

Challenges Encountered By School Administrators during the New Normal Education: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The new normal education poses a great challenge to learners, parents, and other stakeholders and, more importantly, school administrators in delivering the new learning modality. This study explored the challenges encountered by administrators of integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City during the School Year 2021-2022. The phenomenological research design was used in the study, with nine school administrators as the participants selected through purposive sampling. An Interview Guide was used in gathering the data through face-to-face and virtual interviews. The Moustakas' steps for data analysis were used in analyzing the data gathered. Results revealed four themes: lack of school preparedness for the new modality; difficulty in soliciting parents' cooperation and involvement; communication and monitoring barriers; and the uncertainty of the effectiveness of modular distance learning. The study concludes that implementing the new normal education posed several challenges to school administrators as one of the forerunners of the new learning modality.

Keywords: administrators, challenges, distance learning, integrated schools, learning modality

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020; many countries have been affected by the virus (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The Department of Health reported the first COVID-19 local transmission in the Philippines on March 7, 2020. In this vein, President Rodrigo R. Duterte issued, on March 16, 2020, Presidential Proclamation No. 929, "Declaring a State of Calamity throughout the Philippines Due to Corona Virus 2019." Nevertheless, the Department of Education has been firm that education should continue amid the pandemic. Thus, it issued DepEd Order No. 12 s 2020 on the "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) on the School Year 2020-2021 in Light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency" on June 19, 2020. The said plan stipulates that the Department upholds its mandate in promoting the health, safety, and well-being of the teachers and personnel to ensure learning continuity through the K to 12 Curriculum adjustments, alignment of learning, and utilization of multiple learning delivery modalities. In addition, the DepEd Order introduced different alternative learning delivery modes.

In the light of responding to the changes in the education system, school administrators play an indispensable role in realizing the government's goal to provide quality basic education. As defined by Republic Act 9155, or the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, the school head is responsible for administrative and instructional supervision of a school or group of schools. The functions of school administrators include the administration of teaching programs, personnel management of staff, human resource management, financial and physical resource management, stakeholders' relationship management, and maintenance of a conducive environment that promotes safety and security for both learners and teachers (Adebiy et al., 2019). The areas of education management are learner matters, human resources, administrative matters, financial matters, physical facilities, and school community partnerships (Khumalo & Philip, 2018).

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School leaders play a major role in education policy, especially in influencing teachers' motivation and ability to improve the school setup (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). Effective leadership begins with the right mindset, attitudes toward employees, and motivation to improve productivity and performance (Saah, 2017). However, new trends in learning, the composition of educational power, management, and management challenges have been seen as major issues among school heads (Morales & Sapin, 2020). A study on the impact of school leadership on learners' performance revealed that by monitoring teaching, assessment, and curriculum, school principals could observe a high-quality learning experience while maintaining a safe and orderly environment (Gittens, 2018).

A study conducted in Kitui County, Kenya, on the high efficiency of school financial management found that the principal had sufficient skills and knowledge to become effective in financial management (Phylister et al., 2018). Similarly, a study in Tanzania recommended that school principals apply the acquired competent management skills to maintain the professional performance of secondary school teachers (Mdogo, 2019). School leaders had management skills to run their schools effectively despite the challenges, such as insufficient funds to meet some of the school's needs (Godda, 2018). However, another study conducted in Tanzania disclosed that most school administrators lacked knowledge of managing school finances (Ephrahem & Bhoke-Africanus, 2021).

Furthermore, a study conducted in Ghana disclosed the challenges faced by head teachers, such as unsafe school environment, the reluctance of teachers to support student supervision, lack of school staff, lack of student discipline, and negative attitudes toward school education and education in general (Tudzi, 2018). Also, some principals lack strict accountability within the system, heavy administrative duties, crowded classes, student affairs management, lack of parental support in their children's education, lack of subject-qualified teachers, assessment practices, and dropouts (Anwer et al., 2018). A study conducted at Philippine Integrated School in Marawi City revealed that teachers had different professional needs regarding classroom management skills and dealing with professional issues as the bases for teacher training programs (Quinco-Cadosales, n.d.).

The literature revealed that elementary and secondary school administrators had experienced challenges in instructional leadership, management, and supervision during the pandemic. However, the previous literature and studies have yet to specifically discuss the challenges in leadership, management, and supervision by school administrators in handling integrated schools in the new normal education. Hence, this study was conducted to address the gap.

