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Problems and responses of schools in the COVID -19 pandemic: The case of Mountain Province

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Abstract

This study explored the problems faced by the schools in Mountain Province, Philippines with the implementation of distance education during the pandemic and looked into the schools' good practices to mitigate the problems. 26 schools participated in this study. Analysis of the data gathered highlighted the serious problems in Philippine education. The problems faced by the schools during the pandemic are similar to those faced by developing countries, however, the problems and responses faced by the schools in Mountain Province are specific to their context. The common problems identified during this pandemic are: difficulty in distributing and retrieving modules, unavailability of equipment and gadgets, poor internet access, poor quality of learning materials, the unpreparedness of parents taking on the role of teachers, teachers' lack of training on the modality of learning, lack of technological knowledge, a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction, an inadequate learning management plan for blended learning and the decreased income of private schools. The good practices implemented by the schools to address some of their problems are: home visits, tutorials, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) involvement, remediation classes, a seminar on stress management and mechanisms for blended learning. There is a need for the school administration to provide learning management plans which should include short and long-term goals and professional learning initiatives like training to improve teachers' technological pedagogical knowledge.

Keywords: Challenges, Distance education, Modality of learning, Modular approach, Pandemic, School initiatives.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed educational systems worldwide. Because of the public health crisis, most countries implemented lockdowns to control the spread of the virus. Hence, all educational institutions were forced to introduce various learning modalities to continue learning. This led to a sudden paradigm shift in education. In the Philippines, education agencies like the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education

(CHED) implemented learning modalities such as modular, blended learning, online learning, television-based and radio-based learning for elementary and high school.

The DepEd had already created a task group in response to COVID-19 in the educational system before classes were suspended on March 16, 2020. The task group formulates policies and develops strategies and action plans. Directives from the department have been continually updated depending on the country's pandemic status. On the other hand, the CHED advised Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to continue classes using available flexible learning and other alternative modes of learning instead of on-campus learning.

These strategic actions of DepEd and CHED aimed to continue education even in times of disasters and crises (artificial and natural) since massive dropouts would be a much greater, long-term concern. However, the shift from face-to-face classes to other learning modalities created problems for teachers and learners who did not have access to technology [1].

All public schools, elementary and secondary in Mountain Province have adapted to a modular approach because of the province's geographical location whereas other places have a slow internet connection, weak cell phone signal or no reception. As for private or non-DepEd schools, they were allowed to start with their classes as long as they strictly used distance learning modalities. Furthermore, the private schools were required to submit the relevant documents to the regional director such as the school calendar and activities for school year 2020-2021 and the readiness assessment.

In Mountain Province, private schools have implemented modular and blended learning. For example, a private school in Natonin chose the modular approach. However, two private schools (elementary and secondary levels) in Bontoc had implemented blended learning where students had a scheduled face-to-face class and modular for off-campus learning.

The changes in the education sector due to this pandemic have introduced innovative approaches to respond to the paradigm shift in education. New problems continue to emerge in the new learning modality experienced by teachers, parents and students.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Problems in Distance Education as a Modality of Learning during the Pandemic

The education system around the world was greatly affected by COVID -19. Hence, all educational institutions implemented varied distance learning modalities to deliver education to their learners. Most schools have to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process. Inequalities in access to technology between rich and poor, rural and urban areas, across and within countries are felt and observed [2]. Some countries have chosen high-tech modalities, including online (synchronous or asynchronous) platforms and apps, low tech modalities were also their option because they had a higher reach which included T.V., radio, short message service (SMS), commonly referred to as text messaging and printed learning materials [2].

In 2002, [Valentine \[3\]](#) discussed the promises and problems of distance education in his paper. The identified problems include the quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology and the attitudes of instructors, students and administrators. All the issues in distance education for almost two decades are the same today. The quality and misuse of technology by teachers, students and administrators towards distance education still need to be addressed, especially in developing countries.

Some studies in the Philippines have presented challenges that teachers face in implementing distance learning through a modular approach. Like in the study of [Castroverde and Acala \[4\]](#) in Tacloban City, the problems of teachers focused purely on the preparation of modules, distribution of modules, monitoring of students' learning, retrieval of modules, checking and evaluating students' answers in the modules and giving feedback to students. However, with the problems that teachers faced during this process, they found that teachers coped with these challenges by staying positive, managing time and incorporating alternative plans such as home visits. Sometimes teachers would spend their own money to reproduce modules.

[Talimodao and Madrigal \[5\]](#) also assessed the quality and implementation of printed modular distance learning at the elementary level. Their findings show that although modules are evaluated, inadequacies and a lack of appropriateness in summative tests, activities, outputs and post-tests were still given to learners that affected the modules' quality. This reflects the teacher's need for support in the said modality which could be addressed through instructional supervision. According to [Agayon, et al. \[6\]](#), teachers were greatly challenged in the transfer of learning quality, module distribution and retrieval, power disruption and internet connection. As observed in practice and other research studies, teachers need support in implementing distance learning across grade levels and content areas, especially elementary teachers, since they experience disproportionate challenges in teaching and assessing distance learning [7].

