Recalibrating Stance of Survival for Philippine Schools Overseas (PSOs) Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic has brought disruption in the educational system across the globe. The sudden occurrence of the unprecedented event has resulted to educational crisis that placed the education sector to a position of creating immediate solution to address the changing landscape of learning delivery and continuity. This qualitative inquiry explored the challenges in teaching and learning continuity of Philippine Schools Overseas (PSOs) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted from respondents, composed of teachers and school administrators of PSOs from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Greece, Libya, and East Timor. Using the qualitative data analysis framework, essential themes related to surviving the stance of pandemic were identified, namely: learning continuity amid pandemic, technology supported learning, and the need to provide support to teachers. The necessity to address learning continuity and develop plans for future directions beyond pandemic was also explored. To ensure teaching and learning continuity amid pandemic and beyond, PSOs need to implement a post-pandemic educational model through the development of standards for online learning that articulates maximization of the use of technology that is reflective, sensitive, and responsive in times of crisis and to the needs of the future.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Learning continuity, Technology, Philippine Schools Overseas, Qualitative research

Introduction

The Philippine Schools Overseas (PSOs) are duly-registered as educational institutions operating outside the Philippines. As of May 2011, there are forty-one (41) PSOs in ten (10) countries, six (6) are from the Middle East namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates while the remaining four (4) are from Libya, China, East Timor, and Greece. Thirty-five (35) of these schools have Certificates of Recognition or Government Permits issued by the Department of Education (DepEd), Philippines (DepEd, Philippines) and six (6) have provisional permits. A valid permit to operate from the host country is required before applying for accreditation from the DepEd, Philippines. An estimated 27,500 students are currently enrolled in PSOs in various levels in basic education from pre-elementary, elementary, junior high school, and senior high school. The PSOs are implementing the basic education curriculum of the Department of Education (DepEd). They are required to comply with the requirements and regulations of the government of the Philippines and of the host countries. The primary purpose of establishing PSOs is to address the educational needs of the children of Filipinos overseas workers (OFWs); otherwise known as Filipino Expatriates, and eventually facilitate them as they reintegrate to the schools in the Philippines on their return. The schools also provide a venue for the teaching and the propagation of the Filipino culture and heritage among Filipino youth overseas, and serve as a locus for Filipino community activity. The vital role of these schools in educating children of Filipinos overseas calls for certain standards of management, operation, and monitoring system. Thus, the creation of IACPSO (Inter-Agency Committee for Philippine Schools Overseas) that becomes an essential arm in formulating the policies and procedures governing the establishment, management and operation of such schools. It reviews, formulates and adopts or recommends policies and programs to ensure and maintain high quality standards of educational management of education for Filipino youth overseas consistent with national policy. It was established in February 1995 and strengthened through Executive Order No. 252 dated 05 May 2000. It is co-chaired by the Department

of Education (DepEd) and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) (Commission on Filipino Overseas, n.d.).

When the unprecedented health crisis shook the world due to the rapid spread of Covid-19, delivery of education all over the world has greatly changed. This infectious disease, SARS-CoV-2 has made radical changes from one part of the world to the entire globe affecting the education system (Dayagbil, Palompon, Garcia, & Olvido, 2021) of which the Philippine schools overseas are not an exemption. Beginning in the middle of March 2020, almost 10 million students were displaced due to schools shut down. Some schools were caught unprepared for this pandemic threat while others took various steps to help curb the spread of the virus by introducing new learning modalities to ensure continuous education (Elfirdoussi, Lachgar, Kabaili, et. al., 2020). Education must continue under the health protocols set by the World Health Organization and the Department of Health of the respective countries. According to UNESCO, prioritizing learning continuity and education recovery are crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe since more than 1 billion children are at risk of falling behind due to school closures, aimed at mitigating the rapid spread of coronavirus. The agency is supporting countries in their efforts to mitigate the impact of school closures, address learning losses and adapt education systems (UNESCO, n.d.). As a major response to learning continuity amidst pandemic and commitment in protecting the health, safety, and well-being of learners, teachers, and personnel, the Department of Education (DepEd) of the Philippines has established the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). This Department was approved by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases to ensure that learning progresses among students despite the absence of face-to-face classes due to the threat of Covid-19 (Montemayor, 2020). Since the Philippine schools overseas are implementing the DepED basic education curriculum, they are required to comply with the requirements and regulations of the department's learning continuity plan (Commission on Filipino Overseas n.d.). So, this study was conducted to explore the challenges in teaching and learning continuity of Philippine Schools Overseas (PSOs) and to investigate their plans in surviving the stance of pandemic and beyond. It is envisaged that this study would serve as one of the bases on how policy makers, school officials, and educators of Philippine Schools Overseas can create an educational framework that supports equitable and effective teaching and learning strategies that are responsive to the changing scenarios of educational landscape especially in times of crisis.

