The Lived Experiences of Filipino Public High School Students in Emergency Distance Education

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Distance Education (DE) has been extensively researched, yet it emerged as a novel phenomenon during the pandemic, differing significantly from traditional distance learning methods. Moreover, the scarcity of DE studies in public high schools underscores the need to investigate distance learning experiences in a global emergency. Eight public high school students selected through typical purposeful sampling described their lived experiences in Emergency Distance Education. The resulting descriptions were drawn using the Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method of Amedeo Giorgi (2009) with Community of Inquiry as a framework for analysis. The structure of the phenomenon is organized into thematic categories clarifying (1) students' context and (2) factors that enable learning. The social and cognitive presence of the students were characterized by (a) a sense of ambivalence and (b) negotiation of expectations due to physical constraints, entanglement of spatial boundaries, and doubts about learning quality. Students' conflicted view of the teaching presence emphasized the importance of socio-academic interactions, and activated the learner presence through different coping strategies. The findings provide insights to educators who design educational environments for distance learners; emphasize the interconnectedness of social, cognitive, teaching, and learner presences, and call for a self-directed, interdependent learning environment that encourages direct, immediate, and personal communication.

Keywords: emergency distance education, distance learning, modular learning, Covid-19, education in emergencies, descriptive phenomenological psychological method

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the education sector, requiring adjustments in lesson delivery and affecting learning objectives. In the early phase before distance education (DE) was implemented, public discourse was characterized by risks and uncertainties, confusions, and objections prompting some students to call for an 'academic freeze' (Gara, 2021; Hernando-Malipot, 2020). While DE as a modality is not new, its effectiveness in an emergency deserves exploration (Kuhfeld et al., 2020) due to the persistent challenges and expectations on safety and quality (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; UNESCO, 2020).

The pandemic demanded a proactive response prompting the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) to lay down its Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). Aimed at ensuring learning continuity through necessary adjustments, it also aspired to protect the health, safety and well-being of learners, teachers, and personnel (Department of Education, 2020). DepEd's BE-LCP rationalized the K to 12 curriculum into the Most Essential Learning Competencies to focus instruction on the basic aptitudes that learners must acquire in a crisis.

We adopted the use of Emergency Distance Education (EDE) in contextualizing this study. Distance education refers to this variety of learning modalities employed for the affected School Year (SY) 2020-2021 since face-to-face learning is impossible (Department of Education, 2020, p. 22). The word *emergency* distinguishes the context within which this study is situated (Silva- Peña, 2020). Contemporary literature distinguishes between EDE and distance education in general (Craig, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; University of the People, 2021) where EDE is understood as a temporary shift from the normal modes of teaching in view of a crisis. Hence, we employ the term *"Emergency Distance Education"*.

Similar to DE studies, concerns about safety have been demonstrated in global experiences of education in emergencies which offer insights into addressing the risks faced by learners. In these contexts, education is expected to operate as both life-saving and life-sustaining and foster essential survival skills (International Working Group on Education, 2003; Price, 2011). As a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face classrooms, online and print-based DE has emerged along with its advantages and controversies. Some consider the quality of online courses inferior to campus-based courses while some argue that there is no significant difference at all (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; UNESCO, 2020; Humphreys & Konomos, 2010; Simonson et al., 2015). DE has been noted to offer educational benefits, including a focus on student autonomy, redefined instructor roles, technological impact, and the nature of the learning experience itself (Ananga & Biney, 2017; Garrison D., 2003; Moore & Anderson, 2003). The disadvantages include technological limitations, individual challenges, domestic, institutional, and community barriers that hinder learning (Baticulon et al., 2021). While Moore & Anderson (2003) believed that DE "democratizes" and reduces inequalities, it is not always the case. Smooth transitions to online and distance learning (Arinto, 2016; Berino, 2019) are only feasible for those with sufficient resources as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rice et al., 2020).

DE can be described as a mercurial modality due to its close ties to technological advancements (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Bandalaria, 2007; Bozkurt et al., 2015; Miller & Ribble, 2010; Trend, 2004). Consequently, it is often used interchangeably with terms like "online learning," "eLearning," and "remote learning." However, it is important to note that these terms have subtle distinctions, including differences in their educational philosophies (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Silva-Peña, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Miyazoe, 2008). Beyond technology, the educational and social implications, especially in the context of a pandemic that continually reshapes human sociality (Božič, 2021) must also be considered.

The pandemic is often described using the VUCA framework which stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, qualities

that complicate analysis, response, and planning (Wright & Wigmore, 2022). The student-experience and the potential influence of a VUCA situation are important in understanding how theories related to DE evolve. It is an understatement to indicate the need for decision-makers to also consider students' perspectives. This study takes interest in exploring how students make meaning of their immediate experiences within EDE to complement their teachers' perspective.

We maintain that a thorough exploration of EDE's intricacies is imperative. Notably, a vast number of studies on DE in higher education has been conducted but very little attention was paid to secondary basic education (Bozkurt et al., 2015; West, 2009; Zawacki-Richter, 2009). The huge majority of these studies reflect online learning contexts in the higher education settings and not the particularity of online learning in a pandemic (Bozkurt, et al., 2015; Zawacki-Richter, 2009; Hodges et al., 2020). Online DE is popular because of convenience, time flexibility, and location, however, context is entirely different when students are anxious about safety, or when teachers doubt the quality of their teaching given the perceived limitations of online meetings. Further, while access to online technologies for synchronous communication could foster greater teacher-learner interaction, limits to access for some learners constrain participation (Arinto, 2016; Bandalaria, 2007).

