Stakeholder's Experiences and Challenges in Supporting Kindergarten Learners in Blended Learning Approach during the Covid–19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The problem and the aim of the study The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the global educational landscape. It forces the entire students and educators to stay at home and utilize the distance learning mode. This study described the experiences and challenges of school administrators, kindergarten teachers, and kindergarten parents in supporting the kindergarten learners in a blended learning approach of the identified schools in the Districts of Sindangan and Bacungan Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines during the school year 2020–2021.

Research methods This study used a qualitative research design through phenomenology in gathering, analyzing, and generating the themes from the data collected. There were 30 respondents of this study who were selected through purposive convenience sampling technique.

Results The findings revealed that the stakeholders maintain an optimistic attitude despite their frustrations. They have done utmost dedication and exercised Bayanihan Spirit. However, they also got worried that students may not be acquiring learning at all. Some of the parents personally answer the module instead of just facilitating it for the kids. The parents use positive reinforcement in motivating their sons or daughters to answer the module. The principals, teachers, and parents unanimously acknowledge that blended learning is the most appropriate method while face-to-face classes are still suspended. In terms of challenges encountered, the parents recognize that some are illiterate; they lack the skills and patience in teaching their kids; and lastly, the kindergarten teachers had doubts if the students indeed answered the module's assessment tasks.

Conclusion The stakeholders manifested dedication in supporting the kindergarten learners in blended learning approach during the covid–19 pandemic. Nonetheless, they were adamant as to quality learning was attained due to their personal shortcomings as sub-teachers and the credibility and reliability of the answered modules. Therefore, it is recommended that the parents should undergo training to assist their children in their studies while blended learning is still in place.

Keywords: blended learning approach, early childhood education, kindergarten learners, qualitative research method, phenomenology, Zamboanga del Norte, South Sindangan District, Bacungan District, discipline, Zamboanga

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Introduction

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused enormous challenges to all sectors of society worldwide. One of the many groups that had been severely affected by this pandemic is the education sector. The regular meetings between the Subject Teachers and their learners inside a classroom were alternatively redirected to the virtual platform to address possible health risks among concerned individuals deliberately. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the halt of the schools' in-person classes, and alternative learning modalities, such as blended and/or distance learning – that comprises modular distance learning, and TV/Radio–based instruction – was administered to decrease and prevent the virus' transmission [1 & 9].

Equivalent training and interventions for parents, guardians, and tutors were provided. Implementation of the new modalities did not go smoothly at first; but with the collaboration of the stakeholders, the proper adjustments were made. Teachers prepare the instructional materials before their actual distribution among the learners' parents and/or guardians. However, the teachers presented the succeeding technological resources: personal computers, printers, and internet connectivity at home for the students to engage in distance learning were barriers [5 & 6].

To aid the implementation of blended learning, the Department of Education (DepEd) partnered with partnership with the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT). It gave its technical assistance to broadcast, boost connectivity and accessibility to far-flung areas. This provided the teachers, parents, and students their access to online review materials and Open Educational Resources (OERs), which contains e-books for children and young adults on content areas: English, Mathematics, Science, Filipino, Music, and Arts [7 & 8]. This motivated the stakeholders to rise above the pressing challenges, which necessitated an inquiry to craft suitable interventions that would articulate the unspoken sentiments of the learners and stakeholders.

Materials and methods

This study used qualitative research, specifically phenomenology, as its research design in gathering and analyzing the data. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that determines the "essence of an experience" by investigating the participants' multiple perceptions of a particular experience or phenomenon through an in-depth interview [15 & 24]. There were 30 respondents of this study selected through purposive convenience sampling technique, comprising of ten (10) principals, ten (10) teachers, and ten (10) parents from the ten (10) schools of the two (2) Districts of Sindangan and Bacungan, Schools Division of Zamboanga del Norte. Using the researcher-made English open-ended questions, the 30 respondents' stakeholders were individually interviewed through Zoom meeting. All the participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, coded, and classified into different themes which have commonalities and significantly answer the experiences and challenges that the stakeholders had encountered in supporting kindergarten students in blended learning during the school year 2020-2021.