Method
This paper used the Qualitative approach as the means for exploring, investigating, and understanding the essence of the social phenomenon based on the meanings of the experiences described by the individuals or groups (Creswell, 2013). In-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted to obtain detailed information of the respondent's perspectives, point of view, feelings, and experiences about the topic being investigated. Teachers and school administrators of Philippine schools overseas from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Greece, Libya, and East Timor were interviewed to obtain detailed information about achieving learning continuity and surviving the pandemic. A total of 9 participated the interview. Five (5) were school administrators and four (4) were teachers. Teachers are the teaching staff while the school administrators are the school principals, vice principals, or department/unit heads of the schools. Consent was sought from the interviewed participants and they were aware that their participation was voluntary and they can withdraw or stop at any point during the interview should they feel uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted via Zoom that lasted between 60 – 90 minutes. Interviewees were also made aware that the interview was recorded. Recorded data was transcribed and generated texts data were analyzed following the Qualitative data analysis procedures of Wester and Peters (2001) and Agar (1980) that involved classifying and characterizing data categorically, reviewing data repeatedly, identifying and describing patterns and themes as described by the participants based on their perspectives, then the researcher understand and explain these patterns and themes. To ensure validity of these interpretations, data sharing through member-checking procedure with participants for verification was made (Creswell, 2013).

Results and Discussion
Based on the analysis of data, derived themes related to surviving the stance of pandemic were identified, namely: learning continuity amid pandemic, technology supported learning, and the need to provide support

to teachers. Philippine schools overseas also need to address learning continuity and develop plans for future directions beyond pandemic.

Theme 1. Learning Continuity Amidst Pandemic

Many countries are still implementing remote education modalities to ensure learning continuity despite being over one year into the Covid-19 pandemic. This is implemented to mitigate the risk of face-to-face interaction. Most likely, the shift of learning to online delivery will remain to continue in some countries for a certain time until everyone is vaccinated, threats of new variants are eradicated, and schools become fit as a safe and healthy environment. Herewith, public and private institutions have put in place alternative methods for teaching and learning to continue. Ensuring education to continue becomes the priority of governments all over the world, of which majority of the schools turned to online delivery using the internet (Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020). In the Philippines, the Department of Education's learning continuity plan aims to provide quality distance learning with the use of self-learning modules in digital and printed form, radio, television, and the internet (Montemayor, 2020). Similarly, PSOs adapted the same.

> *"There are various available learning platforms that you can use, such as Zoom, Google classroom…" (R5)*

> *"We prepare the infrastructure, internet connectivity" (R6) "The school offered to buy gadgets to our students that they pay in instalment basis" (R4)*

Philippine overseas schools in the Middle East comprehensive distance learning measures are implemented by the host countries to address teaching and learning challenges brought about by the pandemic and to embrace innovative solutions for learning continuity that is student-centred and sustainable (Wyman, 2020). PSOs in the Middle East are also adopting the measures used by the host country to continue teaching and learning during this time of crisis. Schools in Europe including PSOs have adopted measures related to distance learning.
> *"The school is ready for the opening of the next academic year; we will be doing distance/online learning". (R2)*

Teaching and learning are undertaken on digital platforms through the internet, where schools, teachers, families, and learners are taking part in this new normal of learning. Most education systems around the world are using online learning platforms for teaching and learning continuity, through the use of the internet, right technology, and right skills to access technology (Data Europa, 2020).

Theme 2. Technology Supported Learning
In this time of pandemic, technology plays a central and vital role to carry out learning continuity from printed materials, educational radio and television programs, to virtual learning on mobile phones, tablets and computers to facilitate learning without having face-to-face interaction (McBurnie, Adam, & Kaye, 2020). Schools, teachers, students and families support each other to achieve great things with the use of technologies. K-12 schools shifted from classroom to class zoom, wherein teachers created innovative zoom-based teaching that include live workshops, demonstrations, and experiments. Social media, games apps, and instant messaging platforms provide convenient sites for teachers and students to communicate and share insights of learnings obtained in the virtual classrooms. Studies reported that the use of digital media have played an important role in boosting students and teachers' motivation and connection to learn through video contact (Selwyn, 2020). In like manner, PSOs are also adopting the use of technology to support learning during the time of crisis.

