billion children. UNESCO (2021) claims that this has caused the most severe disruption of classes in history. In response, various alternative delivery modes to school-based learning emerged. Many of these options depend on technology (Bozkurt et al., 2020). The teachers, students, schools, parents, and other stakeholders were put to the test when the pandemic occurred. Many school districts shifted activities online to continue the delivery of instruction even when schools were closed (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The Philippines Department of Education has adopted the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP), which contains education interventions that the schools and teachers will implement to respond to the basic education challenges during the pandemic

(DepEd Order 12, s. 2020). In this plan, the schools will adopt the most appropriate learning delivery strategy depending on their capacity and resource availability. Most schools adopted modular distance learning which presented various challenges for the teachers. As observed, teachers had difficulty in the learning delivery of instruction, module distribution and retrieval, power interruption, internet connection and health risk (Agayon et al., 2022). Remote learning was introduced and implemented to ensure learning must continue without consideration on the readiness of the teachers to handle distance learning modality. Jones et al (2022) highlighted that there was a significant reduction in teachers' daily instructional minutes, replaced with increased planning, paperwork, and interactions with colleagues and parents. Despite the learning continuity plan, interventions were implemented by the schools and teachers, the post-pandemic learning gap is alarming during the resumption of in-person classes. In Zamboanga

City, the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory Results shows a high percentage of learners who are at the frustration level. 60.79% of Grade 4 learners are still not reading within their grade level while numeracy assessment results show that 75.93% of the elementary and junior high school learners are not proficient in Mathematics (DEDP, 2023-2028). The widened learning gap was anticipated, according to the world bank study (2022), an interruption to a child's education, no matter how brief, can have a substantial detrimental impact on learning. These losses may have more severe long-term effects, disproportionately affecting the disadvantaged.

Moreover, the transition to face-to-face education, cognitive, social, and psychomotor changes, motivation, concentration, and discipline problems were observed in students' behaviors as explained by Gulmez (2022). The strategies used by the teachers were the management of teaching, behavior, relationships, and the physical environment. Similarly, Jackaria (2022) added that as for the instructional challenges, the teachers expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers and learners who are unprepared cognitively and socially, urging for a comprehensive reading intervention.

Thus, to address the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Education puts a premium on learning recovery initiatives. The teachers, who are at the forefront of teaching and learning, are undoubtedly facing an enormous task. In this context, this study explores the strategies implemented and challenges encountered in addressing learning gaps as an input to policy and program development.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. It is appropriate for this study which explores the teachers' experiences and challenges in addressing learning gaps post-COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted in Zamboanga City, Zamboanga Peninsula Region, Philippines. The selection of the teacher-participants was purposive, based on the criteria set by the researcher. The participants included public-elementary school teachers with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 29 years. Participants are all female, and most of them are generalist teachers. Their assignment varied in terms of school size and comprised small, medium, and large schools to ensure that each type of school was represented. The researcher utilized a one-on-one interview using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. The interview questions were subjected to external validators. The guide questions for the semi-structured interview were: 1.) What strategies have you adopted to address the learning gaps; 2.) Among these strategies, what do you think is the most effective; 3.) What are the challenges you encountered in addressing learning gaps; 4.) How were you able to overcome these challenges?

The researchers secured approved request letters from authorities and consent from participating schools and teachers. In addition, the participants were interviewed during their most convenient time, and the audio recording was done with their permission. Participants were given pseudonyms and codes to maintain confidentiality. Likewise, they were assured that the information gathered would be used exclusively for analysis and not for any other purpose. For data

analysis, the researcher organized, coded, and themed the interview responses using a spreadsheet and qualitative data analysis software.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Teachers' strategies in addressing learning gaps.

The initial step towards addressing learning gaps is to identify exactly what and where those gaps are which the learners have difficulty (Heather, 2020). According to the teachers, the assessment results show that there are significant numbers of non-readers and non-numerates across all grade levels. Therefore, the strategies mainly focused on improving the learner's reading skills.