Literature review

In response to Covid-19 pandemic, DepEd Order 012 was issued on June 19, 2020, titled "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 In the Light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, imposes the adoption of distance learning where the parents are expected to act as sub-teachers since no direct interaction will happen between the teachers and students like that of in the classrooms [20]. Vygotsky's Social Development theory stated that social interaction significantly helps the child's cognitive development [4].

The concept of Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes that discussions should be provided to the students for the teachers are highly trained on how to make effective learning happen [14]. Another important concept of Vygotsky's theory is the building of schemas or scaffolding – structuring of patterns in mind to master a skill or an activity that children receive from adults [17]. Online learning has the following advantages: (1) Students engage with a variety of types of content; (2) Adaptive software adjusts based on how students respond; (3) Students receive immediate feedback; (4) Students can have multiple attempts to master learning

outcomes; (5) Students work at their paces, and (6) Teacher received real-time data to make instructional decisions [19 & 30].

Distance learning has no direct social interaction and collaboration between teachers and students. This resulted in poor educational outcomes [13]. [19 & 2, & 18] corroborated that online learning has the following limitations: (1) Teachers may not always be available when help is needed; (2) Students may not possess the necessary technical skills, and (3) Students may choose content or tasks that are not right for them. The theories and the contradicting related literatures and studies stated above fuel the researchers to conduct this study.

Research program

This study described the experiences and challenges of school administrators, kindergarten teachers, and kindergarten parents in supporting the kindergarten learners in a blended learning approach of the identified schools in the Districts of Sindangan and Bacungan Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines during the school year 2020–2021.

Research results and discussion

Based on the stakeholders' responses when asked about their experiences in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach during this pandemic period and after subjected those statements to Transcendental Phenomenology analysis, six (6) themes had emerged: 1) Feelings of Frustration and Optimism; 2) Dedication; 3) Bayanihan; 4) Unacquired Learning; 5) Creativity; and 6) Recognition.

Repertory Grid 1 shows the stakeholders' (school administrators, teachers, and parents) experiences in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach.

Repertory Grid 1. Stakeholders Experiences	
Themes	**Significant Statements**
Feelings of Frustration and Optimism	*"Okay, but we are having a hard time adjusting to the new learning modality."* *"I am fine even though things are hard; life must go on. So, I am still okay)."* *"I am okay but having a hard time teaching my child."*
Dedication	*"We have a kamustahan, that is a division-wide program, every Monday to Thursday from 10:00 am to 2:00 where we talk to the parents."* *"We keep in touch with the parents and learners constantly."* *"The teachers go to the houses if the situation demands."*
Bayanihan	*"The principals, teachers, and parents work together."* *"All stakeholders were of singular mind to do their best for the learners."* *"Everyone was showing the heart to help the school and the learners, especially in module preparation and distribution."*
Unacquired Learning	*"Students are not learning, for it is the parents who answered the module."* *"Learning competencies are more likely difficult to attain for the parents are not trained to act and teach like teachers."* **"Some parents can't perform as a guide for they are illiterate. Thus, the students' learning may be compromised."*
Creativity	*"So, I promise my child a reward everyone we discuss the module."* *"I promise to give them snacks and let them play so they will listen when we answer the activities in the module."* *"I buy them food so they will do the writing activity"*
Recognition of Blended Learning	*"Blended learning is the only option that we can continue to deliver the teaching-learning process and to ensure the safety of everyone."* *"Flexible learning can be effective if resources are readily available for the students and teachers."* *"Blended learning has to continue as face-to-face classes are still prohibited."*

Theme 1: Feelings of Frustration and Optimism

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It can be gleaned from repertory grid 1 that the school heads, teachers, and parents had difficulty adjusting to the new normal. They got frustrated for they wanted nothing but the best learning outcomes for the learners but had to endure the new blended platform. Despite the disappointment, the participants still had chosen to be optimistic about the situation. Filipinos are naturally optimistic and tend to reward themselves rather than sticking negatively to what happens to them, especially with matters that they have no control of. Hence, this explains why the respondents, no matter how hard life is because of the pandemic, still choose to see life on the brighter side and moving positively forward [28].

