

THE BIG SHIFT: EXAMINING PRACTICES, CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITIONING TO MODULAR DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic threat, the Department of Education (DepEd) established the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to allow students to continue their education and teachers to conduct instruction in a safe working and learning environment. As a result, DepEd implemented the distance learning approach, including Modular Distance Learning (MDL), for the School Year 2020-2021. This paper investigated the practices, challenges, and coping mechanisms of teachers and students involved in the implementation of the MDL in Schools Division of Laoag City. This qualitative research utilized semi-structured interview guide to collect data from 20 teachers and 20 learners from elementary, junior high and senior high schools. Using the phenomenological study, data were analyzed and organized into themes. The study's major themes revealed that teachers and students began familiarizing themselves with the features of MDL but encountered challenges such as printing, distribution, and retrieval of modules, as well as monitoring of student progress on the part of the teacher and answering overloaded activities on the part of the students. They claimed, however, that they have unique coping mechanisms in dealing with the identified challenges by resolving issues independently and seeking help from family and colleagues. Finally, the Modular Distance Learning Adoption Framework (MDLAF) was developed and validated for teachers and students to effectively adopt MDL. The researchers recommended that relevant scaffolding such as capacity building, counseling and instructional support be provided to both teachers and students to effectively adopt different learning modalities such as MDL.

Keywords: modular distance learning, new normal, challenges, coping mechanisms, teachers' practices, students' practice

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic threat had a significant impact on almost all industries and government organizations in the country. The educational sector is one of the most affected. Most nations have temporarily shut down educational institutions to stop the COVID-19 pandemic's spread and reduce infections for several pandemic months (UNESCO, 2020). More than 1.2 billion students worldwide, including more than 28 million in the Philippines, have been affected by this closure (UNESCO, 2020).

The greatest effect of COVID-19 is caused by the requirement for strict social or physical distancing in order to stop or slow its spread (DepEd, 2020). This resulted in the Department of Education (DepEd) having to cancel all in-person classes and other academic activities for the 2020–2021 school year. The threat and ambiguity posed by COVID-19 must be managed by schools while also ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of all students, teachers, and employees.

To comply with President Rodrigo Duterte's order for schools to postpone face-to-face classes until a coronavirus vaccine is available, DepEd decided to switch from face-to-face learning to distance learning for the school year 2020-2021. In response to the threat posed by COVID-19, it started implementing the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to allow basic education students to continue their education and teachers to deliver lessons in a secure working and learning environment.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, DepEd recognizes the need to continue to offer students opportunities for learning, and has made statements to that effect regarding the need for flexible/alternative delivery mechanisms for carrying out their programs. As a guide for schools creating their individual Learning Continuity Plans (LCPs), DepEd unveiled its Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC) prior to the start of the school year 2020-2021 (Ogena, et al., 2020). Given the reduced number of school days, curriculum developers and other stakeholders only chose the competencies that were absolutely necessary to teach.

Additionally, some nations have implemented community lockdowns and community quarantines, which have encouraged students and teachers to study and work from home and given rise to various learning modalities (Crawford, et al., 2020). Since the start of classes for the School Year 2020–2021 on October 5, DepEd has implemented a distance learning approach that allows interaction between the teacher and the students who are geographically separated from each other during instruction. This indicates that instruction will be given away from the conventional face-to-face setting.

Depending on the COVID-19 restrictions and the specific context of the learners in the school or locality, schools may choose one or a combination of the following learning delivery modalities: a) face-to-face; b) distance learning, which includes online, modular, and TV/Radio-based instruction; c) blended learning; and d) homeschooling (DepEd, 2020). However, the use of such modalities came with a variety of risks, issues, and difficulties for both teachers and students (Bao, 2020).

Most students opted to use the "modular" distance learning option this school year out of all the alternative learning modalities DepEd offered (Malipot, 2020). Moreover, the "backbone" of the DepEd's distance learning program is modular learning because most students still lack access to technology (Magsambol, 2020).