In the Division of Ozamiz City, Modular Distance Learning is the main learning delivery mode, while some schools opt for Blended Distance Learning like Modular and Radio-Based Instruction. It has been discerned that school administrators, especially those assigned to integrated schools, have experienced challenges implementing the new learning modality. Many schools need more preparedness for the new modality of learning, with all the requirements that need to be met despite the unavailability of resources and inadequacy of stakeholders in implementing the new modality. The study could shed light on what administrators of integrated schools went through in attending their school functions and responsibilities during the pandemic.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This study explored the challenges encountered by school administrators of integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City during the new normal education.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study used the phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a research design that describes the common meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a particular phenomenon (Webb & Welsh, 2019). The phenomenological design was considered appropriate in exploring the challenges of school administrators of the integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City during the implementation of the new normal education.

2.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted in the nine integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City, Ozamiz City. The Division belongs to the medium category of Region X-Northern Mindanao. It comprises ten districts, thirty-eight elementary schools, ten high schools, and ten integrated schools. The Division of Ozamiz City had implemented Modular Distance Learning (MDL) as the alternative delivery mode. In addition, several schools implemented blended modular distance learning, MDL combined with Radio-based/TV-based instruction.

2.3. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were nine school administrators of the integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City. The three male and six female administrators had attended the School Heads Development Program Foundation Course of the National Educator's Academy of the Philippines. Six of them have less than three years of experience handling integrated schools. The participants were identified through purposive sampling. They all gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

2.4. Research Instrumentation

The researcher-made semi-structured Interview Guide was used to elicit data from the participants. The instrument is composed of questions for the participants' demographic profiles. The opening question asked the participants about their perception of being school heads of integrated schools in the new normal education, while the core questions focused on the challenges encountered by the school administrators in the new normal education. Finally, for the closing question, the participants were asked about the insights gained from their experiences.

2.5. Data Collection

Before gathering data, the researcher asked permission from the Dean of the Graduate School of Misamis University to conduct the study. Approval from the Schools Division Superintendent was also sought for the study, which involved the school administrators of integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City. After the approval was obtained, the face-to-face and online interviews were conducted following the safety protocols for COVID-19. During the interviews, the researcher took down notes and used a digital recorder to facilitate the review of the interview transcripts. The participants were asked to review the transcriptions of the recorded interviews for additional feedback and accuracy. The transcriptions were coded and categorized, and themes were formulated with the aid of the NVivo software. Analysis and interpretations of the themes followed.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study observed the ethical considerations and the provisions of the Republic Act No. 10173, known as the “Data Privacy Act of 2012.” The research participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form which stipulated that their participation was voluntary and that they had the freedom to withdraw their participation at any time they wanted and without any legal obligation. Also, the research protected the dignity and anonymity of the participants and the institutions they represented. The participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

2.7. Data Analysis

The study used the NVIVO software as an aid in identifying the themes of the research data. The Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology of data analysis was used in this study. The following were the steps in the phenomenological reduction which served as a guide in analyzing the data gathered: (1) Bracketing, (2) Horizontalization, (3) Clustering into Themes, (4) Textural Description, (5) Structural Description, and (6) Textural-Structural Synthesis.

2.8. Moustakas' Method of Data Analysis

2.8.1. Bracketing

Bracketing is an approach used to mitigate the effects of preconceived notions and perceptions to be held before the study starts. It is a process of suspending judgments and biases, or 'epoche.' Consequently, it reaches a deep level of inquiry from the topic and population selection, interview design, collection and interpretation, and dissemination of research findings. In this study, this step was followed during the selection of the participants, how the data were collected and interpreted to identify the challenges of the school administrators as the participants of the study.

2.8.2. Horizontalization

Horizontalization refers to the listing of all the verbatim expressions that have bearing in the study. Initially, each statement is looked into with equal value. Then, statements that are found irrelevant, repetitive, overlapping, and outside the scope of the study are ignored. Finally, horizons, which are the remaining sections after the data have been polished, are considered the phenomenon's constituent and meaningful parts. This step was followed in the present study during transcribing the participants' answers to their interviews.

2.8.3. Clustering

Clustering is the third step in obtaining inferences from the study. It involves the reduction of experiences to invariant horizons, creating core themes, and validating the invariant horizons using multiple data sources. In validating the invariant horizons obtained from the study, the researcher reviews the research findings using methods other than data-gathering methods like observation, field note-taking, and related literature. This validation process is crucial to the accuracy and clarity of the representations. In the study, themes of the study were identified during this step.

