

Elementary Teachers' Experiences and Instructional Challenges: Return to School After the Covid-19 Closure In the Philippines

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Abstract — As education started to recover from the impact of COVID-19, the Philippine Department of Education began to roll out pilot face-to-face classes. Hence, there is a need to explore teachers' experiences regarding the preparations and challenges encountered during the reopening of classes after the COVID-19 closures. Specifically, this study explored teachers' preparation and instructional challenges encountered during the first few weeks of reopening of classes. The study utilized a phenomenological research approach. The 12 teacher-participants included in the study are involved in the face-to-face pilot classes of the Bansalan Central Elementary School of Poblacion Uno, Bansalan, Davao del Sur. Each interview lasted for about 30-minutes and was tape-recorded. Data were then transcribed, translated, and analyzed using a thematic analysis technique. The result shows that five themes emerged pertaining to teachers' preparation for the reopening of classes. These include establishing health protocols, school physical improvements, instructional materials development, psychosocial preparation, and acquiring new teaching strategies. As for the instructional challenges encountered, the teachers expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers and students who are mentally and socially unprepared. Other challenges include the difficulty of maintaining health protocols, the need for new teaching strategies, and challenges with time management. The findings suggest that comprehensive reading intervention and psychosocial first aid programs should be part of the school reopening strategy. Furthermore, the researcher recommends that teachers should be trained to handle students during the post-pandemic era.

Keywords — *Class reopening, limited face-to-face, new normal, post-pandemic education, psychological first aid*

I. Introduction

Reopening classes under the new normal entails many preparations as schools involved in the pilot face-to-face classes need to pass the School Safety Assessment (SSAT), a guideline issued by the inter-agency task force on safe school reopening (Philippine Joint Memorandum circular 1, S. 2021). This strategy for the reopening of classes is based on the idea of shared responsibilities. Other government agencies pledged to assist schools with resources and technical support. The need for stringent preparations is to ensure the safety of the school children and personnel as they

physically report to school. The government and school administrators need to ensure that the school reopening will lead to normalcy rather than contribute to the COVID-19 surge.

While our schools are still planning for the full-time face-to-face classes, there are many issues our teacher front liners may have encountered. The apparent lack of studies on the school reopening strategies also contributes to our limited understanding of how best our schools can adapt to the new normal. Hence, the researcher believed in the need to explore teachers' preparations and challenges encountered with the hope of offering insights into our effective school reopening.

The elementary teachers of Bansalan Central Elementary School are the focus of this study. The researcher explored the teachers' preparation and challenges in the school reopening with insights on how to make the reopening suited for the existing pandemic in terms of safety for the children and health protocols for everyone.

This study was conducted to explore elementary teachers' lived experiences during the return to school for the limited face-to-face classes after the COVID-19 closure. Specifically, it aimed to examine teachers' experiences during the preparation phase and instructional challenges encountered during their first few weeks of the pilot face-to-face classes during the last quarter of the academic year 2021-2022.

The study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the preparations of teachers for the reopening of classes amid COVID-19?
2. What are the instructional challenges of the teachers for the reopening of classes?
3. What general guidelines as suggested by teachers should be observed in the reopening of classes?

Most governments supervising school reopening have focused on the immediate challenge of implementing new hygiene protocols at school level and not the opportunity to 'build back better'. Where schools have reopened or are currently reopening, governments have typically taken very seriously the mitigation of the risk that schools might become places where the virus is transmitted. Policy and practice have largely corresponded with the advice of international bodies such as UNESCO and the World Bank on these matters.

School capacity for reopening with new health and safety rules has been carefully assessed in many countries. In some but not all countries key stakeholders have been fully consulted. New standard operating procedures for hygiene and social distancing have been clearly articulated in most places. The World Bank has called on education policymakers to 'build back better'. Our enquiry suggests that much less attention has been given to this agenda of transformation and the need to build long-term resilience.

