

Original Research Article

Post-Pandemic Challenges in Addressing Learning Gaps: Experiences of Teachers in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools

ABSTRACT

Aims: This research focused on identifying challenges faced by public elementary and secondary school teachers after the pandemic, as they tried to address the learning gaps found among students and the potential risks these challenges posed to their learning.

Study design: The study followed a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing a phenomenological design.

Place and Duration of Study: This was conducted in selected public elementary and secondary schools in Abuyog, Javier, and MacArthur Leyte while teachers were addressing learning gaps among students during the school year 2022.

Methodology: A total of 25 teachers from elementary and secondary schools willingly participated in the study through convenience sampling. Researchers employed a survey method using researcher-made semi-structured questionnaires distributed through Google forms and various social media platforms. Data analysis was conducted using the method of Colaizzi (1978).

Results: The findings revealed that elementary teachers faced challenges such as learners' lack of interest and attention, teachers overlapping tasks, the complexity of students' learning needs, and inadequate support from parents or guardians. Secondary school teachers encountered difficulties including students' low motivation, teachers' overlapping tasks, insufficient administrative support, and the complexity of students' learning needs. These challenges were found to have potential risks to students' learning, impeding their learning progress and potentially leading to permanent disconnection from school.

Conclusion: This study concluded that teachers were struggling in addressing learning gaps among students after the pandemic. The need of allowing them to concentrate in teaching struggling learners must be given importance by school administrators. Strong collaboration between teachers, parents or guardians and other stakeholders in fostering student motivation to continue their education must also be prioritized.

Keywords: experiences, learning gaps, post-pandemic, public schools, teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning gap is the difference between a student's actual performance and what was expected of him or her at a certain age and grade level. In public school setting, elementary and secondary school teachers in the Philippines has been challenged by persistent learning gaps of students in numeracy, literacy and even on the acquired competencies of learners in a particular subject area per grade level. This problem has a long-term negative impact on the country's educational system. Researches and studies have been recording Philippines being low in various reading comprehension surveys and numeracy tests across Asian

countries indicating a decreasing quality of public elementary and secondary education (Magno, 2022).

Even before the pandemic, education professionals have raised concerns about learning gaps among children in public elementary and secondary school systems worldwide. In fact, UNESCO reported that an estimated 15 million children in different regions between the ages of 5 and 14 were not in school, and nearly two-thirds were unable to read proficiently. Poverty, social marginalization, displacement, and disruption caused by conflict contributed an extra 10 million children at risk of dropping out. In the Philippines, researches and forums have been highlighting this problem more frequently. In fact, some studies mentioned reasons causing learning gaps among students in public schools such as (a) disparities in resource allocation (Abad & Garcia, 2019), (b) limited parental involvement (Bartolome et al., 2017), and (c) teacher quality and training (David et al., 2019).

The implementation of distance learning due to pandemic have made the teaching-learning process in most schools challenging. Despite efforts made by the Department of Education in implementing different learning modalities and teachers strengthened to initiate and innovate teaching strategies for students to still access education amidst pandemic, teachers still encountered difficulties in ensuring students' engagement and participation (Palad, 2022). The absence of classroom dynamics made it challenging to motivate students and monitor their progress effectively and students had unequal opportunities to participate in online classes considering factors such as socioeconomic status, availability of devices, and internet connectivity resulting to increasing gaps of students' learning. UNESCO and World Bank (2021) reported that about 0 to 15% of 10 years old children in the country could not read a simple text and most of them are from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. They are among the 26,950,258 Filipino learners who were affected due to school closure.

Since academic year 2021-2022, most public elementary and secondary schools across regions in the country returns to in-person classes. The Department of Education strongly mandates and prioritized learning recovery projects specifically those students who were considered struggling both in literacy and numeracy. Teachers, moreover, have implemented innovative and engaging classroom-based activities as learning interventions aiming to supplement learning gaps among students. However, there are only limited literature that highlights challenges experienced by teachers while implementing classroom-based activities addressing learning gaps in public elementary and secondary schools. Thus, there is a need to elicit this information to deeply understand their efforts, factors contributing to these challenges, and the potential risks of these problems to the students learning. This paper investigated the challenges experienced by selected public elementary and secondary school teachers of Abuyog, Javier, and Mac Arthur, Leyte while implementing classroom-based interventions addressing the existing learning gaps among students. Moreover, this study concentrated only on eliciting and discussing actual challenges experienced by teachers while implementing learning activities as interventions addressing to learning gaps and the potential risks of these problems to the students learning.