2.8.4. Textural description

Textural description, or 'what occurred,' refers to an account describing the phenomenon's perception. In obtaining the textural description of the participants' experience, verbatim excerpts from the interviews are used, and a narration of the meaning units derived from the themes is provided. The themes identified are supported by the verbatim statements of the participants. In the study, after identifying the themes formulated based on the research data, the researcher supported them with the participants' responses according to how they were stated.

2.8.5. Structural description

Structural description, or how it occurred, is the integration of imaginative variation, which is an ingenious outlook and insights, into the textural description. An imaginative variation is considered the mental experiment on analyzing the details and structures of the participants' experiences by being detached from natural inclination through epoche. It is appended in each paragraph of textural descriptions to generate a structural description. In the present research, the step was done by providing insights into the participants' experiences.

2.8.6. The textural-structural synthesis

In the textural-structural synthesis process, the meaning units of each of the participants are collated, and a composite of textural and structural descriptions that are common to them is developed. Finally, a narrative or synthesis represents all participants written in a third-person perspective. The primary goal of this final step of Moustakas' method is to obtain the essence of the experience of the phenomenon. In the study, the researcher provided conclusions to the themes identified as to the challenges encountered by the school administrators in implementing the new normal education.

3. Results and Discussion

This study explored the challenges school administrators of integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City encountered during the new normal education. Face-to-face and online interviews were conducted with nine administrators of integrated schools in the Division of Ozamiz City. The study yielded the following main themes: lack of school preparedness for the new modality, difficulty in soliciting parents' cooperation and involvement, communication, and monitoring barriers, and uncertainty about the effectiveness of modular distance learning.

3.1. Lack of School Preparedness for the New Modality

COVID-19 has posed challenges to school administrators because it has changed the educational landscape. Schools have to adhere to many restrictions for the safety of everyone. One of the restrictions is the limited number of parents allowed to come to school to ensure social distancing. In addition, the parents' monthly "pahina" (voluntary and collaborative activity) had been stopped. Participant 8 cited, *"Our challenge is preparing the physical aspect of the school since parents are no longer allowed to have a "pahina." However, the supposed monthly activity could have helped maintain the presentability and cleanliness of the schools, wherein parents could repair minor damages to classrooms and buildings and set up school facilities, like those intended for handwashing. In addition, this pandemic has required schools to set up facilities for health protocols.*

School administrators, especially at the onset of the pandemic, had experienced difficulties preparing the school for the new modality and properly preparing the schools against the spread of the virus. They were confused about how they would set up the schools so that there would be no chance that parents and teachers would have close contact. In addition, they were overwhelmed with the many things they had to prepare for this new modality.

Moreover, the arrangement of the classrooms was also a challenge because parents or guardians could not locate their children's classrooms to get and return the modules. These parents had not visited the schools regularly before implementing the new normal. Participant 2 cited, *"The challenge I had experienced when I arrived at this school is the classrooms were not arranged by grade level in which the parents could hardly locate the classrooms of their children in claiming the modules."*

Among the nine schools included in the study, two were newly established integrated schools, and one had just opened its senior high school. In effect, the secondary school had no allocations yet because the school's budget depended on the General Appropriations Act crafted the previous year. Though the mother school provided most of the printing materials, the increased number of learners in the schools meant an increase in the budget for electricity, water, and other expenses. Participant 9 said, *"I experienced a shortage of materials in producing modules and printers because of the unexpected pandemic. Our junior high school had no allocation yet. I found it difficult to purchase alcohol, alcohol dispenser, thermal scanner because they were not in my PMPs."* As cited by Participant 4, *"The challenges are on the production of modules and how to reduce the number of pages to ensure that all learners will receive the number of modules. One of the challenges is checking whether the teachers have printed enough modules and whether they cater to all learners and the parents."*

du Plessis (2020) cited that COVID-19 has impacted school budgets, teaching posts, fundraising activities, and the day-to-day running of schools. The main challenges that emerged were the lack of school funding to produce and deliver modules (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020). Thus, school principals must have managerial competencies in prioritizing financial allocation according to school needs, keeping accurate financial information, and ensuring accountability in all school expenditures (Victor, 2017).

