

Exploring the challenges and coping strategies of rural high schools in resuming to in-person classes

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to explore the challenges and coping strategies of selected public rural high schools in transitioning from modular to in-person classes. It utilizes a qualitative-case study design gathering primary data by interviewing school heads, ancillary coordinators, teachers, and parents from 3 public high schools in the rural districts of Pagadian City. Coding was the strategy used to analyze the data gathered. Analysis reveals that amidst the implementation of full in-person classes, schools experienced challenges in adapting to the new normal, managing misbehavior, academic unpreparedness, mental health concerns, maintaining health and safety standards, and sustaining school operations. Consequently, schools applied measures to address such challenges by applying systematic response, resourcefulness, effective communication, sustaining productivity, and creating an encouraging environment. Hence, recommendations to further address challenges were discussed. The primary contribution of this study lies in providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and coping strategies faced by rural high schools in transitioning to the "new normal" of education. This study contributes to providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and coping strategies faced by rural high schools in transitioning to the "new normal" of education.

Keywords: *in-person classes, challenges, coping strategies, high schools, rural areas*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Results of the pilot face-to-face classes have pointed out that among the challenges in the reopening of classes that need further preparation from schools scoped by DO 34, s. 2022 include learners' illiteracy, difficulties in faithfully implementing the health and safety protocols, outdated teaching strategies, time constraints in doing tasks, and the social and mental unpreparedness of students (Jackaria, 2022). On a student's standpoint, Nunez, et al. (2022) discovered data that while the majority of students wish to go back to (traditional) face-to-face classes, there a number of students who opt to continue education thru a hybrid of delivery modes and even to continue purely on distance learning modalities. Tagare (2023) also found that during the implementation of the pilot face-to-face classes, students showed signs of lack in motivation and misbehavior which is attributed to the lack of imposed and monitored discipline over the last two years of distance learning. Given the findings of challenges faced in the transition from distance to face-to-face classes, this study infers that while the government is determined to reinstate face-to-face classes and fully reopen schools, it is still clear that current conditions require schools to intensively prepare in doing so.

Discussing about preparation, Pecson and Pogoy (2021), studied about how Chinese Private School Leaders in the Philippines lead their school in the context of during and, in anticipation, after the pandemic. Their research found that these Chinese school leaders practice Situational Leadership,

Instructional Leadership, Benchmarking Leadership, and Distributed Leadership as the core principles of leading their respective schools. School leaders practiced adaptability by analyzing and welcoming the situation that they are in. In doing so, school leaders needed to build their capacity and invest on their faculty and staff to develop the skills necessary to improve operations. School leaders also tapped on their social networks in order to identify social models, and look for good examples for better practice. Lastly, school leaders in Chinese private schools made sure to share the roles and responsibilities to other employees of their school to achieve efficiency in their work (Pecson & Pogoy, 2021).

In another level, Jackaria (2022) suggested that schools implement reading intervention and psycho-social support services in order to alleviate problems of unachieved competencies in literacy. This implies that as teachers are now able to have more time to actively and accurately assess students, schools must implement programs that enhance students' learning needs. In another level, Tagare (2023), suggested that the government should also support teachers as they are usually pressured to use their personal resources in order satisfy classroom demands of maintained physical distancing and other health protocols. Tria (2020) also listed implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to the future of education which are that schools integrate: (1) wearing of face masks and physical distancing; (2) strengthening online learning platforms; (3) strengthening research and development in health; and (4) program creation and health integration. By doing so, schools become empowered to resist worsening conditions of the crisis and sustain quality education even after the pandemic has long passed.

Galang (2021), also pointed out the significance of revisiting curriculum and instruction (CIN) of schools in the country from teachers' inputs formed from their experience and analysis of education in the time of pandemic. It was found that in order for education to be sustainable and resilient in the future, CIN must be reshaped by carefully choosing essential competencies from the curriculum; choosing a unified modality that is tested for its quality, sustainability, and safety; continuous development and sharing of learning materials; revisiting teacher-quality demands in a new normal context; focusing more on individualized tasks for students; and nurturing the culture of leadership and collaboration in schools (Galang, 2021).

