

COVID-19 Challenges in Philippine Education: Paradigm Shifts and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caught most of the world unprepared. Deaths are in the thousands and cities are going into lockdowns. In a developing country such as the Philippines, one of the areas that is most affected by the onslaught of the virus is the education sector. Before the pandemic, the country had its hands full in its efforts to improve the quality of education and make sure that it is accessible to its citizens. While this endeavor has proven to be hard enough, the pandemic seems to have made everything worse. In this light, this paper will look into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to challenges, paradigm shifts, and opportunities for education in the Philippine-setting. A proposal for learning by building communities of inquiry will be presented as a recommendation.

Keywords: education, technology, COVID-19, Philippines, community of inquiry, paradigm shift

Introduction

Before the pandemic, the Philippine government had been implementing several projects and programs with the aim of improving the country's education system. Some of the projects include, but are not limited to, the Education for All (EFA) initiative, the implementation of the K-12 program, and the 10-point plan which consists of pre-schooling for all, technical-vocational training, building of new schools in cooperation with local government units, proficiency in Mathematics and Science, and working closely with private schools as essential partners (Oxford Business Group, 2017). Apart from these, the government also introduced, implemented, and/or achieved system structure, accreditations, increased enrolment rate, expanded alternative learning systems, promoted excellence in higher education institutions, increased in budget allocation, enacted new policies to improve educational outcomes, internationalization, automations, and other various innovations (Oxford Business Group, 2018). However, the global health crisis caught the Philippine education sector by surprise (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020).

The continued onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many parts of the world. The scale and intensity of the effects may vary in every country, but the Philippines is one of those that was hit very hard in Southeast Asia (United Nations, 2020). As of the time of writing, parts of the country are still under quarantine and the cases are continually increasing. This has adversely affected various sectors in the country and the education sector is one where impact was biggest (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020).

The education sector of the country had been in a very deep crisis (Macha, Mackie & Magaziner, 2018) even before the pandemic. In particular, the significantly low ranking of the Philippines in various international assessment programs is a clear manifestation of the problem. For instance, according to the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, the Philippines ranked 58 out of 58 countries in Grade 4 Math and Science with respective scores of 297 and 249 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Ultimately, "[t]he coronavirus pandemic has highlighted school opening woes that have long existed even before the health crisis happened" (Magsambol, 2020, par.1).

Most educational institutions in the country begin their academic year in June. However, the pandemic forced these institutions to open the school year in August (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020). These adjustments were not simply because of the pandemic, but more importantly, to give stakeholders ample time to prepare and adjust whatever they had to so as to deliver quality education to their respective students (Agoncillo & Aurelio, 2020).

The national government's decision to push through with the opening of classes all over the country at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted different societal, institutional, domestic, and economic concerns – questions about safety, limited access to technological resources, and budget were asked (Magsambol, 2020). "To sum it up, the question lies whether the teachers, students, and stakeholders were prepared in this new normal in education, such as teachers' teaching remotely, learners' learning in emergency remote education, parent's role in facilitating child's learning at home, and government's role in ensuring learning opportunities and equal access for all" (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020, p. 28).

Furthermore, students, teachers, and administrators were faced with challenges relating to access to educational materials, instruction, and assessment due to different modalities by which education is expected to be delivered. "From the confines of their homes, teachers and administrators were put to the task of revising and adapting course syllabi and requirements as they shifted to alternative or remote teaching modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous" (Simbulan, 2020, par. 9). All these concerns lead to the question, "have the aims of education in the new normal shifted?"

In this light, using a phenomenological lens, this paper shall examine, through literature review and autoethnography, how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the delivery of education in the Philippines in terms of challenges, paradigm shifts, and opportunities. Despite talking about the Filipino experience, this paper hopes that its readers can relate to the experiences and can learn a thing or two from the discussion because the pandemic, after all, is not just a single nation's experience, but a global one.

Educational Challenges and Some Interventions

Early Childhood and Basic Education

It has been recently reported that more than 93 million pre-primary students in 34 countries and 4.4 million pre-primary teachers (85 percent of whom are women) in 24 countries in the Asia Pacific are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippines, more than 27.7 million children are at risk of significant learning loss due to extended school closures (USAID, 2020). Early childhood care and education (ECCE) targets the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing (UNESCO, 2017). USAID also states that this is a critical stage in young children's education as they develop literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills, which are foundations for lifelong learning (2020).