Our study explores the lived experiences of Grade 10 public school students during the pandemic, guided by the philosophy that learning is both an individual and social process. We assume that students of this age are capable to articulate their experiences. Convinced that the prevalence of DE research may not perfectly reflect the present EDE context, we excluded those in the senior high school level who are at the same age group as those in the college level prior to the K to 12 curriculum implementation. Through understanding students' experiences, we aim to gain insights into the contexts in which learners negotiate their situations and employ self-regulation strategies. This research agenda is guided by two specific questions: (1) How do public high school students experience EDE during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What are the persistent and invariant meanings and structures of these lived experiences for this particular group?

Methodology

Research Design

We employed phenomenology which is a rigorous, non-reductionistic methodology (Neubauer et al., 2019; Cilesiz, 2011) to understand the lived experiences of public secondary school students in EDE, specifically, the Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method (DPPM) developed by Amedeo Giorgi (2009, 2012) within the transcendental phenomenological research tradition. The aim is to describe these lived experiences while maintaining objectivity and setting aside biases (Moustakas, 1994). Description uses language to express intentional objects of experience (Giorgi, 2012). One can reflect on the presented meanings contained in the description and perceive their unity to understand the world of the other, without interpretation. Giorgi employs the term "structure" rather than "essences," recognizing that lived experiences often require multiple constituents that must be taken together as a whole to describe the composition. Constituents are understood, not in isolation, but within their complex relationships as part of a whole (Giorgi, 2008).

Phenomenology prerequires researchers to adopt specific attitudes: phenomenological reduction, a psychological attitude, and sensitivity to the phenomenon (Giorgi 2009). First, phenomenological reduction ("epoché" or "bracketing"), involves suspending pre-existing knowledge and personal interpretations (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (2009) prefers to call the same as "scientific reduction". The researchers must set aside their own meaning and enter the interviewee's world while acknowledging personal biases and interpretations (Hycner, 1985;

Groenewald, 2004; Patton, 1999). The second requires a psychological approach to analyzing the data. The third involves a special sensitivity to the phenomenon under investigation. Researchers must be familiar with the phenomenon being studied, employing bracketing throughout the process, including in the literature review.

We share Neubauer et al. (2019) and Willis (2001)'s belief that reality is subjective to the individual and that the inner life of individuals determines the meaning and essence of their experience. Moreover, we recognize our role in the study and the biases, values, and assumptions we bring (Creswell, 2012).

Phenomenon

The phenomenon in question is emergency distance education. A phenomenon, primarily a philosophical term, is also a cognitive representation human beings assign to any physical or mental object. Phenomenology seeks to describe a phenomenon as '[it] appears in the consciousness' of the person experiencing it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Intentionality of Conciousness

Phenomenology emphasizes that the meaning of things resides in an individual's inner life, and researchers seek to grasp this meaning through a direct exploration of the phenomena themselves (Willis, 2001). Key to understanding intentionality in phenomenology are the concepts of noema and noesis. Noesis refers to various cognitive and emotional activities, and noema represents the object of experience corresponding to the noesis (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). The act of experiencing EDE is interconnected with the meaning of EDE as a phenomenon, and this interplay is referred to as intentionality.

Data Gathering

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured online interviews using open-ended questions. One interview was conducted via Zoom, while the remaining interviews were conducted through Google Meet for convenience. An interview protocol was developed to guide informal interactions and elicit descriptions of the experiences. Three-part serial interviews were conducted with the research participants, considered as "co-researchers": (1) a social conversation to establish rapport and obtain permission and consent which is crucial (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2009) in addressing boundaries of intimacy that may arise during the sharing of experiential episodes; (2) assessment of the co-researchers' experience of the phenomenon; and (3) clarifying the information obtained in the initial interview to further describe essential experiences. Detailed documentation was maintained for audit trail purposes; additional relevant information discovered during the study was recorded through "*memoing"* using an electronic and a physical notebook.

The co-researchers (Co-R) were selected using purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques, ensuring a relatively homogenous group for the phenomenological framework (Creswell, 2007). The study required participants with significant and meaningful experiences of the investigated phenomenon (Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Eight public high school students, meeting specific inclusion criteria, were recruited through direct referrals: six female and two male participants, aged 16, who experienced partially modular EDE where printed modules with occasional synchronous or asynchronous online classes are the primary modes of learning delivery. Students from Quezon and Caloocan, the cities with the highest number of public school enrollees, were selected. They equally comprise the participants who were selected from poor and low-income classes whose monthly income ranges from PHP 9,520 to PHP 19,040 (Albert et al., 2018).

All participants voluntarily participated and provided signed consent forms along with parental permission. The interviews were conducted in the early part of SY 2021-2022, from September 29, 2021

to January 16, 2022. In the interviews, participants were also asked to describe their experiences during SY 2020-2021, the first full year of EDE implementation. During the interviews, students indicated significant coping, suggesting their descriptions would have differed if interviewed earlier in the pandemic. Furthermore, we conducted ethical interviews online, prioritizing authenticity, privacy, safety, and dignity. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities. We respected participants' context, allowing them freedom to decide what is comfortable for them: solo interviews were done; participants were allowed to have their cameras either turned on or off. Table 1 presents the profile of the respondents.