1.1 Objectives of the study

This study aims to identify the challenges experienced by public elementary and secondary school teachers while addressing learning gaps and the potential risks of these challenges to students learning. Specifically, this study focuses on the following:

- a. Challenges experienced by teachers while addressing learning gaps among students.

b. Potential risks of challenges experienced by teachers while addressing learning gaps to students learning.

1.2 Framework of the study

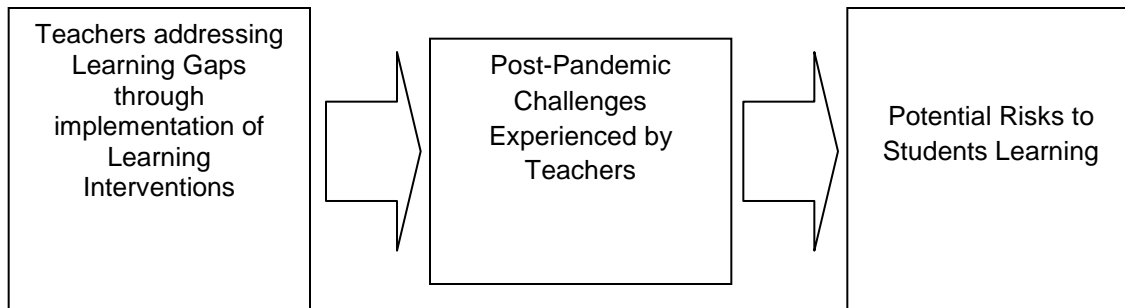


Figure 1. Framework of the study

The framework above shows the concepts that this study concentrated on. From teachers experiences while addressing learning gaps among students through implementing learning interventions, the challenges they encountered were identified and analyzed. From these challenges, perspective of teachers about the potential risks of these problems to students learning was also discussed.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is qualitative research utilizing a phenomenological design in determining post-pandemic challenges encountered by teachers while implementing learning interventions that addressed learning gaps among students and potential risks it posed to students learning. The study was conducted among selected public elementary and secondary schools in Abuyog, Javier & MacArthur Leyte, Philippines. Twenty-Five (25) professional public-school teachers were approached on their voluntary participation in this study using convenience sampling. Twelve (12) of them are from selected elementary schools and Thirteen (13) from the secondary level. Researchers used survey method in this study and utilized google forms and other social media platforms in the distribution of researcher-made semi-structured questionnaires to the respondents and at the same time retrieving their responses. Confidentiality of respondents' profile were guaranteed and researchers ensured that all data gathered will be utilized for research purposes only. Data were analyzed using the method of Colaizzi (1978).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The return of in-person classes in public elementary and secondary schools in the Philippines since late 2021 was believed to reduce the work of teachers from preparing lessons to assessment and monitoring of students learning. However, attending students who underwent distance learning for almost two (2) years have made them realize the wide learning gap among students in different learning areas and the need of implementing learning interventions to address these problems. Moreover, challenges while addressing learning gaps among students were also experienced by the teachers that also have potential effects to students learning and readiness for higher lessons.

The tables below show the actual challenges experienced by teachers in addressing learning gaps among students in public elementary and secondary schools.

Table 1. Post-pandemic challenges experienced by ELEMENTARY teachers while addressing learning gaps

Emerging Themes (Challenges)	Experiences of Teachers
Learners' poor attention and interests in learning	<p><i>"They never pay attention to the activities..."</i></p> <p><i>"They easily get tired having our lessons/remedial classes..."</i></p> <p><i>"Even in writing activities, they find it difficult to try..."</i></p> <p><i>"Poor interests in studying because of gadgets..."</i></p>
Teachers' overlapping tasks	<p><i>"We prepare lessons and conduct classes every day for most of our pupils, prepare for observations/classroom evaluations, attend school-based activities like staff meetings, culminating activities & scheduled seminars/ LAC sessions, while focusing to struggling pupils sometimes becomes less-prioritized..."</i></p> <p><i>"Difficult to schedule or manage time due to urgent reports while attending regular classes to other pupils..."</i></p>
Complexity of learners' learning needs	<p><i>"Some learners in higher grade can't really read both English and Filipino..."</i></p> <p><i>"Can't identify the sounds and can't write their names..."</i></p> <p><i>"Poor penmanship of pupils in higher level..."</i></p> <p><i>"Some learners have speech defect or can't talk or speak well..."</i></p> <p><i>"Very poor ability to read and comprehend"</i> <i>"Learners in higher grade don't even know how to add..."</i></p> <p><i>"Some learners in higher grade level can't fluently read words with CVC..."</i></p>
Inadequate parental or guardians' support	<p><i>"no one is helping our pupils at home..."</i></p> <p><i>"no sufficient food at home and students are experiencing hunger..."</i></p>