Another reason why the ECCE sector is one of the most vulnerable sectors and is prone to experience a bigger impact is because a large percentage of ECCE sectors in the Asia-Pacific are privately funded and operated (UNESCO, 2020). Decrease in household income due to layoffs and business closures caused by the pandemic is likely to have a direct impact on students' enrollment (UNESCO, 2020). Since the private sector's income is mostly dependent on their students, a drop in the number of enrollees will have a huge effect on the schools' financial stability. One of the major reasons for school closure is the alarming dive in enrollment (Lagon, 2020). Consequently, the remaining ECCE workforce experiences unstable income and job security which puts them under more pressure than ever to handle unprecedented challenges, stress, and disruptions (UNESCO, 2020).

Basic education in the Philippines also went through major adjustments. Most governments including the Philippines were forced to adopt distance-learning solutions to ensure education continuity (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020). Distance learning is a "learning delivery mode where interaction takes place between the teacher and the students who are geographically remote from each other during instruction" (Magsambol, 2020, par. 8) This means lessons will be delivered outside the usual face-to-face setup (Magsambol, 2020).

Department of Education Undersecretary Nepomuceno Malaluan enumerated three methods that will be used for distance learning. First, printed modules will be delivered or picked up by parents at designated areas within the agreed schedule for students who have no access to gadgets and the internet. Second, for students who have access to the internet, the department's DepEd Commons will be utilized. DepEd Commons is an online education platform developed by the government agency to support alternative modes of learning (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020). Third, lessons will also be delivered via radio and television. Last May, the DepEd said that Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Secretary Martin Andanar had offered government-run television and radio stations as platforms for delivering lessons during the pandemic (Magsambol, 2020).

One of the disadvantages of distance learning is that it minimizes face-to-face learning to a significant extent. Media richness theory posits that in face-to-face learning, communication is most rich because there is a "high degree of co-location" which means the communicators can hear or see each other, there is "high degree of synchronicity" or the immediacy of feedback, the communicators can "convey and observe" facial expressions or body language, and there is the ability to convey and listen to speech (Bergin, 2016). Similarly, certain learning theories also claim that the lack of face-to-face encounter robs students of more meaningful learning experiences. "Behaviorists believe that online learning cannot provide the same positive learning results as face-to-face learning. Constructivists use discovery learning and critical learning activities which [are] done synchronously" (Weegar & Pacis, 2012, p. 13).

Considering the vulnerability of the basic education sector, a desk review was conducted by UNESCO Bangkok who also initiated a joint survey with UNICEF, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI), and International Step by Step Association (ISSA) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the early childhood education (ECE) workforce in the Asia-Pacific region. The survey was conducted between April 20 and May 22, 2020 and received a total of 2,040 responses from 34 countries, which included the Philippines. The results of the review, however, appear to be relevant not only to ECE but to all levels of basic education.

There were seven key messages and promising practices derived from the desk review and the workforce survey. The first one is how government support for educational service providers, teachers, and families is essential to overcome this challenging period. The survey has shown that privately financed institutions are less likely to receive support through government measures compared to publicly financed education institutions. Fortunately, many governments in Asia and the Pacific region are actively providing both financial and technical support for ECE center/preschool, ECE staff and parents/caregivers in order to ensure the continuity of learning (UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippines, there have been initiatives from different local government units (LGU) to provide technical and financial support to schools. One example is when the Pasig City government passed an ordinance temporarily waiving all regulatory fees for private schools and extended its scholarship coverage to cover 3,000 indigent students from private schools as face-to-face classes remain prohibited due to the pandemic (Kabagani, 2020). Another example is the Manila city government's distribution of about 110,000 tablets with SIM cards to the city's Kinder to Grade 12 public school students and 11,000 laptops with pocket Wi-Fi for the teachers for their online classes (Moaje, 2020). However, this shows that the support that a school would receive is highly dependent on its LGU. For this reason, there is a lack of uniformity in the technical and financial support that the schools in the Philippines will receive.