Although the findings and recommendations offer significant insights into the Philippines' shift from distance to face-to-face classes, there is a notable absence of understanding regarding the experiences of school managers upon the official return to five-day face-to-face classes mandated by DepEd Order 34 s. 2022. Previous studies have primarily focused on specific subjects, lacking a comprehensive view from school-wide perspectives that encompass administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. Moreover, the existing research lacks specificity to particular settings, making it challenging to determine whether findings apply equally to rural and urban schools with differing conditions.

Consequently, this study aims to bridge these gaps by investigating the challenges faced by rural junior high schools during the transition from modular to in-person instruction and exploring the strategies employed to address them. By doing so, this research seeks to inform various sectors about potential areas for improvement and serve as a basis for further academic exploration into the post-pandemic impact of COVID-19. This study specifically focuses on examining the challenges and coping mechanisms of selected public rural high schools in Pagadian City as they navigate the transition to the new normal in education. Its objective is to collect initial data on encountered challenges and coping strategies adopted during the implementation of in-person classes after more than two years of pandemic-related restrictions. Ultimately, the aim is to enhance understanding of the academic experience in the Philippines in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research design, specifically using the case study method discussed by Merriam (1985). The descriptive-qualitative nature of this design was selected as the researcher only aims to answer the questions using the raw experiences of the participants in their natural context as persons involved in education during the pandemic. Lambert and Lambert (2012) discussed the nature of descriptive qualitative research design comprehensively as the distinguished gathering of categorical data from the natural, unmanipulated, or the absence of a pre-conditioned setup of participants, environments, and activities; a design whose main and only output is a summary of the experiences of participants with no treatment of philosophical or statistical operations.

More specifically, this study employs the case study method of investigation. As a study on the topic of transitioning education from modular to in-person classes, this research is focused on the case of rural junior high schools; their experience, challenges and ways of addressing dilemmas in the transition.

This study invited a total of 16 participants composite of 3 school heads; 5 ancillary coordinators; and 7 teachers as primary sources of data in order to gather a broader scope of perspective on their actual experience in planning and implementing various practices to ensure a safe and efficient transition from modular to full in-person learning modality. In order to triangulate responses, perspectives from 3 parents and 3 students who expressed willingness to participate were employed as secondary sources of data. These participants were selected from public junior high schools in the rural districts of Pagadian City. They possessed the following characteristics that made them able to provide a deeper insight about explored practices; (1) worked in the school for more than two years; (2) they experienced the school's implementation of the limited face-to-face classes; (3) they had an active role in the preparation of the school for the School Year 2022-2023; they have a working knowledge and relationship with the locals of the community. Prior to the interview, the study made use of a request for an informed consent in order to secure the number of individuals willing to participate for every category of participants.

As qualitative research, this study employed the researcher as the primary instrument of gathering data with the aid of interview guide questions. The researcher is working as a Teacher I of a public rural junior high school for the last four months, but have already been practicing the profession for the last three years in a private school in the urban area of Pagadian City. This voids the researcher of any active involvement or knowledge about the experience of public rural junior high schools at the time of the preparation for the implementation of full in-person classes. In this case, the data-gathering process of this research starts by asking for permission from the Schools Division Superintendent to conduct a study in the DepEd Division of Pagadian City. After which, a request to conduct a study along with the approved letter of request from the office of the SDO was sent to the school heads for the go-signal, as well as the technical assistance to conduct the study in their respective schools. After being granted such permission, the researcher proceeded to start an ocular observation of the area. After doing so, the researcher informed the target participants about the research and consolidate responses on who are willing to participate. The researcher then discusses with the interested participants the research details and asks for their informed consent. After confirming their willingness to participate, the researcher proceeds to the interview session in a semi-private area where unnecessary noise is significantly reduced or nonexistent.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges faced in the Implementation of In-person Classes

As schools traverse the in-person classes, challenges encountered include personal adjustment problems of students, increasing cases of student misbehavior, the prevalence of a learning gap,

overwhelming responsibilities of teachers and students, difficulty maintaining health and safety standards, and the decrease in student enrollment.

