CHALLENGES MET AND STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE SCHOOL HEADS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MODULAR DISTANCE LEARNING MODALITY

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Abstract:

This study determined the challenges met and strategies employed by the school heads in Magallanes South District, Division of Sorsogon in the implementation of modular distance learning modality along with facilitating learning, provision for instructional materials, pupils' development and teachers' supervision and evaluation. This descriptive-survey research utilized survey questionnaires and unstructured interviews to 12 school heads, S.Y. 2021-2022. Results indicated that the topmost challenges met by the school heads were limited teaching interaction and risks in conducting home visitation, delimitation in the assessment components, insufficient budget allocation, inconsistency in giving grades and difficulty in validating pupils' performance, the bulk of workloads and delimitation in the conduct classroom observation. Hence, to address the challenges, the participants devised strategies such as facilitation of community partnerships, home visitation, training and capacity building, realignment of funds, utilization of existing school resources, revised assessment criteria, a delegation of responsibilities, and scheduled teachers' observation through video lesson presentation. It was concluded that the challenges were heightened and became inevitable due to the human mobility restrictions in different contexts due to the pandemic. These challenges muddle the academic and administrative functions of the school heads. However, despite the challenges, results illustrated the aptitude of the school leaders to lead by example and to show resiliency in maintaining and furthering the school institution through their creativity and intuitiveness in strategizing so as not to hamper the quality of education.

Keywords: modular distance learning modality, school heads, challenges, strategies, action plan

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1. Introduction

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 pandemic globally affects the socio-economic, education, transportation and mobility, health and the world of work, thus, bringing unpredictable changes in all aspects of people's lives. Specifically, focusing on academic institutions, the closure of schools, learning institutions and other learning spaces have impacted millions of student populations. Common practices have been disturbed by social distancing and restrictive movement policies.

Countries around the world make necessary precautions to control the transmission of the virus. It includes mandatory health protocols such as handwashing, wearing of facemasks, physical distancing and avoiding mass gatherings and assemblies. Further, lockdowns and staying home strategies were also implemented to protect everyone from the virus (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Further, as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the pandemic last March 2020, massive interruptions in normal school classes all over the world occur. Schools were compelled to implement ways to manage the safety of everyone not only the learners but also the teachers and other school personnel and at the same to minimize the transmission of the virus (Bailey & Breslin, 2021).

Given the challenge, as stipulated in Resolution No. 29 of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF), and the Department of Education (DepEd) issued DepEd Order No.14 s.2020 or the Guidelines on the Required Health Standards on Basic Education Schools and Offices for the guidelines of all learners, teachers and non-teaching personnel nationwide. Guided by its BE-LCP, DOH and IATF, DepEd adopted the Required Health Standards which is implemented in all basic education schools and community learning centers (CLCs) until such time when the learners and other DepEd personnel are allowed to return physically to their respective schools and offices to ensure their health, safety and well-being as well as slow down the transmission of the virus.

Due to this unexpected health crisis, all academic health institutions including the Department of Education were directed to close, hence classes were cancelled in March 2020. However, despite the closure, schools in the country find ways for learning to continue. Just like other schools in the country, the DepEd followed the government mandate to ensure the health, safety and well-being of learners, teachers and personnel. Thus, DepEd Order No.012, s. 2020 was implemented to address the need for basic education without compromising the health and security of its clientele. The said guideline stipulates the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) of the Department of Education implemented during the pandemic.

Considering this abrupt implementation of modular distance learning, school leaders faced difficult situations during its planning, implementation and monitoring. As front liners in the education arena, school heads have critical roles in ensuring the quality of education in the midst of the pandemic (Azorin, 2020).

As the 2020-2021 school year unfolds, school heads continue to lead their school communities despite the adversities (Maya, 2020). Hence, the roles and responsibilities of the school heads are very critical during this time of the pandemic. Functioning as administrative and academic leaders, school administrators have complex roles in an academic institution. During the pandemic, they are expected to be more flexible in managing school resources to be abreast with the changing guidelines.

In addition, during the lockdown and school closures, the school heads coordinate measures to ensure learning continuity. They were also responsible to ensure a safe learning environment for the learners that's why they need to promote and establish collaboration with different stakeholders. During this time of the pandemic, school heads need more time and energy to cope with those emerging challenges (Whang, 2020).

Moreover, school principals have a challenging responsibility during the pandemic such as balancing learners on their needs in response to the health concerns and expectations of the teachers, parents and other stakeholders (Varela & Fedynic, 2020). During school closures, the schools are facing a crisis which has unpredictable consequences and the school heads are confronting stress and pressure on how to deal with it.