The survey also revealed that providing job security and timely, adequate compensation is critical to ensure teacher motivation and retention during times of crisis. It was shown in the survey that the school closure has affected the working condition of school staff. Among the respondents, 6.7 percent were approached by their employer to consider leaving or terminating their contracts and 49.3 percent reported that their salaries were not secured under social security schemes and so they had to rely on other income sources to sustain their living. In the context of the basic education private school teachers in the Philippines, "[a]bout 370,000 of them were laid off, retrenched, have gone on floating status without pay, taken pay cuts or non-renewal of contracts, or gone on 'no work, no pay' status since the pandemic started. That is 90% of basic education private school teachers in the country experiencing or who have experienced a fundamental crisis in their livelihood" (Lagon, 2020, par. 4). Hence, "it is critical to ensure measures to

provide job security, and adequate and timely compensation so that teacher motivation can be maintained and retain the teachers during times of crisis” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 2). Initiatives to help private schools financially such as the one previously mentioned about the Pasig City LGU waiving the regulatory fees and providing scholarship to private school students could help lessen the financial load of the school. This should allow private schools to provide adequate compensation and retention during times of crises.

The next key message is to invest in pre- and in-service teacher training on adapting to new technologies, social-emotional skills, as well as preventing, preparing for and responding to crises. Without clear guidance or any prior training, many ECCE teachers are expected to deliver distance learning. Among the respondents, only 20% have prior training on delivering distance learning and 1.28 percent on crisis and disaster management. Governments and learning institutions should prioritize training and professional development of ECCE teachers to equip them with relevant information and increase their resilience (UNESCO, 2020). Fortunately, in the basic education sector, the Department of Education made efforts to train the public-school teachers before they delivered distance learning for the first time (Magsambol, 2020). There are also efforts from other educational institutions such as the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) that rolled out free online courses to train teachers in online teaching (Newsbytes.PH, 2020); this is available to teachers in all levels of education.

There is also a call to support teachers’ health and social-emotional wellbeing and resilience before, during, and after the crisis. Frustration with the current unpredictable situation, worries about income and job security, and anxiety about delivering distance learning are the causes of pandemic-induced stress experienced by teachers. Before teachers provide social and emotional support to students and their families, it is important that they receive support from peers or specialized professionals to continue teaching and learning amid the crisis. However, only 35.2 percent of the survey respondents reported having received psycho-social support such as stress management advice from the government (UNESCO, 2020). One of the efforts done by the Department of Education (DepEd) to recognize the mental health and wellbeing of their personnel was launching a series of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) provisions for DepEd personnel

last July 2020. Through the lectures and activities provided, participants were able to learn more about normalizing feelings, recognizing common and extreme stress reactions, identifying and expressing needs, and guides to practicing positive coping strategies. They were also reminded that feeling anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed is normal and valid during this challenging time (Department of Education, 2020).

Next is to ensure inclusion, equity, and fairness in providing distance learning. Monitoring the learning progress of children was identified as the major challenge in urban locations where web-based online platforms are often used while distance learning equipment access is the difficulty that has been identified in rural locations where TV and radio are used for learning (UNESCO, 2020). This is also true for the Philippines that is why the DepEd prepared different methods for distance learning depending on the student's access to resources, as mentioned by the DepEd Undersecretary Nepomuceno Malaluan (Magsambol, 2020). Digital divide still exists among the Filipino students.

Aside from the teachers, the students also need the internet to do supplemental research on more complex homework; this poses a problem specifically because a DepEd survey shows that of the 6.5 million students who have access to the internet, approximately 20 percent use computer shops or other public places to go online (Santos, 2020). "Worse, 2.8 million students have no way of going online at all. This is especially common in the rural areas where 53 percent of the population live and where both internet access and speed can be a challenge" (Santos, 2020, par. 13). To make education more inclusive now that there is a pandemic, educators should explore innovative ways in providing distance learning (UNESCO, 2020).

Another key message is to provide clear guidance for and maintain regular communication with parents/caretakers. Parents and caregivers are tasked with providing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive developmental needs of children most especially now that their roles are critical for home-based learning. Continuous communication with parents and caregivers is more important now than ever to be able to track children's development as accurately as possible. In the case of the Philippines, like New Zealand and Samoa, a special webpage is utilized by the Ministry of

Education to provide practical guidance for parents and caregivers on helping children's learning at home (UNESCO, 2020).