Personal Adjustment Problems of Students. Analysis of transcripts lead to the emergence of personal adjustment problems experienced by students in the in-person classes after getting used to modular learning modalities for two years. Participants discuss this code by revealing;

Students' attention (is a challenge) because most of them were more like "new students" of course due to the past years of not being in a real classroom setting (T4);

They have been stuck in their homes for two years with their parents standing as their teachers. Now, as they go back to school, it becomes all new to them because their mentors are now the teachers from the school (SH1)

After getting used to self-paced learning, students faced issues on how to adjust to the demands of in-person classes where most learning activities are met with strict monitoring from teachers who now have greater presence in their new learning environment. In an observation, the researcher was able to notice students startled about having to pass a learning activity that they clearly weren't able to do. This can be attributed to the fact that there are modules, submitted with incomplete answers during the modular distance learning in the previous school years. Now, students are struggling to remove the habit of submitting unanswered to incomplete learning activities which they have been acculturated to during their distance learning experience because of their parents' tolerant approach in monitoring their learning. This later translates to students' interest being hampered as they are now getting easily exhausted from keeping up with in-person class requirements that seem foreign to them when they were still undergoing modular distance classes.

Teachers also struggled to keep students' attention in class as they observe that students do not behave according to what they are expected to do in an in-person class. Triangulation interviews pointed out that parents have observed that their students were used to wake up late during the past two years and so they are still working on this behavior in the full in-person classes.

Another considerable challenge that rural junior high schools faced as they adapt to the new normal education is financial constraints. As the in-person classes continue, face-to-face extra and co-curricular activities such as scouting, sports meet, and journalism activities have been re-implemented in schools. While these activities are good for the holistic development of students, schools are struggling to motivate students to participate as these activities demand expenses for both operational costs and personal consumption of students. Despite students' interest, they are easily discouraged to participate as they consider the financial conditions of their household. Further triangulation interviews reveal that parents are experiencing financial problems because of the inflation situation in the country.

This supports Echazarra & Radinger (2019) in discussing that rural areas often have low socio-economic standing which limits their participation in activities concerning finances. This further justifies students' response towards school activities that require monetary support. This is seen as a challenge for schools as students' non-participation defeats the purpose of such in-person activities of promoting a holistic learning across all areas of human development.

Increasing Cases of Student Misbehavior. As schools continue to implement the in-person classes, teachers and other school personnel need to engage more with the students. However, experiences point out that school personnel are now struggling with how to deal with the increasing cases of student misbehavior towards them and their schoolmates. To understand this, participants revealed that;

The behavior of the student is that they become more erratic, their self-esteem is becoming extremely low, they got easily discouraged, they become more troublemaker because two years without the guidance of the teachers is the reason why our students gain a lot of these changes (COOR5);

students have become tough to manage because of their attitude of talking back to teachers. Usually this is a result of the two-year gap of not being guided on what's morally correct attitude (SH2);

The above statements show that students are now experiencing a sudden shift in viewpoint regarding their attitude towards schools and its personnel. In a field observation, the researcher noticed students uttering foul and curse words as though it has been a normal part of their daily conversation. Using the testaments of the participants, the lack of guidance from teachers and the school in general, has contributed significantly to this sudden change. With restrictions imposed for the last two years, teachers had very limited access to monitor student behavior and attitude, let alone to impose corrective measures for misbehavior. With the lack of constant reminding, as well as the inefficiency of the modular distance learning created a vacuum on students' mentality about how to properly behave as a student. Another key finding, shown in the participants' responses is the influence of community behavior on students' attitude. One of the participants vouched that usual conversations in community centers use words that are heavily prohibited in schools. However, the restrictions during the high times of the pandemic, have exposed students on such rustic conversations which have had a significant influence on them causing them to incorporate such words and using to establish conversations akin to how they've seen it in their environment (Zhao, 2022)

Prevalent Learning Gap. The past two years of school lockdowns has significantly reduced students' academic edge as they were not able to effectively learn the competencies that they should have prior to their current curriculum level.

This is justified in the revelations of the participants as they said;

the number of non-readers is very alarming (SH2);

Before the start of the pandemic, non-readers have already been noted in primarily in elementary schools. However, in the onset of the pandemic and school lockdowns, such non-readers have been promoted to secondary schools which creates a dilemma in the focus of teachers in terms of curriculum. The entry of non-readers in high schools creates a gap between the demands of the learners and the competencies that secondary schools are expected to develop over the course of four to six years. DepEd under DepEd Order 62 (2022) also recognized this as a prevalent problem in schools across the country, thus ordering the implementation of Brigada Pagbasa, a program that aims to stimulate schools to create initiatives that will assist students in honing their reading skills.