This table shows the challenges experienced by public elementary school teachers while addressing learning gaps among identified struggling learners after the pandemic. It was revealed that elementary teachers struggle to learners' poor attention and interests in

learning, their overlapping tasks in school, the complexity of learners' learning gaps, and the lacking support from learners' parents or guardians. Most teachers observed the low attention span of pupils on the provided learning activities but can overplay gadgets. In addition, they easily get tired on remedials classes or special session for them and have low motivation to try and expose themselves in learning activities that will enhance their skills.

Elementary teachers also struggle on the overlapping works or tasks given to them while addressing learning gaps of their pupils. Based on the data gathered it was revealed that aside from concentrating on the needs of the identified struggling learners, they are still required to conduct regular classes for the rest of their learners. They have to perform their teaching duties indicated on their class programs including other ancillary tasks and paper works every day. In addition, there are also urgent reports that has to be complied and submitted to district or division office, urgent meetings and observations which can also cause interruptions on their remedial sessions.

Another challenge that elementary teachers experience while addressing learning gaps of their learners after the pandemic is the complexity of the learning needs that has to be addressed. On the survey conducted it was revealed that there are learners in key stage 2 who can barely read in English and in Filipino, can't recognize sounds and can't even spell and write their names. There are also learners in higher level who are struggling in recognizing consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words that a teacher needs to jump from the very basic skills in reading just to address these difficulties found in them.

Lacking support from parents or guardians were also identified as a challenge of teachers while addressing learning gaps of their struggling learners. It was found out that, most struggling pupils do not have anyone with them helping while they are working on their learning exercises given by the teachers. Some parents also cannot provide enough food for their children resulting that they cannot concentrate on their learning at school.

Table 2. Post-pandemic challenges experienced by SECONDARY teachers while addressing learning gaps

Emerging Themes (Challenges)	Experiences of Teachers
Students' poor motivation in learning	<p><i>"Struggling students were always absent making it difficult for me to provide learning interventions..."</i></p> <p><i>"Struggling learners have little to no cooperation on the learning interventions provided for them, printed worksheets for them to answer and practice at home weren't returned for checking..."</i></p> <p><i>"Students prioritize playing games on their gadgets than of complying learning tasks given to them..."</i></p> <p><i>"Some parents are losing hope on the education of their children because they are not listening to them, they can't motivate them to finish their learning tasks at home..."</i></p>

Teachers' overlapping tasks and poor administrative support	<p><i>"We have a regular class schedule of six hours for actual teaching and two hours for ancillary tasks and lesson preparation every day. Providing time and attention for specific learning interventions for struggling learners is very challenging..."</i></p> <p><i>"Most struggling learners are from mountainous areas and you have to cross rivers for home visitation. It is very time consuming and risky..."</i></p> <p><i>"We are required to not disrupt our regular classes while attending our struggling students...At the end of the quarter we are asked to submit updates of students' progress despite insufficient time given to us to cater their learning gaps so we just reported it positively because if not, we are asked to provide plenty of MOVs or modes of verifications to support that our students really are not doing well despite our efforts, and it's an additional burden again..."</i></p>
Complexity of students' learning needs	<p><i>"Students have poor foundation of basic concepts; numeracy skill is very low. Not ready for secondary school..."</i></p> <p><i>"Can't read and understand simple instructions in Filipino or in English..."</i></p>

This table shows the challenges experienced by public secondary school teachers while addressing learning gaps among students after the pandemic. Based on the data collected it was revealed that secondary school teachers are struggling to poor motivation of students towards learning, teachers' overlapping tasks and poor administrative support, and the complexity of students learning needs.

While addressing learning gaps among students after the pandemic, secondary school teachers were particularly challenged by students' low motivation to learn. Teachers have experienced that the majority of their struggling learners do not appear in class or even during remedial sessions. Worksheets and other printed exercises or learning activities for students were never returned to the teacher for evaluation. They prefer mobile gaming to the extent that their parents are beginning to lose hope in their schooling.