Data analysis reveals that the teachers mainly implemented remedial reading and pull-out sessions. From the narrative, "*I gave remedial sessions after lunch or before they left for home. I do remedial reading and numeracy on separate days*". During remediation, the teacher gave individualized lessons to the target learners. A participant added "*learning gaps were addressed through conduct of remediation. I do 30 minutes of reading remediation every day. Level 3 and 4 are having their remediation in fluency and comprehension*". This suggests that remedial instruction was the primary strategy employed by the teachers to address the problem. Remedial reading is a short-term intervention in teaching reading to struggling readers. This program targets the learners' most significant area of need. In addition, it will help prevent or remediate skill deficits for learners who are somewhat below grade level (DM 0960 s, 2022). Literature also supports that remedial instruction is among the widely used and effective strategies in addressing pandemic-related learning recovery targeting underperforming learners (UNICEF, 2022).

Another strategy implemented by the teachers is integrating reading in all subject areas. Regardless of the subject matter they are teaching, reading activities (vocabulary and spelling) were incorporated, "*I still have reading activities even with other lessons, even in math and music I still do reading activities before I proceed with the lesson proper. We have the so-called word of the day*". This implies that all teachers prioritize reading regardless of their area of specialization. Fenty & Brydon (2017) highlighted that analysis of teachers' lesson plans indicated a focus on integrating comprehension and vocabulary skills across content areas. The student content assessment data revealed overall increases in content understanding using average pre- and post-assessment scores.

Moreover, teachers adopted differentiated instructions based on the types of learners and capability of the teacher. "*I use so many strategies, I utilize CLAVERIA, MARUNGKO, and DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). CLAVERIA for English and Filipino Non-Readers, followed by MARUNGKO for beginners. For me, learning will only take place if I am at ease with the strategy and am also aware of how my learners learn best. Otherwise, there won't be any learning*". Other strategies adopted by the teachers are game-based learning and visual analysis to encourage engagement even when learners have difficulty with reading and understanding. "*I typically use game-based learning to capture their interest. They are more enthusiastic about playing games while learning. They perform better when working with a group*". Another participant also added, "*When they are unable to read the words, I will just use picture analysis. I employ this strategy to get them to respond to my questions. For*

instance, I showed them an image associated with my lesson". There were several teaching strategies mentioned and adopted by the participants. However, addressing the learning gap boils down to the conclusion that effective strategies will vary on the type of learners and capability of the teachers. Using various materials for teaching reading comprehension skills to match students' different needs and abilities helped enhance their reading comprehension proficiency (Saleh, 2021).

Lastly, the teachers have exerted extra effort in preparing enrichment materials. These are in terms of additional worksheets, activity sheets and passages to do during break or weekends. One teacher said: "I gave reading booklets with questions and space for them to answer. Then after they have completed the booklets, I see to it that I conduct one-on-one questions and answers with them, for me to know if they have really understood what they have read". This means that aside from their regular lessons, the learners were provided with enrichment materials. The teacher typically contextualizes these materials so that they meet the needs of the learners. This was seconded by another teacher who said, "aside from remedial, I also prepared take home activity sheets for them especially on weekends". Supplementary materials include books, newspapers, informational pamphlets, and other materials printed in mother tongue and instructional languages reflecting local customs and concerns. They enrich teaching, engage students in multi-dimensional learning, and build students' abilities to apply their knowledge (Elliott and Corrie, 2015). The use of enrichment materials is found to be effective in studies conducted. According to the developed enrichment learning materials in Physics is effective and has improved the students in the chosen least mastered topics (Marces 2020).

3.2 Teachers' challenges in addressing learning gaps.

The teacher-participants were asked to identify the challenges encountered in addressing the learning gaps during the resumption of the in-person classes. The findings showed that the limited availability of resources was a major challenge. One participant from a remote school encounters a problem with the supply of electricity. Despite having ICT equipment and gadgets, they cannot make use of it in the delivery of instruction. She said: "Much as I wanted to present the video lessons, given that we have visual learners but still it's not possible. The solar power is not enough to energize the interactive projector provided to us". The congestion of classes was also experienced by the teachers, "we really lack teachers and classrooms, in my class I have 50 learners". This is supported by another participant by saying that they lack teachers and that she was handling two (2) sections.

To cope with digital learning materials' limitations, the teachers manually print and use visual materials to support instruction and use what is available. McBurnie et al, (2020) highlighted that the most marginalized children appear to have the fewest educational chances, with few kids in low- and middle-income countries having access to technology-supported learning, children appearing to have the least educational opportunities.