Table 1

Profile of Co-Researchers

Co-Researcher	Co-Researcher	Caloocan City	Partially modular delivery	Data / Internet Plan
Alexa	F	Caloocan City	Yes	Mobile Data
Althea	F	Quezon City	Yes	Mobile Data
Andrea	F	Quezon City	Yes	Wired/ Wireless
Angela	F	Caloocan City	Yes	Wired
Angelica	F	Quezon City	Yes	Mobile Data
Jacob	M	Caloocan City	Yes	Wired
James	M	Quezon City	Yes	Wired
Joshua	M	Caloocan City	Yes	Mobile Data

Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the co-researchers' identities.

Data Analysis Steps

DPPM follows a five-step process that holds Husserlian Phenomenology as its philosophical foundation (Giorgi, 2012). The particular steps in DPPM, operating within the three aforementioned required attitudes, were followed in this research, to wit:

1. reading and re-reading of the entire transcription to get a sense of the whole;
2. assuming the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction;
3. delineating the transcribed statements into distinct individual meaning units;
4. using the *free imaginative variation* to transform the meaning units into expressions more directly indicative of the psychological meaning of what the co-researchers said. In this step, aspects of the phenomenon are varied until its essential or invariant characteristics are manifested.
5. describing the invariant characteristics and their relationship to each other which becomes the essential structure of the phenomenon; and

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued using qualitative nomenclature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure credibility, "triangulation" or the use of multiple sources and methods for corroborating evidence was employed. The findings were compared with what the literature offers and disconfirming evidence or rival explanations. "Prolonged contact" was observed by requesting co-researchers for three interviews, and "member check" was employed in a manner consistent with Giorgi's method, where copies of the raw, unprocessed data were presented to co-researchers to check for accuracy (Duran, 2020). The study ensured transferability through thick descriptions and dependability through auditable documentation and peer debriefing, while reflexivity was observed to warrant confirmability.

Results and Descriptions

A phenomenological study primarily aims to describe experiences rather than extensively analyze data. Adhering to this approach, the succeeding statement presents the general structure of the phenomenon along with the individual constituents that build up this structure. This answers research Question No. 1. *How do public high school students experience emergency distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

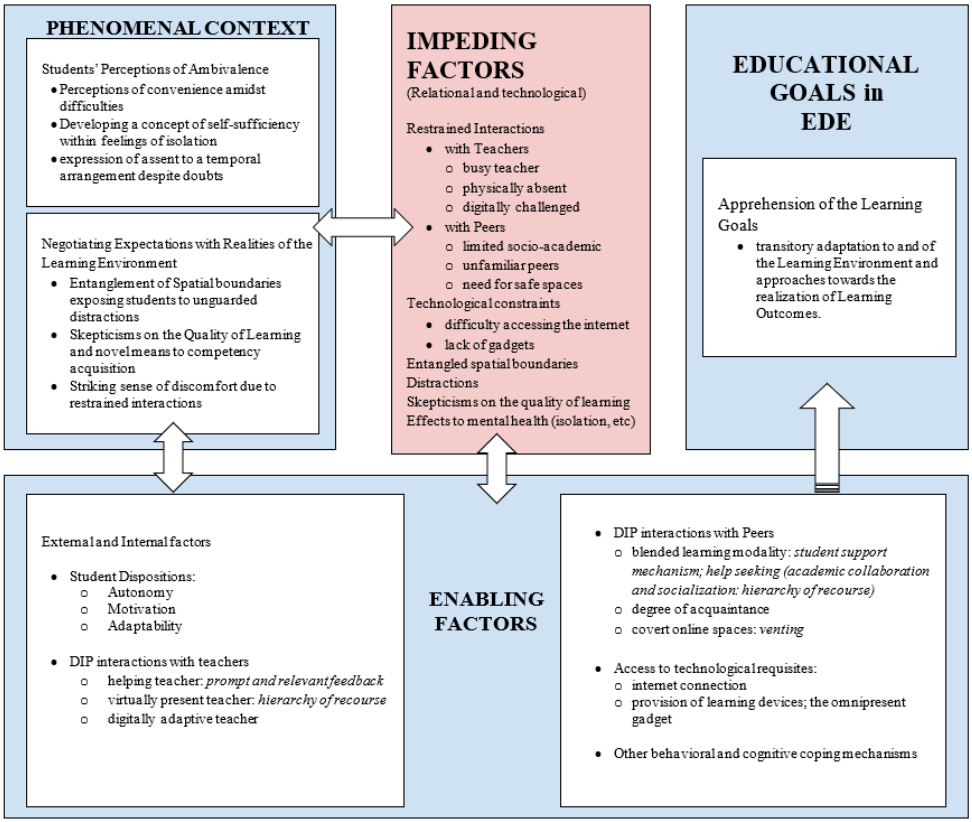
> For Co-researcher, who is a junior public high school student, learning in Emergency Distance Education is characterized by a sense of ambivalence and a persistent negotiation of expectations with the learning realities. This ambivalence is observed in the contrasting images of the learning context that is perceived to be convenient despite some difficulties imposed by a foreign, unexpected learning arrangement shift. The difficulties include the sense of isolation due to communication constraints but which also allowed development of autonomy. Co-researcher expressed apprehension about attending school amidst disarray but also reluctantly accepts EDE as a necessary temporary option. Accustomed to a physical classroom, co-researcher inevitably found a tension between their ideal of what a classroom should be and the unfamiliar environment blended learning presented to them. The blurred boundaries between home and school created a spatial entanglement that, if not managed, could lead to distractions and vulnerability for learners. The absence of a 'physical teacher' led co-researcher questioning the quality of their learning and yet bringing about the discovery of new ways in acquiring competencies. Mobility restrictions limited meaningful interactions with peers and teachers, resulting in a conflicted view of the teacher's presence and brought to the fore the importance of peer support for socio-academic interactions in the absence of direct teacher intervention. EDE learners were conscious of their goals, which involved adapting to the learning environment and achieving learning outcomes. However, they faced obstacles stemming from the phenomenal context. Learners adapted to their situation by employing behavioral and cognitive coping strategies based on their own disposition, supported by pedagogical, technological, and social factors.