The teachers and learners were not the only ones affected by module learning. The parents and guardians of elementary and secondary learners view modular learning as the most appropriate modality of the learner's education during the pandemic. However, the parents had difficulties in balancing responsibilities since they struggled with the delivery of instruction, the use and availability of technology, unsatisfactory learning outcomes, personal problems on health, stress and the learning style of their child on top of financial difficulties during lockdown [8]. These difficulties are a significant part of parents' experiences as they call for higher parental involvement, so learning may still occur in a difficult situation [9].

The study by [Agaton and Cueto \[10\]](#) focused on the parents' experiences of modular learning who acted as tutors, home-schooling teachers and learning supervisors. Their study shows that parents need to adjust to the new learning setup since it requires their presence to study with their children for a better learning outcome. In their study, the parents acknowledged the unique roles of teachers in the teaching-learning process. In this learning modality, parents observed that

their children have difficulty in understanding some concepts because of the fast pacing of lessons, too many activities in a short period of time and unattained learning outcomes. Furthermore, this new instructional setup for parents posed instructional, financial and technical problems. [Agaton and Cueto \[10\]](#) found that parents generally had a negative attitude towards online learning because they have difficulty in balancing their responsibilities and lack of time and professional knowledge to support online learning.

[Tadesse and Muluye \[11\]](#) also conducted a review on the impact of COVID-19 in education in developing countries. Their study also emphasized that female students from low-income families and in rural areas are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, forced labour and early marriage.

The study of [Özüdoğru \[12\]](#) found that pre-service teachers have faced problems implementing distance education. The researcher noted excessive workload due to homework, an ambiguous evaluation system and technical problems during live courses. Among the students, individual problems such as an inability to focus, an inability to communicate with friends and a lack of knowledge were also experienced. Another theme identified is impossibility since the students had problems with an internet connection, lack of computers, unsuitable smartphones and inequality of opportunities. Instructors faced problems such as lack of communication, being unable to receive feedback, skills and attitudes not being accustomed to the system were also experienced.

[Süt and Öznaçar \[13\]](#) also looked into the effects of COVID-19 on education in different age groups and occupations in Turkey and found that there is a negative impact on the loss of human resources and on developing the online system for smart classes; hence, their study suggests changes and the implementation of online tools and technology.

In the Philippines, [Rotas and Cahapay \[14\]](#); [Bustillo and Aguilos \[15\]](#) investigated the challenges that confronted university students in distance education during the pandemic. Their results revealed that most of the problems are related to technology such as internet connectivity problems, inadequate learning resources and their limited access to technology because of their socioeconomic status and geographical location. These problems are also true at the elementary and high school levels.

[Samartin, et al. \[16\]](#) also looked into the experiences of senior high school students in distant learning and the impact of the learning modality on the students' learning experiences during the school year 2020-2021. They have highlighted the difficulties students have experienced regarding technology, independent learning and financial capabilities and resources.

[Dangle and Sumaoang \[17\]](#) conducted a study in two national high schools in the northern Philippines, one in Baguio City, Benguet and the other in San Gabriel, La Union. Their study found the challenges teachers, parents and students faced in modular learning in secondary public schools. They found that students prefer modular learning to online learning, but they need help in subject areas such as mathematics, history, entrepreneurship and applied economics. Other problems faced by students were lack of sleep, low internet connection, self-studying and difficulty completing the activities because there were more activities in each module and they needed more focus. The researchers found that parents lack the knowledge to assist their children in their activities. The teachers have problems with a lack of resources for the production of the modules, a lack of trust in the validity of the answered modules and a low internet connection.

Though all the studies mentioned above looked into the problems faced by teachers and students as a basis for recommending national governments propose policies or increase funding to schools, the studies did not explore how schools, teachers and other stakeholders responded to these problems.

Hence, this research focused more on the problems experienced by the schools in Mountain Province. Specifically, it looked into the problems the schools have experienced in implementing distance learning where a modular approach and using Audio-Visual Presentations (AVPs) were encouraged in the province. Additional to the problems schools are facing, this study also looked into the initiatives of the school heads, teachers and parents in addressing these problems. Identifying the good practices of the schools as well as their initiatives to mitigate these problems is important to the study as it hopes to be a tool that could serve as a discourse for the schools and their stakeholders as it sheds new ideas on addressing emerging problems in the education sector. This could help policymakers in the province or region formulate appropriate guidelines on how education should occur in the community context.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the theory of distance education. Though distance-learning education has existed for decades, it is new to most Filipino teachers especially in its implementation in primary and secondary education. Schools worldwide have implemented distance learning with the emergence of technology. However, in the case of the Philippines, most schools only implemented this due to the COVID -19 pandemic.

