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BEST PRACTICES ON BRIDGING LEARNING GAPS: FROM THE NARRATIVES OF SCHOOL HEADS

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ABSTRACT

Learning gaps have always been common in education. The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic has been especially difficult for students. The transition to remote learning has been a lot tougher on some students than others, and unfortunately, this has led to an increase in learning gaps. Hence, this qualitative phenomenological research study explored the best practices in bridging learning gaps employed by the school heads in Loreto South District. It utilized in-depth interviews to gather data. This study used an interview guide created by the researcher as a qualitative analysis method. The researcher used a tool with a list of questions to keep track of to ensure that all the topics necessary to address the research questions were covered. This study aims to explore school heads' experiences, challenges, and insights in bridging learning gaps. There were five purposively selected school heads who participated in the conduct of the study. Findings revealed that the learners have poor academic performance because of remote learning during the pandemic. Because of this, learners' inability to master the basic competencies specifically reading, writing, and arithmetic (3Rs) made bridging learning gaps challenging. The study also revealed that there is a need for the implementation of learning recovery plans and intervention programs to recover learning losses. The study concludes with recommendations to assess the best practices, coping mechanisms, and strategies the school heads have employed in bridging learning gaps.

KEYWORD: best practices, school heads, experiences, challenges, insights, phenomenological research

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an educational structure block that must be bettered through learning different generalities and capabilities. With the multitudinous chops and capabilities demanded to be covered in one academy time, hourly, the mastery of the assignment was overlooked causing literacy gaps still, there's a good chance that any unborn generalities that calculate on understanding this knowledge are going to be indeed more delicate to grasp. If a pupil failed to learn and master the prerequisite skill. This is how literacy gaps begin to form.

Globally, a new review of COVID- period exploration shows that $K{\text -}12$ scholars around the world suffered harrowing literacy loss due to academy closures that persist moment. The study finds that scholars endured average literacy poverties equal to about one-third of academy time. And the detriment was more severe in poorer countries and among poorer populations of scholars (Mahnken, 2023).

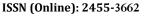
According to an article published by The Glossary of Educational Reform in 2014, nearly affiliated to achievement gap and occasion gap, a literacy gap is the difference between what a pupil has learned — i.e., the academic progress he or she has made — and what the pupil was anticipated to learn at a certain point in his or her education, similar as a particular age or grade

position. A literacy gap can be minor — the failure to acquire a specific skill or meet a particular literacy standard, for illustration — or it can be significant and educationally consequential, as in the case of scholars who have missed large quantities of training.

In pastoral India, nearly three- diggings of third graders cannot break a two-number deduction problem like 46 minus 17, and by grade five — half still cannot do so. Children reach a youthful majority without indeed the most introductory chops like calculating the correct change from a sale, reading a croaker's instructions, or understanding a machine schedule — let alone erecting a fulfilling career or educating their children (The World Bank, 2019).

Although academy sections and preceptors did their stylish to cover their scholars and give acceptable distance literacy surroundings, a recent exploration paper by McKinsey and Company, published in the United States in July 2021, reports the impact of the epidemic on K-12 literacy left scholars a normal of five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020- 2021 academy time. The epidemic widened preexisting occasion and achievement gaps, hitting historically underprivileged scholars the hardest.

Meanwhile, the literacy gap estimated for the Philippines is about 5.5 times, which is larger than its Asian neighbors grounded on the World Bank's Human Capital Index.





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Orbeta and Pacqueo also cited that an average Filipino pupil spends further time in the academy but is less productive than his/her counterparts in other countries. They also added that the quality of advanced education in the country is "uneven" which can be traced to the low quality of introductory education. Only a many Philippines universities are on the list of top universities in the world rankings. Therefore, the Philippines' Department of Education (DepEd) recognizes the literacy gaps endured by learners because of indispensable literacy modalities. That's why, DepEd is seeking innovative strategies to address problems in education in achieving learning issues as scholars transition to in-person classes (Beam & Yang, 2019).

On the other hand, learning gaps were apparent to abecedarian scholars of Loreto South District, Loreto, Agusan del Sur. In their position, the utmost of the scholars could hardly read and write. To validate this problem, the experimenter conducted a short interview with colorful academy heads of the said quarter. Throughout assessing the scholars' performance, experimenter observed that the scholars still had difficulty in feting letters indeed though they were anticipated to master the faculty considering the grade position they were in. Because of this, the scholars had difficulty in reading and jotting which are two of the most essential chops to learn. Likewise, scholars in advanced situations also held the same problem as it was apparent with the numerous married crimes in doing written tasks. The same observation was also refocused by some preceptors of the quarter.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study was a qualitative study employing a phenomenological approach because it aimed to explore the best practices utilized by the selected school heads. This research study utilized phenomenology as the research design. Phenomenology (Giorgi, 2012) is a qualitative research tool for describing how people respond to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological research tries to put aside prejudices and preconceived notions about human perceptions, emotions, and reactions to a situation. It will enable the researcher to investigate the experiences, understandings, and emotions of others who have observed or lived through the phenomenon or circumstance of interest. The researcher would explore the experiences, challenges, insights, and coping mechanisms of the selected school heads.