Aside from challenges in reading, schools also identified academic working skills to have been severely hindered by the pandemic. Modular distance learning during the previous school years have limited the teaching-learning experience of students to reading and writing activities. Aside from that, the nature of modules being brought to their homes, diminish the opportunity for teachers to make sure if the students themselves are really the ones reading and answering their modules. This provides students, and families in general to transfer the responsibility of completing the modules to other members of the family who are more capable of answering it accurately. Parents or families do this either because they want their students to have high grades or if the students themselves are not motivated to answer the modules and that they only need somebody to answer it in the place of the student so that teachers won't

ask them anymore about why they are unable to answer the modules. This creates a dilemma for teachers and students alike.

With the lack of active guidance from teachers as well as the lack of varied, contextualized, and individualized instruction, modular distance learning subjected diverse students into a single method of teaching without consideration of individual differences which is an integral part of effective instruction. Because of this, modules failed to impart the necessary knowledge, let alone develop the intended competencies that students should have developed in the previous school years of the pandemic. As it has already been repeatedly discussed, school lockdowns have caused a significant rise in the loss of learning for students around the world (Hevia et al., 2022). Nevertheless, teachers have been expecting that students already have an idea about their previous topics from their modules, unfortunately, this was not the case. With that, teachers are now facing the dilemma of reteaching the undeveloped competencies from the previous school years which could compromise the expected learning outcomes intended for the current school year.

Overwhelming responsibilities. Another major challenge that has emerged from the rationalization of data is that teachers and students have been overwhelmed with several responsibilities. This code is revealed by participants as they said:

Teachers are heavily loaded with tasks (SH1);

The second one sir is frequent absences and tardiness...they were get distracted, and also their time was being corrupted due to the fact that they are doing farming, or doing chores, or doing sideline because of their kalawad-on (*poverty*) (COOR2);

Even before the return of in-person classes, teachers have been reported to have been exposed to stressors related to their profession as teachers that has had an impact on their mental health. Moreso, this school year, along with the return of in-person classes, participants confess that teachers are also expressed to mental health issues primarily on getting overworked.

With the constant issuance of policies requiring reports and other necessary documents from schools for division and national consolidation, teachers are duty-bound to complete such documents in usually very limited spans of time. Under such conditions teachers are pressured to devote a huge amount of their time and energy in completing such documents alongside preparing and conducting teaching-learning activities with students in in-person classes. Having to keep the balance between the two means that one must be loosely treated than the other. Having to do so, requires a big deal of mental operations for time management, as well as moral repercussions if they fail at either one of their tasks.

Aside from deskwork, teachers are also duty-bound to interact and accommodate various members of the community. Given the strict implementation of the local government on the requirement of student vaccination, teachers are usually the frontliners to deal with possible policy protesters. However, despite this condition, teachers still need to keep a straight face, accommodate conflicting parties' agenda, and remain in the center of every discussion. While this case is ideal, teachers are called to pursue doing so, in order to maintain a harmonious and coordinated relationship with other stakeholders.

Robinson et al. (2023), supports these findings as they discuss that teachers in the Philippines often identify professional roles and frustrations with institutional entities regarding COVID resilience to be the identified major causes of stress for teachers. Aside from that, the above research also added concerns for students' well-being and frustrations with internal management as additional stressors that need to be addressed by policymakers.

Such revelations show that rural junior high school students are exposed to conditions that require them to prioritize responsibilities at home over their academics. These responsibilities press students to be commit absences, as well as lose focus on learning activities, both of which affect their academic performance negatively. As such, this negative performance often led to a variety of concerns for teachers as these may affect their overall efficacy in teaching. However, more than that, being burdened with multiple responsibilities is a problem in itself as it affects the reception of students on the lessons introduced in the in-person classes negatively.

Difficulty Maintaining Health and Safety Standards. Another important code on the challenges experienced by rural junior high schools in resuming in-person classes is that schools experience difficulties in maintaining the health and safety protocols. Participants reveal this by saying:

There was a student who really wants to join the face-to-face classes but because of the COVID vaccine (requirement), she was being restricted to enter the school. Though it didn't take long after she was vaccinated...I let her (during the start of classes for school year 2022-2023) because she was interested and it'd be a wasted opportunity otherwise (COOR2);

in our school, I would say that the biggest problem is the over crowdedness of classrooms which compromises ventilation (SH3)

One of the unique traits of today's in-person classes is the inclusion of COVID resilience measures. However, with the constant loosening of restrictions across the country, maintaining the integrity of these health and safety standards becomes a challenge.