Distance education complements face-to-face instruction. It is an approach to deliver education to students who are not physically present in the classroom. According to Moore's theory, distance education is characterized by learner autonomy and the distance between teachers and learners [18]. In Moore's theory, [Simonson, et al. \[18\]](#) further explained that learners depend more on the teacher in the traditional classroom setting while in distance education, there is a gap between the learners and the teachers where learners should accept the responsibility of the learning program. With this setup, the autonomous learners will receive little help from the teachers. Though the theory relies heavily on the materials used in the learning process because either learners or teachers do not meet at all or only occasionally, distance education does not simply mean producing materials. However, it is necessary to include communication between human beings [19]. Communication technology provided new possibilities for improving distance education. [Holmberg \[19\]](#) also calls this the theory of "teaching-learning conversations." Suppose the subject or course represents communication processes that have

conversational characteristics. Learners will have a stronger feeling of personal relations with their teachers even in distance education.

This approach affects an institution's pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs. With distance learning, technology is highly involved in the teaching and learning process.

DepEd acknowledges the issues of poor internet connection in rural areas. Hence, schools implemented various learning modalities depending on the student's available resources such as Online Distance Learning (ODL), Modular Distance Learning (MDL) and Self-learning Module (T.V./ Radio-based instruction). With these learning modalities, teachers were also expected to maintain communication with their learners through text messaging, group chats or other modes of communication.

Since Mountain Province does not have a stable internet connection and considering the student's economic status, the Schools Division of Mountain Province opted for the Modular Distance Learning and self-learning module in mid-2020. It included audio-visual presentations for the school year 2021-2022. A modular approach is a form of distance learning.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to address the problems faced by the schools in Mountain Province during the COVID-19 pandemic and the good practices employed by these schools to respond to these problems. The data gathered from the teachers, school heads and parents through interviews and focus group discussions during the site visits in the schools of Mountain Province were analyzed using thematic analysis. Document analysis of the reports submitted by the public schools to the division office of Mountain Province was also employed to validate the data gathered during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interview.

4.2. Locale of the Study

This research was conducted in the Mountain Province. This is one of the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) provinces located in the northern part of Luzon, Philippines. Mountain Province has ten municipalities: Barlig, Bauko, Besao, Bontoc, Natonin, Paracelis, Sabangan, Sadanga, Sagada and Tadian. The study was conducted from June 2020 - June 2021. [Table 1](#) summarizes the schools that were visited for each municipality.

Table 1.
List of schools that participated in the interview and focus group discussion.

No.	Municipality	Elementary		Secondary	
		Public	Private	Public	Private
1	Barlig	1		1	
2	Bauko	1		1	
3	Besao	1		1	
4	Bontoc	1	2	1	2
5	Natonin	1	1	1	1
6	Paracelis	1		1	
7	Sabangan	1		1	
8	Sadanga	1		1	
9	Sagada	1		1	
10	Tadian	1		1	
Subtotal		10	3	10	3
Total number of schools		26			

4.3. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were the school heads, teachers and parents and guardians of the students. School heads and teachers were aware of the interview and focus group discussions since permission to gather data was granted through the Schools Division of Mountain Province and school heads were informed. Since students were not allowed to go to their schools during the data gathering, they were not included. The presence of the teachers is not 100% because of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) directive that only 30% of the workforce of any office should report. Therefore, for each school that was visited during the data gathering, only 5-8 teachers reported. Hence, those who were present during site visits were the respondents to the study. The parents that respondents were the parents of the students who were at the schools during site visits. These parents were there for the submission of their children's modules.

Considering the travel restrictions, community lockdowns and other guidelines being implemented by the authorities in each municipality because of the pandemic, 26 schools in the Mountain Province were visited for the gathering of data. In addition, a school head was interviewed and the teachers present during the visit were interviewed for a focus group discussion (FGD).

4.4. Instrumentation

A one-to-one interview using open-ended questions was done with the parents and the school head of each school. In addition, a focus group discussion was also conducted for the faculty members of the schools that were visited. During these visits to the schools in the Mountain province, an audio recorder and field notes were also used.

To further support the data gathered from the interview and the focus group discussions, reports from the school heads were gathered for additional information. In addition, consolidated reports submitted to the Schools Division of Mountain Province on challenges faced by schools during this pandemic which included feedback from parents were also gathered.

4.5. Data Gathering

4.5.1. Planning and Designing

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, issues and concerns from different agencies were voiced out on television. Teachers were not exempted from this. Hence, collaboration between agencies was planned. There were travel restrictions from different municipalities, the Mountain Province State Polytechnic College (MPSPC) and the Local Government of Mountain Province through the Provincial Disaster and Risk Reduction Management Office (PDRRMO) signed a Memorandum of agreement for collaborative research to mitigate COVID-19 in the province. Because of the agreement, several researchers at the institution were able to conduct research in different sectors. This research focused on the education sector. After the research was approved, the researcher prepared the data-gathering tools for validation. Interview guide questions were content-validated by three experts from the institution. Comments and suggestions were incorporated.

4.5.2. Preparing for Data Collection

A letter was sent to the Schools Division Superintendent of Mountain Province and the principals of the private schools. The approved letter to the Schools Division of Mountain Province was then sent to the department heads of DepEd-selected schools. Their school principals also approved the letter sent to the private schools.

The researcher then personally called the school heads of the selected schools to confirm their acceptance of participating in the research. After the participants' acceptance, the researcher and the participants arranged a school visit and interview schedule. After the schedule was arranged, the researcher worked with the PDRRM team. Letters were also sent to the mayor of each municipality to allow the researcher's team entry into their municipality.

