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Beyond the Pandemic: Last-Mile Teachers' Insights for Future-Ready Education in Rural Schools

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Modular Distance Learning (MDL) became a critical mode of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in remote schools with limited access to technology and internet connectivity. In this context, learners independently complete lessons using printed self-learning modules, while teachers are responsible for preparing, distributing, and retrieving these materials. This study explores the lived experiences of the last-mile teachers regarding the implementation of MDL in a public secondary school located in a remote community. Using a phenomenological research design, the study captured the lived experiences of 15 teachers selected through purposive and convenience sampling based on their involvement in MDL. In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, and thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights. The findings reveal a complex view of MDL, with teachers recognizing both its advantages, such as flexibility and learner autonomy, and its disadvantages, including time-consuming preparation and limited resources. Key challenges included difficulties in monitoring student progress, engaging parents, and managing inconsistent work arrangements. To cope, teachers employed action-based strategies, such as home visitations, and emotion-based strategies, such as maintaining a positive outlook and offering emotional support. The study offers recommendations to enhance MDL implementation, including strengthening teacher support, fostering greater parental involvement, and improving training and resource allocation. The study concludes that while MDL has shown potential as a solution during crises, its future success depends on community-wide support, improved logistical coordination, and policies that are adaptable to the evolving needs of educators and students in remote contexts

1. INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, profoundly disrupted nations across the world, including highly developed countries such as the United States, Japan, and China. While its toll on public health and the

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economy was devastating, the education sector experienced one of the most significant and immediate transformations. Educational institutions were forced to swiftly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to alternative learning delivery modalities in order to preserve educational continuity amid lockdowns and mobility restrictions. As health and safety became paramount, school closures were implemented globally to help curb the spread of the virus (UNESO, 2020, p.1).

These closures, although necessary, exposed longstanding disparities in access, infrastructure, and capacity, particularly in marginalized and geographically isolated communities. Even now, years after the height of the pandemic, the residual impacts continue to influence educational policies, technological integration, and pedagogical approaches. The urgent shift during the pandemic has given rise to a reimagining of how education can be delivered in the future, one that is inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) responded by adopting the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) through DepEd Order No. 012, s. 2020. This policy framework enabled schools to continue delivering instruction through various distance learning modalities despite ongoing health risks. Distance learning, also known as distance education, e-learning, or online learning is defined by Simonson and Berg (2016, p.20) as a mode of education wherein teachers and learners are physically separated, with instruction mediated through communication technologies. Initially developed to serve nontraditional students, this model became a national lifeline for education during the pandemic.

According to MEMORANDUM DM-CI-2020-00162, distance Learning may be implemented through the following delivery modalities: a. Modular Distance Learning (MDL) b.1. Digital Modular Distance Learning (DMDL) b.2. Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) b. Online Distance Learning (ODL) c. TV-Video/Radio-based Instruction (TV-Video/RBI) c.1. TV-Video (SLM-based) c.2 TV-Video (MELCs Mapped) c.3. Radio-Based Instruction (RBI) d. Blended Distance Learning (BDL).

In remote schools such as Hinandayan National High School, located in a geographically isolated area, Printed Modular Distance Learning was the most viable and widely adopted modality. Based on data from the Modified Learner Enrollment and Survey Form (MLESF), the majority of parents preferred printed modules for their children’s learning. Consequently, the school implemented a system in which learners used printed self-learning modules (SLMs) to study independently at home, supported by regular teacher follow-ups and feedback mechanisms.

While this modality allowed learning to continue, it also presented unique challenges—especially for last-mile teachers serving underserved communities. Gueta and Janer (2021, pp. 59-61) found that issues such as module preparation, learner monitoring, health risks, lack of conducive learning spaces, minimal parental support, and student disengagement severely affected teachers' capacity to deliver quality education. In addition, the physical distance from students complicated efforts to assess learning outcomes and provide timely remediation.

Results revealed that the challenges of teachers in modular distance learning includes time-consuming, incomplete and unanswered modules, inadequate parental support, and insufficient trainings to teachers (Cabardo et al., 2022, p. 175). For last-mile educators, these challenges were compounded by logistical constraints, limited connectivity, and lack of institutional support. Yet, despite these setbacks, many teachers demonstrated resilience, innovation, and dedication—making critical decisions and sacrifices to ensure their students continued to learn.