Given the rural location of the participating schools, it is not new to find that there are teachers that tolerate exemptions due to their close relationship with community members. These events occur when teachers realize that local government inspectors do not usually come to monitor them because of their distance from the city center. Hence, subtle exemptions are made in order to make full use of the learning opportunities presented. These becomes a challenge since it exposes the school to possible infection to the deadly COVID virus

Another considerable finding shows that due to the use of makeshift classrooms in rural junior high schools, participating schools often experience overcrowding which compromises the health and safety standard of physical distancing. Continuous loosening also creates a mental image to people distorting the integrity of standard policies. As participants reveal;

Such revelations show that rural junior high schools struggle to sustain health and safety practices because of common disregard and the lack of supplies to accommodate daily conformance to health and safety standards. This can be attributed to the fact that rural junior high schools are not usually monitored for following such standards making it easy for school personnel and other stakeholders to forget strictly abiding to health and safety standards.

Coping Strategies to Address Challenges in In-person Classes

With the given challenges in mind, rural junior high schools opted to cope with these challenges by employing a collaborative approach to address challenging situations, identifying alternative sources of support materials, maintaining effective communication with support networks, minimizing teachers' load of responsibilities, fostering cooperation among school personnel, rewarding students' positive behavior, adjusting instruction according to students' academic strengths and weaknesses, and ensuring sustained provision of essential needs to students.

Employing a collaborative approach towards addressing challenges. Rationalization of data point out that rural schools do not work upon a single dictate but employs a collaborative approach to address problems. With that in mind, participants reveal their statements on the matter;

Have a meeting with teachers to consolidate the problems, make and implement a plan with the teachers, then monitor and assess the plans effectiveness, if it's not then create an alternative (SH1)

Such response is coherent with their testimonies on their preparation activities regarding their adaptable attitude towards possible problems. Schools anticipate problems, and given their wide experience on management, accept the reality that plans will not always move out perfectly, hence plans must be carried out with flexibility in mind. In this case, participants showed that schools showed flexibility in dealing with challenges in an organized manner. Unlike whimsical leadership, participants showed that consolidating information from various areas of the school, in this case from teachers, regarding the nature and intensity of the problem provides the administration with adequate basis for an intervention. Aside from this, holding meetings with teachers also provide an avenue for the administration to gather insights and proposals towards an effective strategy to deal with challenges.

Essential to the collaborative approach is the identification and profiling of challenges that need to be addressed. Cognizant of the current situation on students' reading abilities, the DepEd Division Office has religiously conducted Division-wide reading assessments, to which schools have also taken guidance and motivation from to conduct means to improve students' reading abilities. DepEd Order 14 (2018) mandates that all public schools undergo assessments on their Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) which aims to ensure that schools have been conducting efforts in order to enable all students enrolled to read and write according to their respective grade levels. With this, participants claim that aside from the assessments conducted by the division office, the school itself conducts assessments as to the current level of reading competence of their students for necessary actions. It is in these assessments that participating schools were able to point out reading problems as one of their major challenges in this time of in-person classes. With assessments like this, participating schools are able to visualize the problem to which school meetings will be able to accurately analyze and arrive at more reasonable resolutions.

The next step for this collaborative approach lies on one of the strategies used by the school administrators on the preparation of classes; designating responsibilities. The statements reveal that vital to the preparation for the implementation of interventions in reading and health-related materials, participating schools divide and assign responsibilities to individual persons who are more capable and adept in such area of tasks. These identified school personnel will then be functioning autonomously in order to ensure a timelier and more manageable implementation of intervention plans.

In relation to designating responsibilities, the school has also set up protocol line-ups in practicing autonomous responsibilities. In the context of addressing misbehavior, participants showed that protocols are necessary in order to effectively assess the nature of misbehavior. Doing so, also ensures that persons addressing misbehavior are confident enough in their abilities, hence seek to refer to other persons who are more capable of handling cases they find unassailable on their own. This also shows that while tasks are designated in an autonomous nature, the school itself still works as an interconnected system where all members including other stakeholders like parents to function collaboratively. The feasibility of this protocol may be attributed to the findings of Echazarra & Radinger (2019) emphasizing the sociological nature of rural areas as having strong social ties among its members.