The interview and focus group discussion with the participants were done face-to-face observing the minimum health protocols. Before the interview and FGD were done, the researcher explained what was written in the communication letter and the purpose of the research. The researcher also asked the participants to sign the consent form. The researcher then asked permission from the participants to record their conversation and discussion.

4.5.3. Transcribing of Data

All the data from the interview and focus group discussion were transcribed. Information that was not clearly recorded because of noise and other external barriers was referred to in the researcher's field notes and logs. The transcribed data allowed the researcher to read and gather data for coding.

4.5.4. Coding of Qualitative Data

To get the themes from the gathered data, the transcribed data was coded. The interviews and focus group discussions from the respondents were arranged into groups identified by code, allowing the researcher to get the main points and common meanings that recur throughout the data. The themes that were generated from the coding were again reviewed for accurate representations of data followed by the analysis of the data.

4.5.5. Validating the data

The reliability and validity of data were accomplished through audio recording, triangulation through document analysis and member checking. Member checking is also known as "respondent validation" [20]. To observe this, results from the gathered data are returned to the participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences [20]. In this study, the results were presented during the PDRRM council meeting where representatives of each school were invited. The representatives who were also participants in the study concurred with the results of the gathered data.

4.6. Data Analysis

This research used deductively-oriented thematic analysis since there were preconceived themes and the coded data were sorted into these themes. Further close reading and subsequent analysis of the data revealed other themes to be present.

To understand more themes, a narrative analysis was also employed allowing the researcher to glean insights into the stories and experiences of the respondents to understand the identified themes further.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1. Problems Faced by the Schools in the Implementation of Distance Learning in the Mountain Province

5.1.1. Difficulty in the Distribution and Retrieval of Modules

Before the distribution of modules, it is observed that some schools have followed the IATF protocols such as installing hand-washing facilities and posting signs and labels around the school campus especially on the entrance and exit for teachers and also for parents and guardians who will be claiming and submitting modules. These are observed at Barlig

Central School, Barlig National High School and Sadanga Central School. In addition, the participants explained that they conducted a dry run for teachers and parents on the distribution of modules.

In the private schools, Immaculate Heart High School (IHHS) in Natonin has no signs and labels because they assigned areas in barangays where their students live to distribute and retrieve modules so they do not have to go to the school. In Bontoc, Saint Vincent Elementary School (SVES) has installed signs and labels for the entrance and exit. Saint Vincent High School may not have signs and labels but they have a thermal scanner at their entrance. At All Saints Mission International School (ASMIS), it is observed that they did not install such facilities.

Almost all schools in Mountain Province, public or private have set up areas for distributing and retrieving modules in the barangays where their students live.

However, these procedures that schools have implemented, they still face problems. One common problem they have faced is that some elementary and high school students claimed their modules despite school reminders that parents or guardians should be the ones to claim them. One reason is that some parents are busy tending to their fields or have other errands to run. One school head explained that:

"Even with our strict reminders, some parents still sent their children to claim their modules. So what we did is that we sent the children home. We cannot give them their modules because we know that in the next distribution, their parents will send them again."

Another problem they faced was when some parents and guardians did not observe minimum health standards like wearing face masks when they claimed their children's modules. Another school head stated:

"I was really worried. Some might take pictures and post them in social media and we will be criticized even if we have reminded them not to be complacent and wear face masks even if we have very few cases in the province."

5.1.2. The Unpreparedness of Parents Taking the Role of Teachers

Modular learning involves the guidance of parents or guardians especially at the elementary level. Because there is strictly no face-to-face class in all DepEd schools, parents and guardians of the students became teachers of their children. DepEd encourages parents to teach their children and parents should take this opportunity to learn more about them and their learning attitudes. This is also a way to bond or reconnect with their children. However, during the early weeks after the SLMs were distributed, parents' complaints reached the schools. During the interview, a school head in Bauko stated that parents went to her office to request a face-to-face class. This is the same in all schools especially at the elementary level, specifically Grades 1 to 3. The parents suggested that there should be a face-to-face, especially for areas with a low risk of COVID-19. The participants said that these parents might have jobs so they cannot teach their children or these parents or guardians do not know how to read or write. Another school head stated that:

"You would expect that the parents and guardians of our students would be educated since most of their parents are in their 30s or early 40s but that is not the case. In areas like our place, many parents do not know how to read and write. Some students also live with their grandparents because their parents are overseas working. Parents who are educated do not also have time to teach their children because of their work."

There were two instances in two municipalities where parents expressed that their children would take time off from school because they were frustrated with answering the modules. They cannot assist them since they do not have the knowledge to teach it to their children. When asked about their answer, the teachers assured the parents that they could help the students. They made a schedule for the students to visit them at their houses for a tutorial.