Concerns about the urgent need to address health and safety has led many policymakers to neglect the challenge of providing equitable blended learning opportunities in reopened schools. The intensity of the preoccupation with the health and hygiene challenge has made it difficult for policymakers to devote much attention to issues of access and equity in the reopened schools.

Most school systems have reopened or will reopen with reduced access to face-to-face teaching, with time in school rationed through some form of shift or rota system. Policymakers assume that students will have access to ‘blended’ learning opportunities. Reduced classroom time will be compensated by increased learning at home. There are many risks associated with these assumptions regarding blended learning. There has been little focus at national and provincial level on the role of technology in the new world of blended learning. In most countries there remains a ‘digital divide’ that will make it more difficult for disadvantaged students to participate in any online learning provision. Similarly, disadvantaged students will find it more difficult to engage at home when ‘low tech’ TV or radio broadcasting is used to supplement classroom time. Worldwide teachers will need training and support if they are to be effective in the management of the mixed modalities of blended learning.

Policy on school reopening rarely addresses the question of the quality and impact of provision in reopened schools. Ensuring the effectiveness of blended learning in reopened schools will depend upon the existence and use of information from the frontline about school quality, student engagement and academic progress.

Country level responses to reopening rarely emphasize the importance of data related to individual students and groups of students. Data should be gathered on student enrolment, attendance, engagement, and achievement. Disaggregated data is particularly important for identifying and tracking the engagement of vulnerable groups of students. One aspect that has received relatively little attention from the planning and coordination of school reopening efforts is the accountability of schools and teachers. There is a need to check that students are receiving good blended learning opportunities.

The scale of difficulty of reopening schools in low-income countries is such that it will require new solutions and not simply the modification of approaches currently being implemented in some high-income countries. It is difficult to understate the challenge of school reopening in resource-poor contexts where schools are often overcrowded. In low-income countries the blended learning model is doubly problematic: social distancing and frequent washing in school is very difficult and engagement with technologically-enabled home learning is not currently possible in many households.

The measures being introduced in high-income countries to ensure the health and wellbeing of students and staff during school reopening will be extremely difficult to manage. Millions of students in low-income countries lack access to online learning and educational broadcasting.

Different approaches are needed that are not simply a version of the blended model that is emerging in high-income contexts.

Most models of school reopening involve reductions of class size, increasing physical distance between students, and keeping students in defined groups with limited interaction between groups to reduce the potential for wide-scale transmission within schools.

Most countries that have reopened schools have instituted some degree of staggering the start, stop, and break times within the school. A number of countries are using alternate shifts (morning, afternoon) or alternate days, while a smaller number of countries have maintained relatively normal school schedules.

A number of countries have reopened schools only for younger or older students in order to accommodate the increase in resources (classroom space, teachers, etc.) required for smaller class sizes. More countries have re-opened only for younger students than have re-opened only for older students.

In a number of countries, face masks are required for students and/or staff in schools, with variability of the lower age limit for face mask requirements. However, some countries are not using facemasks as a part of their reopening model.

Systematic school-based testing for SARS-CoV-2 virus or antibodies is being done on a small scale in a limited number of settings, but this approach is not widely implemented at this time.

Summary of Approaches to Reopening Schools and Subsequent Transmission

Since the initial round of school closures, many countries have reopened schools using a wide range of models. Characteristics of these models that vary between countries include the affected grades (younger students only, older students only, or all students), schedules (reduced in-person time, alternating shifts, alternating days), and implementation of transmission control measures (class size reductions, physical distancing, face masks, hand washing, temperature checks, and viral or antibody testing).

Affected grades: Many, but not all, countries that have reopened schools have done it for only a subset of grades. In most examples, this appears to be an effort to make available more classrooms to accommodate smaller class sizes. Many countries have reopened schools only for younger children (Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Norway, Sweden initially) while others have re-opened only for older students, based on the belief that older students would be more able to comply with physical distancing and transmission control measures (Germany). A smaller number of countries have re-opened schools for all grades (France in “green zones” , Israel, Scotland proposed for 8/11/2020 re-opening, Sweden currently, Taiwan, and Vietnam).

