



DEALING WITH THE LEARNING GAPS DURING THE IN-PERSON CLASSES: PERSPECTIVES OF PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HEADS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study aims to delve into the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of the school heads in the Banaybanay district of the Department of Education, Division of Davao Oriental. In addressing the learning gaps during in-person classes, this qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to collect and analyze data. In order to close learning gaps, particularly after two years of distance learning, school heads' experiences and perspectives on the gaps in learning during in-person sessions are crucial. These viewpoints focused on closing the gaps, especially in reading and numeracy abilities. A sample of fourteen (14) participants was selected using a purposive sampling technique. Seven participants underwent focus group discussions, and the other seven underwent in-depth interviews, highlighting the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of the school heads in the research locale. As to the participants' experiences, two major themes emerged: encountered problems with unpreparedness for the in-person classes; and b) observed students with reading difficulties. With regard to their responses to coping mechanisms, six major themes emerged: implemented reading intervention activities, established open communication, extended technical assistance to teachers, collaboration with stakeholders, provided additional learning and reading materials, and implemented a literacy and numeracy program. Lastly, their insights revealed five major themes: reduction of teacher workloads, provision of learning materials, strengthened programs in teaching fundamental skills, intensification of feedback mechanisms, and assignment of remediation teachers. The study revealed that the school heads in Banaybanay district collaborated with stakeholders, including teachers and parents to solve difficulties and prepare students for academic success during in-person classes. It emphasizes open communication, providing reading materials, technical assistance, and implementing numeracy and literacy programs, which were very significant to the participants. Public elementary school heads as well as the Department of Education implementers need to intensify feedbacking to assess the real situation of students in the field so that they can perform their duty as leaders in addressing gaps based on the situation in the field.

KEYWORDS: education, school heads, learning gaps, in-person classes, and coping mechanisms and strategies, phenomenological research, thematic analysis, Division of Davao Oriental

INTRODUCTION

As a result of two years of distance learning, children's learning was dormant. During the in-person classes, there were a lot of school heads and teachers who faced the quest of how to address the learning gap for our children. Even though students returned to face-to-face classes, our young children still suffered from a learning gap. Unsurprisingly, our children may have forgotten some of the skills they had acquired in previous grade levels and missed out on gaining knowledge during modular distance learning. The comprehensive discussion and analysis based on the elementary public school heads' perspectives were considered and significantly identified to bridge the learning gaps during the in-person classes.

In Pakistan, children's learning had been studied after the school closures due to the 2005 earthquake, and schools were closed for more than 100 days in the affected area. However, in the later years, it was discovered that they were not just 100 days behind; they were behind in learning for the equivalent of 1.5 years of schooling (Andrabi et al., 2020). Also, in Malaysia, learning gaps after school closures consisted of a small loss rate of 0.45 years (5.4 months). Of all the developing Asian nations studied, it suffered from the greatest learning losses, with a startling rate of loss of 0.95 years (11.4 months) (Aruta et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in Cambodia, learning gaps due to school closures were estimated at 2 to 5 months per learner in primary education. In East Asia,



South Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America, learning crises had been a problem even before the pandemic, and they were relatively increasing in terms of learning poverty (Azevedo, 2020).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, results from National Achievement Tests (NATs) and international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) have shown that students are performing poorly. The Department of Education remains committed to addressing the learning loss exacerbated by school closures and disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic (DO. 13 s. 2023). The Department of Education was promoting in-person instruction, claiming it improves academic attainment and mental health (Malipot, 2022). Moreover, in-person learning was essential to addressing learning gaps because it enabled teachers and students to collaborate in an environment that fosters learning by doing and seeing. Monitoring learning progress was easy when learning through physical activity (Media Advisory, 2022). Thus, DepEd aimed to close learning gaps and assist K–12 learners nationwide in attaining standards (DO 14 s. 2023).