Another teacher at Bauko mentioned how other teachers are disappointed because of the unanswered modules they received. A guardian of a student in grade 5 submitted the unanswered module and explained that she does not know how to explain things to her granddaughter. She said that her granddaughter would cry because she did not have anyone in the household to help her. This predicament is the same with most municipalities of the Mountain Province based on the interviews conducted. Based on the reports submitted to the schools division of the Mountain Province, the parents' feedback reflected their complaints and frustrations regarding modular learning. In all provinces and municipalities, most parents requested a minimum face-to-face class explaining that their place is in a rural area so there is a slight chance of spreading the virus.

5.1.3. Lack of teachers Training on the Modality of Learning

The DepEd announced in July 2020 that it would provide Self-learning Modules (SLMs) for various learners across the Philippines as an alternative mode of teaching and learning especially for those schools located in coastal areas, far-flung provinces and communities without access to the internet or electricity. Furthermore, the department also added that video sessions would be provided for learners with special needs and teachers would be assigned to guide them throughout their lessons. However, when teachers and heads of schools were interviewed, they expressed that modules were not really delivered on time. Because of this, the teachers produced their learning modules, so they have something to distribute. For example, one teacher in Paracelis explained:

"Module development started months ago and the opening of classes this school year was October 5. Unfortunately, we did not have our first module at that time, so we must prepare something."

Other teachers in the province have also experienced this and expressed how difficult it was for them. One demanding concern of the teachers on this matter is the lack of training in developing modules [4, 6, 17]. The teachers pointed out that they do not have adequate training for module development and they called for DepEd specialists to develop the modules.

DepEd admits that module development requires training; hence, the department encourages its teachers to immerse themselves in the training where the module writing training is an opportunity for them to share.

On preparing the modules, elementary and high school teachers pointed out the difficulty of preparing modules. DepEd had assured that modules would be prepared at the national level but teachers will have to contextualize. A school head in Barlig explained that there is overlap in the preparation of modules. She admitted that teachers do not have training for such activities. She added:

"At first, it was challenging since there is no guideline for module development in the early months of preparing modules. It is only now that they have given some guidelines. So, yes, we are all learning as we go through this. We have to."

In May 2021, another mode of instruction was introduced to public teachers. They were asked to make an audio-visual presentation (AVP) instead of modules to be given to students in September 2021. The AVP will be given to students along with activity sheets. For teachers, this is another form of preparation. One participant expressed her frustration:

"We just learned how to develop modules and we know how difficult it was. This time the department is giving us another assignment. We did not yet perfect the other one [modular] and here comes another one. All of us here lack knowledge on video making and we do not have the tools."

Other participants also supported this. One added:

"We just had our training on creating our AVP. We realized how time-consuming it would be. Doing that during our workshop, we need to come up with our script based on our lesson. We prepare our presentation. We become our editor, director, editor, and many more. I even bought a new phone, so I can use it in taking a video."

The teachers admitted that their training did not give them the confidence to make an AVP. Hence, some teachers chose to wait for the developed AVPs by other teachers and they could use them since the developed materials could be used for the whole Division. One teacher in Bontoc admitted that this could bring negative feedback from the parents. He explained that:

"We are allowed to use AVPs created by other teachers on the same subject. However, problems will arise when the content is not edited or revised like the examples in the presentation. We submit our AVPs at the Division Office for quality assurance, but I heard other schools are not doing that since they immediately give them to the students." He also added that "AVPs are allowed to be used by other schools since they do not have the equipment."

5.1.4. Lack of Time for Module Preparation or Audio-Visual Presentation

Some DepEd schools, especially those in far-flung areas have multi-grade classes. Teachers have to prepare modules for different subjects at different levels. With all these problems, the participants pointed out that teachers are overloaded since there are other reports they need to accomplish and modules they need to check and modules they need to prepare. On top of these duties, some would still visit their students at home or conduct tutorials. One teacher who handles multi-grade levels in Sagada explained that:

"I already don't have time to help my children answer their modules. It's hard teaching multi-grade level, how much more this time that it's modular when you have to prepare modules in all the subjects of one grade level then prepare modules for another level."

In rural areas, teaching multi-grade is observed. This is true in the Mountain Province, especially for small schools where one teacher may simultaneously teach two to three grades. However, since most of them do not have equipment for developing AVPs, they will still use the modules for the school year 2021-2022. Some households do not have laptops, computers or T.V. where students can watch the prepared AVPs.

Other teachers admit that they are still grappling with the time they have to prepare for the modules, even if it has been more than a year since their implementation because of their other functions. They explained that they still have other reports to submit while conducting tutorials especially at the primary level and checking for the modules.

On AVP preparation, the teachers shared that it is time-consuming from planning to execution to video editing. The AVPs are given to students every week. Since they must submit the AVPs for review, they have to submit them early so there is a time for editing. One teacher said:

"This is harder than the module. AVPs will be given every week. How many videos are we going to make in a week? We have to prepare the activity sheets and to make our schedule for the shooting of our video if we use the rooms designated for shooting and we have to wait for the availability of the equipment to be used since there are many of us here."

5.1.5. Lack of Technological Pedagogical Knowledge

Integrating technology into the teaching-learning process has always challenged teachers even in face-to-face teaching. Many teachers in the Mountain Province expressed dissatisfaction when asked to develop modules since they claim they need to learn. This is not only their knowledge of modular development but also of technology. They admit that they only know the basic tools of Microsoft Office (Word) but for other things such as creating graphs, inserting pictures and using other tools in Word, they explained that they had difficulty learning them.