DepEd Commons is the online platform developed by the DepEd to support the continuous delivery of basic education to Filipino learners. It is envisioned to be a constantly evolving portal that provides students and teachers access to free and quality learning resources in a sustainable manner. The goal is to have teachers and learners actively creating and improving academic content (Llego, n.d.). However, since not all Filipino students have access to the internet, DepEd Commons remains an optional resource.

Lastly, there should be support in the continuity of quality education through inter-sectoral approaches. Young children have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic not only in terms of education but also in terms of daily nutrition, security, and safety (UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippines, it is under the law for the government to provide a supplemental feeding program for daycare children, a school-based feeding program for public school children from kinder to Grade 6, a milk-feeding program, a micronutrient feeding program, health examinations, vaccinations, and deworming among others (Martin, 2020). That being said, it is essential to have an integrated approach that works across government agencies and community organizations to ensure holistic development of students (UNESCO, 2020). Specifically for the Philippines, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque said instead of preparing hot meals for students, nutritious food products will be delivered to households or picked up by parents from schools (Martin, 2020).

Higher Education

As described earlier, many teachers across the world have had similar experiences since the pandemic hit in the early part of 2020. Problems like lack of internet connection, domestic concerns, technological issues, and budget constraints are just some of the most evident challenges faced by teachers and students alike. In a study that was conducted by the British Council, it was mentioned that many teachers are in the midst of adjusting to one of the most dramatic changes in their career. They are now under pressure to find alternative ways to teach, support, and reach out to their students (British Council, 2020). In the Philippines, despite such challenges and calls for academic freeze, universities and colleges decided to push

through and open the academic year, with guidelines and solutions in place to ensure that no one is left behind (Madarang, 2020).

Unlike other more developed countries, remote learning is something that is foreign to universities and colleges in the Philippines. Except for very few universities that offer distance learning such as the University of the Philippines Open University, AMA University Online Education, Polytechnic University of the Philippines Open University, CAP College Foundation, INC., Asian Institute for Distance Education, New Era University, Benguet State University - Open University, Visayas State University - Open University, E-Learning for Agriculture and Fisheries, and Southville International School Affiliated with Foreign Universities, all the other schools maintained the traditional way of learning, that is, meeting every day to conduct classes (Katigbak, 2018). Hence, teachers and students needed to make big adjustments in the way they chose their mode of teaching and learning. As proof of such struggle, almost all universities, despite not heeding the call of academic freeze, were forced to push back the start of the academic year (San Juan, 2020). This is to give teachers, administrators, parents, and students more time to make the necessary arrangements and modifications. For instance, in the case of the University of the Philippines Diliman, the academic year originally starts in August. However, due to the pandemic, the start was changed to early September (University of the Philippines, 2020). Consequently, the 16-week duration of a regular semester was reduced to only 14 weeks. Undeterred by changes in the academic calendar and mode of learning, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), along with various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), worked together to make sure that learning continues (De Vera, 2020).

In the case of the University of the Philippines, to ensure that the same quality of education is being provided to students despite having alternative modes of delivery and to facilitate independent learning, teachers were asked to come up with course packs that can be uploaded in the University Virtual Learning Environment (UVLE). Basically, a course pack is a collection of all the materials a student needs in a specific course for the entire semester. These course packs include: “a course guide with detailed syllabus, learning resources such as readings, multimedia resources like video lectures, and other content resources; study and activity guides, and assignment guides” (UPDate Diliman, 2020, para. 16).

Meanwhile, in De La Salle University, students can make use of the newly adopted alternate mode of education called Lasallians Remote and Engaged Approach for Connectivity in Higher Education (R.E.A.C.H). This is a technology-enabled platform that emphasizes the importance of student-teacher engagement to ensure quality education (De La Salle University, 2020). Furthermore, in Ateneo De Manila University (ADMU), Adaptive Design for Learning (ADL) was piloted. Unlike other learning management systems, ADL does not focus only on the use of technology but on the design of online learning in the current context (Ateneo De Manila University, 2020). Lastly, in University of Santo Tomas, students were provided with the Enriched Virtual Mode which allowed instructors to employ both online and offline modes of teaching (Alejandrino, 2020).