The preceding description forms the structure of the phenomenon and comprises fifteen components bound together by four thematic categories. Holistically, they depict the students' lifeworld in EDE, describing in full the student's context and how they adapted in EDE.

The succeeding discussions are detailed phenomenological descriptions which answers Research Question No. 2: *What are the persistent and invariant meanings and structures of these lived experiences for this particular group?* The phenomenal structure is organized into thematic categories clarifying (1) students' context characterized by (a) a sense of ambivalence and (b) negotiation of expectations due to physical constraints, entanglement of spatial boundaries, and doubts about learning quality, and (2) factors that either help them achieve or hinder their learning goals. This is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The General Psychological Structure of the Experience in Emergency Distance Education



A sense of ambivalence

Capturing mixed emotions, co-researchers described their perception of EDE with indecisiveness. Initial uncertainty led to anxiety requiring behavioral, cognitive, and social changes. The components comprising this thematic category are (1) *perception of convenience amidst difficulties, (2) development of a sense of self-reliance despite a sense of isolation,* and *(3) expressions of assent to a temporal arrangement despite their doubts.* The first constituent established the main context for EDE while the other two revealed the ambivalence. Andrea sets this tone by saying that EDE is convenient and difficult at the same time. Perceived conveniences of the home-school blend included safety, flexibility, proximity, immediacy, cost-effectiveness, and adaptable teacher authority. This setup provides a unique time-space experience, alleviating temporal pressures like tardiness. Staying home ensured safety and economic benefits, saving on transport and food costs. Alexa likened the experience to groping in the dark ["nangangapa sa dilim"] due to a lack of knowledge, being new to the online class. The inconveniences include the lack of physical contact that are viewed as harmful to academic performance and well-being. Text-based

online communication fails to substitute for in-person interactions, leaving students craving such connections. Despite isolation, students demonstrated self-sufficiency in their EDE roles, displaying introspection and addressing personal hurdles before seeking external aid. Through adaptability, they turned tension into achievement and recognized transferable skills. They saw EDE as challenging yet a respite from in-person classes. Althea said that she was dominated by melancholy mainly because she had to stay at home and be isolated, although she is no longer sad because she can now manage online classes on her own. Despite doubts, they valued persistence and opted to pursue their education. Angela added that she thought she should just study hard because she did not want to regret missing a year.

Negotiating expectations with realities of the learning environment and process

Co-researchers are surprised by the unfamiliarity of EDE, constantly comparing it to their traditional classroom. They appreciate the unique conveniences of distance learning but feel the limitations in social interactions. Althea provided this context saying it was difficult to study at home because one does things entirely different at home from what one does in school. Co-researchers describe the entanglement of spatial boundaries exposing them to unguarded distractions. The blurred line between home and school posed challenges, demanding self-paced time management and a fusion of domestic and academic duties. For Alexa, the noise at home prevented her from focusing on her studies. In the home setting, students independently tackled distractions due to reduced teacher oversight. The overlapping boundaries also raised privacy concerns, e.g. recording private spaces, potentially causing embarrassment. Co-researchers voiced skepticism about the quality of learning in EDE while exploring alternative competence-building avenues. Andrea explained that she has no idea what college life would be like, expressing skepticism about learning enough from online classes. Further, limited feedback fostered occasional doubts about self-efficacy so resourceful learners would resort to the internet and some go-to persons for help. Additionally, platforms like TikTok and Facebook, originally meant for socializing or networking, became learning tools. Co-researchers also conveyed discomfort due to restrained interactions. Tension existed between students' desire for social interactions and the limitations of DE. Initially, spatial separation made personal interactions difficult. Text-based online chats that lacked non-verbal cues were viewed as inadequate. While video calling helped, it did not fully replace physical interactions. James believed that the quality of interactions is never the same than when physical interactions are possible because students understand each other better in school.

Sub-component 1. Paradoxes of the teacher's presence

Co-researchers described three paradoxes of teacher presence - teacher-perceptions in EDE significantly affecting engagement and outcomes.

Teachers might seem *busy or available for help.* Co-researchers hesitated to contact teachers directly, fearing it could disturb or burden them. Joshua rarely contacted the teacher directly, assuming they are occupied with their tasks and should not be interrupted.

Students struggle with the concept of teachers *being physically absent but virtually present,* fearing neglect and a decrease in the quality of interaction, which undermines their self-efficacy. Unlike face-to-face settings, pressure for students is weaker in EDE, leading to relaxed compliance to lesson-related demands. Andrea suggested this is partly because students feel less of their teachers' supervision in online classes. To bridge this gap, she said that they favored blended learning which integrates video conferencing and collaboration tools for classes. Apparently, online discussions offer them a sense of surveillance with the teacher being virtually present. This is viewed helpful to self-learning, and added a sense of urgency for a timely submission of class works.

Lastly, teachers may appear *as digitally amateurish or adaptive.* Even seasoned teachers faced issues with unfamiliar online tools which co-researchers recognize as a challenge. However, they anticipated teacher adaptation, as they themselves had. Evidently, teachers in this study adjusted their authority style, exhibited task and submission flexibility, and utilized online social media tools to interact with students.