The teachers also acknowledged the need for pedagogical enhancement, notably in teaching beginning reading. One teacher admitted that "I am a subject teacher and only have limited background in teaching reading, but I have to teach basic reading

because even in higher grades there are still non-readers". This implies the need for competency enhancement of the teachers to address the needs of the learners. They use readily available online instructional reading materials appropriate for their lessons as a coping mechanism.

Moreover, the participants experienced a lack of support from parents. A participant narrated, "the parents lack follow-up. That is what I observed. Only a few of the parents are doing follow-ups with their children. To the point that we already do home visitations, but still nothing happens". Aside from regular meetings, the participants have also exhausted other means of reaching out with the parents such as through phone calls, social media group messengers and home visitations. Another participant confirmed that "even if the parents were told to do follow-ups at home, nothing happens because they are busy with their livelihood (kaingin). At times, I am the one to adjust with their schedule when we have homeroom meetings". This is supported by another participant saying that only half of the class parents participate in meetings, orientations, and school activities due to conflict of schedule. Despite numerous studies on the positive effect of parental engagement on learners' performance, schools and teachers face challenges in making the parents fully involved with their children's education. According to Axford et al (2019), for some parents, it can be difficult to get involved in their children's schooling particularly those from lower socioeconomic origins or minority groups. There are material and psychological obstacles which operate differentially (and discriminatingly) across the social classes and evidence of a socioeconomic gradient to parents' engagement in their children's learning and the home learning environment.

Additionally, the teachers are challenged by the learners' absenteeism. As one teacher commented, "for me, my number one challenge is the absenteeism of my learners. They just come to school on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday about half of the class are absent". Absenteeism is one of the factors that contribute to the learning loss. The learners frequently cite inclement weather and helping parents at home or on the farm as excuses. Another participant from a hinterland school supports this by saying that she is considerate when the learners are absent or leave school early when it rains, given that they still have to cross rivers to reach home. Public school absenteeism is a prevalent issue in the Philippines. Every day in the classroom, one out of every 10 pupils had their absences recorded. Among all the causes of absenteeism among public school pupils, financial difficulty or poverty is the primary reason. Other reasons for their absences are the following: distance of the school, health, 38 and family problems. The least reason for their absence is having a negative attitude towards studies (Dimaisip 2019). According to the participants' statements, absenteeism persists despite their efforts to conduct home visits. This suggests that schools should have a strong collaboration with parents and enhance delivery or mode of instruction that will cater to the learners in a disadvantaged situation. This suggests further that teachers must work on creating meaningful and conducive learning environments to motivate learners to attend class.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As we transition to the post-pandemic era, the teacher's role in delivering instruction to close the learning gaps and ensure quality learning becomes even more challenging. Teachers need to be equipped with varied teaching strategies and methodologies to meet different learners' needs.

The study's findings found a range of challenges that the teachers experienced in addressing the learning gaps. Among the challenges were the limited availability of resources, the need for professional development to address pedagogical changes, the lack of parental support, and absenteeism among learners.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions the following recommendations are made:

1. Department of Education officials and planners should prioritize the allocation of basic resources such as but not limited to teachers, classrooms and facilities.
2. Education Supervisors should focus on the provision of technical assistance to novice teachers and to schools with very low proficiency levels.
3. Human Resource Development should address the training needs of the teachers, particularly in teaching beginning reading strategies.
4. Head of Schools should ensure that the competency needs of the teachers are addressed in the In-Service Trainings and Learning Action Cells. Moreover, they should identify and provide the basic resources needed by the teachers in the delivery of instruction.
5. Teachers should conduct assessment using reliable and prescribed tools and adopt appropriate teaching strategies based on assessment results. Moreover, they should subject themselves to continuous competency enhancement from DepEd training, external providers, and self-learning.
6. Parents should recognize their crucial roles in the learning and development of their children. They should engage with school activities and provide academic support at home.
7. A similar study may be conducted involving teachers in Junior and Senior High School.

Acknowledgments

The author of this research expresses her deep appreciation and gratitude to her subject professor, all the participating teachers, for their time, cooperation, and experiences shared during the interview. The researcher also owes her most profound gratitude to her family for their unwavering support in all her endeavors. All of this was made possible by their steadfast prayers and unconditional love.

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