Furthermore, NAT results from the 2017-2018 school year in one of the schools in the Division of Davao Oriental revealed that pupils scored less than 70% in problem solving, information literacy, and critical thinking. Prior to COVID-19, the scores were already poor, and the scores were projected to be lower after the school closures. Furthermore, based on my observations, pupils were having difficulties catching up with the lessons. This was notably true for all subjects, particularly English/reading, math, and science. They struggled to understand the concepts since they hardly read.

Based on my readings, Moscoviz and Evans (2022) investigated learning loss and dropouts two years after school closures due to the pandemic; Engzell et al. (2021) investigated learning gaps after school closures and discovered that while learning at home, pupils made little or no progress; and Kaffenberger (2021) discovered that effective remediation during in-person classes could reduce half of long-term learning loss. However, these studies only looked at learning gaps after school closures and did not investigate the experiences and perspectives of school heads on learning gaps during these in-person classes. As a result, this study filled a void left by previous studies.

Thus, the urgency of this qualitative study provided additional references and insights for individuals, authorities, and organizations interested in learning about the perspectives, coping mechanisms, and viewpoints of school heads on the learning gap in the return of in-person classes. Also, the result of this study encouraged school heads to engage in teachers' and learners' processes to bridge gaps and monitor students' progress.

Furthermore, this study had social significance because the findings helped all school leaders manage and monitor the teaching-learning process, as well as design and improve remedial programs in numeracy and literacy skills to meet the

needs and interests of students. It also equipped all teachers with the skills to address students' learning needs, which was especially important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It benefited students while providing guidance and support to improve the educational system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the views and perspectives of school heads in dealing with the learning gaps, coping mechanisms, and insights of public elementary schools during in-person classes after the two years of implementation of modular distance learning at Banaybanay District.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of elementary school heads in dealing with the learning gaps during in-person classes?
2. How did elementary school heads cope with the challenges they encountered in dealing with the learning gaps during in-person classes?
3. What are the insights drawn from the experiences of elementary school heads in dealing with the learning gaps during in-person classes?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach aimed at describing and understanding the lived experiences, perspectives, coping mechanisms, and insights of school heads regarding learning gaps during in-person classes following school closures due to the pandemic. According to Creswell (2013), employing descriptive types of data allows qualitative research to explore topics where little is known about a phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate as it focused on the lived experiences, perspectives, coping mechanisms, and insights of school heads in the return to in-person classes.

The study involved fourteen (14) public elementary school heads who shared their experiences and perspectives on the learning gap among students during in-person classes post-school closures. Seven (7) participated in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and another seven (7) underwent an Individual In-Depth Interview (IDI). They were chosen based on their ability to provide accurate information pertinent to the research questions. A qualitative approach, involving five (5) to twenty-five (25) individuals selected through the phenomenological process, was employed to ensure participants shared experiences with the phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Thus, there were a total of fourteen (14) participants in this study. Purposive sampling was employed in qualitative research, emphasizing the importance of participants' cooperation and availability to engage and share their experiences and ideas in clear, expressive, and introspective ways (Etikan et al., 2016).



Furthermore, the criteria for selecting study participants included: (a) current public elementary school heads in Banaybanay District, Division of Davao Oriental; (b) school heads with a minimum of three (3) years of experience who observed learning gaps among students; (c) school heads overseeing either large or small schools. Excluded were school heads on forced leave, elderly individuals with illnesses, pregnant women on bed rest, and assistant school heads. The participants varied in gender, age, status, and ethnicity.

Data from interviews underwent thematic analysis, a flexible method in qualitative research. Thematic interpretation was employed to understand the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, views, and perspectives of school heads in addressing learning gaps during in-person classes. Analysis was based on participants' responses, with data organized, separated,

and thoroughly examined. Coding was utilized to sort and categorize participants' answers. Finally, results were written and presented in a table for in-depth examination. Ethical considerations were also integrated into the process to safeguard the participants' welfare.

RESULTS

Experiences of Public Elementary School Heads in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During the In-Person Classes

After analyzing the experiences of public elementary school heads in dealing with the learning gaps during the in-person classes, two major themes emerged: a) Encountered Problems on Unpreparedness for the in-Person Classes; b) Observed Students with Reading Difficulty.