Schedules: Many countries have staggered start times, break times, and dismissal times to increase physical distancing. Some countries have adopted alternative school schedules to accommodate smaller class sizes and to ensure greater social distancing. Approaches include having students attending alternate shifts (morning and afternoon) (Germany, South Korea, and Scotland potentially) or attending alternate days (Belgium, Switzerland).

Transmission control measures: Most countries have instituted some combination of school-based measures intended to reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2 among students and staff. These include the use of face masks (with some variability in age requirements: Belgium, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam), reduced class size (typically 10-15 students or approximately 50% capacity: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, South Korea, Norway, Scotland proposed, Switzerland). Some countries have not reduced class size, many of which are relying on other measures to reduce transmission such as closing schools with confirmed cases and using desktop dividers to increase physical separation between classroom desks and cafeteria seating without increasing physical distance between students (Israel, Sweden, Taiwan, and Vietnam). Required temperature checks at school entries have been instituted in some countries (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam). Routine screening for SARS-CoV-2 virus or antibodies is reported on a small scale in Germany. Systematic contact tracing in the event that a student or staff tests positive for SARS-CoV-2 or has confirmed COVID-19 is reported in some countries (Israel, South Korea, New Zealand, and Germany).

There is limited evidence regarding the impact of school-reopening on SARS-CoV-2 transmission in the community. Based on the experience of four European countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Germany), there is some evidence that school closures led to declines in the epidemic growth rates of COVID-19 (Stage, Shingleton, Ghosh, Scarabel, Pellis, Finnie & Shut, 2020).

Reopening of schools for all students in countries with low community transmission (Denmark and Norway) has not resulted in a significant increase in the growth rate of COVID-19 cases. Return of most students to school in countries with higher levels of community transmission (Germany) has been accompanied by increased transmission among students, but not school staff. After reopening schools in Israel there have been a number of outbreaks of SARS-CoV-2 in schools that have resulted in those schools being closed. In South Korea, schools in some areas were closed again after re-opening in response to surges in the number of COVID-19 cases in the community.

Country-Specific Experience with School Re-Opening

Sweden. Sweden did not close schools for students in kindergarten through grade 9 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were closed for students in upper secondary grades from around March 18, 2020 through June 14, after which schools were reopened for all students. No major adjustments to class size, lunch policies, or recess rules were instituted (Vogel, 2020).

Seroprevalence surveys conducted by the Swedish Public Health Agency found that the antibody prevalence in children/teenagers was 4.7% compared with 6.7% in adults age 20-64 and 2.7% in adults aged 65-70. The relatively high rate in children suggests there may have been significant spread in schools (Vogel, 2020).

Reopening of classes in the Philippines: Preparations Made

Recently, face-to-face classes in 100 public schools across the country were held for the first time in almost two years. This pilot run classes is very much welcome considering that the education of a significant number of students has been disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Melnick, & Darling-Hammond, L. (with Leung, Yun, Schachner, Plasencia, & Ondrasek, 2020).

While the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) worked hard to introduce distance and blended learning tools so that students would continue learning even while inside their homes, for many families, coping with the various challenges under the new setup has been very difficult and stressful. Among the most common issues faced by families is the lack of a reliable internet connection. Parents have also become the de facto teachers or tutors of their children at home. So apart from dealing with their challenges at work, they also have to struggle with the additional burden of educating their children.

The opening of limited in-person classes in some public and private schools this month gives hope that a return to some degree of normalcy is forthcoming. We can attribute this development to the increase in the number of Filipinos getting vaccinated daily and their adherence to the health protocols imposed by our authorities (Gopez, 2021).