This shows that some teachers only use technology for personal use rather than for teaching purposes. Some admitted that they asked their colleagues for help. On AVP development, the teachers were also asked what teaching strategies they were using. They explained that just like in a classroom, they provide a lecture only. When asked if they can use other

applications where they can only apply voice so they can only show images, graphs or other videos while explaining, they still have to learn them. This clearly shows that the lecture method used in traditional instruction is just transformed into a video where the teacher's face is shown most of the time during the presentation. The teachers may be using technology during this pandemic but integrating technology into pedagogy for a meaningful learning experience is not observed.

A research conducted in 2016, [Arinto \[21\]](#) also discussed the issues and challenges in distance learning faced by the University of the Philippines Open Universities (UPOU). In her research, the faculty and administration declared that fostering innovative teaching and learning practices are challenging at their institution. With public teachers' lack of technological pedagogical knowledge, this may seem like the same dilemma that teachers will face.

5.1.6. Unavailability of Equipment, Gadgets, Internet Access and Others

This refers to the lack of gadgets such as cellphones and tablets, the unavailability of computer units or laptops and the lack of internet modems or access to the internet. The unavailability of learning equipment at home is a difficult situation for students since they do not have the means to access information that can provide additional knowledge that can help them comply with the requirements of their modules. Furthermore, there are module requirements that involve the printing of outputs. If students have a laptop and printer at home, they find it easier to comply with requirements.

Teachers and students of public schools in the Mountain Province expressed their sentiments on the available learning resources and the low internet connection. One teacher said:

"This is out of our control already. Even if we get frustrated with our connection, we just have to be patient. However, the submission of reports will always be late. Some students do not have cellphones, laptops or even T.V. How do you expect them to complete their activities if they lack this?"

Most students do not have a computer or internet at home and are unable to access online classes and lessons broadcast over social media. The shift to distance learning due to the pandemic highlighted the difficulties of teachers and students in public schools: they are burdened with heavier workloads, internet connectivity problems, cost problems and inadequate resources which is similar to the finding of other studies [\[14-17\]](#). Parents are concerned with providing their children with gadgets and prepaid loads for internet connectivity.

In the Philippines, at least 2.3 million children have not been enrolled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise in the school drop-out rate is less of a factor in the cost of tuition than low-income families' lack of gadgets and access to the internet connectivity required for online learning during the pandemic.

5.1.7. Lack of Trust in Student Outputs

The modular approach became a trend in the Philippines as a learning mode when classes were suspended nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In both DepEd and private schools, teachers' concerns are almost the same regarding how learners answer their modules. One observation from the teachers is the unanswered modules. This was not only in the first modules that were distributed. Even the succeeding modules have the same result and with the same students. Another observed problem is that most were not answered by the learners themselves but by their parents or guardians.

One school head in Sadanga said:

"We know if it is our students' answers. One of our teachers in grade 1 brought a module from one of her students and showed it to me. It is obvious that it is an adult's handwriting. It is not only from one student, even in the higher grades." She further added, "So what we do is to always remind the guardians and parents not to answer the modules."

Other teachers also agreed and even on the higher grades, the teachers also answered that the answers were not from the students considering the vocabulary used in their sentences.

Another concern is that the distributed modules have key answers and all the interviewed teachers and participants had similar thoughts on the key answers placed in the last part of each module. They said that students do not understand the purpose of the key answers at the back. For example, a school head stated that students are outside playing instead of answering their modules. She explained:

"When I asked one of our students why he was outside instead of answering his modules, he said that it was so easy because he would just copy the answers on the back page of the module."

Private schools do not have problems with unanswered modules but activities in the modules were not answered. A school head stated that this was acceptable but some parents or guardians answered some modules. This is also obvious in the handwriting of the students. With this problem, teachers worry if students are learning.

The teachers' concerns about the answered module proved true when the parents were interviewed and they explained that there are just too many activities for a one-week module. Some parents said that they answered the modules and let her son copy the answers. She added:

"I get frustrated when I repeat what I say to him. I tell him to go to his father and ask him to explain it, and his father would just tell him to see me. I am tired from work but there are times when I sit down with him and teach him. But it's also the reason I would spank him because he always complains. I would just answer the activities and let him copy."

To assess student learning, schools still provided assessments (formative and summative) for students. Private schools have quarterly assessments in place of the periodical test but it is still a take-home assessment. There is already the DepEd order on the validation of results of student outputs. However, the assessment is still taken at home. Teachers questioned the quality and validity of the outputs because teachers knew that some parents answered the modules. This is true for

private and public schools, though public schools follow the new standard grading system guidelines from DepEd. During the FGD, one participant said:

"There should be no awards for students this year since we know that they [students] are not the ones who are answering those modules. For some, yes, but most parents are answering the activities. I usually give it [answered module] back to the parent if I see that it is not their children's handwriting."