Opposite these portraits of amateurish EDE teachers are the helping EDE teacher who allow adaptive interactions that involve features of direct, immediate, and personal communication despite the limitations. Presented in Table 2, helping teachers are positive student-enablers in EDE. They are seen as thoughtful, empathetic, and approachable. Within this perspective, a helping teacher is one who employs some pedagogical and social strategies to help their students learn.

Table 2

Images of the Helping Teacher

Qualities	Pedagogical	Social
Approachable	exerts efforts to explain provides precise, uncomplicated answers	allows students to ask gives direct, immediate response
Thoughtful	evaluates learning provides feedback	checks how students are faring compliments/ encourages students
Empathetic	employs various teaching approaches extends presence recognizes differences	provides psychosocial support proactive in helping considerate to students

Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the co-researchers' identities.

Sub-components 2. The indispensability of Peer Support

In this study, peer support is situated within socio-academic interactions mediated by familiarity among individuals and teacher's presence. Such was what Alexa said that in the face-to-face setup, despite heavy teacher assignments, they don't feel overwhelmed because they have friends to talk to. Moreover, in EDE, the students' degree of acquaintance influences peer support. Classmates can aid each other, but the inclination to seek and provide help hinges on their familiarity. Althea said that because they barely know each other they feel timid to reach out to each other. Despite desiring social connections, there was reluctance to engage with unfamiliar peers. Further, peer support thrived in spaces beyond the teacher's clout such as in group chats for students only aside from a class group chat with the teacher as described by Alexa. Here, students found ways to recreate online social interactions which may consist of covert conversations where they freely express their opinions.

A grasp of the Goals of EDE

The co-researchers in EDE understood and conformed to the learning objectives which necessitated adapting both teaching strategies and learning environment. They stay focused on this vision through External and Internal Enabling Factors and their components.

External Enabling Factors

Contextual factors, including technological, social, and pedagogical elements, significantly shaped the co-researchers' learning perception.

They highlighted the importance of two key technological requirements: a device and internet access. James believed that having both is crucial for virtual classroom participation. For him, accessing learning sources and online classes would be difficult without a gadget. Initially, they found communication in EDE impersonal and lacking immediacy, leading to feelings of isolation and a longing for face-to-face interaction, as Joshua noted. He said that chat messaging in the modular learning environment can be challenging when responses are delayed.

Students in EDE understand the personal challenges teachers face and have modest expectations from the school, yet they seek empathetic support. Andrea emphasized that students should be assisted in their submission of classwork especially when they are sick. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of timely, relevant feedback. They observed that in EDE, assessments often prioritize compliance over quality, requiring significant self-monitoring. Positive teacher feedback strongly influences their self-concept. They suggest that written instructions alone do not ensure effective learning; clarifications and explanations from knowledgeable individuals are crucial. Due to time constraints in online classes, co-researchers feel more emphasis is placed on assessments than on explaining lessons, sometimes leading students to skim through content. Alexa described it as just submitting, but not learning.

Internal Enabling Factors

Personal dispositions, including attitudes, motivation, and adaptability, significantly contribute to the learning outcomes of EDE learners. EDE provides opportunities for co-researchers to engage in self-directed learning (SDL) by completing modules at their own pace and conducting independent research, promoting autonomy. Althea explained that they do their research independently and seek help when necessary since they can simply search the internet where all the information they need is readily available.

Regarding motivation, co-researchers consider several factors impacting their enthusiasm for virtual classes which are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature. These include their interest, inherent complexity of the subject matter, the EDE teacher's discussion facilitation effectiveness, and students' perceived abilities. Awareness of their family's situation further boosts motivation.

Interestingly, manifestations of adaptability were gathered in the form of coping strategies further broken down into behavioral types (tech savviness, time management, help-seeking for academic and social support, managing distractions, venting out) and cognitive types (internet literacy, positive mindset, defense mechanisms). Co-researchers emphasized that students need not be literally independent in EDE. They are actually interdependent, and many of their activities require collaboration. When faced with challenges, learners seek assistance from individuals they perceive as more knowledgeable.

Discussions

Undeniably, EDE presents conveniences. These benefits encompass the hallmarks of self-directed learning such as the abilities to set their own pace with their coursework, to manage their time, and to work around other commitments (Bączek et al., 2021; Keržič et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021; Murders, 2017; Song & Hill, 2007). These principles are also illustrated in what the co-researchers reported as self-reliance amid apprehensions and feelings of isolation. While co-researchers acknowledged that much of their learning was within their control, they continue to view the significant impact faculty and administrators have on their desire and ability to learn, supporting what other research has found (Douglass & Morris, 2014).

We also find how the perception of ambivalence aligned with the concept of VUCA described in Wright & Wiggmore (2022). In EDE, volatility arises from the unpredictable daily changes related to the pandemic, leading schools to make

decisive measures for safety. Uncertainty stems from the inability to predict when the pandemic will end, causing confusion and anxiety among students. Complexity arises from the widespread impact of the pandemic on various aspects of students' lives, including academics, social interactions, and mental well-being. Ambiguity is reflected in the contrasting dichotomies and ambivalent perceptions of the students' life world in EDE. Despite the challenges and their doubts, or what has been described as contrasting dichotomies (Adnan et al., 2021), students developed self-reliance and accepted the temporary arrangement of EDE.