One question that was in the minds when the government was going over the proposed 2022 budget was — how prepared are our schools for the holding of in-person classes? When the government went over the 2022 National Expenditure Program (NEP) or the version of the national budget submitted by the executive branch, and the General Appropriations Bill (GAB) or the version approved by the House of Representatives, there was no item for the preparations and implementation of face-to-face classes in the DepEd, CHED and the State Universities and Colleges (SUCs). This actually comes as no surprise considering that when the different government agencies and offices submitted their respective budget proposals, there was still no plan to hold face-to-face classes.

In response to this new development and to aid our schools in their preparations, the Senate Committee on Finance which we chair proposed additions in the 2022 budget of the DepEd. We anticipate that more schools will be included in the coming months, so we deemed it necessary to provide appropriate budgetary support to the DepEd for this purpose. For our 116 SUCs, including the University of the Philippines System, the committee also proposed additions for preparations for the holding of face-to-face classes (Gopez, 2021).

For both basic education and higher education budgets, we provided for greater flexibility in the use of the funds. The DepEd and SUCs may use the funds to modify the layout and ventilation of the classrooms, laboratories, and other parts of the schools; for the COVID testing of the faculty and staff; for the purchase of supplies and other equipment for the implementation of safety protocols and standards; and for assistance to the students, teachers and staff for their transportation requirements. We give credit to our vice chairpersons of the Finance Committee — Senators Pia Cayetano, Sherwin Gatchalian and Joel Villanueva for coming up with these interventions when they took up the proposed budgets of the education sector during the committee hearings.

The Committee on Finance also included a special provision to the proposed budget such that there would be stronger quality control when it comes to the production of self-learning modules, learning activity sheets, manuals, and worksheets, adding special provisions. We also wanted to make sure that no one is left behind when it comes to education. For this reason, the committee proposed an additional budget for the implementation of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) and the Special Education Program of the DepEd. The ALS allows Filipinos who do not have or cannot access formal education in the traditional school setting the opportunity to complete their studies (Bayod, Forosuelo, Morante, & Guerrero, 2021). The SPED, on the other hand, caters to our learners with disabilities. The committee also proposed an increase in the budget for the Last Mile Schools Program to pave the way for the construction of more school buildings; tech-voc laboratories; water and sanitation facilities; and even the installation of solar panels in far-flung areas.

With the gradual resumption of face-to-face classes, the struggles of both the children and their parents in coping with home-based education will soon be eased. Our hardworking teachers, who already have sacrificed enough to ensure our children get the quality education they deserve even during the pandemic, will also have some relief once they are able to step inside their classrooms once again. It's only appropriate then that the precautions are taken to protect our children from possible infection, as we gradually return to face-to-face classes (Penna, 2020).

This research is guided by the theoretical perspective of schools as open systems, a subset of systems theory. In general, researchers use systems theory to understand interactions that occur in response to actions taken by participants within the system itself. Orren and Smith (2013) state that individuals in social systems “engage in input/output exchanges with their social environments.” Schools can be viewed as social systems with interdependent elements (e.g. teachers depend on principals; students depend on teachers) (Ee & Gandara, 2020; Anderson & Carter, 1990; Parsons, 1959).

School disasters are characterized by their large-scale disruption and sudden changes in normal routine to the school and community. In many instances of disaster, there are marked times of uncertainty, unexpectedness, and unpreparedness. Disasters stem from many causes: school shootings; natural disasters that include hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, flood, and/or fire; and

biological disasters that include epidemics or pandemics that often require schools to close and considerably alter schools' normal routines. As a result, in the time of disaster, school administrators in the affected school are faced with unique challenges in leadership that include supporting students, teachers, and the community; adopting new job duties; and establishing a plan of action. Moreover, school administrators are responsible for establishing protocols that will be implemented in a future disaster with similar circumstances if it were to occur.

II. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design, particularly a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study which explores the lived experiences and challenges encountered by the public elementary school teachers during the first few weeks of the reopening of classes after the COVID-19 closure. The choice of the phenomenological approach is due to its ability to understand the issue deeper from the perspective of teachers themselves (Dela Fuente, 2021; Qutoshi, 2018).