In other words, involving as much social support to manage misbehavior is a major strength for schools in rural areas.

Identify alternative sources of support materials. Another important code generated from the participating schools' means to identify alternative sources of materials. Being distant from the city center where necessary materials and support are easily accessible, rural junior high schools mostly had to rely on their capacity and nearby resources to make necessary changes possible. This condition of insufficiency is expressed by a participant as he acclaimed;

In our case, we just make use of whatever supplies that we have and wait for the action or orders from the Division/Central Office (SH1);

Teachers are very resourceful...they really find ways to provide the needed lessons for a particular week (COOR1);

This shows that as a public school, participants rely heavily on the material and financial provision of the national government. However, given the bureaucratic nature of government offices, timeliness of such provisions is usually compromised thereby forcing schools, especially those located away from the city center to be patient. However, apart from this, schools also expressed that as they wait for support coming from the national government, they also make full use of whatever supply is left or can be utilized from their environment. In other words, schools made alternative ways to generate materials they needed.

In the demand of additional learning materials, participants stressed that the reason why securing learning materials was no longer heavily considered a challenge despite it being a lack in the preparation for in-person classes, is that teachers have been practicing looking for online resources as an alternative to the delayed learning materials, in this case modules from the Division Office. With the lack of directives about whether textbooks will be distributed for the in-person classes, teachers made it a point to reuse the modules from the previous school years as their new references for their lessons. Online websites offering varied modules are also explored by teachers in order to add variety to their instruction. While other teachers tap their social networks for possible sources of learning materials for referencing in the in-person classes.

However, as much as being able to secure alternative sources of learning materials is the ability of the schools to use their available materials efficiently. Since participating schools admitted that they are strongly supported by their barangay or local government, they were able to easily request assistance from the community to make separate rooms for reading. In this case, the school efficiently utilized their community networks in order to support their efforts towards addressing challenges related to students' low reading abilities. Another participant also revealed that they initiated feeding programs for non to frustrating readers in order to encourage them to participate in their practice reading activities. In this case, the school needed a considerable amount of finances in order to make such endeavor possible.

This particular event shows that the school allots a significant value on their reading program that they are willing to invest their independent earning for its success. All of these provide an insight as to the resourceful character of junior high schools. Despite their geographic disadvantage, these schools are still able to manage accomplishing goals as much as their urban counterparts by invoking community support and local resources. As such, rural junior high school's resourcefulness relies heavily on their ability to independently identify alternative sources of materials, and to discern a more efficient way of utilizing local resources in order to achieve goals.

Maintaining Effective Communication with support networks. Participants expressed that vital to the management of a problem is active and progress-oriented communication across various social networks of the school. This is shown as participants expressed:

all we have to do is monitor for information (coming from the division office), because the school has a consistent internet connection so even if we are far from the city center, we can still manage (SH1)

constant communication between the school and parents since we already have a strong and supportive relationship] (SH2);

Statements given show light about what the school does to effectively carry out the policies of DepEd. This shows that public schools are entirely committed to conform with the directives coming from the Department of Education. Moreover, it affirms that schools' agenda are likewise the agenda of DepEd and vice versa. It is in this constant line of communication that rural junior high schools are able to inquire on the initial response needed in times of challenges. It's also an opportunity for both parties to efficiently share information and materials to help schools overcome challenging situations in the return to in-person classes.

Constant communication with DepEd keeps schools updated with the latest issuances that enable schools to keep up with the programs and benefits that the national government mandates to them. As public schools, it is essential that rural junior high schools maintain unity with DepEd's progress. In doing so, schools must also share their progress reports to the Division Office for national consolidation which will add to the DepEd's database of issues that need to be addressed. Hence, school-to-agency communication is highly essential for rural junior high schools to be guided and supported in realizing a safe and effective implementation of in-person classes in the country.

Another line of communication identified by participants to be essential in addressing challenges is with parents and community members. Participants admit that they constantly need the support of parents along with other external stakeholders such as barangay local government officials. Hence, constant communication has always been seen as an important means to sustain the relationship between the school and the community. Regular PTA meetings and participation in community activities make it possible for the schools to maintain this communication line and regularly inform the community of the school's condition.