> *"(Our) communication is through different social media platforms" (R1)*
> *"We made sure that our students are equipped with gadgets such as mobile phones, tablets, or laptops" (R4)*
> *"Google classroom is our learning management system (LMS) and we use zoom for synchronous classes" (R5)*

The shift to remote or virtual learning will have a lasting impact on learning delivery and likely to continue and grow even after the pandemic. According to EdTech report a steady increased in technology-used in the classroom is seen whether virtual or in person (The Journal, 2021). Therefore, tech-based learning is likely to stay, so schools must ensure effective use of tech-enabled strategies in supporting teaching and learning. The top 10 technologies used in response to the Covid-19 pandemic are Google Docs, Google Slides, YouTube, Google Drive, Google Forms, Google Classroom, Kahoot, Google Sites, Zoom, and Google Sheets (De La Rosa, 2021).

> *"We are using zoom in our virtual classes." (R9)*
> *"We are using free online platforms such as Edmodo, Google Meet, and Google Classroom. Our teachers enrolled their students in Google suite wherein they create their own email addresses attached to the school." (R6)*
> *"We also record our online class discussion for future review" (R3)*

While a survey made by K-12Dive revealed the top techniques educators reported planning to continue use post-pandemic include online polling or quizzes (41%), on-demand instructional videos (32%), one-on-one video meetings (25%), online tools to ensure academic integrity (24%) and project-based learning (23%) (The Journal, 2021). These digital tools that are adopted and integrated into the classrooms in creative ways which started during the peak of the pandemic and post-pandemic will continue to be an area that needs innovation and attention to increase student performance and achievement of which one of the respondents confirmed to this.

> *"Don't stop discovering new ways, don't stop searching for ways to provide effective learning for the students." (R8)*

Theme 3. The Need to Provide Support to Teachers
The pandemic has replaced traditional classrooms with new tech-based learning strategies to avoid face-to-face instruction and mitigate the spread of the virus. However, the sudden shift of instructional delivery made teachers feel inadequate and unprepared to facilitate learning, hence, they need support in terms of technological and technical aspects. To equip themselves, teachers engaged in various ways to learn new pedagogies for distance or online learning such as attending webinars, watching YouTube tutorial videos, and peer mentoring (De Villa & Manalo, 2020). During this challenging time, just like anybody else, PSO teachers have pushed their technology skills to the next level to improve their understanding on the effective use learning management systems, online assessments, the use interactive games into learning; and familiarizing themselves on the use of modern video communication tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, etc.

> *"We have been attending webinars everywhere and, in the Philippines, provided by the Publishers, and we participated in discussions related to online learning." (R6)*
> *"Personal preparation is part of the process. We educate ourselves by attending webinars and enrol in online classes related to online education" (R1)*

The Department of Education in the Philippines, provided support to the teachers' capacity building and equipping program by providing appropriate training for teachers in terms of assessment, effective sue of social media, different pedagogical ideas, and flexible learning (De Vera, 2020). The new teaching and learning modalities require knowledgeable, skilled, and committed educators to achieve effective learning continuity. Thus, it is critically important for school administrators and policy makers to recognize the importance of developing, training, and retaining a strong educator workforce to accomplish the goals of the school. To ensure proper support to teachers, schools need to invest in high-quality educator preparation for tech-based learning, tailor educator training and learning opportunities to match and meet current needs, intensify mentoring and support system to new roles, and provide more collaboration time opportunities such as collaboration time for teachers to work in teams and learn from each other (Darling-Hammond, Edgerton, Truong, & Cookson, 2020). In the case of PSOs, proper support to their teachers is secured so that the aspirations of the school can be realized.