In modular distance learning, teachers and students aired their sentiments and concerns regarding the implementation of such delivery mode. Among these issues include printing, distribution and retrieval of modules, safety of the teachers, and overloaded activities found in the modules (Malipot, 2020). On October 30, 2020, the Undersecretary for Curriculum and Instruction Diosdado San Antonio issued Memorandum OUCI-2020-307 outlining ten highly-recommended measures to field units to ensure flexibility in teaching and learning. This was done to promote "academic ease" and assist teachers and learners who are still adjusting to the distance learning setup. Additionally, the policy was created in response to requests from teacher and student groups to simplify the implementation of distance learning's component parts (DepEd, 2020). The time allotted for students to complete and submit their assignments should be reevaluated, and group wellness sessions should be expanded to provide teachers, students, and parents with support for their mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing. However, there is little

discussion in the literature about the obstacles and issues that teachers and students face when implementing modular learning, or how these obstacles and issues are overcome.

With the aforementioned concepts in mind, it was decided to conduct this study in order to examine, using empirical methods, how teachers and students transitioned to modular instruction. This study also emphasizes the difficulties in implementing modular learning and examines these difficulties as well as teachers' and students' coping strategies.

With the available related studies reviewed, the researchers were motivated to examine the issues, concerns and coping mechanisms of teachers and students in shifting from face-to-face learning to modular distance learning. Particularly, the researchers endeavored to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the practices of teachers and students in adopting the modular distance learning?
2. What are the challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers and students in adopting modular distance learning?
3. What are the implications of the practices, challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers and students in adopting modular distance learning?

RESEARCH METHOD

To have an in-depth exploration of the study, qualitative research was preferred using phenomenological approach. In order to collect data from the teacher-participants, the researchers sought the approval of their respective school principal on the conduct of the research study (Nalla, 2022). Likewise, the researchers also sought the approval of the parents of the student-participants. The approval of the participants for a face-to-face interview and their participation in the study were recorded through a mobile phone. Their informed consent was also documented. Minimum standard health protocols set by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) such as wearing of face mask and face shield and observing social distancing all throughout the duration of interview were strictly followed.

An in-depth interview was conducted in either the participants' native language or English using a uniform interview guide that was approved by master teachers and a member of the schools division research committee (Nalla, 2022). Because it fosters a casual or everyday mode of conversation, the use of the native tongue was permitted. Inquisitive questions were also asked to determine the accuracy of the information. With permission from all parties involved, including the parents of student participants, the information obtained from the interview was saved on a mobile device. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and focused on 12 semi – structured open – ended questions for teacher-participants and seven (7) questions for student-participants. Member checking was used at the end of the interview to establish credibility, as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*. This method gave the participants the chance to evaluate intentions, fix mistakes, and offer more information.

Each participant was assured that his or her responses to the interview questions are confidential. After each interview, the responses were transcribed into detailed conversations (Núñez, 2021).

Research Design

The research study employed a qualitative method. Specifically, it employed phenomenological study which is primarily concerned with a complete analysis of lived experiences, interpreting and analyzing these leading to a particular experience using a wide range of descriptive and reflective questions for the study. The goal was to find common themes, patterns, and categories in the interviews that will reveal the practices, challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers and students in transitioning to modular distance learning. Using the phenomenological design, the varied perspectives of teachers and students gave the study varied perspectives from those who had direct experience with the phenomena (Gula, 2022).

Population and Sample

This research involved 20 teachers and 20 learners from elementary, junior high and senior high schools of the Schools Division of Laoag City (SDO-LC). The participants were selected using purposive

sampling. Based on the selection criteria, teachers who are implementing modular instruction, writers of localized modules and presently teaching in the SDO-LC were qualified and were selected to be the participants of the study. Similarly, the students of the selected teacher-participants were qualified for this study.

Instruments

The study made use of two interview guides for teachers and students, respectively. Specifically, 12 semi – structured open – ended questions for teacher-participants and seven (7) questions for student-participants were utilized focusing on their practices, challenges and coping mechanisms in adopting MDL. The said instruments for teachers and students which were designed to probe deeper into the experiences of participants to gather extensive, detailed, rich information specific to their experience in transitioning to MDL.

In validating the developed framework, this research also adapted the Expert Review and Validation Form used by Sabri (2017) in her research. An expert review is a procedure in which experts are consulted for their ideas, suggestions, feedback, or remarks (Angkananon et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded on audio and video and transcribed by the researchers. After each interview, the researchers took notes on the participants' initial impressions and key thoughts, insights, and perspectives about the session, which they could refer to later when the data were analyzed. To develop thematic areas across data categories, thematic data analyses were applied.