Given the challenges of misbehavior and disinterest in participating in school activities, schools ask the support of parents by constantly communicating to them their role of stressing out the importance of taking education seriously. Schools report to parents both academic and behavioral conditions of their students, as well as communicate possible parental guidance strategies that they can use to influence their children's behavior. However, the ultimate decision to support or neglect the cause of teachers are in the hands of the parents themselves. While schools report to have had a positive response from their engagements with parents, there still remain cases of unchanged behavior. This may be attributed to the social reality in rural areas where students have had to prioritize earning for a living than to simply focus on schooling. With such a reason, it becomes difficult for parents to sustain their commitment as they themselves see livelihood with equal or, for some, greater importance to education. Despite this, school communication with parents still holds an important role in assisting schools to modify students' negative attitude towards schooling.

Moreover, schools do not solely rely on parents in modifying students' attitude towards education, as participants reveal that they also engage with students regularly. Constantly reminding

students both in school and at home is the strategy of rural junior high schools to effectively condition positive school attitude in students. By doing so, schools are able to influence students' motivation, and mood towards education, as well as improve their cognitive abilities (Qu & Ong, 2015).

Minimizing Teachers' load of Responsibility. In order to address challenges on overloaded responsibilities, rural junior high schools invest their efforts on ways to minimize teachers' work load. To do this, participants reveal that school administrators initiate changes in work loads in order to balance work-life attention of school personnel. This is further detailed in the statements exposed by participants as they said;

since we're left with no choice, we just have to fuse some sections, this is also to lessen the load of our teachers (SH1)

Schools recognize that teaching can be a very overwhelming profession especially in this moment of major restructuring as schools prepare and sustain measures to keep in-person classes safe for all. However, going back to the demands of the school prior to the start of in-person classes, rural junior high schools often have a very few number of teachers which makes it difficult to divide the number of students in ideal class sizes. However, the most pervasive public-school condition that is disadvantaged by insufficient number of teachers is the existence of numerous ancillary positions. In order to address this, one strategy employed by school administrations is the union of two sections of the same year level. Doing so eliminates duplicate preparation in separate time schedules. This means that teachers will now have more time on other relevant activities, and eventually improve daily productivity.

Fostering School Cooperation among School Personnel. In further response to the challenge of overworked teachers, rationalization of data also shows that schools have been fostering cooperation among its school personnel as a way to support one another. To discuss on this, participants have revealed:

As a teacher, I prioritize self-care and communication with colleagues. It's also important to help oneself thru socio-emotional learning and professional development (COOR3);

the teachers are very cooperative, always ready to help, and make adjustments. That's why I can say that we are able to cope with the challenges by developing the sense of cooperation and unity (SH1).

Aside from school administrators, teachers themselves have been looking for individual means to sustain both their interest and capacity to work effectively. As claimed in the statement above, teachers often release their work stress by communicating with their colleagues. By building social relationships with their co-workers, teachers are able to open up various problems related to work and other life areas. Aside from this, constant communication with colleagues enables teachers to gain insights about similar challenges which can provide them with information on how to address such challenges and build up confidence.

Given the small number of teachers, along with a relatively compressed set of buildings and classrooms, teachers and other school personnel are able to engage with one another easily. Given such conditions, teachers are able to monitor the conditions of their colleagues, helping them relate with one another, and eventually cultivating a culture of helpfulness and camaraderie. Having few teachers also meant that school administrators assign more than one responsibility to each teacher, adding to each of their value in accomplishing tasks and making each one of them as indispensable members of the school.

These conditions make teachers feel more valued not only for their contributions but also for the fact that they are part of the school's workforce.

Rewarding Positive Behavior. Rural junior high schools respond to challenges in disinterest in learning activities by rewarding positive behavior. Participants revealed this as they said;

we also have a reward system for those who easily progress in their reading abilities. Our latest initiative in this system is to give feeding programs for non-readers twice a week (SH2);

Instead of focusing on punitive discipline, rural junior high schools invest in positive reinforcements for good behavior. Food, in particular, is a common reward for students as teachers consider it to be more sensible given the common condition of students in rural areas who only bring minimal quantities of food in school. In doing so, schools are able to target both nutritional satisfaction, and behavioral shifting.