When asked about the performance task outputs, the teachers said that they appreciate it more since they ask parents for the elementary level and students for high school to take a video of the student performing the task. However, not all activities in the different content areas would require performance tasks. Some teachers also agree that it is still time-consuming. In traditional instruction, they could quickly assess student performance in real-time.

5.1.8. Poor Quality of Learning Materials

Some parents complained about the quality of learning materials given to their children regarding their content and packaging. The COVID-19 pandemic affected schools abruptly so most teachers were unprepared for module making. According to a school head:

"I admit that our teachers are more proficient in classroom teaching. However, they are unfamiliar with preparing modules. During the first lockdown, we needed to pattern our modules to the format of our sister school yet the modules that were prepared are not that comprehensive."

This testimony suggests that most modules prepared during the early months of the pandemic were of lower quality. In turn, parents struggle to guide their children as [Dangle and Sumaoang \[17\]](#) posited, some parents have difficulty understanding and answering the modules of their children and the modules have lots of exercises which students are not interested in doing.

In the development of AVPs, teachers have problems with video and audio quality since some videos are recorded through cellphones. The teachers admit that some cell phones have poor quality. They do not have videos and video editing equipment.

However, to address this problem, the teachers have been attending webinars on module preparation and even videography to improve the modules they give to the students. This is also to maintain the quality of education that the students deserve.

5.1.9. A One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Instruction

Most of the time, due to congested classrooms and the lack of resources in public schools in the Philippines, teachers use the traditional one-size-fits-all approach in the classroom. Teachers use the same teaching styles and evaluation methods for all students regardless of their levels, abilities and interests. With the pandemic, teachers distribute developed modules or APVs to their students to deliver their lessons. They do not have enough time to prepare learning materials. Hence, parents complain that their children cannot answer the given activities in the modules because they were difficult. One teacher commented on this:

"What we do is to prepare our modules according to what lessons should be taken in that quarter; we prepare lessons according to the aims or objectives of the lesson. There are parents who come and submit their child's module and complain of the level of difficulty of the activities. I just tell them to understand us too because we can't always conduct tutorials."

She further added that some modules were prepared by other teachers. There are some contexts that parents and students may not understand. Other teachers agree that:

"We always contextualize or localize our lessons if we are in the classroom but with the modular approach and AVPs, some materials are from other teachers and we are just using them to our students. There might be words or examples in the modules that students can't relate to because they are not present in our community. Also, the levels of the students may not have been considered too."

With the modules and AVPs being used as learning materials for the students, this may result in less motivation and the quality of efficiency and effectiveness of education today might be questioned.

Another problem that some teachers face in Sagada and Bauko is their students' learning problems such as visual, hearing, motor handicaps and intellectual disabilities. Since they do not have schools offering special education in their municipalities, students with learning problems are still accommodated in their classes. One teacher said:

"I have a student who is deaf. However, he is still accepted by the general population. It was okay when we still had face-to-face but now that we can't meet them, his guardian did not enroll him." The teacher further added that, "I don't know if I should be thankful because he did not enroll in the school this year. I would have a problem what kind of module I will be giving him."

5.1.10. Inadequate Learning Management Plan for Blended Learning in Private Schools

Blended learning is an approach that involves traditional face-to-face instruction and self-learning modules (SLMs). Two private schools in Bontoc opted for blended learning as their learning modality. This included SLMs and a scheduled face-to-face class. When asked about the problems they have faced during the implementation of the face-to-face class, one school head explained that the safety of their students is their priority. Hence, they ensured that if they conducted the face-to-face class, they strictly followed the minimum health protocols such as wearing a facemask, frequent hand washing and alcohol use. The classrooms only accommodated ten students and chairs were enclosed with plastic covers. Their classes

are also limited. Parents are also advised to bring their children to school. In high school, students were strictly advised to go home immediately after class. However, the schools still faced some problems even with their strict guidelines. One school head explained that:

"Even with our guidelines, like observing social distancing, we can't really avoid children doing this. Because they will always play. So, I am always outside, checking if students are playing outside. We had this problem at first. But as they are always reminded, their movements are limited."

When the school heads were asked about their plan for new cases of COVID-19, they answered that the face-to-face class would immediately be suspended.

Some parents' concerns were raised during the PTA meeting of their schools before the face-to-face was implemented. The school head explained during the interview that when they had the parent orientation, some parents pointed out the safety of their children when they go out and attend class. The school head further explained that the students would not be forced to come to class since they have another modality: the SLMs. The face-to-face class is for students to understand further the concepts presented in the module, especially if they do not have enough support from the SLMs.

5.1.11. Decrease in Income of Private Schools

All the private schools that were interviewed have the same concern when it comes to their income. They admitted that there was a decrease in students' enrollment which affected the school's income. Because of this issue, one private school has to terminate the contract of one of their teachers. The school head explained that as much as they want to keep all the teachers, they do not have option because their tenure depends on the number of students enrolling. The participants mentioned that there was no tuition fee increase in 2020-2021 so it was difficult for them to keep all their teachers when they had a decrease in students. This is also true in other private schools in the country. According to [Gumarang \[22\]](#), the pandemic has underscored the inequalities between private and public school teachers. The study found that teachers were not paid on time and received a lower salary than public school teachers. It also showed that some private schools were forced to close due to few enrollments which affected the teachers' salaries.