A thematic approach utilized in the study allowed the data to tell the story and clearly expressed the similarities and patterns. To reduce and classify data, the interviews were read many times. The researchers were able to code the data after a first review of the transcripts. The data were then analyzed again after initial codes were produced to refine mutually exclusive codes, as guided by the study of Billups (2014).

The study provided a framework for teachers and students to effectively adopt modular distance learning. The Modular Distance Learning Adoption Framework (MDLAF) developed in this study could benefit teachers and students in championing their adoption of MDL. This comprehensive framework is also applicable to blended learning modality that involves MDL. This output identified the practices, challenges, and coping mechanisms that teachers and students should consider in order to successfully implement MDL. Five experts validated the framework using the Expert Review and Validation Form, which Sabri (2017) used in her research. The comments and suggestions of the validators were incorporated to improve the said framework.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

1. Teachers' Practices, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Theme 1: A Blurry Start: Familiarizing the facets of the Modular Distance Learning

The first major theme describes the practices of teachers in adopting the modular distance learning in terms of planning and writing modules. It also discusses the perception of teachers regarding the benefits of adopting modular distance learning in the new normal. Four minor themes emerged during this phase of the adoption of the modular distance learning (MDL) namely: 1) Teachers familiarize themselves with modular distance learning; 2) Teachers struggle in writing self-learning modules; 3) Teachers learn how to make authentic assessments and 4) The teachers adjust in the transition period.

Theme 2: A Rocky Road: The Challenges of the Modular Distance Learning

The second major theme describes the challenges of teachers in adopting the modular distance learning. Teacher responses regarding challenges in MDL were coded and categorized. This section provides the challenge codes used and significant excerpts from the series of interviews conducted. Minor themes that emerged surrounding challenges in the implementation of MDL included printing, packing and retrieving of modules and answer sheets; and monitoring of student progress.

Theme 3: A Fine Finish: Overcoming the Challenges of Modular Distance Learning

The third major theme describes the coping mechanisms of teachers in adopting the modular distance learning. There are two minor themes that emerged namely: 1) Teachers resolve issues on their own; and 2) Teachers resolve issues with colleagues.

2. Students' Practices, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Theme 1: The Resistance Phase: Struggling with Modular Distance Learning

The first major theme describes the practices and lived experiences of students in the implementation of modular distance learning. It also discusses the perception of students regarding the presentation of lessons in the given modules. It can be noted that majority of the students agreed that they had a hard time adjusting from face-to-face classes to modular distance learning, hence, their resistance to accept MDL.

Theme 2: The Tolerance Phase: Enduring the Challenges of Modular Distance Learning

The second major theme depicts the tolerance phase of students where they described how they overcome the challenges of the MDL. This section discusses the strategies used by the students to survive MDL and to answer the activities given in the modules.

Theme 3: The Acceptance Phase: Getting Used to Modular Distance Learning

The third major theme briefly describes the acceptance of the students of the MDL. This section discusses how the students got used to answering activities in their modules.

Discussion

1. Teachers' Practices, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Teachers' Practices in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Due to unfamiliarity of the new learning modalities implemented in the division during the onset of the pandemic, teachers have uncertainty on how to fully implement the MDL. Out of the 20 teachers who were included in the study, only three claimed that they are at least 80% familiar with the features of the MDL before the opening of classes for SY 2020 – 2021. However, teachers claimed that they learned the features of MDL when the division provided them with the template of the module with the description of each part of the module.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that the teachers had difficulty in the crafting the modules because majority of them said that they did not know 'where to start'. Although teachers struggled in writing the modules, they were able to produce modules which underwent quality assurance by the supervisors and selected teachers. The factors that they considered in writing SLMs include: alignment of the activities with the most essential learning competencies (MELCs) prescribed by the curriculum, types of learners, suitability of activities to the level of students, and the contextualization of the lessons. Along with the writing of modules, include making of authentic assessments where teachers were introduced on how to make various assessment tools such as: selected-response, creative constructed-response, claim-evidence

reasoning, error-correction, open books, performance task with single product, and performance task with differentiated products.