EDE students felt disoriented during the pandemic's early months prompting self-doubt. The absence of physical contact heightened their isolation, negatively influencing learning perception. Persistent challenges in maintaining focus amid distractions and unequal access to reliable internet connections were also observed. As traditional schools were forced to transform into virtual schools, the unexpected shift, exacerbated by the VUCA climate explained the discomfort (Yan et al., 2021). Similar to what Baticulon et al., (2021) found, some degree of mental health difficulty caused by psychological stress makes it difficult for students to focus. They expressed feelings of anxiety, burnout, loneliness, grief, and hopelessness. They also worried about their online assessments, future plans in school, possible delays in training, and the safety of their families from COVID-19. Further, students identified technological, individual, domestic, institutional, barriers to online learning including pandemic restrictions.

In DE, learners are left to fend for themselves and are expected to understand their lessons and do their coursework correctly (Song & Hill, 2007). In EDE, the lack of interactivity and collaborative experiences leave an isolating effect to students that can be detrimental to success (Bączek et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021; Owens et al., 2009). This highlights why learners need their teachers' guidance and their peer's collaboration. Thus, integrating social interaction into pedagogy for online learning is essential, as well as seeking the views of isolated students (Antoine, 2011; Alvarez, 2020; Barbour, 2010; Owens et al., 2009).

The co-researchers initially expressed doubts and apprehensions about EDE, believing that education could be postponed. Over time, they developed optimism and recognized the importance of continuing and taking their lessons seriously, while still maintaining a preference for traditional classroom settings. The same has been predicted in prior studies done by Kemo and Grieve (2014) and Meyer (2019) which the Department of Education (2020) has also noted. They were convinced that EDE was a necessary option for their own safety but prolonging this modality is viewed deleterious (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Gillett-Swan, 2017). This study also noted co-researchers' statements of unsatisfactory learning experiences, which they described as too compliance-focused rather than learning-oriented, a sentiment previously observed among online distance learners (Song & Hill, 2007).

Distance learners are struck by the novelty of EDE, frequently contrasting it with their traditional classroom experience. The preference for face-to-face settings in physical classrooms aligns with previous studies (Anderson & Dron, 2011; DepEd, 2020; Kemo & Grieve, 2014; Meyer, 2019). More recent studies have identified various barriers to distance learning during the pandemic, including difficulties in adapting to new learning styles, lack of attention during lessons, the need to juggle home responsibilities, and unclear instructions from educators (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Baticulon et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021). Domestic conflicts, socialization, and chores can disrupt student focus (Baticulon et al., 2021). Nevertheless, household chores can offer productive breaks giving students time to reflect on lessons. Effective time management, prioritization, and parental support in scheduling help students regulate distractions.

The co-researchers expressed uncertainty about EDE's learning quality while seeking alternative competency development. However, reduced meaningful social interaction diminishes their satisfaction. With limited feedback, students sometimes doubt their efficiency. While DE research on learning quality yields contrasting findings, EDE studies identify factors contributing to the perception of inadequate learning, such as the absence of guidelines, unfair policies, inconsistent schedules, low-quality materials, ineffective strategies, and excessive requirements (Baticulon et al., 2021; Cuisia-Villanueva & Nuñez, 2020; Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020). Fast-paced lessons, overwhelming activities, and unmet outcomes frustrate students' positive perception of EDE (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). This perception of learning quality significantly impacts students' academic performance (Kerzic et al., 2021) and simply introducing online learning does not ensure improvements in learner motivation and outcomes (Barbour, 2010).

The absence of direct communication in DE has been identified as a weakness (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), which, in this study, led to a sense of discomfort among learners. Previous studies emphasize the significance of interaction for learning (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Keegan, 1993; Liu, 2008; Murders, 2017; Owens et al., 2009; Symeonides & Childs, 2015; Tunceren, 2017) and students' persistence (Symeonides & Childs, 2015). Interaction plays a crucial role in establishing emotional connections between learners, professors, and course materials, improving learning quality, reducing dropout rates, and providing timely information and feedback (Tunceren, 2017; Keegan, 1993; Owens et al., 2009). Students' concerns about the quality of their DE experience align with these findings, as the perceived lack of interaction impacts their self-efficacy and motivation. Two important observations related to teacher presence and peer interactions were noted in this context.

The co-researchers expected direct, immediate, and personal (DIP) communication and considered real-time responses as essential for meaningful interaction. They described DIP interactions in EDE as occurring when students are able to directly communicate with others, overcoming any perceived boundaries, with timely responses and without the need for intermediaries. It involves acknowledging and apprehending the presence of the other person, recognizing their individual context, and considering both verbal and non-verbal factors in the communication process. When interactions are DIP, they feel more secure and trusting.

Reduced real-time and direct communication in a distance education setting impacts students' perceived ability to effectively complete tasks and learn meaningfully, more so in the EDE, where the perceived paradoxes of teacher's presence are felt (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). The hesitation to approach busy teachers is shaped by power dynamics in Filipino culture (Muega et al., 2016). Students avoid direct contact to avoid being viewed as disrespectful. Recreating interpersonal communication is indeed crucial in distance education to foster dialogue, socialization, and interaction without negative perceptions (Keegan, 1993).

Notably, even experienced teachers in EDE may struggle with unfamiliar online platforms (Bączek et al., 2021). Proficiency in technology is thus essential for both teachers and students (Arinto, 2013; Bandalaria, 2007; Kennedy & Archambault, 2015; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012). Teachers in this study were perceived to have adjusted their authority style, showed flexibility in class tasks and submissions, and embraced online tools, like social media, to engage with students. Therefore, co-researchers value teachers who employ adaptive, empathetic communication strategies despite EDE limitations.

