



Education and COVID-19: Experiences and insights from a developing country

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the pandemic varies from one country to the next, but poor and developing countries are the ones that are most at risk. This risk is compounded when it concerns sectors that are more vulnerable than others. Such is the case of the Philippine education sector. In this essay, we will look into the experiences of the Philippine education sector amidst the COVID-19 onslaught. We will glean insights that can serve as lessons that point to ways we can improve from such experiences. We will discuss how the prevalent issues of inequality, poverty, and reactionary politics have forced Filipino families, especially students, into a position where they are expected to continue pursuing quality education despite the pandemic taking its toll on the economic resources and mental health of families, students, and teachers. We will try to show what steps can be taken for the Philippine education sector to become more prepared, resilient, and effective in crisis contexts.

KEYWORDS

Education and technology; COVID-19 pandemic; Philippines; learner-centered; community of inquiry

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how sound policies, timely interventions, proper resource allocations, and systematic prioritization of necessities could have significant impacts on how a nation will survive crisis contexts. These factors have profound, if not irreversible, ramifications in the context of developing countries, such as the Philippines, whose very limited resources are stretched thinly by the effects of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic varies from one country to the next. But the fact remains that poor and developing countries are the ones that are most at risk. This risk is compounded when it concerns sectors that are more vulnerable than others. Such is the case of the Philippine education sector. The succeeding discussion tries to highlight some of the lessons that may be learned from the experiences of a developing country – the Philippines – with regard to education and COVID-19. In particular, it will delve deeper into the question, ‘has the aims of Philippine education in the new normal shifted?’ by looking into the Filipino-lived experience,

which may be helpful in evoking and structuring what must be considered as the more important aims of education in the new normal.

When the first case of COVID-19 was detected in the Philippines, its leaders were slow to react. A piece of legislation, the Senate Bill No. 1573 or the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act that was filed seven years ago is yet to be passed (Tan, 2020). The military and police were prioritized to lead the response instead of experts from the medical and allied sciences (Cabato, 2020; Dizon, 2020). Resources that could have been spent to flatten the curve were wasted on politics and non-essentials (CNN Philippines, 2020; Cuazon, 2020; Punongbayan, 2020; Quismorio, 2020). Today, the virus is still ravaging the country and among those that are drastically affected is the education sector. For instance, the production of learning modules in time for the opening of classes forced educators to find additional funding sources for the printing and reproduction. Some teachers had to cross rivers to distribute these modules to the homes of their students. Other education institutions needed to suspend their remote learning activities because not everyone has access to the needed facilities, especially students from poor families. Furthermore pushing through with classes has had adverse effects on the mental health of the students and teachers (Bernardo, 2020, Hernando-Malipot, 2020; Simbulan, 2020).

Statistics show that the literacy rate in the Philippines has steadily increased year-on-year for the past 40 years (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020). Unfortunately, the numbers do not show the reality of the state of how education is delivered on the ground. Underneath the statistics, there is a glaring divide between the rich and the poor. Many poor students and teachers cannot afford to buy the necessary equipment for online learning. While the rich can afford unlimited internet access, the poor can barely pay for metered mobile data packages. And while some students can afford to study in the safety of their own homes, others put themselves at risk just so that they are not left behind in their education. For instance, some students need to climb on the roof of their houses, on trees, or on mountains just to find a stronger internet connection. Some do so even while peddling food and cigarettes in the streets.

In addition, there is the seemingly opposing motivations of educators and the government in educating the young. Educators see education as a tool to mold students to become good and reasonable human beings and to help them become a better version of themselves. In contrast, government uses education as a tool for socio-economic development and to address the needs of the country. There is also the pressure to produce labor-ready graduates brought about by globalization and international development. This is manifested by the fact that class requirements are still demanding because students have to move up the next grade level, graduate at the same time, or prepare to pass licensure exams, even if not everyone has equal access to educational materials and do not have the means to study properly. These harsh realities, among others (Durban & Catalan, 2012), are unfortunately exacerbated by the onslaught of COVID-19 (Teodoro, 2020). Despite this, the education sector must do what it can to go forward amidst this pandemic.

According to UNESCO (2020), the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector is especially vulnerable to learning loss during the pandemic because children at this age need extra support from their parents or caregivers. In addition, most ECE schools are privately funded and enrollment in private schools has dropped significantly. The survey and desk review of UNESCO Bangkok with the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI), and International Step by Step Association (ISSA) provided key messages about the concerns and support needed by the ECCE sector in the Asia-Pacific region which are very much applicable in situation of the Philippines. The study revealed that the education sector will benefit from the following kinds of support: job security and timely, adequate compensation; pre-service and in-service training designed to help teachers adapt to distance learning delivery; and support for teachers' health and social-emotional wellbeing and resilience before, during, and after the crisis. Other relevant concerns include ensuring inclusion, equity, and fairness in providing distance learning, providing clear guidance for

and in maintaining regular communication with parents/guardians, and continuity of quality education through inter-sectoral approaches.