In light of these realities, this study, "Beyond the Pandemic: Last-Mile Teachers' Insights for Future-Ready Education in Rural Schools," seeks to explore the lived experiences of teachers at a public secondary school in a remote area of Northern Mindanao in the implementation of Modular Distance Learning. It aims to document their perceptions, challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations as the education sector moves forward in the post-pandemic era. The findings of this study can inform more inclusive and future-proof education policies that consider the voices of educators who serve in last-mile communities—those who, against all odds, remained committed to reaching every learner, even in the most difficult circumstances.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research Questions

This study primarily aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers at Hinandayan National High School in the implementation of Modular Distance Learning. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers perceive Modular Distance Learning as an educational approach in the context of last-mile education?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing Modular Distance Learning in a remote school setting?
3. What coping strategies do teachers employ to address the challenges associated with Modular Distance Learning?
4. What recommendations do teachers have for enhancing the implementation of distance learning in the post-pandemic period?

Scope and delimitation of the study

This study focused on exploring the lived experiences of teachers at Hinandayan National High School regarding the implementation of Modular Distance Learning (MDL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions, the challenges they encountered, their coping strategies, and the recommendations they have for enhancing distance learning education in the post-pandemic period.

The scope of the study is limited to the teachers of Hinandayan National High School, a remote school located in a geographically isolated area of the Caraga region, which primarily employed the Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) approach. As such, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other schools, especially those in urban areas or those using different learning modalities. The study does not include the perspectives of learners, parents, or other stakeholders involved in the implementation of distance learning.

The study's delimitations include focusing solely on the experiences of teachers and not exploring the broader educational landscape or experiences in other regions or schools. Additionally, while the study emphasizes the post-pandemic period, it is confined to a specific time-frame of the school year 2020-2021 school, reflecting the immediate impacts and adaptations during the transition to distance learning.

Surveys

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of teachers in the implementation of Modular Distance Learning (MDL) in a remote public secondary school in Northern Mindanao. Phenomenology was chosen for its focus on understanding individuals' personal experiences and perceptions within a particular context.

The study was conducted in a geographically isolated school located in Barangay Camagong, Nasipit, Agusan del Norte, Philippines. The school has two campuses: the main campus in Sitio Hinandayan and the annex in Sitio Minbahandi, both serving Junior and Senior High School students in last-mile communities. The name of the school has been withheld in this paper to ensure participant confidentiality and comply with ethical research protocols.

Fifteen teachers were selected through purposive sampling. According to Robinson (2023), purposive sampling involves selecting participants who have specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research topic. This method was deemed appropriate for the study as it focused on teachers who had direct experience with the implementation of distance learning in the new normal setup.

To collect the necessary data, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. This approach allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into participants' lived experiences. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the school head through a formal consent letter.

Due to ongoing public health concerns at the time of the study, interview and survey forms were distributed online to ensure participant convenience and compliance with health protocols. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, thematic analysis was employed. This method is well-suited to qualitative research and enabled the identification of significant themes and patterns from the participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations: To uphold research ethics and protect the identity of the participants, the name of the school where the study was conducted has been withheld and is referred to in this paper as a public secondary school in a rural community in Northern Mindanao. This approach ensures confidentiality and complies with ethical research standards.

The study was granted ethical clearance by the school head, and all research procedures followed the ethical guidelines for human subject research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their experiences and insights in depth. Each interview was conducted in a private setting within the school premises, with permission from the school administration. Audio recordings were made with participants' consent, and all recordings were securely stored. Transcripts were anonymized by replacing real names with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality throughout the data analysis and reporting process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The table 1 presents the teachers' perceptions, challenges, and coping mechanisms related to the implementation of Modular Distance Learning (MDL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the gathered data, the analysis is categorized into four major areas: (1) teachers' perceptions of MDL, (2) challenges encountered, (3) coping mechanisms, and (4) implications for teaching and learning.