The co-researchers believe that optimal learning thrives in an environment that encourages unrestricted interactions, including verbal and non-verbal communication (Liu, 2008). Teachers and peers are considered valuable facilitators of information, and their absence creates discomfort

and tension. Socio-academic interactions demonstrate the dual purpose of meeting social needs and contributing to self-efficacy and academic achievement (Baticulon et al., 2021; Berino, 2019; Murders, 2017; Nguyen, 2006; Yan et al., 2021). Despite technological challenges, students prioritize meaningful, face-to-face human interactions to establish closeness with classmates and teachers (Vargas-Madrid, 2019). These findings align with the Filipino concept of companionship and emotional support during times of difficulty often relying on peers to validate their social and emotional needs and to assist in addressing various concerns (Fernandez, 2012). In EDE, classmates have the potential to provide help, but the willingness to seek and offer assistance is influenced by how much they know each other (Liu, 2008). This reluctance to interact with less familiar people despite the desire for social connections can be juxtaposed to the convenience of independence in distance learning reducing the necessity of engaging with unfamiliar peers (Liu, 2008).

Some factors influencing student engagement in DE including interactions they may prefer not to share with their teachers (Falloon, 2011) include technological, structural elements of the learning environment and contextual factors which significantly influence and shape the student's learning perception (Abraham et al., 2015; Makoe, 2008; Tessmer & Richey, 1997). Factors internal to students (e.g. self-motivation, time management, and achieving study-life balance) are also crucial for distance learners to successfully complete their studies.

In EDE, these technological, social, and pedagogical elements were manifested. Technology serves as the primary means to bridge the spatial and temporal gap between students and teachers in DE (Garrison, 2003; Moore, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Improved digital competencies and better-quality infrastructure at home have been shown to positively impact satisfaction and performance in online DE (Keržič et al., 2021). It is important to further note that online learning enables constructive human interaction supports self-directed learning and expands educational opportunities through equal access for learners (Barbour, 2010; Jaleel & Anuroofa, 2017; Smith et al., 2005).

Technology facilitates communication in DE, addressing psycho-social aspects by supporting students, reducing isolation, and fostering belongingness (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Bandalaria, 2007). Therefore, overcoming technological challenges enables meaningful interactions with peers and teachers (Vargas-Madrid, 2019). However, the deficit in direct and personal human interaction and communication constraints can hinder adjustment and coping, impacting students' persistence in their learning (Fiock, 2020; Symeonides & Childs, 2015) as noted in what has been described as DIP communication.

In terms of their teachers and school, students recognize the personal challenges teachers encounter and maintain modest expectations from the school but seek empathetic support. A holistic approach is crucial for effectively aiding affected students, covering academic, material, and psychosocial support (Fiock, 2020). Teachers must proactively initiate and facilitate student support mechanisms, including making reasonable arrangements for those in precarious situations. Interaction between learners and teachers in online environments contribute to student success and well-being, mitigating the negative psychological consequences of community quarantine and enhancing individual coping capacities (Yan et al., 2021; Camitan & Bajin, 2021). Interaction is highly valued in EDE, with *blended learning* being preferred by learners as opposed to preference to online learning concluded in previous research (Cabual, 2021; Keržič et al., 2021; Harvey et al, 2014). Students find learning less challenging when topics are discussed by teachers, highlighting the significance of teacher presence (Baticulon et al., 2021). Establishing a virtual classroom environment promotes trust, rapport, and group identification

among students and teachers (Falloon, 2011). Active participation is vital for effective learning, as learners benefit from engagement rather than passivity (Berino, 2019). Additionally, adapting teaching materials and reducing cognitive loads are crucial strategies to improve comprehension and align with curricular objectives (Bandalaria, 2007; Baticulon et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2005).

Co-researchers emphasize timely, pertinent and positive feedback being crucial to feeling valued. Previous studies highlighted the lack of feedback in online learning and recommended enhancing interactivity and providing feedback to improve learning outcomes and student satisfaction (Arinto, 2013; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Baticulon et al., 2021; Falloon, 2011; Keržič et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2018). Increased communication, feedback, and student-centered interactions positively impacted student academic performance (Smith et al., 2005).

Personal traits like attitudes, motivation, and adaptability significantly impact distance learners' outcomes. Motivations in EDE are influenced by factors such as subject complexity, teacher effectiveness, and students' self-efficacy. These interconnected factors impact students' interest in a specific subject and their motivation to engage in learning (Rosales, 2022; Gillett-Swan, 2017). Human connections and empathy have been identified as important factors that can motivate students in distance education (Rosales, 2022). Cognitive complexity and intellectual stimulation also contribute to student success (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Validation of positive self-regard and confidence in a subject can enhance students' interest in that subject. Self-determination theory suggests that intrinsic motivation, fostered through autonomy, competence, relatedness, and purpose, can drive students' engagement in learning tasks (Douglas & Morris, 2014). Moreover, students with independent orientations towards learning, fueled by intrinsic motivation, tend to thrive in online learning environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). In EDE, students experienced heightened self-direction and increased autonomy due to a higher structure - lower dialogue situation (Moore, 1997; Anderson & Dron, 2011). This was evident in their help-seeking pattern: they seek guidance from more knowledgeable individuals only when challenged. The constraints in interaction prompted their reliance to their internet-connected device which further boosted their digital competence and autonomy.