To put it briefly, all of these learning platforms were made with the intention of improving flexible learning (combination of face-to-face/non-face-to-face, synchronous/asynchronous learning) or distance learning (a form of flexible learning). Specifically, all of them are able to accommodate online and offline learning, and synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Furthermore, for such innovations to be even more effective, the University of the Philippines, De La Salle University, Ateneo De Manila University, and University of Santo Tomas conducted their own workshops and webinars to train their teachers on how to effectively use such learning management systems.

Further, the authors, in the performance of their duties as educators, observed that other steps and courses of action that have been undertaken by schools to address distance learning problems include, but are not limited to, no tuition fee increase, reduced miscellaneous fees, allowances or free gadgets to students who need financial help, scholarships, and physical course packs. While all these are admirable, most of the steps undertaken focused on the welfare of students. However, teachers have, more or less, similar needs as students when it comes to shifting the mode of learning. For instance, teachers spent sleepless nights tirelessly accomplishing their respective course packs. Along with this, there is also the task of attending numerous webinars detailing how exactly a course pack should be made and what it looks like. Since this is the first time that teachers are going to make a course pack, a lot of them, especially the more seasoned faculty

members, had a hard time learning to use different devices and navigating through various programs, applications, websites, and learning management systems. While preparing for distance learning, not only did teachers forgo their sleep, but they also had to sacrifice their budget because some academic-related expenditures had to be taken out of teachers' personal pockets just to make sure that learning continues. In addition, teachers also had to endure an additional mental burden because they do not only consider the quality of education in making their course packs, but they also ponder "about equity issues, not wanting to privilege students who have super-fast Wi-fi connections and the latest computers" (Tan, 2020, para. 17). It is for these reasons that universities not only had to focus on assisting students, but also faculty members.

The experiences of the authors as teachers regarding the shift to distance learning in the Philippines can be fittingly described as a roller coaster ride. There are instances when they hit their lowest points, not knowing what to do and how to move forward, but there are also times when they hit their highest points, that is, finally understanding how the semester works and finishing the course packs. Regardless of where they are right now, the fact remains that these teachers have put their best foot forward and the rest, unfortunately, is already left up to the students. To this end, technology, relatively, can be a useful ally.

Technological Paradigm Shift

Recognizing the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced students to assume greater responsibility when it comes to their education goes hand in hand with recognizing the fact that it seems that technology has become important to these students now more than ever (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Acosta (2015) argues that the emergence of e-Learning or e-Education even before the pandemic has created a paradigm shift in the way society perceives technology and its significance to education. The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an unprecedented disruption of education and learning systems, leading to an educational crisis (Kranalis, 2020), did not only highlight this shift (Asfani, 2020; Espino-Diaz, Fernandez-Camirero, Hernandez-Lloret, et al., 2020; Sharma, 2020; Mondol & Mohiuddin, 2020), but has necessitated coordinated response not only from national

governments to schools and enterprises, but also among international organizations. The current pandemic has inadvertently heightened this paradigm shift when online learning became one of the most viable solutions. UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay emphasized that the main objective of institutions and governments worldwide at this crucial time was to “assure the continuity of learning” (UNESCO, 2020, para. 4).

The authors observed that in the Philippine context, short-term flexible arrangements for both basic and higher education were implemented at the start of the quarantine period last March 2020 with the attempt to close the school year as planned. Given the lack of preparation, intended learning competencies were not adequately met even by the end of the academic year of 2019-2020.

From the authors’ perspective on curriculum development and implementation, learning has been disrupted. With the current situation, completion became the priority more than meaningful learning. Kranalis (2020) argues that the education sector is faced with a complex problem that renders tested techniques and expertise gained from formal education techniques inadequate. With the educational crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the theories and practice of non-formal planning such as flexible and ad hoc solutions, could lend more effective solutions to the crisis at hand. Previous sections on this paper have enumerated different ways on how basic and higher education in the Philippines has tried to cope with this crisis in education – modular learning, a blend of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and creation of course packs, among others.