Table 1 Teachers' Experiences with Modular Distance Learning

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Quote	Description
Teachers' Perception of MDL Education	Useful	"Modular Distance Learning is helpful to us, especially in the midst of the pandemic, to continue the teaching and learning process."	MDL ensured continuity of instruction despite school closures.
	Flexible	"It is more comfortable than face-to-face teaching for me because I can manage my time flexibly."	Teachers could organize work around personal and professional commitments.
	Student Autonomy	"Modular Distance Learning … gives learners the opportunity to explore on their own and receive instructions via LAS or online."	Encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning.
	Undervalued	"Learners tend to disregard the importance of answering and comprehending what is written in the modules…"	Students often neglect module activities, undermining learning outcomes.
	Not Beneficial to Low-Performing Students	"It is not beneficial to the majority, especially those who had poor performance even before the pandemic."	Students already struggling found MDL even less supportive without in-person guidance.
	Less Effective than Face-to-Face	"Its effectiveness is not the same as the approaches a teacher can do in a face-to-face class…"	Interactive, adaptive teaching methods in the classroom cannot be fully replicated in MDL.
	No Teacher–Student Interaction	"It was difficult because there is no interaction with the students and it is hard to provide teaching assistance to all…"	Lack of real-time feedback and support decreased student engagement and comprehension.
Challenges in Modular Distance Learning	Lack of Printing Supplies	"Lacking supplies like bond papers, ink, printers, staples, and staple wires was a big challenge…"	Insufficient materials forced teachers to use personal resources or limit module distribution.

	Time-Consuming	"It takes so much time to prepare and print the modules/LAS…"	Preparing, printing, sorting, and stapling modules consumed excessive teacher time.
	Seasonal Retrieval	"Some students are seasonal in getting their modules…"	Inconsistent module collection led to gaps in learning continuity.
	Late Retrieval	"Most of the learners did not get the modules on time…"	Delayed access to materials hindered timely completion of assignments.
	Late Submission	"Some students fail to follow the schedule for submitting modules."	Teachers struggled to track and assess student work due to untimely submissions.
	Copying Answer Keys	"Some students did not answer the module…just copied the answer key even when 'answer may vary'."	Academic dishonesty and lack of genuine engagement with the tasks.
	Unanswered Modules	"Modules/LAS were returned without answers…"	Complete lack of student engagement with learning activities.
	Inability to Self-Learn	"They could not follow simple instructions in the activity…"	Students lacked basic self-regulation and comprehension skills needed for independent work.
	Lack of Sincerity	"Students…do their modules for compliance only…"	Modules were completed perfunctorily, undermining learning depth.
	Parents' Inability to Assist	"Not all parents are knowledgeable enough in teaching their children…"	Low literacy or educational levels among parents limited home support.
	Unsupportive Parents	"Some parents lack support for their children's education, even in simple tasks like module distribution and retrieval."	Parental disengagement added to student access and accountability issues.
	Absence of Face-to-Face Interaction	"I could not further teach students who need me because we are not allowed to teach face-to-face…"	Teachers unable to provide real-time clarification and scaffolding.

	Geographic Dispersion	"Home visits…are a challenge due to their dispersed and far-flung locations…"	Remoteness made in-person follow-up logistically difficult.
	Poor Internet Connection	"I cannot monitor them through calls or texts because of poor signal in the area."	Communication barriers impeded regular check-ins and support.
Coping Mechanisms	Stakeholder Coordination	"I coped by asking favors from parents/students with access to gadgets…to relay information to uninformed parents/students."	Leveraged community networks to bridge resource and communication gaps.
	Home Visitation	"Sometimes, we conduct home visits to check on students and offer remedial help."	In-person follow-up to diagnose learning issues and provide targeted support.
	Classroom Reminders	"I leave reminders in the classroom if I wasn't able to meet them."	Visual prompts to reinforce deadlines and instructions.
	Social Media Platforms	"I create group chats to address questions and clarify concerns."	Online group chats allowed asynchronous Q&A and peer support.
	Module Distribution Opportunities	"I take advantage of distribution/retrieval times to monitor and help students with difficulties."	Combined logistic occasions with mini-consultations to maximize contact.
	Positive Mindset	"By embracing this new normal…staying positive helps me cope with challenges."	Maintaining optimism as a resilience strategy.
	Mental Conditioning	"Adjusting and understanding the situation has helped me remain focused."	Cognitive reframing to accept and adapt to new teaching conditions.
	Emotional Support for Students	"I encourage students to ask queries to ensure better understanding."	Fostering open communication and psychological safety to build trust and engagement.
	Social Media Platforms	"I create group chats to address questions and clarify concerns."	Online group chats allowed asynchronous Q&A and peer support.

	Module Distribution Opportunities	"I take advantage of distribution/retrieval times to monitor and help students with difficulties."	Combined logistic occasions with mini-consultations to maximize contact.