Theme 2: Dedication

As shown in grid 1, teachers' dedication to their duty has been so apparent that they conducted home visitation while observing the health protocols or doing the virtual "kamustahan" to the kindergarten students and kindergarten parents. Keeping in touch and being ready to extend whatever kind of help for the learners and parents are significant steps towards achieving quality educational outcomes as this is a form of intrinsic motivation. [3] postulated that the students' perceptions of teachers' autonomy support and teachers' care predicted students' intrinsic motivation. Students tend to feel his importance and therefore exert reasonable efforts to study and comply with the tasks given by the teachers.

Theme 3: Bayanihan or The Spirit of Working Together

Grid 1 significant statements highlighted that the "the principals, teachers and parents work together; all stakeholders were of singular mind to do their best for the learners, and everyone was showing the heart to help the school and the learners specially in module preparation and distribution. These are all vibrant signs of how the stakeholders work hand in hand just to make each other load lighter and achieve the goals despite the challenging school year. The culture of Bayanihan is one of the distinctive Filipino characteristics that is naturally activated during downtimes. Such a trait is much timely and vital in this pandemic as the kindergarten students are totally dependent on the stakeholders' effort to attain the learning goals. The Bayanihan spirit helps the Filipinos surpass trying times as the latter expect nothing in return and remain steadfast in overcoming different challenges. Its application even transcends over and beyond familial boundaries [13].

Theme 4: Unacquired Learning

The stakeholders conveyed their dismay that "students are not learning for it is the parents who answered the module; learning competencies are more likely difficult to attain for the parents are not trained to act and teach like teachers, and some parents can't perform as a guide for they are illiterate. Thus, the students' learning may be compromised. While these reports have to be properly investigated, Undersecretary Tonisito Umali of Department of Education (DepEd) called on the parents not to answer the students' worksheets and modules but only to guide them in learning. Parents have to realize the significant role they play in the new set-up of education. However, it does not mean that they will take over the child's activities in school. Otherwise, students' learning will get affected [10].

Theme 5: Creativity

Retaining the learners' attention is much more challenging throughout the module-answering process. Significant statements in grid 1 show that the parents promise their children a reward, snacks, and/or any food so the students will continue answering the module and be attentive with their discussions. Giving a reward is a form of positive reinforcement that effectively captures and retains the learners' attention span [29]. Children have simple joys. A simple treat, snack, or having playtime makes a big difference to their lives. Parents shared their different creative ways of surviving their "new role" as the para-teachers to their children is indeed a must for effective learning to occur.

Theme 6: Recognition of Blended Learning

The stakeholders firmly believe that Blended learning is the only option to continue to deliver the teaching-learning process and ensure the safety of everyone; Flexible learning can be effective if resources are readily

available for the students and teachers, and Blended learning must continue as face-to-face classes are still prohibited. The principal, teachers, and parents deeply know that the new normal must be embraced for the school year does not stop despite the pandemic. The Department of Education has issued the Department Orders 018 and 032, s. 2020 laying down the guidelines on the utilization and liquidation of support funds for the printing and delivery of self-learning modules and other learning resources to fully operate the blended learning approach [11 & 12]. Blended Learning enhanced learning regardless of distance and was an effective platform used during this Coronavirus pandemic [21]. It was corroborated that by using moodle as a platform in a blended learning method, and there was a significant improvement in the elementary teacher education academic performance [27]. The above findings only reveal that blended learning is a good learning platform once the needed materials and resources are provided. The teachers and parents have done their gigantic tasks in facilitating the teaching-learning process.

Based on the stakeholders' responses when asked about the challenges encountered in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach during this pandemic period and after subjected those statements to Transcendental Phenomenology analysis, three (3) themes had emerged, such as (1) Illiteracy; (2) Parents' Limitations; and (3) Invalid Data. **Repertory Grid 2** shows the stakeholders' (school administrators, teachers, and parents) challenges encountered in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach.