It is in this light that flexible learning was proposed by UNESCO to address the disruption of education (Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang, et al., 2020). Naidu (2017) emphasizes that flexible learning provides both educators and learners the capacity to choose the “time, place and pace of study (p. 269).” By and large, flexible learning is learner-centered because its main goal is to “increase learner opportunities for access and control,” (Samarawickrema, 2005, p. 51). This should also include strategies that will attempt to make learning equitable as flexible learning should not just be open, it should also be inclusive and accessible (Burge, 2008). If harnessed correctly, online education through flexible learning presents a pedagogy that not only

continues learning, but also ensures quality that could be institutionalized in the K-12 curriculum. This entails that learning is done online and on the learner's own time and pace, which implies that it is asynchronous and has a more accommodating deadlines to assist students who have limited internet access.

As the Philippines transitions into a new school year that attempts to rely mostly on distance learning (Department of Education, 2020), it is crucial to look into the capacity of flexible learning to help the Philippine educational system transition into the technological paradigm shift. Curriculum planning in the context of the pandemic carries challenges that need to welcome the shift in the educational setting and embrace the viability of online flexible learning as a context towards facilitating learner-centered education (Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang, et al., 2020). The next section will outline three aspects that posed challenges to this setup and subsequently how they can be addressed through an approach that envisions learner-centered education.

Welcoming Technological Innovation

There is a trend in distance education or remote learning wherein traditional modes of learning continue to be carried over in online learning, but its context is not necessarily transformed in alignment to the potential of online learning (Arinto, 2015; Conole, 2004; Kirkwood, 2009). Curriculum development, particularly at the start of the pandemic, was dependent on the fact that online learning was transitional – focusing on emergency migration from face-to-face to online learning (Bao, 2020). Older teachers have found the implementation of online tools to be difficult (Lagat, 2020) hence capacitating educators should also be implemented. Further, while synchronous sessions are integral, these fail to consider the pacing of different learners that have different contexts (e.g., learning styles, home setup, internet connectivity, etc.) on top of increasing concern for their mental health (Baloran, 2020; Lee, 2020).

There must be a conscious attempt to not only adapt curricula into an online context, but also to reform them towards more individuated pedagogy. Hence, flexible learning will be more appropriate and learner-friendly (Huang, et al., 2020). Incorporating flexible learning in curriculum

development will help integrate the strength of online learning such as interactivity, social presence, and cognitive presence (Huang et al., 2020) in helping learners adapt to the current crisis. This entails having a mix of asynchronous and non-asynchronous as well as virtual and non-virtual educational experiences (e.g., online discussions, text message exchanges, etc.).

Given that distance education has been implemented for almost 15 years in the Philippines (Acosta 2015), the pedagogy and various strategies of open distance learning have been developed. While implementation has been largely applied in the tertiary level pre-pandemic, existing resources may be adopted for basic education at this time of crisis. Online learning has features that have yet to be maximized if given the appropriate institutional support. This may include a range of teaching strategies that measure holistic understanding, and tools that aim to facilitate discourse even through a virtual presence. This could include “case studies, open discussions, learners-led discovery, experiential learning, etc.” (Huang, et al., 2020).

Curriculum planning must be geared towards creating materials that will bring out learner independence and higher order thinking skills. Technology must be used to create empowered learners (International Society for Technology Education, 2019) that actively participate in their own learning (Morgan, 2020). Moreover, this should not exclude students from the rural/suburban areas whose challenges to access are higher (lack of internet connection, gadgets, and electricity) (Deped, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The national government should strive to give these students access to technology. Ultimately, these recommendations can only work if all stakeholders and the government ensure that inclusive, accessible, and relevant curriculum is developed in the time of the pandemic and beyond.

Professional Training and Computer Literacy

To produce quality curricula, developers must also be professionally equipped and properly trained to navigate the new system. At the start of the crisis, educators who were tasked to overhaul existing curricula into ones that align with online learning at a relatively shorter span of time led to creation of materials that aim to continue education but were largely perceived

as insensitive to the context of learners during the pandemic since not all of them have access to the internet or devices (Joaquin, Biana & Dacela, 2020).