Adjusting Instruction According to Students' Academic Strengths and Weaknesses. Schools also emphasized the importance of adjusting to the learning needs of students. As participants revealed;

for me, I just use various strategies in teaching so that they (students) would be ready in engaging in school activities (T5);

As participants revealed the existence of academic unpreparedness as a result of the lack of actual guidance from teachers, participants now point out that they need to cover the learning gap by employing various strategies. Strategies exposed by participants include semantic comprehension, differentiated instruction, and selection of appropriate assessment difficulty. These adjustments are done in order to gradually condition students' cognition where the teacher has to exert additional effort in developing unachieved competencies in the pandemic years until such time that students themselves can learn complex concepts on their own (Mcleod, 2023). By doing so, participants expect that these strategies will enable to students to perceive their lessons in lighter mood, as well as appreciate the amount of support that they can get from the in-person classes in understanding their lessons.

As participants revealed in their demands, students show signs of being mentally attached to their modular distance learning culture, and find the in-person classes to be new to them. This adds to the academic unpreparedness of students which significantly affects their academic performance negatively. In anticipation of this, participants reveal that they have prepared for this kind of attitude to rise from students, hence made sure to be as open to students as possible. By doing so, they expect students to freely express any emotionally disturbing experiences that could potentially affect their performance. Another important reason for being socially approachable to students, is to improve students' perception of schools as a place of kindness and refuge.

Ensuring Sustained Provision of Essential Needs. Another important aspect of an encouraging environment is the provision of essential services. Participants reveal their provision of such services as they said;

"All students participated in face-to-face classes are required to bring 1-2 liters of drinking water for them to use for washing their hands. Few months later "patabay project" was implemented with the effort of the School Parent-Teacher Association, wherein all parents donated a little amount for the implementation of "patabay" project." (COOR4)

Water accessibility is among, if not the most essential service that schools need in any context. Rural junior high schools, admit that water accessibility is indeed a major lack in their schools, hence schools have been investing local resources on securing a stable and safe access to water for the benefit of both students and teachers. Indeed, the community thru the School Parent-Teacher Association is supportive of this endeavor as parents themselves see the value of keeping their children hydrated, as well as keeping proper hygiene especially in the current dynamics of the climate.

Lastly, schools also made efforts to support the external community as a way of supporting socio-economic needs. This is shown in a triangulation interview where parents testify that the school did not make expensive demands to the already existing contribution of the PTA. It was also mentioned that the school even distributed vegetable seeds for parents to cultivate in their backyard.

In order to reciprocate support from the community, rural junior high schools made sure to consider parents' condition in their activities. Given the relatively modest socio-economic conditions of the majority of rural population, schools prevented any form of contribution outside those resolved in the Parents-Teachers council. Moreover, rural junior high schools also procured from the MOOE funds, study and learning materials for students to use in the in-person classes. In doing so, the school ensures that parents no longer need to buy numerous quantities of study materials lest share such burden with the school. In this case, schools are able to portray an image of support that both parents and students can appreciate.

4. CONCLUSION

The reopening of in-person classes is an uncertain task for a lot of schools in the Philippines, especially for rural junior high schools whose geographic and socio-economic conditions pose several disadvantages. Challenges were deemed inevitable necessitating further actions from schools. Given its rural community, rural junior high schools often have a small population making it unable to qualify for a greater funding from national government to improve school operations. Similar conditions also meant that rural schools only have a small number of teaching force that are often burdened with an irrational number of responsibilities, thereby affecting productivity. Apart from this, cognitive and behavioral effects of the modular distance learning have also affected school implementation of the in-person classes.

In response to these challenges, rural schools have implemented various coping strategies aimed at sustaining positive outcomes during the transition to in-person instruction. Notably, these schools have emphasized the importance of collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders, leveraging the interconnected relationships within rural communities and small organizations to navigate challenging circumstances effectively. This socially integrated approach fosters a supportive environment conducive to successful implementation of in-person classes.

The contribution of this research lies in shedding light on the unique challenges faced by rural junior high schools during the transition to in-person classes and identifying effective coping strategies employed by these institutions. By elucidating the experiences of rural schools and highlighting successful approaches to overcoming obstacles, this study informs educational stakeholders and policymakers about the needs and opportunities for improvement in rural education settings. Ultimately, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of educational transition in rural contexts and provide valuable insights for enhancing educational resilience and effectiveness in similar settings.

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