The challenges in the school set up and facilities, as well as the production of modules, were experienced greatly by school administrators of non-integrated schools. They had to learn how to prioritize allocations by consulting the different stakeholders of the school. Aside from school administrators ensuring that quality learning amid the difficulties, the higher academic authorities extend assistance for the successful implementation of modular distance learning.

3.2. Difficulty in Soliciting Parents' Cooperation and Involvement

The Department of Education had pushed for schooling to continue amid the pandemic in the safest way for all learners, teachers, and stakeholders. Thus, the department issued DepEd Order no. 12 s. 2020, "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) for School Year 2020-2021 in Light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency." In the BE-LCP, the department laid out the health protocols that school administrators needed to implement to prevent the spread of the virus in the school vicinity. However, school administrators observed that some parents did not adhere to health protocols. For example, participant 2 stated, *"With regard to the protocols for COVID-19, some parents did not follow them within the first few weeks of the distribution and retrieval of modules."* Similarly, Participant 3 mentioned, *"We had challenges in implementing health and safety protocols because parents did not adhere to them."*

It was observed that the parents were reluctant to follow the safety protocols like the proper wearing of face masks and face shields. Some of them wore their face masks without covering their noses. They wore their face shields as

headbands, thereby undermining the supposed barriers against disease-causing respiratory droplets from infected people. Other parents did not follow social distancing despite the presence of markers on the school premises and ignored the required proper handwashing protocol. Others never filled out the health checklist intended to prevent individuals with COVID symptoms from entering the school premises and for contact tracing.

Non-compliance with hygiene-related measures is viewed as antisocial potential. In addition, people with less trust in the government to fight the virus complied less with the health protocols (Nivette et al., 2021). In this vein, school administrators need to encourage parents to follow protocols like proper wearing of masking, routine testing, ventilation, and staying home as preventive measures and strategies against COVID-19 (Lam-Hine et al., 2021).

The school administrators were responsible for ensuring that their respective schools were safe amid the deadly virus threat. In addition, they were to ensure that everyone in the school had to follow the health standards prescribed by the Inter-Agency Task Force of the national government. Adherence to the protocols could contribute to the success of the modular distance learning implemented in most public schools.

On the other hand, the school administrators found that some parents felt burdened in going to school, especially those residing far away. They lost interest in getting and returning modules because of frustrations that they could not facilitate learning effectively in their homes with their low educational attainment. Besides, the parents also needed to earn a living for their families to survive. The school administrators have found this situation challenging because it had been the factor why the learners could not do their activities on time nor submit their modules as scheduled. This challenge was highlighted by Participant 6, who claimed, *"As a school head in the new normal education, getting parents involved is difficult because they have work in the city and on the farm, which somehow causes the delay of the distribution and retrieval of modules."* The participant's statements revealed the challenge of engaging parents in the distribution and retrieval of the learning modules. Parents' failure to get and return the learning modules affected the school's performance in implementing modular distance learning.

Modules are government investments for schooling to continue in the new normal education. As stewards of the schools, the administrators needed to remind parents and learners of the proper handling of the modules. Managing school operations and resources is one of the Professional Standards for School Heads domains, from which the school administrators' performance could be determined.

3.3. Communication and Monitoring Barriers

Internet connectivity served a vital purpose and function in the new normal education. Virtual meetings, seminars, and conferences became commonplace. On the part of the school administrators, they have to continue communicating with teachers on the different activities and instructions from the Schools Division Superintendent. They conducted virtual classroom observations and provided technical assistance in real-time. While Internet connection might help make work possible during the pandemic, it could also be challenging for school administrators assigned in places with an unstable internet connection. Thus, they experienced difficulties in attending webinars and training. Participant 9 cited, *"Poor internet connection and weak mobile signal made it challenging to attend online training and webinars because we are in the hinterland."*

Even before the pandemic, poor internet connection has been a problem for some schools in the Division of Ozamiz City. The location of some schools prevented service providers from extending their services, especially with the limited capacity of their business operations. Such a problem of connectivity caused delays for the school administrators in submitting some online reports, especially urgent documents. Also, the poor connections made it difficult for them to grasp the information fully during virtual seminars and meetings, making them unable to share well the information and input with their teachers, who looked up to the school administrators as the reliable source of correct and updated information, especially the teachers were on the work-from-home scheme. Participant 6 stressed, *"I found it very difficult to contact teachers working from home because of the internet connection of the school and the connection of the teachers' residence."* Participant 7 added, *"The poor internet signal of the school and some teachers' homes also contributed to this problem. Therefore, on the monitoring, we could not monitor their work-from-home activities even though they were sending pictures of their activities."*