Many educators became beginners fumbling through an almost entirely alien platform (Lagat, 2020). Hence, the experience and expertise accumulated from previous teaching becomes, to a point, lacking and inadequate. However, the pandemic did not deter educators from finding innovative ways to “continue learning” even through non-traditional means such as online learning or flexible learning. A community of learning emerged stronger among teachers and staff, and even among different educational institutions to find new ways of content delivery. For instance, different schools tried to adjust curricula and content to adjust to the needs of learners (Joaquin, Biana & Dacela 2020). Thus, a community of learning, as used in this paper, refers to a group (of individuals or institutions that are related or otherwise) that work collaboratively to advance learning.

It is also important to recognize that educators also need proper access to the internet, technology, and a conducive environment to deliver quality education (Dayagbil, 2020). With the proper training and institutional support from school administrators, and especially from the state itself (in the form of concrete and data-backed educational policy), the potential of online flexible learning as a viable educational system for Filipinos could be unlocked.

Aligning the Vision of Educators and Institutions

The role of educators in formulating the educational curricula is paramount but this only extends to what school administrative policies and regulations allow. In times of crisis, the role of school leaders is heightened (Direen, 2017) and collaboration with both educators and stakeholders is crucial to continue learning (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Administrative vision, and subsequently its regulations, largely impact the type of instruction developed, and later, the learning that might be fostered among its students. Hence, the vision of developing and implementing a learner-centered curriculum amidst the pandemic must be shared by both educators and the administrators. This means that more options to deliver education must be considered.

The Department of Education (2020) in their Learning Continuity Plan suggests multiple modalities such as face-to-face learning for very low risk areas; modular distance learning where learners can use self-learning modules via a print or digital medium, online distance learning that allows for synchronous instruction; tv/radio-based instruction that provides video lessons for television, and radio scripts for radio; blended learning which mixes modular, online and tv/radio-based instruction; and homeschooling that relies on the facilitation of a qualified adult/instructor. While multiple modalities are available, the challenge of implementation that can cater to different learner contexts remains (Lagat, 2020).

Furthermore, curriculum revision at the time of crisis should not exclude discussions on access and fairness that have been going on even before the pandemic. According to the 2020 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) of the Philippine Statistics Authority, 24.3 % or one in every four Filipinos aged 6 to 24 were not in school mainly because of employment, marriage, finished schooling or finished post-secondary/college, high cost of education, and the Covid-19 pandemic (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). About 4 million learners did not enroll for the school year of 2020-2021 (CNN Philippines, 2020).

The problem of accessibility is also present among educators. In a survey conducted by Deped (2020) on teacher readiness for distance education, 99,155 teachers still have no available computers at home while 336,252 teachers do not have internet connection. There is a need to capacitate the faculty and upgrade online infrastructure on top of recalibrating the curriculum (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, et al., 2020). School administrators must provide immediate and professional help in the form of training to its teachers to ensure the stability of the curriculum being implemented. Furthermore, training must not only be limited to equipping the teachers with the necessary technological skills but also to impart motivation among the teaching staff regarding their broader involvement in the solution being envisioned (Kranalis, 2020).

These challenges in terms of implementing institutional objectives lie at the hands of the state. Acosta (2015) argues that the state's solutions to educational crises tend to disregard long-term effects on the future generation

of learners. Embracing the paradigm shift towards online flexible learning requires partnership and congruence in vision of not only in the meso-level but also at the macro-level such as the local government units, and the national government itself (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, et al., 2018).

As such, a reliable network infrastructure, and better access to gadgets, internet connection, and even power source must be mandated in partnership with the private sectors to ensure long-term reliability of online learning. There must be a thorough assessment of the country's capacity to provide learning programs that answer this crisis (Joaquin, Biana & Dacela, 2020). Educational policy that is crafted in partnership with educational experts must be created to institutionalize learner-centered pedagogy, and the integration of online technology in the educational system of the country for the years to come.

Maximizing Opportunities for an Inclusive and Collaborative Learning Approach

The discussions above – highlighting a learner-centered and technology-enhanced approach to education – have further underscored the appeal of having an inclusive and collaborative education in these troubled times. With the new strategies being developed and reintroduced, it can be observed that fostering a community of learning is still possible. Fortunately, nothing speaks more about inclusivity than the building of communities – communities of learning through inquiry. To put it simply, the authors propose the Community of Inquiry (COI) as a response to the challenges of welcoming technological innovation, professional training and computer literacy, and aligning the vision of educators and institutions.