Teachers' Perception of Modular Distance Learning

Teachers identified both advantages and disadvantages of the Modular Distance Learning (MDL) modality. Three main advantages emerged: its usefulness, flexibility, and its ability to promote student autonomy.

One teacher remarked, *"Modular Distance Learning is helpful to us, especially in the midst of the pandemic, to continue the teaching and learning process."* This underscores MDL's role in ensuring educational continuity during unprecedented school closures and highlights its benefits in delivering knowledge and skills during challenging times. The statement highlights the importance of flexible educational models, such as MDL, in ensuring that learning persists even during global crises—allowing educators to continue fulfilling their roles in supporting students' academic growth. These insights call for continued support, refinement, and professional training in distance learning modalities to maximize their long-term educational impact.

Flexibility was another commonly cited advantage. Teachers appreciated the freedom to manage their schedules around both personal and professional responsibilities. As one teacher shared, *"It is more comfortable than face-to-face teaching for me because I can manage my time flexibly."* This reflects how MDL offers a more adaptable schedule that alleviates the rigid time constraints of traditional classroom instruction. The resulting work-life balance potentially reduces teacher burnout and enhances job satisfaction. Such findings suggest that future educational frameworks should consider integrating adaptable teaching structures, particularly for educators in remote or high-stress contexts, to support sustainable and resilient instructional practices.

Furthermore, MDL was seen to foster learner independence. One teacher noted, *"Modular Distance Learning… gives learners the opportunity to explore on their own and receive instructions via LAS or online."* This emphasizes the importance of student autonomy in distance learning settings. These advantages suggest that select features of MDL—such as flexibility and learner-centered approaches—may be worth retaining and integrating into future hybrid or blended learning environments.

However, several disadvantages were also raised. Teachers observed that MDL was often undervalued by learners, who tended to neglect module activities, thereby compromising learning outcomes.

One teacher stated, *"Learners tend to disregard the importance of answering and comprehending what is written in the modules."* Additionally, MDL was considered unsuitable for struggling students. As one teacher explained, *"It is not beneficial to the majority, especially those who had poor performance even before the pandemic."* These observations highlight that although MDL supports learner autonomy, it may not fully address the needs of all students—particularly those who require close supervision and individualized support. This underscores the importance of differentiated strategies and targeted interventions to promote inclusivity and equity in distance education. In learning environments where student autonomy is essential, innovative, learner-centered methods should be prioritized (Fotiadou et al., 2017, p. 107).

Another notable concern was that MDL was perceived as less effective than face-to-face instruction, primarily because adaptive and interactive teaching strategies could not be replicated. As one teacher expressed, *"Its effectiveness is not the same as the approaches a teacher can do in a face-to-face class."* Moreover, the lack of teacher-student interaction hindered efforts to monitor and assist learners: *"It was difficult because there is no interaction with the students and it is hard to provide teaching assistance to all."* This aligns with findings that limited interaction weakens both instructional impact and learner motivation. Despite these insights, challenges persist—particularly concerning the overall effectiveness of modular instruction, which teachers consistently perceive as inferior to face-to-face learning. Castroverde and Acala (2021, p. 13) found that while communication between teachers and parents in Tacloban City is often facilitated through text and social media platforms like Messenger, limited access to gadgets, mobile load, and stable internet hinders effective communication. Consequently, teachers struggle to update learners on their academic progress and to provide timely feedback on their outputs.

Challenges Encountered in Modular Distance Learning

The study revealed multiple operational and instructional challenges faced by teachers during the preparation, distribution, and retrieval of modules under the Modular Distance Learning (MDL) modality.

Module Preparation Challenges: One of the foremost difficulties encountered was the lack of necessary supplies for printing learning materials. As one teacher stated, *"Lacking supplies like bond papers, ink, printers, staples, and staple wires was a big challenge."* This contradicts the findings of Guiamalon (2021, p. 466), who reported that schools had been provided with sufficient funds and resources, which were properly allocated. ikewise, Aviles et al. (2021, p. 285) highlighted the importance of institutional support in developing well-structured and high-quality modules for effective teaching and learning.

In addition, the process of preparing and printing modules was described as time-consuming: *"It takes so much time to prepare and print the modules/LAS."* These operational demands highlight the need for streamlined workflows, equitable resource distribution, and increased institutional backing in future distance learning initiatives.