This study was conducted in Davao del Sur Province, the southern province of the Philippines. The selection of the elementary school was purposive since only one school in the target district was allowed to conduct the limited face-to-face classes. The 12 teacher-participants included in the study are involved in the face-to-face pilot classes of the Bansalan Central Elementary School of Poblacion Uno, Bansalan, Davao del Sur. The teacher-participants were selected using the inclusion criteria set by the researcher. This was to ensure that each grade level was equally represented, from kindergarten to Grade 6 and that the comprehensive teachers' experiences were captured (Rahman, et al., 2022).

The researcher utilized a one-on-one interview with the respondents using a semi-structured interview questionnaire as used by Dela Fuente (2019). The interview questions were subjected to three external validators. The questionnaire also tries to determine its appropriateness and the estimated time it takes to complete. As a result, possible questions were added, and the expected time will be put at 30 minutes per interview. Field notes will be used during the follow-up class observation. To capture the actual experiences of teachers, the respondents will be allowed to speak in any language freely they were comfortable with (i.e., Cebuano, Bisaya, Hiligaynon, Filipino, or English). During the interview, the conversations were audio recorded while the researcher made notes of the responses.

For the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interview and class observation, the researcher followed the six-phase approach of thematic analysis, which consisted of (1) familiarizing with the collected data by reading the transcript, (2) generating initial codes, (3) search for themes by merging related codes (4) review themes (5) define themes and (6) interpret and make the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was done manually since the data gathered is not too large.

III. Results and Discussion

Preparations of teachers for the reopening of classes amid COVID-19

Teachers' preparation for the limited face-to-face classes was done months before the pilot face-to-face classes. Analysis of the data on teachers' experiences shows five themes emerged which explain the focus of their preparation based on the frequency of occurrence: *preparation on establishing health protocols in the classrooms, preparation for the physical improvement of the classrooms, preparation for instructional materials development, preparation of teacher on psychosocial aspect, and re-learning effective face-to-face strategy after two years of modular learning.*

Instructional challenges of the teachers for the reopening of classes

The teacher-respondents were asked to talk about the challenges they encountered during the first few weeks of the face-to-face classes, particularly those relating to instructions. Thematic analysis of their responses leads to the formation of five themes. Overwhelmingly, all the teachers I interviewed expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers in their classes. They said it was challenging since they needed to make adjustments just to be on the students' level. Hence, they cannot continue with their supposed lessons as stated in the curriculum. Some have resorted to sectioning their classes into readers and non-readers. Two themes emerged as instructional challenges: *increased non-readers in class, and unpreparedness for F2F classes.*

General guidelines as suggested by teachers should be observed in the reopening of classes.

Towards addressing development and learning losses among young children in a safe environment, the safe reopening of classes in the public schools should observed the following as suggested by teachers: *informed planning, relevant policies and budget allocation, involvement of stakeholders, training and support provided, strengthening of pedagogy, prevent disease transmission, and planning in the event of re-closure.*

Discussion

This study focused on determining the experiences and challenges encountered by public elementary school teachers during the first few weeks of the reopening of classes. By the nature of the phenomenological study, the study findings were drawn from the real experiences of a limited number of participants. The study captures the experiences of the twelve (12) teacher-participants who are part of the pilot face-to-face classes. In addition, the context was in a rural setting and did not provide insights into the experiences of the urban and private school teachers, who may have different experiences and insights.