2.2 Respondents

The study focused on the experiences, challenges as well as best practices utilized by the school heads in bridging learning gaps. The participants of this study were five school heads of Loreto South District, Loreto, Agusan del Sur through purposive sampling. Three of these informants were elementary school heads while the other two were secondary school heads. All five informants were from public schools. An in-depth interview was utilized in the data gathering. The research started in February

2023 and lasted until March 2023 of School Year 2022- 2023, which took the researcher approximately one and half months to complete this study from the preliminaries until the end.

2.3 Instrument

This study used an interview guide which was created by the researcher as a qualitative analysis method. The researcher used a tool with a list of questions to keep track of to ensure that all the topics necessary to address the research questions were covered. The study interview guide aimed to learn about the experiences, challenges, insights, best practices, and coping mechanisms of selected school heads.

The researcher underwent the guidelines on the procedure of gathering the data.

2.4 Statistical Tools

To interpret the results, the researcher used a deductive approach. The deductive approach to qualitative data analysis entailed interpreting data according to a predetermined framework by the researcher.

After collecting data in the field, the researcher used transcription to make sense of the details. The first step in data analysis was to transcribe everything. Transcription is the method of converting all data into text.

Following data transcription, the researcher referred to the study objectives or questions and arranged the collected data following the objectives/questions.

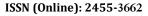
For a more effective data processing method, coding was the best way to compress the data into easily understandable concepts. Coding was the process of categorizing data into principles, properties, trends, or emerging themes in qualitative research.

One of the foundations of good research was data validation. Since data was at the core of the research, it was critical to ensure that it was free of errors.

3. FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow (1996). The Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) is a theory that examines how an adult interprets his life experiences and how he makes meaning through these experiences. Mezirow (1996) has defined learning and teaching as a process of making new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience which guides future understanding, appreciation, and action. He explained that learning is understood as the process of using one's prior interpretation to interpret a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one 's experience to guide future action.

To achieve transformational learning, Mezirow encouraged critical reflection since it helps the learner in making meaning. Mezirow (1990) stated that the most significant learning experiences in adulthood comprise critical reflection reexamining the way we have posed problems and reexamining our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting. Reflection can be defined as inference, generalization, analogy,





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distinction, evaluation, as well as memorizing and solving problems; critical reflection is the method of sensibly examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions. Critical reflection is an essential part of decision-making since it is not apprehensive with the how or the how-to of action but with its why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what one does.

In this study, the selected school heads' experiences in bridging learning gaps brought them new interpretations which guided them for their future action. The realizations, insights, and learning that occurred to the school heads had changed their entire perspective in the essence of addressing learning gaps. As they perceived that bridging learning gaps is not an easy task and that one has to prepare and plans to cope with the said problem, these insights have brought them new learning through a change in perspective.

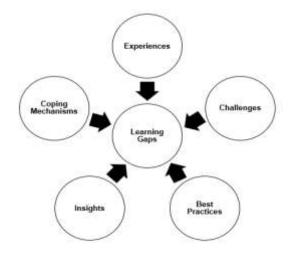


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following implications for practice are offered.

On the School Heads' Experiences in Bridging Learning Gaps. The impacts of the pandemic on education were undeniable. It can be reckoned that the research participants experienced difficulties in bridging learning mostly because of the students' inability to read which resulted in poor academic performance. The application of new teaching techniques and working out of a recovery plan which would fit the students' needs was also revealed to be arduous on the part of the school heads.

The need for teachers to instill in their pupils the academic significance of fluent reading. Teachers should build the confidence level of the pupils through implementing questioning techniques in reading discussions, that are age specific and where all answers to questions are accepted. Also, the implementation of reading programs must be intensified to further remediate the students.

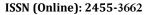
On the Challenges Encountered in Bridging Learning Gaps. As noted in the findings of the study, the challenges mentioned were determining the most effective ways, addressing the learning needs, lack of facilities, materials, and resources, teaching-learning process adjustment, teachers' and students' commitment, responsiveness, and willingness, and identifying and planning an intervention. Among the challenges, it is

addressing the learning needs in reading, writing, and arithmetic (3Rs) must be prioritized. For this reason, it is high time that the school incorporates the 3Rs in lesson delivery. The integration of these skills across the curriculum will enable the students to deepen their learning, communicate effectively, and widen their perspectives.