In a Community of Inquiry, learning happens through the interaction of cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). Cognitive presence refers to “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Social presence means “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other

participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Teaching presence involves two functions: educational experience – “the selection, organization, and primary presentation of course content, as well as the design and development of learning activities and assessment” – and facilitation (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 90).

It is important to note, however, that while it is true that many Filipino students do not have equal opportunities or capacities for distance learning, the communities of inquiry allow for a more flexible learning environment that does not necessarily require students to have a fast internet connection or a high-end device. In other words, communities of inquiry can be conducted asynchronously and unfacilitated by the teacher via Facebook, Jamboard, or student-to-student discussion via other information and communication technology platforms that are not necessarily online such as text messaging or phone call. On the other hand, for those who do not have access to such technology, COI can be conducted through family member-to-family member dialogue.

Learning begins with inquiry. Building communities of learning through communities of inquiry via distance or remote learning set-up can prove to be challenging, but not impossible. Existing literature show that such communities can be established as long as the (1) social, (2) cognitive, and (3) teaching presence of the community of inquiry framework can be found (Garrison, 2009; Richardson, Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Ice, Swan, & Garrison, 2014; Bektashi, 2018). This can be achieved through the existence of (1) students or family members who are willing to engage in a dialogue, (2) use of reason and production of knowledge, and (3) the inquirer as a learner-facilitator. Further, using COI promotes transformative learning (Dempsey, 2017).

This is an encouraging notion given that the challenges posed by COVID-19 to face-to-face physical classroom interactions limit the delivery of quality and transformative education. Even if the health situation in the country normalizes, the essence of collaborative/communal learning – giving the learner more freedom on what set-up will work best for their learning together – should be continued and strengthened. Materials should be developed towards the goal of helping students learn together – as

collaborators. This freedom however does not mean that the teacher/educator is no longer needed. Instead, apart from being excellent educators, teachers should also be trained to come up with textbooks and/or modules that would allow for COI. That way, students will be able to engage in a meaningful dialogue easily and conveniently – with another student or with a family member – even without or with a limited facilitation from the teacher. Avenues for integration and synthesis of materials need to be present and regularly available – be it synchronous sessions or asynchronous sessions that encourage and foster collaboration and discourse.

The challenges posed by welcoming technological innovation, professional training and computer literacy, and aligning the vision of educators and institutions can be addressed through the COI approach that envisions learner-centered education because despite the limited access to new technologies, despite the lack of professional training and computer literacy, and despite the different visions of educators and institutions, learning by building communities of inquiry is possible because of its flexibility. For as long as there are ways to meet the cognitive, social, and teaching presence of the COI, education can happen. A paradigm shift to new technologies is just a way (perhaps the ideal one) to facilitate a wider reach and increase the effectiveness of this approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic that has led to an educational crisis (Kranalis, 2020) has paved the way for numerous opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2020; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Nakicenovic, 2020), among which is that it has shed light onto pedagogical practices that were no longer effective even before the pandemic, particularly on the fixation to a solely teacher-centered instruction and delivery. Apart from the need for reform, it also compelled a paradigm shift towards the importance of technology in enhancing a learner-centered approach to learning and curriculum development that can only be achieved through a collaboration between educators, administrations, and the national government. The pandemic has forced Philippine schools not only to upgrade their capabilities for remote learning, but more importantly, to guide their students into becoming independent and self-supervised learners and required the students to take charge of their education (Joaquin, Biana & Dacela, 2020). The way forward

should not be in resisting this technological shift but in embracing the objective of putting the learner as the center of education.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught the Philippine education sector at a bad time, but it has presented opportunities for the latter to improvise, adapt, and overcome. The new normal has underscored the need for a greater focus on learner-centered education as one of the more important and immediate aims of education given the current situation. The Filipino experiences stand as testaments to this fact. For this reason, it is paramount that the country's education sector takes advantage of new technologies to ensure that none of its students gets left behind. If the leaders and decision-makers in the Philippine education sector are serious in attaining this goal, then it is only logical that they approach it with a communal mindset aiming to strengthen educational communities by working collaboratively in building communities of inquiry with the aid of technology.

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