Repertory Grid 2. Stakeholders' Challenges Encountered	
Themes	Significant Statements
Illiteracy	*"Sir, how are we going to teach our children we can't even read and write?"* *"Parents who are illiterate can be difficult because they want to help their children, but they do not understand what to do."* *"It is different in the mountain because the parents do not have much education. So, guiding their children in answering remain a challenge."*
Parents' Limitations	*"Some of the parents refuse to perform their duties as a "little teacher…."* *"Parents don't have the patience to be the guide of their sons or daughters in answering the modules."* *"Most of the parents are complaining about these modules because they found it hard or difficult on how to handle these modules."*
Invalid Data	*"It is hard because parents are the ones answering the modules. I know it since kindergarten students do not know how to write that so well."* *"Parents are the ones answering the modules of the children for even the hardest questions have answers."* *"The children do not listen to their moms when they answer the modules, so their mom answers the modules for them…."*

Theme 1: Illiteracy

It is highlighted in grid 2 that the parents air out their sentiments on guiding their children in answering the module that they had difficulty for they do not know how to read and write; they are illiterate, and no matter how eager they are to extend some help and act as the teachers at home, they do not know what to do. Therefore, it hampers the transmittal or acquisition of learning towards the learners. Becoming a teacher highly requires knowledge of learning theories, how learning occurs, and the skills of transmitting the expected learning outcomes effectively to the students. It cannot be denied that whether the parents like it or not, they have to act as para-teachers in explaining the modules and facilitating their kids to answer the same [25 & 22]. The parents recognized their weakness as they are not trained to teach. Hence, the department has to come up with solutions that would address this problem.

Theme 2: Parents' limitations

Grid 2 further reveals that the parents refuse to perform their duties as a "little teacher; parents don't have the patience to be the guide of their sons or daughters in answering the modules, and parents complain

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about these modules because they find it hard to handle the modules or discuss its contents to their kids. Not all people could teach because teaching is a specialized acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, and characteristics that one has to study and acquire thru years of experience to provide quality educational services to different types of learners in society [16]. Students who have educated parents are a bit advantage for explaining and simplifying matters written in the module for the kids to learn. Nevertheless, the parents who are less to non-educated, undoubtedly, have to seek help from the teachers so their son/daughter could attain the expected competencies written in the module, for it is nearly impossible for somebody to give what he or she has not got.

Theme 3: Invalid Data

Still, in Grid 2, the teachers' significant statements have conveyed that It is hard for them to assess whether the learners have learned or not because they notice that it is the parents who are answering the modules. It is noticeable since kindergarten students do not know how to write that so well, and the most challenging questions have answers.

As recounted by the teachers: "*The children do not listen to their moms when they answer the modules, so their mom answers the modules for them.*"

Formative assessment for learning is critical as teachers use its information to gauge the extent of students' learning and adjustments in their teaching strategies to optimize learning occurrences. If the students do not answer the assessment task, the teachers will not have an actual genuine result telling accurate scores. Thus, the teachers might be deceived into proceeding to the following competencies without the students gaining the previous competencies [26]. It is imperative that these problems be addressed to have continuous improvement in implementing a blended learning approach in the succeeding school year.

Conclusion

In terms of the stakeholders' experiences in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach during this pandemic period, the stakeholders maintain an optimistic attitude despite their frustrations. They have done utmost dedication and exercised Bayanihan Spirit. However, they also got worried that students may not be acquiring learning at all. Some of the parents personally answer the module instead of just facilitating it for the kids. The parents use positive reinforcement in motivating their sons or daughters to answer the module. The principals, teachers, and parents unanimously acknowledge that blended learning is the most appropriate method, while face-to-face classes are not allowed to resume yet. In terms of the challenges encountered in supporting the kindergarten learners in the blended learning approach during this pandemic period, the parents recognize that some if not many of them are illiterate; they lack the skills and patience in teaching their kids; and lastly, the kindergarten teachers believe that they cannot be sure whether or not it is the students themselves who answer the module's assessment tasks. All stakeholders thought that it is the downside of the modular distance learning approach; however, there is no other option for the students to learn but to have a blended or distance learning approach.

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