Heubeck (2021) says that the tasks of school heads are not easy and the pandemic brought additional burdens and challenges to them that not even the most prepared administrator could have anticipated. Aside from the heavy workloads, the school heads are confronted and are obliged to do tasks like arranging the schedules of the learners and addressing some health concerns of their subordinates.

While there are studies such as Lien, Khan, & Eid (2022) who focused on the experiences of the school principals from face-to-face to digital education, Asterio, Madriaga, Bulatao, & Arcilla, (2020) who dealt with the perspectives of school heads in private and public schools in the Philippines about the importance of modular distance learning modality (MDLM), and Castroverde & Acala (2021) who determined the challenges of teachers during the pandemic, no studies have conducted which looked deeply into the perspectives of the school heads regarding their challenges during the implementation of MDLM. This issue is vital considering that the school heads are the pillars of the Department of Education. It is in this spirit that this study examined the challenges and the strategies used by the school heads so as to determine their personal experiences that may be reflective of the school's public administration and may have implications for future educational leadership when a crisis strikes further in the future.

2. Objectives/purpose of the Study

1) What are the challenges encountered by the school heads on the implementation of the modular distance learning modality in terms of:
   a) Facilitating of Learning,
   b) Provision for Instructional Materials,
   c) Pupil's Development, and

    d) Teacher's Supervision and Evaluation
2) What are the strategies employed by the school heads to address the challenges met along the identified variables?
3) What output may be proposed as a result of the study?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design
This study utilized the descriptive research design which employed the survey method to determine the challenges met by the elementary school heads in Magallanes, Sorsogon and unstructured interviews to identify the strategies employed by the participants in the implementation of Modular Distance Learning Modality. The collected data were treated statistically and analyzed using weighted mean, frequency count, and rank. The responses of the participants were thematically presented and analyzed.

3.2 Respondents
Using the total enumeration of the population, there were 12 elementary school heads who represented the 12 elementary schools in Magallanes South District served as the primary source of data for this study. These participants were chosen for their schools were involved in the implementation of the modular distance learning modality.

3.3 Research Instrument
The main instrument utilized in this study is the survey questionnaire which is composed of two parts. The first part contained the challenges met by the participants along with facilitating learning, provision for instructional materials, pupil's development and teachers' supervision and evaluation guided by the Likert scale. The second part focused on the identification of strategies employed by the participants to address the challenges they identified. Further, the study also employed unstructured interviews to validate the data gathered from the survey questionnaire.

3.4 Data Collection and Procedures
After the compliance of the comments and suggestions of the panelists, the researcher finalized and conducted a dry run in selected school heads at Magallanes North District who was not included in the study. Comments and suggestions of the participants were taken for accuracy and accuracy of the instrument.

With the instrument ready for administration, the researcher sought a request to the School Division Superintendent of Sorsogon for the actual conduct of the survey. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants and retrieved on the last week of July 2022. More so, the unstructured interview was conducted during the vacant time of some of the participants and through the scheduled appointment of other school heads due to their busy schedules in their respective schools.

3.5 Statistical Treatment of Data

The data gathered were organized, tabulated and analyzed using the appropriate statistical tools. The weighted mean was used in determining the challenges met employed by the school heads on modular distance learning modality in terms of facilitating of learning, provision for instructional materials, pupil development and teacher supervision and evaluation.

The following scale and interpretation were used as references.

Range	Verbal Interpretation
4.50 – 5.00	Strongly Agree
3.50 – 4.49	Agree
2.50 – 3.49	Neutral
1.50 – 2.49	Disagree
1.00 – 1.49	Strongly Disagree

The frequency count and ranking were used in presenting the challenges met by the school heads. Data obtained from frequency and ranking were further interpreted, analyzed and triangulated based on the result of the interview.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Challenges of School Heads

As shown in Table 1, there are numerous challenges met by the school heads in the implementation of modular distance learning. Out of five indicators in each category, the study identified the two top challenges met by the participants.

Table 1: Summary of the Challenges met by the School Heads

A. Facilitating of Learning	WM	Description	Rank
There are issues with limited teaching interaction resulting in difficulty in facilitating active learning environment among pupils.	4.67	Strongly Agree	1
Risks are encountered by teachers in conducting home visitation.	4.5	Strongly Agree	2
B. Provision for Instructional Materials			
Modular distance learning delimits some components to assess the pupils' learning, performance and achievement on a specific area of study effectively.	4.25	Agree	1
There is an insufficient allocation in 2021 budget for the shift from face-to-face to modular distance learning.	4.08	Agree	2
C. Pupil's development			
There is inconsistency in pupil's grades which cannot directly assess pupil's academic standing.	4.5	Strongly Agree	1
There is difficulty in validating pupils' learning, performance, and achievement in specific areas of study effectively	4.33	Agree	2
D. Teacher's Supervision and Evaluation			

Too much workload of the school heads that it affects time and efficiency in supervising teacher's performance and other related works	4.17	Agree	1.5
Modular distance learning modality delimits actual classroom observation to teachers as teaching shifted to video lessons and online instructions where there is no active interaction between teacher and learners.	4.17	Agree	1.5

Results indicated that the participants said that the modular approach challenges them because it was implemented haphazardly with very short planning and preparation. Indeed, the most common challenges faced by school administrators during COVID-19 pandemic such as the inability to maintain students' motivation to learn, parents' incapability to create a home learning environment for students and failure to access and connect to the internet, among others were also the challenges faced not only in the Philippines but also in other countries (Aytac, 2020).