Module Distribution and Retrieval Challenges: Teachers reported recurring problems with module distribution. Learners were inconsistent in collecting modules, often doing so sporadically: *"Some students are seasonal in getting their modules"* and *"Most of the learners did not get the modules on time."* These irregularities worry teachers, particularly regarding learners' progress, as they can disrupt learning continuity and hinder the timely completion of tasks, as supported by Niemi and Kousa (2020, p. 352). During module retrieval, several critical issues emerged:

1. **Late submission**: *"Some students fail to follow the schedule for submitting modules."*
2. **Copying answer keys**: *"Some students did not answer the module… just copied the answer key even when 'answer may vary'."*
3. **Unanswered modules**: *"Modules/LAS were returned without answers."*
4. **Inability to self-learn**: *"They could not follow simple instructions in the activity."*
5. **Lack of sincerity**: *"Students… do their modules for compliance only."*

Instructional and Monitoring Difficulties: The shift from face-to-face instruction to Modular Distance Learning (MDL) brought significant challenges in planning, monitoring, and assessing learner performance. Teachers struggled to deliver quality instruction, track students' progress, and provide meaningful feedback—primarily due to the lack of direct interaction. This aligns with the findings of Hidalgo (2022, p. 152), who reported that difficulties in monitoring and evaluating learners' progress, along with delivering quality instruction, were among the main challenges teachers faced during the transition to MDL. Additionally, the availability of quality resource materials and the attainment of learning competencies were identified as key factors influencing the effective implementation of MDL. Celis et al. (2022, p. 20) also noted additional concerns, including health risks and time constraints in preparing materials, difficulties in validating student outputs, and challenges in maintaining communication with parents.

However, Junpel (2023, p. 546) suggested that despite these obstacles, the overall intensity of challenges experienced by teachers remained low, implying relative manageability in implementing MDL.This suggests that with adequate support and resources, teachers are capable of adapting to modular instruction and sustaining instructional delivery even in the face of constraints.

Parental Involvement and Learner Support*:* Teachers also struggled with the lack of parental involvement. Some parents were unable to assist their children: *"Not all parents are knowledgeable enough in teaching their children…"* Others were unsupportive: *"Some parents lack support for their children's education, even in simple tasks like module distribution and retrieval."* Arzaga (2023, p. 1535) noted similar issues, citing incomplete submissions, parent-answered modules, and plagiarism as persistent problems. These findings underline the importance of parental support, which must be emphasized during orientation and stakeholder meetings.

Geographic and Technological Barriers: Monitoring students was especially challenging due to:

1. **Lack of face-to-face interaction**: *"I could not further teach students who need me because we are not allowed to teach face-to-face."*
2. **Remote student locations**: *"Home visits… are a challenge due to their dispersed and far-flung locations."*
3. **Poor internet connectivity**: *"I cannot monitor them through calls or texts because of poor signal in the area."*

These barriers significantly hindered teaching efforts, especially in geographically isolated areas. In response, school-community partnerships can serve as effective means to enrich students' learning experiences by ensuring that curricula are locally relevant and aligned with community values, thereby boosting student engagement (Teo et al., 2022, p. 11). To overcome persistent challenges in resource-limited settings, alternative strategies, such as community-based learning hubs, radio-based instruction, and collaboration with local leaders should be employed to guarantee inclusive and equitable access to education, even in gadget-poor environments.

Technical and Socioeconomic Difficulties: Finally, challenges related to device navigation and resource limitations were prevalent. Aguilar-Abando (2022, p. 44) found that teachers perceived MDL as difficult due to limited printing capacity, unstable supply chains, financial burdens, and communication issues with both learners and parents. These were exacerbated by learners' poor comprehension, lack of mobile devices, weak internet access, and distant home locations.

Coping Mechanisms Employed by Teachers

Despite the multitude of operational and instructional challenges brought about by the implementation of Modular Distance Learning (MDL), teachers demonstrated resilience and agency by employing a range of coping mechanisms. These strategies, grounded in both action-oriented and emotion-based responses, reveal the adaptive capacities of educators navigating an unfamiliar and often under-resourced educational modality.