On the Challenges Difficult to Address in Bridging Learning Gaps. Reading plays a vital role in for learners to understand and comprehend the lessons. The findings of the study revealed that difficulty in reading hinders students from learning. Because of this, struggling readers lack the enthusiasm to study and learn.

This implies that the schools must strengthen their reading programs to provide additional strategies to boost reading skills in the areas of decoding, comprehension, and fluency for struggling readers. Reading programs may also serve as interventions that act as a supplement to the mainstream reading program curriculum.

On the Factors that Make Bridging Gaps Difficult. In the view of the factors that make bridging gaps difficult, it can be reckoned that the adjustment in the shift from modular to face-to-face classes, difficulty in 3Rs, learners' absenteeism, teachers' heavy workloads, and commitment to the process were the factors that contribute to making bridging gaps difficult. Therefore, teachers must not neglect the advantages of Psychological First





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Aid (PFA). PFA is an evidence-informed approach that is built on the concept of human resilience. In addition, PFA aims to reduce stress symptoms and assist in a healthy recovery following traumatic events, natural disasters, public health emergencies, or even personal crises.

Meanwhile, learners' absenteeism should be addressed through home visitation and monitoring. Teachers could also incorporate interactive and engaging class sessions to rule out boredom and disinterest as a cause of absenteeism.

Moreover, the Department of Education (DepEd) announced that they will launch a "workload balancing tool" to determine the time that teachers spend in their classrooms teaching and doing administrative or clerical work with the aim to answer the problem of teachers' heavy workload. A few months ago, administrative officers were hired to lessen the administrative or clerical tasks of teachers so they can focus on teaching, especially since they must close the learning gap due to the COVID-19 pandemic where students had to make do with blended learning instead of face-to-face classes. However, this did not answer the problem of subject loads handled by teachers. DepEd should assess the number of needed teachers per school so that can hire more and address the problem of teachers' overload. On Best Practices Used in Coping the Challenges in Bridging Learning Gaps. With the challenges faced in bridging learning gaps, the findings have highlighted the best practices employed by the informants. The informants focused on the strategies that would address the problem in reading. The strategies mentioned were a learning development plan, a reading intervention plan, one-on-one teaching in reading, and review, recall, and exposure to reading.

This implies that schools must prioritize reading and reading improvement among learners because reading creates better students, better cognition and memory, and a better vocabulary. Reading integration across all subjects should also be pursued to foster literacy and cognitive engagement.

On Coping Mechanisms Used to Overcome Problems in Bridging Learning Gaps. In relevance to the previous theme, the findings of the present study show that a learning development plan, LAC sessions, remediation, orientation, and monitoring was done.

In the previous themes, the said coping mechanisms were mentioned. As said, the school needs to strategize these types of ways to help learners recover from the learning losses. In addition, these would also give teachers the opportunity to communicate and plan effective methods to address the problem of learning gaps.

On Teachers' Help with the Encountered Difficulties in Bridging Learning Gaps. Aside from the coping mechanisms employed by the informants, teachers' involvement through initiating and implementing the intervention programs contributed much to bridging the learning gaps.

As the backbone of education, a teacher plays a key role in assisting students who are experiencing difficulties in the classroom. Rooted in special education background, an intervention teacher provides expertise and intentional support to

students who demonstrate behavioral, social, and educational challenges.

On Insights Gained in Experiencing Difficulties in Bridging Learning Gaps. Based on the emerging themes, the research informants learned to embrace new teaching techniques, become resilient leaders, provide a good learning foundation to children, value commitment and teamwork, and expose students to reading, review, and recall.

These insights posit a positive impact on the part of the research informants. This implies that teachers may sustain the positivity expressed by the informants through learning new teaching strategies and methods that would mold learners into becoming effective, efficient, and critical thinkers, and exposing learners to differentiated activities to foster learning. Resiliency must not be overlooked since it is needed to process and overcome hardship. Those lacking resilience get easily overwhelmed and may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. Resilient people tap into their strengths and support systems to overcome challenges and work through problems.

Also, work commitment and teamwork should be valued because it creates a positive environment in the workplace enabling favorable results to happen.

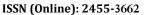
On Teachers and Parents' Contribution in Bridging Learning Gaps. The finding revealed that teachers and parents worked together to help the learners through facilitating learning, monitoring, follow-up, and partnership.

Positive connections between parents and teachers have been shown to improve children's academic achievement, social competencies, and emotional well-being. When parents and teachers work as partners, children do better in school and at home. Since they are the sources of encouragement, optimism, and resilience, strengthening the bond between the school community and the stakeholders could create confident and competent learners in fulfilling their dreams.

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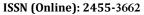
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