As to the issue of instructional materials, the school heads explained that due to the abrupt implementation of modular distance learning in their respective schools, they have very limited time to (re)train the teachers on how to enhance their strategies and skills in the IMs preparation suited to distance learning education. Though there are trainings conducted for the preparation of modular distance learning before the beginning of the school year 2021, they said that those are not sufficient to supplement all the needed knowledge and skills of the teachers due to time constraints from preparation to the printing of materials.

In as much as the schools including the Magallanes schools district would like to apply flexible learning (such as synchronous and asynchronous classes) so as to lessen the printing of modules, the participants declared that in reality there are more parents who cannot afford to have internet connectivity and buy a necessary gadget for synchronous and asynchronous classes. Also, there are still other rural areas in the province that do not have access to cell sites and electricity. Further, there are also more parents who are incapacitated to manipulate the gadgets; thus, they could hardly assist their children with this kind of instructional transition. Thus, taking into consideration the situation of the learners, the school heads have no other option but to choose modular distance learning.

This result reflects that of Pe Dangle & Sumaoang (2020) study who found out similar challenges during the onset of modular distance learning. They identified the most common problems such as lack of resources, lack of preparedness and lack and poor communication during the implementation of modular learning in the Philippine secondary schools in Baguio City.

The data also show that the participants are confronted with another challenge on how to accurately and objectively assess the academic performance of the pupils considering that the grading system is designed for a face-to-face assessment. While the teachers are accustomed to assessing the learners' performance using the given criteria set by the DepEd, factors such as parents' and siblings' interventions were taken into

consideration in the assessment of learners' general academic performance during modular distance learning. The participants said that there are always instances wherein the pupils have difficulty in doing the learning activities since there are no teachers who actually guide them on what to do. Hence, the intervention mostly comes from the parents and siblings (those pupils with older siblings already). However, in cases when the parents are incapable to assist the child, the activities in the modules are left unanswered. On the other hand, the participants added that if the parents are knowledgeable, often, the parents do the work for their kids. Considering these scenarios, the results of the activities are also compromised and diluted due to parents' and siblings' intervention in different aspects of the child's accumulation of knowledge in the subject matters. Hence, issues on the quality of pupils' output based on the actual experiences of the participants become problematic.

These findings are stressed in the study of Dangle & Sumaoang (2020), who found out that modular instruction is not a 100% guarantee that learners become more independent compared to classroom interaction. Their results indicated that students could hardly follow instructions without the assistance of the teachers and parents, thus answer sheets were submitted unanswered or with incomplete entries. Thus, results show that modular distance learning seems that pupils' development more constrained compared to the physical school environment.

Also, since the school managers are mandated to follow the issuances of the new guidelines from the top of the Department of Education, they are additionally burdened with additional terms of references as stipulated in DepEd Order No.11, s.2020 or the *Revised Guidelines on Alternative Work Arrangement in the Department of Education during the Period of State of National Emergency due to COVID -19 Pandemic.* The guideline stipulates that all DepEd teaching and non-teaching personnel are expected to make themselves available during working hours and to maximize the time spent in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities. Hence, the school heads are authorized to make the alternative working schedules of the personnel. In the absence of some teachers and non-teaching personnel, the school heads said that they do all the work, thus this becomes an additional load and another factor that hinder them from staunchly doing the classroom observations. The results echoed Lapada's (2020) notion that geographic location and local set-up are some of the many challenges in conducting distance education in the Philippines. Hence evaluation of the performance of both the teachers and students is really difficult to measure and implement.

Considering that those should not be the reasons not to supervise and evaluate the teachers, thus, they opted to have schedules for the teachers' monitoring so as to balance their tasks and have good relationships with teachers. These balancing tasks of school heads echo that of Songkayawon, et al. (2022) study in a public school in Antique, who found out that effective management skills of the school heads are significantly correlated with teachers' performance. This indicates that working harmoniously with teachers leads to better performance of the school heads and the school performance in general.