Teachers' overlapping school obligations and little administration support have made it difficult for them to address student learning gaps. According to the data gathered, teachers are struggling to find enough time to cater to the needs of their struggling students while also attending six hours of regular classes and two hours of other paperwork and ancillary duties. It is incredibly challenging to prepare teaching materials and conduct lessons on a daily basis based on the number of subjects they have to teach indicated on their class programs while also adhering to the learning needs of their struggling students. Teachers frequently consider home visitation challenging at times due to the distance between students' homes

and school. Most teachers are also dissatisfied with the assistance provided by school administration in addressing learning gaps among struggling students. They feel stressed by the quarterly reporting of learners' progress, even if they were only given a little time to focus on meeting their learning needs. They were requested to provide evidences if they saw no development among struggling students or if teachers submitted failed remarks of the pupils despite their efforts, which is why many of them reported favorable remarks despite the fact that students are not progressing.

The complexity of students' learning needs was also identified as a challenge for teachers while addressing learning gaps after the pandemic. It was discovered that several secondary students have very unsatisfactory numeracy and literacy foundations. There are also students who are struggling to read and comprehend simple instructions printed in English or Filipino. These issues posed a challenge for secondary school teachers who wanted to return to basics without jeopardizing their daily lessons to average or fast learners in their class.

Potential risks to students' learning

Aside from the challenges experienced by the teachers while addressing learning among students after the pandemic, they also highlighted the potential risks of these problems to students learning. The following are the potentials risks of the challenges encountered by the teachers while addressing learning gaps to students learning:

a. Impede progress of learning

Teachers believed that learners' poor motivation or interest in learning, poor support from the school administration, teachers' overlapping tasks, lacking support from the parents or guardians will impede progress of learning of every struggling learner. According to one the respondents of the study:

"The struggling learners will remain struggling if they'll refuse to cooperate with the learning interventions being provided to them."

This means that students' participation is really important in order for the teacher to address the learning needs of the identified struggling learners. In addition, this will help teachers, identify the exact learning intervention that has to be implemented for the struggling learners considering the complexity of students' learning needs that has to be addressed. There will be no continuous progress of students learning if they will not submit themselves to their teachers. Parents or guardians, moreover, must play vital role as learning partner of teachers at home by strengthening students' motivation to continue their education. Teacher respondents also believed that school administration must create alternative class schedules for struggling learners that will allow teachers utilized and concentrate their time in addressing the learning needs of each struggling learners.

b. Permanent disconnection from school

Teachers strongly believed that if those challenges they encounter will continue, permanent disconnection of students from school will be very possible. In fact, a respondent said that:

"If learners will continue to experience learning difficulties because they are not ready for the competencies of each subject

on the grade level they are enrolled in, may lower their self-esteem and will end up to disconnecting themselves from school.”

This statement only shows that it is important to consider the particular learning need of each struggling learners and sufficient time given to teachers while addressing the gap among learners. Students will continue to experience self-doubt if they can feel that they are left behind. If students will continue to struggle with academic demands, it can have negative consequences on their self-esteem and overall engagement in school. This, in turn, may lead to permanent disconnection of students to teachers or to school. However, these arguments give an opportunity for school leaders and policy makers to consider, prioritize and plan carefully the initiatives that will allow and strengthen teachers on their tasks to cater all learning needs of identified struggling learners without sacrificing many tasks assigned to them.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that public elementary and secondary school teachers encountered challenges while addressing learning gaps among learners after the pandemic. Elementary teachers struggle to pupils' poor attention and interests in learning, their overlapping tasks, complexity of pupils' learning needs and lacking support from the parents or guardians. Secondary teachers moreover, struggle to student's poor motivation in learning, teachers' overlapping tasks, poor administrative support and the complexity of students' learning needs. These challenges were also identified as potential risks to students learning particularly, impeded students learning progress and students' permanent disconnection from school.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Researcher recommends to school policy makers and administrators to have an alternative class program for teachers who will handle struggling learners for the entire school year and lessen their ancillary task so they can focus on addressing students' learning needs. Also, schools' administrators should allow teachers to retain struggling learners on their grade level if found not ready for higher level without asking too much evidences. Schools should also strengthen partnership with parents or guardians of each struggling learners to strengthen relationships and instill learners' motivation to continue their education. Lastly, researchers recommend future researchers to utilize the result of this study for further research.

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