The COVID-19 crisis revealed that many countries were unprepared for crisis response. Currently, most countries do not have contingency plans and where they exist, very few mention the issue of pedagogical continuity or incorporate distance learning. One of the major lessons from

the current crisis is the need to strengthen the resilience of education systems to better cope with emergency situations. Education systems need to anticipate and prepare for possible viral resurgence with multiple scenarios, from isolated, localized cases to a more widespread wave of infection. Preparing for resurgence will require system readiness to protect both the health of the school population and the learning process. From the health perspective, health protocols need to be in place to prevent, detect early and control COVID-19 in schools. To prevent infection, ongoing communication between education and health experts in monitoring the evolution of the pandemic, at national but also local and school levels. Based on the infection rates observed, individual, localized or country-wide closures might be foreseen.

From the pedagogical perspective, countries need to consider blending education delivery modalities, both school-based and distance learning, so that there is a smooth transition between the two (or in combination), if and when the necessity arises. This will necessitate adjusting the curriculum, teaching, and learning materials, preparing for necessary communication channels (e.g., internet, tablets, TV, and radio), making teacher and staff contingency plans, teacher, and student training, while drawing on lessons learnt from the ongoing practices. Lessons can be drawn from experiences carried out during the Covid-19 crisis in various countries.

Incorporating crisis risk reduction and management into education planning processes can assist MOEs in planning and delivering education before, during, and after a crisis and prepare them to better mitigate the impact of a crisis.

IV. Conclusion

The 12 teacher-participants included in the study are involved in the face-to-face pilot classes of the Bansalan Central Elementary School of Poblacion Uno, Bansalan, Davao del Sur. Each interview lasted for about 30-minutes and was tape-recorded. Data were then transcribed, translated, and analyzed using a thematic analysis technique. The result shows that five themes emerged pertaining to teachers' preparation for the reopening of classes. These include establishing health protocols, school physical improvements, instructional materials development, psychosocial preparation, and acquiring new teaching strategies. As for the instructional challenges encountered, the teachers expressed concern about the alarming number of non-readers and students who are mentally and socially unprepared. Other challenges include the difficulty of maintaining health protocols, the need for new teaching strategies, and challenges with time management. The findings suggest that comprehensive reading intervention and psychosocial first aid programs should be part of the school reopening strategy. Furthermore, the researcher recommends that teachers should be trained to handle students during the post-pandemic era.

The researcher believes that more than the physical and safety preparation, there is also a need to make sure that our teachers are competent to handle classes in the new normal, being the key movers in education. As we are still in the expansion of pilot face-to-face classes, there is also

the need to identify challenges teachers encounter and hopefully offer insights as we are planning for our learning recovery programs. Hence, this study was conducted aimed at exploring elementary teachers' personal experiences during the return to school for the limited face-to-face classes after almost two years of school closure due to COVID-19. Particularly, it examined teachers' preparations and instructional challenges encountered with a focus on their first few weeks' experiences of the pilot face-to-face classes.

The result shows that five themes emerged in the teachers' preparation for face-to-face classes. Foremost, teachers' preparation includes establishing health protocols in schools and classrooms, such as the construction of handwashing facilities, trash bins, and the spacing of seating arrangements. This was followed by the need for instructional materials development, such as module and supplemental materials printing. Aside from these physical preparations, the teachers also spend hours on psychosocial preparation as they expect to meet their students face-to-face after almost two years. According to these teachers, they need to find time learning new teaching strategies for face-to-face classes. Then the teachers were asked to talk about the challenges they encountered during the first few weeks of the face-to-face classes, particularly those relating to instructions. Based on the teachers' responses, five themes emerged, including the alarming number of non-readers, the presence of students who are mentally and socially unprepared for face-to-face classes, the difficulty of maintaining health protocols while the children are in school, the need for new teaching strategies appropriate under the new normal, and the challenge with time management for them to meet the set curriculum contents.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE



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Susie never intended to be a teacher. She discovered her passion by experiences, as a working student and teacher assistant during her 3rd year in high school. She is fierce and bold to turn her experiences into reality.

Presently, she is actively pursuing a Master's degree in Educational Management at Rizal Memorial Colleges Inc. in Davao City, Philippines. Susie's education and experiences have provided many opportunities for her to give back to the pupils and help them achieve something great in life.