Tria (2020) cited that the Philippines ranked lowest in Asia regarding internet connectivity. The internet speed, internet access, and digital literacy levels affected the benefits that could be derived from online learning and activities (Dhawan, 2020). The school administrators were required to monitor the teachers on the work-from-home scheme wherein the latter were expected to devote adequate time doing work-related activities. However, there had been instances when school administrators could not contact the teachers because of the poor internet connection of

the latter's homes. With this new normal education, many reports were for urgent submission. Participant 5 cited, *“There are many paper works to be done and always require urgent submissions.”*

However, the work-from-home scheme somehow affected the school administrators' submission of the reports, especially when the teachers assigned to prepare the documents could not be reached due to poor internet connectivity. In this regard, timely compliance with the documents required by the Division's Office became difficult, if not impossible, sometimes for the school administrators. They had to deal with the reality that there could be times that they had to rely on the availability of virtual connections.

3.4. Uncertainty of the Effectiveness of Modular Distance Learning

The school administrators clearly understood their functions and responsibilities as school leaders. Among the nine participants, six had experienced being elementary school administrators but had not attended any training in handling an integrated school. Aside from the challenge of handling a new work assignment, they also needed to adjust to the demands of the new normal education. They were also expected to provide technical assistance to teachers under their supervision. Participant 1 cited, *“I have not attended training on handling an integrated school, which is another challenge because I used to handle a complete elementary school. The learning resources that will fit this new normal are challenging because the curriculum is compressed and only includes essential learning competencies. Another challenge is how to give technical assistance to the teachers because teachers' training and background are in face-to-face teaching. Modular distance learning is new to them. My challenge as a school head is how to mentor them.”* (P1)

Without training, school administrators newly assigned to integrated schools struggled to perform their functions effectively, especially since there were many programs implemented in Junior and Senior High Schools alongside effective learning delivery. Despite the administrators' computer literacy, they still experienced difficulties during virtual meetings. Also, they found themselves stressed, especially when national, regional, and division meetings were held virtually and scheduled on the same day and time. Their divided attention made them unable to get the gist of the meetings and uncertain of the important matters that were supposed to be completely understood.

Regarding classroom monitoring, the school administrators received feedback from the teachers that several learners did not answer some of the modules. However, in other instances, the parents answered some of the activities, as evidenced by their penmanship. Thus, authentic learning did not happen. Participant 1 claimed, *“The challenge is how to provide learning experiences to our learners amid this pandemic. For me, face-to-face is an effective means of delivering quality instruction and interactions with the learners. However, it is challenging to determine the learners' performance, for we are not sure if it is their actual performance or not.”*

However, the changes in the grading system, assessment, and evaluation of students' performance pose a challenge to school administrators (Toquero, 2020). Also, in modular distance learning, it was found that parents accomplished the learning tasks indicated in the modules, which should have been done by the learners themselves (Anzaldo, 2021). Hence, teachers found it difficult to validate students' learning (Castroverde & Acala, 2021).

The learners' performance is the main business of schools. Different programs and mechanisms are designed to foster learning among the learners, even during the pandemic. Hence, school administrators are expected to seek ways to establish the authenticity of the learners' performance. The school administrators need to create synergy in the school that provides learners with better learning opportunities and actual learning.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the new normal education, the school administrators of integrated schools experienced various challenges, especially in implementing the BE-LCP, which required a lot of preparations to ensure that school facilities adhered to health and safety protocols and quality of education. In addition, the school administrators and teachers needed to cope with the abrupt changes in the school system. The administrators had to ensure that teachers performed their respective responsibilities amid the new work scheme. Finally, the school administrators faced the challenges of gauging the authenticity of learners' academic performance under the modular learning modality.

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, it is recommended for the Ozamiz City Schools Division Office to provide adequate training to school administrators in leading, managing, and supervising integrated schools effectively. Also, the Office may assist the administrators in monitoring the teachers' work functions outside the

school environment. On the other hand, school administrators may heighten collaboration with community partners such as barangay officials, city health office personnel, and parents to implement health and safety protocols and deliver education through a modular learning modality. Lastly, future researchers conduct similar studies that explore the other challenges not identified in the study.

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