Table 1
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Public Elementary School Heads in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During the In-Person Classes

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Encountered Problems on Unpreparedness for the in-Person Classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of preparedness on the challenges related to health protocols • felt the culture shock of students and teachers during the in-person classes • dealt with the misbehavior of students towards their teachers • being challenged in improving the school physical environment for the opening of in-person classes
Observed Students with Reading Difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • observed students with anxiety in reading • encountered grade 4 pupils with reading difficulty • noticed students with difficulty in reading, writing and arithmetic

Coping Mechanism of Elementary School Heads on the Challenges they Encountered in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During In-Person Classes

After analyzing the experiences of the school heads about coping mechanisms and the challenges they had encountered in dealing with the learning gaps during in-person classes in public elementary schools, six major themes emerged: a) Implemented

reading intervention activities; b) Established open communication; c) Extended technical assistance to teachers; d) Collaborated with stakeholders; e) Provided additional learning and reading materials; f) Implemented a literacy and numeracy program.

Table 2
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanism of Elementary School Heads on the Challenges they Encountered in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During In-Person Classes

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Implemented Reading Intervention Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reminded teachers to conduct remedial classes for non and slow readers • had remediation for students with reading difficulty • applied Project BOOKas, the district reading intervention • adopted the DEAR Program and the after-lunch reading time • introduced Project CAROL to learners
Established Open Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • solved learning gaps through open communication with students and teachers



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • had proper communication with stakeholders • communicated with teachers DepEd programs and consulted with parents • shared best practices to cope with the challenges
Extended Technical Assistance to Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oriented teachers on the possible problem during in-person classes • guided teachers to solve or deal with class-related problems • conducted LAC sessions to give teachers technical assistance • had LAC sessions to improve learning and teaching style • had LAC session to resolve issues and concerns.
Collaborated with Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • worked collaboratively with teachers and parents • connected with partners to assist children in reading • Implemented programs and activities in collaboration with stakeholders to solve problems at the opening of classes • one-on-one interaction between the speaker and the teacher during LAC sessions • provided books through donations from stakeholders
Provided Additional Learning and Reading Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provided pupils with additional reading materials • gave supplementary reading materials for remedial classes
Implemented Literacy and Numeracy Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implemented programs on reading, writing, and numeracy in the school continuity plan • monitored the implementation of reading, writing, and numeracy program

Insights of Elementary School Heads in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During In-Person Classes

After analyzing the insights of the school heads in dealing with the learning gaps during in-person classes, five major themes came out: a) Reduction of Teachers Work Loads; b) Provisioned

of Learning Materials; c) Strengthened Programs in Teaching Fundamental Skills; d) Intensification of Feedback Mechanism; and e) Assigned Remediation Teacher.

Table 3

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights Drawn from the Experiences of Elementary School Heads in Dealing with the Learning Gaps During In-Person Classes

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Reduction of Teacher Work Loads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decongesting school activities to have more time for teaching and learning • assigning a teacher aid to lessen and help on the paper works • rearranged class programs to reduce the burden of teachers • lessened paperwork for teachers • shortening competencies in other subject areas for quality time • implementing administrative support systems like AO (Administrative Officer) and ADAS (Administrative Assistant) in every school can reduce the workload of school heads.
Provision of Learning Materials & Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hoping to be provided with instructional materials • paying attention on the materials needed in the classroom • hoping to provide schools with room, building, and learning resources



Strengthening Programs in Teaching Fundamental Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> utilizing an 8-week curriculum to help the struggling students in their capabilities in numeracy and literacy implementing literacy and numeracy program strengthening programs on reading, writing, and arithmetic
Intensification of Feedback Mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> suggesting to identify and give attention to the school related feedbacks Having open communication with the teachers and other stakeholders on the problems identified monitoring religiously, giving feedback and recommendations for better results
Allocation or Provision of Additional Remedial Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> suggesting to send more personnel to be assigned in addressing the learning gaps suggesting to have additional teachers focusing specifically on reading suggesting to assign a person to concentrate on reading

CONCLUSIONS

Never begin something that you are not willing to finish. All that began has now come to an end. Due to persistence and the desire for accomplishment, this study was finished in a valuable way. This research was a difficult road for the researcher, requiring perseverance and diligence. The researcher now has a better understanding of the duties and responsibilities of school leaders, according to the study's findings. Their tireless efforts and commitment to helping the schoolchildren made the researcher realize how difficult their job was. As a result, the researcher praised their commitment and tenacity in serving.