Further, as to the classroom observation, the teacher's evaluation form mismatches already with the new normal mode of instruction (modular distance learning modality) implemented in Magallanes District considering that its design is suited to face-to-face class observation only. This is particularly challenging considering that the school heads cannot even do the online platform teaching evaluation due to a very poor internet connection in the area.

Additionally, the school heads also admitted that there is still insufficient knowledge of the teachers as to the teaching approaches in the new normal. They mentioned that there is a gap and lack of knowledge and skills on the part of the teachers (especially those seasoned teachers who are not technologically-oriented) in utilizing the available online instructional tools and recent instructional materials, preparation and teaching strategies for the new normal for they lack training due to the unforeseen shift from traditional classroom teaching to modular distance learning.

4.2 Strategies Employed by the School Heads

Despite the challenges experienced by the school heads, they devised strategies to lessen their burden as school administrators as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the strategies employed by the school heads

Challenges (based on the categories/variables)	Strategies
Facilitating learning	- teacher-parent partnership - community assistance - information dissemination
Provision for instructional materials	- conducted teachers' training-workshop - prioritized the utilization of funds for the reproduction of Self-Learning Modules (SLM) and Learning Activity Sheets (LAS). - sought assistance and coordinated with other stakeholders to support the implementation of modular distance learning modality
Pupil's development	- revised assessment criteria suited to modular distance learning - conducted individual home visitations to personally assess pupils' academic performance - by group visitation - one on one discussion/tutorial
Teacher's supervision and evaluation	- delegated and shared responsibilities with other staff - scheduled teachers' observation - facilitate training for the preparation of video lessons - facilitated the video presentations

The results showed that the common strategies that were derived from the responses of the school heads along with facilitating learning were strong community partnerships, home visitation and information dissemination and communication. While, support to students and utilization of resources for the provision of instructional materials. Assessment for pupils' performance and provision of IMs and LMs for pupils'

development. Trainings and seminars and time management and learning resources are for teacher's supervision and evaluation.

During COVID-19 crisis, school heads' leadership and management were tested particularly in making complex decisions while doing statutory and regulatory works and requirements. Even though the participants are bombarded with too many workloads due to unavoidable circumstances during the pandemic, they said that they need to supervise the teachers' performance for it is needed in the individual performance commitment review as well as one of the bases for the general performance of the agency.

The participants mentioned that delegation of tasks to other personnel helps them lessen their burden in academic matters. Other teachers who are scheduled for particular days are requested to perform designated functions related to academic matters to easily facilitate academic activities. Meanwhile, the participants mentioned that scheduling teachers' observations is what she did so as not to overlap with other activities since personnel and teachers have work-from-home schedules.

Considering that actual observation during class hours cannot be done during the pandemic, the school heads let their teachers attend seminars on how to prepare video presentations and other instructional materials. Then they let their teachers prepare actual video lesson presentations and subsequently, they let the teachers submit their outputs to them.

This proves that despite the huge responsibility of the school heads during the pandemic, they believe that class observation/demonstration lesson is a very effective way to understand the quality of instruction and interaction with teachers and pupils as well as the basis for the teachers' teaching effectiveness and efficiency.

4.3 Projects MINDS

The action plan Project MINDS (Modular Distance Learning Modality Implementation using New Designs and Strategies) was proposed to address the challenges encountered by the school heads. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Education has been forced to immediately shift the mode of instruction from face-to-face modality to modular or online learning to ensure and deliver quality education to all learners amidst the crisis. However, considering that the shift of education is now going back to face-to-face learning modality in elementary public schools in the country, this action plan is applicable both synchronous and asynchronous modality. This provides opportunities for th school heads, teachers, parents, and learners to enhance their knowledge and skills as they continue to board on their journey to quality education amidst the pandemic and eventually the post pandemic.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1) The school heads encountered several challenges in the implementation of modular distance modality along facilitating of learning, provision for instructional materials, pupils' development, teacher's supervision and evaluation. These challenges were heightened and became inevitable due to the human mobility restrictions in different contexts due to the pandemic, thus muddling the academic and administrative functions of the school heads.

2) Strategies were crafted and done to alleviate the problems so as not to compromise the quality of education. These actions illustrate the aptitude of the school leaders to lead by example and to show resiliency in maintaining and furthering the school institution despite adversities.

3) The action plan was made that can be adopted and implemented.

6. Recommendations

In light of the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made:

1) The school heads may consider the inclusion of specific objectives and activities in their plan of action to address the challenges that they encountered in the implementation of the modular learning modality.

2) The school heads together with the teachers and parents may collaborate to create a strategic plan with the strategies for resolving the challenges in the implementation of modular distance learning.

3) The action plan hereby made may be considered for implementation upon evaluation, review and approval of DepEd authorities.

4) Other researches parallel to the present study may be conducted using other variables in addressing the challenges of the modular distance learning modality.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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