Finally, based on the data gathered from the teachers, it is evident that all of them agreed that there is a big difference between having face-to-face classes and having MDL and that they had to adjust in the transition period.

Teachers' Challenges in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Results revealed that the teachers' challenges in the implementation of MDL included printing, packing and retrieving of modules and answer sheets; and monitoring of student progress. Teachers claimed that they lack resources and time in printing bulk numbers of modules for their students. Consequently, they are also hard up in retrieving the answer sheets of the students which delay the computation of their grades.

Moreover, the findings regarding the challenge on the monitoring of students' answer sheets is primarily focused on how this impacts the teacher's ability to assess and monitor student progress. When activities in the modules are not answered by the students and when students and parents do not respond to the teacher's concerns, the teacher struggles to communicate the feedback to them. In addition, three teachers claimed that there are parents who are difficult to reach via text message or Facebook chat and are uncooperative.

Teachers' Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

The teacher individual interviews suggest that teachers have two common ways in resolving tensions encountered in the implementation of MDL: resolving issues on their own and resolving issues with colleagues. When it comes to printing modules, another teacher stated, *"Sometimes, I bring the printer at home so I can print the required number of modules ready for distribution the next week."* Another teacher shared her strategy saying, *"Most of the time, I print modules early, so I do not need to rush every time we are called to pack modules."* Also, one teacher shared his coping mechanism about the issue on feedbacking stating, *"If I cannot reach out to the students or parents, I personally do home visitation to ask the status of student progress in accomplishing the modules."*

On the other hand, teachers' responses are indicative of their collaboration with other teachers and school authorities in resolving problems encountered in the implementation of MDL. Most of them verified that teachers are 'on the same page' or are 'on the same boat' and that they exchange ideas in overcoming all the challenges met. One teacher said that *"We learn from each other's experiences. Sometimes, we also do home visitation together."* Majority also claimed that they are very thankful because their school heads are very supportive in helping them in addressing their concerns related to modular instruction.

2. Students' Practices, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

2.1. Students' Practices in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

At the beginning of the school years, all the students argued that they were overwhelmed with the many activities to be answered in their modules. It can be noted that majority of the students agreed that they had a hard time adjusting from face-to-face classes to modular distance learning, hence, their resistance to accept MDL. As reflected in the data gathered by the researchers, 60% of the students claimed that modular instruction is not effective in their learning, although the rest of them said that the effectiveness of the learning modality 'depends on the learning area'. Initially, students were hard up in answering all the activities in the modules in all their subjects. They had a hard time understanding concepts especially in Math and Science subjects.

2.2. Students' Challenges in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

The students' challenges in MDL primarily concerns in the answering of the activities in the modules. As one elementary student said, *"I find it difficult to answer tasks that require reading a literary text."* This was supported by the experiences of other JHS students who claimed that the essay type of test

is very difficult and that there are terms used in the modules that they do not understand. There was a concern also on the giving of activities in the modules such as poster slogan and problem solving. One student said, *“Sometimes, not only one subject but 3 or more subjects require students to do poster or slogan in a single week. It’s kind of exhausting in our part as students.”* Another student said that, *“Sometimes, I am hard up in answering the performance task especially if it is on problem solving.”*

2.3. Students’ Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Modular Distance Learning

Just like the teachers, the individual interviews of the students suggest that students have unique ways in resolving tensions encountered in the accomplishment of modular activities. All the students revealed that their coping mechanisms help them attain their target in answering the activities in the modules. For example, one student specifically stated that *“I usually answer the most difficult subjects such as Math, Science and Araling Panlipunan so that I consume lesser time in answering those subjects that are easy for me.”* Other JHS and SHS students also said that they make a schedule in making the modules for them to strictly follow so that they will be able to submit their answer sheets on time. Moreover, most of the elementary pupils also claimed that they asked for the help of their parents, relatives or siblings in accomplishing the modules. Students’ responses are also indicative of their constant communication with their advisers and subject teachers when they do not understand the lesson. The participants in the group agreed with this assertion as reflected in their answers to the interview guides.