The hardest aspect of this study was the interview section, which required a lot of patience and understanding because the participants were all busy and the researcher had to follow their available time. This allowed the researcher plenty of time to collect the data required for this investigation. Although some school heads' responses to the FGD were limited and some simply agreed with what other participants said, the researcher gave them time to answer probing questions, which encouraged the researcher to find more information pertinent to the investigation. On the other hand, the in-depth interview (IDI) of the other school heads gave the researcher confidence that they could provide suitable answers related to the study since their answers were informative. They provided sufficient data that was relevant to my thesis questions. The participants were challenged to express their thoughts and opinions about the study. After the interview, transcription was followed, and the researcher primarily analyzed the data. Also, the researcher was grateful for the participants' full cooperation and trust during the interview process. Further, this journey allowed the researcher to explore the viewpoints of the school heads on the learning gaps during in-person classes. It gave an understanding of the experiences they had encountered.

Recommendations

The study underscores the challenges confronted by school administrators due to their unpreparedness for in-person classes, particularly in addressing students with reading difficulties.

Administrators have tackled learning gaps during face-to-face instruction, emphasizing the necessity of collaborative efforts among stakeholders to overcome these challenges. Ensuring student readiness through targeted interventions in foundational skills is imperative for successful learning outcomes, requiring proactive direction and monitoring by school leaders.

Moreover, the study offers practical strategies for school administrators to close learning gaps effectively. It emphasizes the importance of providing teachers with technical support to eliminate gaps in learning and to oversee the teaching and learning process more effectively. During the recovery phase, it encourages administrators to actively participate in and guide effective teaching practices, providing additional learning materials as needed and monitoring the implementation of literacy and numeracy programs.

Furthermore, students directly benefit from efficient strategies implemented by school heads and teachers to address learning losses during school closures. Enhanced learning performance and readiness, particularly in fundamental skills such as writing, reading, and mathematics, equip students to catch up with globally competitive education standards. Importantly, it helps students understand the impact of their behavior on relationships and shapes them into better individuals.

Subsequently, the study encourages teachers to address learning gaps, especially in reading, through remedial classes and activities that strengthen fundamental skills. It advocates for effective communication with stakeholders and the implementation of programs for numeracy and literacy enhancement, providing additional learning materials as necessary. Job-embedded learning opportunities aid in swiftly applying newly acquired knowledge and skills to teaching practices, thereby improving teaching approaches and strategies to respond to student needs.



Recommendations for Further Research

While this study successfully addresses the perspectives of fourteen school administrators, it is essential to recognize its limitations in terms of sample size. Therefore, it is suggested that future research expand the sample size to encompass a wider population for more robust findings. Additionally, exploring various coping strategies employed by administrators to address learning gaps in face-to-face instruction warrants further investigation.

Moreover, recommendations are extended to education officials to streamline school activities, prioritize teaching and learning, and provide adequate support to teachers. Decongesting school activities, rearranging class programs, and implementing administrative support systems can significantly alleviate teachers' workload and create a conducive learning environment. Shortening competencies in other subject areas can allow for more focused instruction on literacy and numeracy, while effective feedback mechanisms and additional personnel can further support struggling students and improve overall learning outcomes.

Lastly, this study serves as a valuable resource for future researchers examining school administrators' perspectives on in-person instruction post-pandemic. It offers insights into potential areas for further investigation and underscores the importance of effectively addressing learning gaps in classroom settings.

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