In this regard, to adapt to the country's pandemic situation, the Department of Education (DepEd) released the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) that shall serve as the guideline for the implementation of the revised K to 12 curricula (Gonzales, 2020). The said curricula was a result of increasing Philippine basic education from 10 to 12 years by virtue of Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013. The MELCs further narrow down all the possible essential lessons, concepts, and skills sets that a student must know, acquire, and understand, even if the classes will be conducted through different modalities sans face-to-face physical classroom interactions. Meanwhile, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) also implemented changes in the possible delivery of the curriculum and accessibility to student services to further address the needs of the students in higher education (Boliver, 2020; Magsambol, 2020). The proverbial ball now lies on the efficiency and effectiveness of these plans of action towards the holistic development of students while staying in their own homes. Interestingly, it is at this juncture where the implications of having streamlined curricula coupled with changes in strategies in delivering education are revealed. More precisely, how did these interventions affect the education situation in the Philippines during the pandemic?

During the old normal, teachers take charge of the education of students. They prepare lesson plans and conduct face-to-face lectures and activities. Teachers facilitate the building of communities of inquiry and learning wherein students can collaborate with each other to broaden and deepen their understanding of their lessons. In this set-up, indeed, there were instances wherein students sleep or chat with their seatmates inside the classroom. They also sometimes talked over each other, resulting in noise instead of collaborative dialogue. Some did assignments for other classes or prepared for a quiz for the next class during lectures. Fortunately, given that the set-up is face-to-face, teachers can also respond appropriately. Teachers can call the attention of their students and have them do extra activities, confiscate paraphernalia that do not contribute to the discussion, or make the discussion more interesting to get their attention. All these play different roles that contribute to a richer and more effective learning interaction, which is absent in the new normal of online or modular learning.

It would appear that, in the time of the new normal, the shift from a teacher-led education to a student-led and technology-enhanced one has become not only necessary, but more apparent (Casal, 2020). Thus, it would seem that the aims of Philippine education have shifted from one that is focused on the students to one that is focused on the family (not just the students) and getting the most out of technology. Since students are studying at home, they can easily approach their family members to ask for information or assistance regarding their lessons. In addition, despite the fact that students are provided modules and/or course packs that will guide them on what they need to study, it is within the student's grasp to go beyond what has been determined by their curricula and learn something new. This is made possible by the presence of technological devices in their respective homes that may not be available inside the classroom as well as the absence of a structured day-to-day schedule that is implemented in schools. This, however, is not without its disadvantages. Some students tend to lose focus since distractions are abundant at home, parents worry about having to shell out money for additional remote-learning-related expenses, and teachers are doing more work without the increase in compensation (Nicholls, 2020). In some cases, relatives are the ones who work on the requirements instead of the students (Bernardo, 2020). Thus, the increased involvement of the family in the education of the student – and knowing when to get involved as well as the extent and limits of their involvement – has now become more in demand and relevant than ever before. Unfortunately, this shift has resulted in an additional burden to many poor families whose members are now forced to divide their time among managing the household, clocking in the required hours for work, and guiding the children in their education, among other things. Whereas rich parents can afford hiring tutors to help their children with their lessons, poor parents rely on teachers to educate their young. Sadly, since most of the family income is spent on

food and utility bills, families lack the resources to pay for a stable and unlimited internet connection, as well as gadgets such as laptops or smartphones. Consequently, poor families have very limited choices. It is left to the family to take charge of the education of their younger members (Dollanganger, 2020).

This, of course, does not mean that prior to this challenge-ridden shift to distance learning (Kritz, 2020), there were no challenges in face-to-face classroom-based learning. In many public schools, where the majority of students come from poor families, there has always been a shortage of classrooms, textbooks, and other educational resources, even prior to the pandemic. What makes this more problematic is that since the national government has, year-on-year, failed to provide adequate educational materials to public schools before the pandemic, it would be impossible for it to supply all students at these public schools the gadgets necessary for online learning during the pandemic. In addition, even if there was some way to provide them with laptops, smartphones, or tablets, the telecommunications infrastructure of the country is ill-equipped to cater to the internet connectivity needs of everyone (Dollanganger, 2020), especially those who reside in far-flung areas. In this case, even families who can purchase their own gadgets are not guaranteed to receive quality online education. As a result, physical learning modules are the medium of choice. Unfortunately, teachers are the ones who suffer the most because they are required to reproduce these modules in spite of tight budgets (Mercado, 2020). They are also compelled to distribute these learning modules that, in some instances, may take a four-hour motorcycle ride through rocky, muddy, or uneven terrain (Casilao, 2020) or require them to cross rivers (Aglibot et al., 2020) just to deliver them to the hands of their students. The foregoing problems could have easily been mitigated if the elected and appointed government officials during the past half-century focused their efforts on resolving these problems instead of wasting the time and money of Filipinos on their personal politics and ambitions (Syjuco, 2017).