From an action-based standpoint, many teachers collaborated with stakeholders to address communication barriers during remote learning. One participant shared, *"I coped by asking favors from parents/students with access to gadgets… to relay information,"* highlighting the critical role of community networks in sustaining learning. Home visitation also emerged as a key strategy: *"Sometimes, we conduct home visits to check on students and offer remedial help,"* despite the geographic and health-related challenges. Teachers also maximized classroom spaces in their absence: *"I leave reminders in the classroom if I wasn't able to meet them,"* showing their continued dedication to instruction. These challenges were mitigated through various strategies, including home visitation, exerting extra effort and patience, providing additional worksheets and activities, modifying self-learning modules (SLMs), extending submission deadlines, prioritizing monitoring plans, maintaining communication with parents, and practicing effective time management (Butial et al., 2022, p. 7358).

Time management, adaptability, and mentorship were also crucial. As Padilla and Estrella (2022, p. 1992) highlighted, novice teachers employed proper scheduling, sought guidance from more experienced colleagues, and maintained flexibility to navigate the complexities of MDL. The use of technology, particularly social media platforms such as group chats, also facilitated communication and learner support. One teacher shared, *"I create group chats to address questions and clarify concerns,"* while another explained, *"I take advantage of distribution/retrieval times to monitor and help students."* These practices align with the adaptive strategies proposed by Gueta and Janer (2021, p. 70), who emphasized the value of leveraging available resources for learner engagement.

In terms of emotion-based coping, teachers leaned on internal resilience and psychological adaptation. Several participants highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive outlook, such as: *"By embracing this new normal… staying positive helps me cope with challenges."* Others described efforts in mental conditioning and acceptance, stating, *"Adjusting and understanding the situation has helped me remain focused."* Furthermore, teachers extended emotional support to their learners, offering encouragement and ensuring learners felt safe to seek clarification: *"I encourage students to ask queries to ensure better understanding."*

Through a phenomenological lens, these lived experiences reveal not only the immediate responses to institutional shortcomings, but also the deeper meanings teachers ascribe to their roles during crisis. The strategies described above reflect not just surface-level adjustments, but embodied expressions of professional commitment, identity, and care. Teachers' efforts to mediate

instructional gaps, despite technological, logistical, and emotional constraints, underscore their integral role in preserving educational continuity amid adversity.

Moreover, these findings resonate with resilience theory, which underscores the dynamic process by which individuals respond to stress through adaptive thinking and behavior. The teachers' ability to transform challenges into manageable experiences — through collaboration, innovation, and emotional regulation — demonstrates a resilient mindset crucial for sustaining education in marginalized or disrupted contexts.

In sum, the coping mechanisms employed by teachers in the MDL context illustrate a profound intersection of practical ingenuity and emotional strength. These strategies not only enabled them to meet instructional demands but also reaffirmed their enduring commitment to learners, even in the face of systemic limitations.

Teachers' Suggestion In Enhancing The Implementation Of Modular Distance Learning

Based on the teachers' lived experiences in implementing Modular Distance Learning (MDL), they offered the following suggestions to improve its effectiveness, particularly in far-flung and marginalized communities:

1. **Streamline Learning Modules-** Teachers recommended reducing the number of activities and focusing only on essential topics. They emphasized the importance of ensuring that all lessons and tasks included in the modules are significant, meaningful, and responsive to the learners' needs, to promote better learning outcomes and mastery of concepts.
2. **Provide Technological Support for Marginalized Learners**- It was suggested that government agencies and other stakeholders should provide free public Wi-Fi access and gadgets for marginalized and underprivileged students. This would help bridge the digital divide and improve access to online resources and communication channels, which are crucial in distance learning modalities.
3. **Benchmark Best Practices from Other Countries-** Teachers proposed that the Philippine education system should study and adopt effective strategies from other countries that have successfully delivered quality education during the pandemic, without compromising the health and well-being of teachers, students, and other stakeholders.
4. **Strengthen Parent-Teacher Orientation and Stakeholder Engagement-** The teachers highlighted the need to conduct thorough orientation programs for parents on the principles and expectations of Distance Learning. Furthermore, they recommended actively involving the General Parents-

Teachers Association (GPTA) and other community stakeholders to foster a shared responsibility in supporting students' learning.

5. **Conduct Regular Assessments of MDL Implementation-** It was suggested that periodic evaluations of MDL should be conducted to assess its effectiveness, identify existing challenges, and determine areas for improvement. This would ensure that the program remains relevant, learner-centered, and responsive to the needs of both students and teachers.
6. **Implement Limited Face-to-Face Classes-** Given the contextual realities of teaching in remote, far-flung areas, teachers strongly advocated for the implementation of limited face-to-face classes. They emphasized that many students in these communities require direct, in-person guidance from teachers to effectively comprehend lessons and accomplish learning tasks.