5.2. Good Practices/ Initiatives Implemented by Schools

The actions or initiatives taken by the schools to solve their problems with distance learning which are deemed appropriate by school authorities and government officials in their context are considered good practices in this sense.

5.2.1. Home Visits

Some SLMs were returned unanswered and some learners have difficulty in learning, teachers conduct home visits. This is a scheduled visit to the houses of the learners. Teachers would conduct home visits in their community. This is common among the DepEd schools at the elementary level in all municipalities. This allowed teachers to learn more about their student's home environment. They get to understand the clamor of their learners' parents.

5.2.2. Tutorial

Teachers also conduct tutorials in the school. This is a scheduled tutorial for grades 1 to 3. This practice is observed in one of the elementary schools in Natonin where they have three students in the morning and three in the afternoon. The schedule is the same for the whole week but with different students. When asked about the safety concerns of the students, the teacher said, "we strictly observe the minimum health standards. We do this for now since we still do not have a case but once there is a case, this will immediately stop." The tutorial for grades 1-3 only focused on two language skills: reading and writing. They focused on these skills since the three grades are the learners' formative years. This is the same in one of the elementary schools in Sagada. They have the same reason as Natonin: while they still do not have a case in their area, they would conduct scheduled tutorials for their learners.

In Sagada, for higher levels, teachers invited fresh graduates to tutor learners who have difficulty in learning. The teachers identified the needs of their students. The youth were also asked to conduct tutorials.

If there is a case in their area, tutoring will immediately stop. During the interview, they have at least conducted tutoring twice in areas provided by the community officials. During the tutorial with the guidance of the PTA, an assigned parents who is scheduled for the students' tutoring will look after them.

The tutorial for students is scheduled to avoid overcrowding. Therefore, the teachers and the PTA officers have instructed students to observe the minimum health protocols.

5.2.3. Parent-teacher Association Involvement

The PTA in one of the DepEd schools in Sagada is involved with the decision and planning of the schools when it comes to solutions to the problems that their students are facing as a result of the pandemic. The PTA president is always present whenever the school meets with teachers and community officials. They have submitted their action plan to help teachers. This action plan is peer tutoring. The community officials are supportive of the plan and have already implemented it.

5.2.4. Remediation

For private schools, they have remediation especially for those students who could not complete the activities in the module. This allowed the teachers to guide them in their activities. Remediation was also scheduled for students.

5.2.5. Seminar on Stress Management

A private school in Natonin has conducted a teacher stress management seminar before the S.Y. 2020 with the guidance office. This helped the teachers manage the stress of the work. However, for public schools, no stress management seminars were conducted from 2020 until June 2021 where the scope of this study was conducted.

5.2.6. Mechanism for Blended learning

It was mentioned that two private schools in Bontoc conducted face-to-face classes. However, one private school has a clear set of guidelines for how they conduct their face-to-face class to ensure the safety of their students while maintaining the quality of their students' learning. The school heads (elementary and high school) explained that they first prepared the face-to-face class. They have invited some authorities to inspect the classrooms. Before they started a new session, they surveyed the parents to allow their children to a face-to-face class. The survey forms were placed in an envelope for the students in the last quarter of the academic year. From the survey forms, they already estimated the number of students who will be enrolled in the school. Before they formally opened the school, they conducted a parent orientation to explain the guidelines of blended learning, their role in this modality and some concerns. After parents orientation next was the student orientation. The student orientation was also scheduled for each class to observe social distancing. Students were strictly reminded of the health protocols. The school heads explained that face-to-face classes would be suspended immediately when new cases of pandemic were discovered in the area. Resume of classes will be announced through text to the parents. For the school year 2021-2022, since there is strictly no face-to-face class or limited face-to-face even for private schools, they have implemented student consultation hours. With this strategy, students are still allowed to go to school for consultation with their teachers.

Though the responses of these schools were short-term and different in each case, it could be observed that schools in the Philippines continue to adopt or evolve in terms of their policies, management systems and educational strategies during this pandemic even if they have already implemented the face-to-face classes in all levels for the school year 2022-2023.

6. Conclusion

The problems faced by the schools during the pandemic may be similar to the issues and challenges described in the present literature. However, the problems and responses faced by schools of the Mountain Province are specific to their context. Based on previous studies, common problems identified during this pandemic are difficulty in distributing and retrieving modules, unavailability of equipment, gadgets, internet access, poor quality of learning materials and unpreparedness of parents taking the role of teachers. All these problems were also identified in this study. However, some problems were ignored such as teachers' lack of training on the modality of learning, lack of technological knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge, one-size-fits-all approach to instruction, inadequate learning management plan for blended learning of private schools and decrease in income of private schools. All these problems will have a long-term impact on students' outcomes.

The good practices implemented by schools in the Mountain Province to address the problems brought by this pandemic are home visits, tutorials, parent-teacher association involvement, remediation, seminar on stress management and mechanism for blended learning.

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