> *"A technological committee was created to provide technical support for learning continuity and to mentor teachers who are afraid to use the technology. We also do demonstration teaching of virtual online classroom teaching." (R7)*

It is clear that harnessing human development through proper learning and development, and the provision of supportive and meaningful experiences will empower the teaching force to reinvent their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *"We (teachers) are resilient. We are flexible. We make it a point that we are connected with each other. Because of our support system we draw inspiration and strength from each other. By supporting our teams, we inspire and motivate each other. Because we believe we will, we will overcome all of these." (R2)*

Theme 4. Educational Directions for PSOs Beyond Covid

It is very evident that Covid-19 has brought massive change to the education system around the world. The future remains uncertain, although there are hopes of normalizing the situation, but it is very clear that it will never be the same as before. Covid-19 has likely shaped a different direction to the future of education. We have seen the unpreparedness of schools to the abrupt migration to digital and remote learning. However, we have also witnessed resourcefulness, creativity, commitment, increased collaboration, and strong solidarity among teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders of the schools, that showed an undeniable resilience to the challenges of the times (UNESCO, 2020). Education landscape is ever changing. An education system that is resilient must be adapted, one that can transform and adapt to adversities and uncertainties of the future. Policy makers can utilize the existing situation as benchmark to create informed plans and strategies to forecast eventualities of any crises that may come in the future (Van der Graaf, Dunajeva, Siarova, & Bankauskaite, 2021).

> *"It helps us to discover a lot of things even if teaching and learning is done at home. You can do a lot of stuff so that students will learn." (R8)*
> *"We have established an open communication system. We solicit feedback from each other, the administration, teachers, parents, and students, we openly communicate so that we work together following the same objectives and goals." (R7)*
> *"Change is the reality. Collaboration is the strategy. We have to capitalize that we really have to work together." (R1)*

With the shift of learning from the traditional mode to remote and distance learning. Online learning becomes the future of education as it paves the way to future advances in education due to the following reasons: 1.) Online learning is flexible providing teachers and students their own learning space and create flexible schedules. 2.) Online learning provides various program options that allow students and teachers to have unlimited skills and subjects to teach and learn. 3.) Online learning is accessible that makes teaching and learning doable anywhere in the world. 4.) Online learning offers a personalize learning experience. Students can meet their own needs and skill levels, in the same manner, teachers can combine various teaching methods and aids (Childhope Philippines, 2021).

> *"Our world now is really digital. In the new normal, distance and online learning is the new modality. I believe that this is one way of improving the future of our education." (R2)*

To continuously build remarkable learning experiences, steps to move forward to the new normal need to be undertaken to make online learning even better. Educational institutions need to migrate to flexible teaching and learning style by recalibrating the curriculum, capacitating the faculty, upgrading the infrastructure, and ensure that all children, regardless of income and access to technology, internet connection, can avail and participate in experiencing supportive and meaningful learning opportunities. These strategic actions have to be continuously assessed, modified, and enhanced to respond to the volatile, uncertain, and changing scenarios in times of crisis and match the demand of the situation (Darling-Hammond, Edgerton, Truong, &

Cookson, 2020; Dayagbil, Palompon, Garcia, & Olvido, 2021). Philippine Schools Overseas (PSOs) can continue to adapt and enhance their learning modalities ---- online, in person, or hybrid. Irrespective of the medium to which learning takes place, school personnel must endeavor in transforming and refining this online learning platform by contributing meaningful learning experiences in response to the need of the existing situation of the students.

> *"We have been using the online learning platform for so long (before pandemic), we just maximize its full potential this time."* (R9)
> *"We have to move forward because this is what the situation calls for. We have to move forward to the future in order for us to meet our goals, objectives, and the needs of the children (students) primarily."* (R7)

Conclusion

Continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic was one of the most challenging tasks of the officials and stakeholders of Philippine Schools Overseas. Ensuring non-disruption of learning requires careful planning and analysis by which collective efforts of the school officials, teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders are deemed important. Deriving from the data obtained through this research, PSOs were able to create strategic initiatives related to learning continuity amid pandemic, technology supported learning, the need to provide support to teachers, and educational directions for PSOs in order to address stance of survival amid pandemic and beyond. As schools prepare for redesigning education system that is responsive to the post-pandemic situation, it is imperative to consider the existing demands of the students, needs of the teachers and its stakeholders when reforming the educational platforms. It requires a careful and thorough analysis of the parameters by which the school operates from the perspectives of the students, teachers, parents, and external stakeholders. Redesigning ideas of how school operates must be tailored according to the existing needs of the learners to ensure responsive and meaningful learning despite the oddities they are facing through and likewise harness the knowledge and development of the teachers to leverage greater teaching expertise amidst the negative impact that this pandemic has brought about. Equally important is the development of standards for online learning that articulates how to maximize the use of technology to empower students and teachers. Utilizing these practices can help schools successfully implement the post-pandemic educational model that is reflective, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of the future.

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