Conclusions and implications

The findings of this study reveal that while Modular Distance Learning (MDL) provided a practical alternative to ensure educational continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has also posed significant limitations, particularly for low-performing learners who were already struggling academically prior to the crisis. MDL's reliance on independent learning proved challenging for these students, highlighting the limitations of a purely modular, self-paced approach without adequate in-person guidance and support.

Teachers encountered multiple challenges throughout the implementation of MDL. These included issues in the preparation, distribution, and retrieval of learning modules, difficulties in monitoring learner progress, providing timely assistance, and addressing the limited capacity of parents to support their children's education at home. Additionally, the frequent changes in work arrangements added strain to teachers' responsibilities and disrupted instructional consistency.

To navigate these obstacles, teachers employed a combination of Action-Based and Emotion-Based coping mechanisms. These strategies involved collaborating with stakeholders, conducting home visits, utilizing social media platforms, providing emotional encouragement to learners, and adopting a positive mindset to adapt to the demands of the new teaching environment.

Moreover, teachers offered constructive recommendations to improve the implementation of MDL. Notably, they emphasized the importance of introducing limited face-to-face classes as a complementary strategy. Given the geographic isolation and limited access to reliable communication technology in far-flung areas, these limited in-person sessions would provide much-needed opportunities for direct instruction, remedial support, and meaningful teacher-student interactions, thereby enhancing learning outcomes for all learners.

In conclusion, while MDL served as a valuable emergency response, its long-term effectiveness especially for marginalized, remote, and low-performing students remains limited without addressing the contextual challenges faced by both learners and teachers. To become truly future-ready, distance education in rural settings must evolve into a more flexible, inclusive, and context-responsive model one that blends modular autonomy with strategic in-person engagement, equitable resource allocation, and community partnerships to ensure resilience and relevance in any circumstance.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions drawn from this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the implementation of Modular Distance Learning (MDL), particularly in far-flung and marginalized communities. First, the Department of Education (DepEd) and local school administrations should consider integrating limited, safe, and well-monitored face-to-face classes. This approach would help address the specific needs of low-performing and marginalized learners by providing opportunities for direct instruction, remedial support, and interactive learning experiences that are difficult to achieve through self-paced modules alone.

It is also recommended to simplify and contextualize the learning modules by focusing on essential competencies and minimizing non-critical activities. Lessons and tasks should be carefully selected to ensure relevance, cultural sensitivity, and appropriateness to the learners' contexts and abilities, thereby promoting meaningful learning and mastery of skills. Additionally, technological and infrastructure support should be strengthened. Government agencies, private sectors, and local stakeholders need to collaborate in improving learners' access to digital resources, such as providing free public Wi-Fi in remote areas, distributing gadgets to underprivileged students, and establishing community-based learning hubs with internet and printing services.

Regular and comprehensive Parent-Teacher Orientation programs must be conducted to equip parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their children's learning at home. These sessions should include clear guidelines on module distribution, retrieval, answering protocols, and monitoring learner progress. Furthermore, educational leaders and policymakers are encouraged to benchmark effective distance learning practices from other countries or successful local initiatives. Adapting strategies that prioritize quality education delivery without compromising the health and well-being of teachers, learners, and stakeholders is essential for sustaining educational continuity.

To ensure the ongoing improvement of MDL, schools should establish a continuous monitoring and evaluation system. This system must include

feedback mechanisms from teachers, learners, and parents to regularly assess the effectiveness of the program, identify gaps, and inform necessary adjustments in response to the community's evolving educational needs. In addition, promoting teacher and learner well-being programs is crucial. Initiatives such as psychological support services, positive coping strategy workshops, and manageable workload arrangements should be introduced, particularly during periods of shifting work environments.

Lastly, it is highly recommended to encourage active stakeholder involvement. Strengthening partnerships with the General Parents-Teachers Association (GPTA), local government units, and community organizations will be vital in addressing logistical challenges, bridging communication gaps, and providing much-needed support services, especially in geographically isolated areas. By addressing these key areas, the effectiveness and inclusivity of Modular Distance Learning can be significantly improved, ensuring that no learner is left behind in the pursuit of quality education.

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