Furthermore, co-researchers exhibited adaptability by adopting conscious coping strategies to decrease tension and anxiety. These coping strategies align with the developmental skills in emergency education described by Price (2011) and with what was outlined by Holahan et al. (2017) involving cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stress and emotional distress. Adaptive coping serves as a protective factor against the adverse effects of stressors and can reduce their occurrence. Their study recognizes two distinct types of coping: problem-focused strategies and tension-reducing strategies, aligning with the results of this research. Co-researchers use behavioral and cognitive coping strategies in EDE, such as being tech-savvy, managing time effectively, seeking support, and managing distractions. Venting out is an avoidance coping strategy. Cognitive coping involves developing internet literacy and maintaining a positive mindset, while cognitive avoidance coping includes rationalization and denial. These strategies align with the characteristics of successful online students (Smith et al., 2005).

Theoretical Implications

Theoretical frameworks in a phenomenological study evolves alongside research progress, shaped by data rather pre-determined theories. We draw on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, a social-constructivist framework (Anderson, 2017) based on Garrison et al.'s work (2000). Initially devised to capture educational dynamics and guide online learning effectiveness research in higher education, the CoI model has been extended to aid in organizing online and blended educational experiences, adaptable to diverse learning environments (Bektashi, 2018). CoI assumes that a learning experience aiming for

higher-order outcomes thrives within a community of inquiry consisting of students and teachers, and the quality of their interactions. An educational community of inquiry is a collective of individuals participating in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to build personal significance and ensure shared comprehension (Garrison & Akyol, 2013).

Community of Inquiry in EDE

The CoI model highlights collaborative engagement and critical discourse among co-researchers to achieve personal meaning and mutual understanding (Garrison et al., 2000). The co-researchers in EDE recognize the importance of social interactions for their self-efficacy despite distance and isolation. However, the absence of a cohesive approach from educators may impede mutual understanding. We adopted the enhanced CoI model that consists of four important components, emphasizing the need for a recognizable approach to facilitate meaningful learning and reflection.

Social presence

Building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging are crucial for supporting critical inquiry and educational outcomes. More than social interactions, social presence involves creating a climate that encourages questioning, skepticism, and collaborative idea sharing. The co-researchers emphasize this as important for their self-efficacy and coping. The need for belongingness is heightened due to social distancing measures. However, there is limited evidence of purposeful critical discourse in their virtual socialization. Lockdowns and social distancing led to increased feelings of isolation, which could have been mitigated with proactive efforts from teachers to establish a sense of community. From the co-researchers' perspective, connecting with peers becomes even more important in the absence of strong teacher presence.

Cognitive presence

Sustained reflection and discourse are important in constructing and confirming meaning within a CoI. EDE students demonstrated autonomy in conducting research and utilizing online resources, while recognizing the importance of teachers in motivating their learning. However, insufficient feedback and facilitation hindered collaborative discourse and sustained reflection. The CoI framework aims to foster deep approaches to learning, including higher-order cognitive processing (Garrison et al., 2000). EDE presented unique constraints that required learners to adapt their cognitive processes, emphasizing the need for further exploration and improvement in teacher facilitation.

Teaching presence

This key element integrates social and cognitive presence during the inquiry process (Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Anderson, 2017). In EDE, students experienced a lack of teaching presence, leading to fewer interactions with their teachers. However, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating knowledge and are seen as arbiters of information. The inadequacy of teaching presence, the power distance and isolation in EDE creates a missed opportunity for both teachers and learners. Students expressed the need for teacher explanations, highlighting how teaching presence facilitates concept acquisition.

Learner presence

Anderson (2017) proposed the inclusion of *learner* presence as a vital component alongside social, cognitive, and teaching presence. This addition acknowledges the importance of learners' effort, self-efficacy, and self-regulation in the effectiveness of teaching (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Here, learner presence cannot be underestimated, the sub-components of which intersect with the other presences, such as self-efficacy being linked to teaching and social presence. Effort, valued in teaching presence, enhances cognitive presence. Furthermore, students' coping strategies and adaptive mechanisms, influenced by their interactions with peers and teachers, demonstrate self-regulation in the learning process.

Implications to Educational Psychology

This research fills the gap in the literature on secondary school students' experiences in EDE. The findings offer valuable insights into distance learning in general, particularly regarding teacher roles and strategies. Teachers play a critical role in designing effective learning objectives, fostering connections, providing feedback, and adapting to technology. Improving internet infrastructure and teaching students to identify reliable sources are important considerations. It is recommended to explore the dynamics of cognitive, social, and teaching presence in blended learning approaches. Gradual introductions of new processes and addressing isolation can enhance student motivation. Collaboration among educational stakeholders and duty-bearers is vital for effective distance education.

Delimitations and Limitation

Caution is advised when generalizing the findings of this research due to the limitations of a qualitative study. The participants represent a specific socio-economic group, and their experiences may not reflect those of all EDE students. Variations in learner differences, learning styles, and preferences may lead to different experiences. Additionally, online interviews may have influenced the depth of understanding. Nonetheless, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of teachers and students during EDE.

Conclusion

Understanding the lifeworld of public secondary school students in EDE is the main purpose of this research. Phenomenology as a research design was considered appropriate because of its explorative, rigorous, and non-reductionist nature. Although a well-researched topic, distance education in a time of a mobility restrictive pandemic is a distinct category that also presented a void in the literature about the experience of Filipino public high school students. The aim of this research method is to describe the phenomena through the expression of the lived experiences of students as co-researchers. Overall, the experience was characterized by feelings of ambivalence and a persistent negotiation of expectations with the realities of the learning environment. Such constraints triggered a conflicted view on the teacher's presence, availability, and accessibility, underscored the indispensability of socio-academic interactions, and compelled learners to adopt various coping strategies. These findings highlight human resilience, showcasing how individuals can transcend their predicament despite its volatility, ambivalence, complexity, and ambiguity.

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