Output

The patterns of lived experiences, challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers and students based on the narratives examined revealed common themes which emerged, including norms that developed into generalized theories and addressed the research objectives that provided a framework applied in the adoption of MDL. This study produced a Modular Distance Learning Adoption Framework (MDLAF), as shown in Figure 1, which describes the implications of the adoption of MDL among teachers and students. The said framework was validated by 3 experts using the adapted Expert Review Validation Form used by Sabri (2017) in her study.

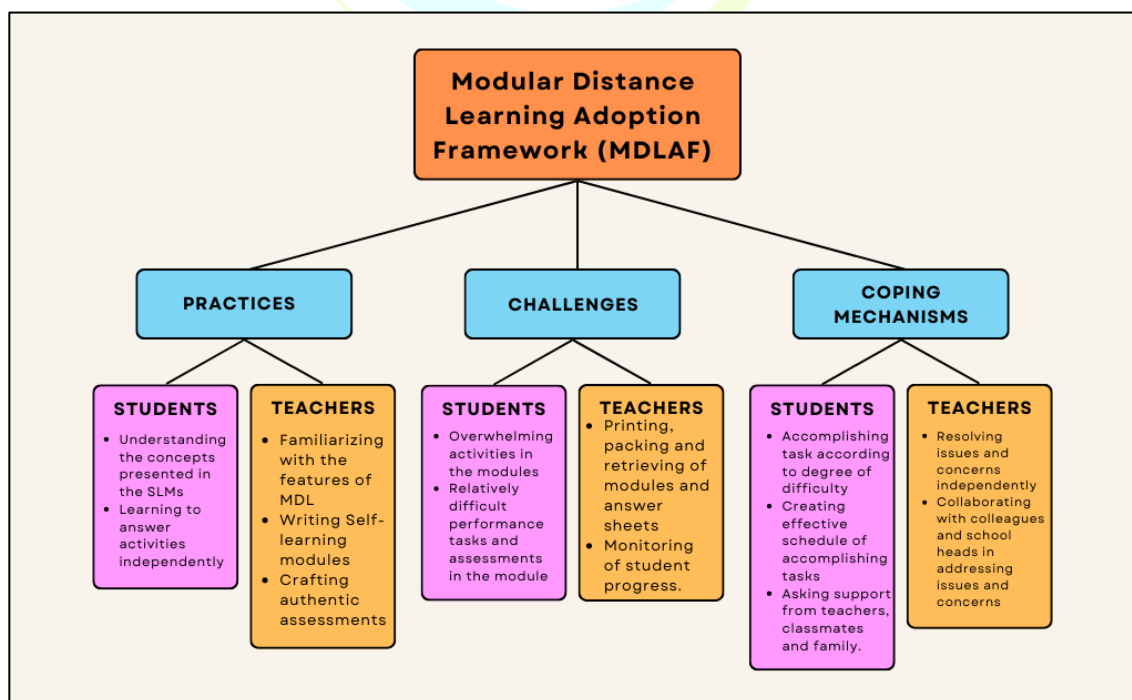


Figure 1. Modular Distance Learning Adoption Framework (MDLAF)

CONCLUSION

The commonality that all the teachers and students participated in the study shared was that they believed modular distance learning was difficult to implement and adopt at the beginning of the school year. Although they considered themselves to be neophytes in the new learning modality, teachers held a continuous desire to improve the capacity for effective teaching and learning. MDL is one way to support the teaching and learning process during this time of the pandemic. Hence, teachers must upgrade themselves so that they will be able to produce modules that are appropriate to the students and are aligned with the learning competencies prescribed by the K to 12 Curriculum.

On the other hand, students struggled in the implementation of MDL at the beginning of the school year. But as days passed by, students were able to adapt to the new learning modality. They developed unique coping mechanisms in order to deliver all the tasks required of them. Asking help from their siblings, parents, or relatives become another option in addressing concerns in the adoption of MDL. With all the findings gathered in this study, it is recommended that all the educational stakeholders should revisit the implementation of MDL in the division. All teachers must have acquired necessary trainings in order for them to fully-understand the features of MDL. In this way, they can fully implement such learning modality in their respective school. Furthermore, it is recommended that students should develop effective study habits in accomplishing activities in their modules. Students may also benefit from doing strategic techniques in answering the modules such as setting up a conducive learning space, creating a schedule of activities highlighting the subjects to be prioritized for the week, and staying connected with the subject teachers in case of further assistance or clarification.

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