In the time of distance-learning, there may be goals that cannot be fully attained due to the changes in the physical setting of the 'classroom', especially if the 'classroom' right now is the one that has long been considered as the home. The family has been given the charge to supervise the education of their younger members. However, in many instances, the older members cannot do so because they have to manage the household by putting food on the table, finding money to pay the bills, and taking care of the young or the elderly. As a result, the students, themselves, must step up and take charge of their own personal education. It is no wonder that the mental health of students has been a point of concern from the onset when the government decided that schools will be reopened amidst the pandemic (Aguilar, 2020; Lalu, 2020). For these reasons, nurturing online/virtual communities that can help replicate the collaborative and supportive nature of communities of inquiry and learning that are built in physical classrooms appear to be timely and relevant.

For such purposes, apart from popular learning management systems (LMS), social networking sites such as Facebook, Viber, or WhatsApp can be utilized and maximized. Given that the Philippines is dubbed as the social media capital of the world (Mateo, 2018), the integration of remote teaching and learning with popular social media technologies allow for more accessible quality education to Filipino students in many parts of the country. However, a decent internet connectivity is still necessary and a pressing challenge in many areas. Either students cannot afford to pay for reliable and unlimited internet connection or telecommunication infrastructures are not enough to accommodate sustained online learning. Several sources show that the average data consumption for using Facebook is between 120-160MB/hour. In comparison, Zoom consumes between 540MB-2.4GB/hour depending on the call type (one-on-one or group) and video quality (Abbott, 2020; Seph, 2020). In addition, videoconferencing requires high spec hardware. This shows why social media can be accessible to many Filipinos (even if they have to climb on the roof of their houses or on top of trees just to get a stable internet signal) while access to videoconferencing platforms can be very problematic. Further, if social media is maximized, there is also the existing potential for international collaboration since these social networking platforms transcend

geographical boundaries. By exploiting the advantages offered by information and communication technology, the potentials of creating and nurturing communities of learning and inquiry in the Philippines seem to be limitless. Unfortunately, all these benefits are still found in the realm of the possible because the Department of Education discourages using social media for online learning due to the possibility of exposing students to cyber threats (Hernando-Malipot, 2019; Papa, 2020). This appears to be one of the more important aims in the new normal that the Philippine education sector and the national government must focus on. If these institutions can collaborate with each other as well as with the various technology providers in the country to ensure that these social media platforms become safe learning spaces, then the benefits to students who only have access to social media for their education can be immensely helpful during the pandemic.

Ultimately, the new normal in Philippine education is characterized by remote learning that heavily relies on the students' and their respective families' capabilities to sustain quality education with minimal to almost non-existent supervision from teachers due to the fact that many families cannot afford the technology for online connectivity. In worse cases, education relies on the student alone because other family members have other equally important things to take care of, which would demand the student to quickly develop as an independent and self-supervised learner. The COVID-19 experiences have further highlighted how the existing problems of poverty, economic inequality, and reactive governance can drastically affect the delivery of education in crisis contexts and that things might take a turn for the worse if the proper authorities fail to do something to resolve these problems. These experiences underscore the recommendations of the UNESCO survey and desk review as vital lessons that need to be taken to heart and must be implemented immediately so as to alleviate the sufferings felt by Filipino students and their respective families. Furthermore, these experiences emphasize the necessity to maximize new media such as the various social media platforms to serve as avenues for education due to their accessibility to most Filipino students. If there is a lesson that can be gleaned here, it is the fact that the government has the power and capability to protect its citizens from cyber threats and Filipino students will benefit greatly if their government will exercise their power to ensure that the social media in the country becomes a safe learning space.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Philippine education sector not only to upgrade its capabilities for remote learning, but more importantly, to realize that it could barely survive without the social, economic, and political problems of the country being resolved. As it appears, charging head on into a crisis with these problems as baggage would require Filipino students to take charge of their education, since their respective families and teachers can only do so much to help them. However, there is no need to leave these students alone to fend for themselves. Rather, an opportunity presents itself: to gather students together into small communities – communities of learning and inquiry – with the help of technology. With the new strategies being developed and reintroduced, the direction now seems to point to the possibility of fostering communities of learning and inquiry through distance education (Spencer, 2020), preferably, using social media. In the end, it will be noteworthy for future researchers to look into how the community of inquiry and learning framework can best help students from the Philippines as well as students from other developing and poor countries to achieve quality education through technology-assisted interventions.

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