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Research Article

Assessment Challenges Encountered by Teachers in the Implementation of Printed Modular Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges in the field of education. Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) was one of the most challenging modes of instruction in basic education, and the assessment stage posed specific difficulties for secondary school teachers in the Schools Division of Puerto Princesa City during the School Year 2020-2021. This research aimed to explore the real-life experiences of 15 secondary school teachers who taught via PMDL. Using a phenomenological study, the researcher conducted individual interviews with the teachers, who were chosen through purposive sampling. The study found that teachers encountered various challenges during the implementation of PMDL, with specific difficulties arising during the assessment stage. One of the significant problems reported by the participants was the submission of unanswered or incomplete modules by some students. Additionally, some learners had modules that were answered by their parents or other family members, while others copied answers directly from the internet or answer keys. The lack of names on modules and illegible handwriting also added to the challenges experienced by the teachers. Furthermore, the sheer volume of modules to be checked was a significant challenge for the participants. To ensure the quality and validity of module-based assessments, it is recommended that guidelines be provided to learners, monitoring and feedback mechanisms be put in place, and policies that prevent cheating be implemented. Educators should also have workload management strategies to ensure timely grading and feedback.

Keywords: *Modular distance learning, Teachers' experiences, Challenges encountered, Assessment, Puerto princesa city, Philippines*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education of millions of students around the

world, leading to the adoption of distance learning modalities as a response to the crisis. In the Philippines, the Department of Education

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(DepEd) has implemented various distance learning delivery modalities to ensure continued learning for students amidst the pandemic. These modalities include Modular Distance Learning, Online Distance Learning, television (TV)/Radio-Based Instruction, and Blended Distance Learning (Pimentel-Tibon, 2020). However, the implementation of these modalities has not been without challenges, particularly in the assessment of student performance.

Assessment of student performance is a critical component of the teaching and learning process, providing teachers with valuable information on their students' progress and understanding of the material (Earl, 2013). By comparing student performance to predetermined learning objectives, assessment helps teachers to analyze current difficulties in educational assessment and gauge the effectiveness of their instruction. It also provides students with feedback on their progress and helps them to identify areas where they need to improve (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Moreover, assessment plays a crucial role in ensuring that students receive a high-quality education and that they are prepared for the challenges of the future. As such, assessment should be an integral part of any educational program and should be designed to support student learning and achievement (Chappuis et al., 2017).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers faced various challenges in assessing student learning. One of the main difficulties was the lack of alignment between assessment methods and learning objectives, which can result in assessments that do not accurately measure student achievement (Stiggins, 2017). Additionally, the use of standardized tests has been criticized for its narrow focus on specific skills and knowledge and its potential to create educational inequalities (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2015). Moreover, the assessment of non-cognitive skills, such as creativity and critical thinking, can be more complex and subjective, requiring innovative methods to measure student achievement ("PISA 2018 assessment and analytical framework," 2019). These challenges highlight the need for educators to develop and utilize effective and equitable assessment strategies that align with learning objectives and measure a broad range of skills and knowledge.

The assessment of student performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the implementation of distance learning modalities, has been a significant challenge for teachers. Many are struggling to find ways to effectively evaluate their students' progress in the absence of face-to-face interaction and traditional classroom settings (Tullis, 2022). Additionally, the shift to distance learning modalities has highlighted the digital divide and social disadvantage (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement & UNESCO, 2022).

In the Philippines, the implementation of Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) has presented significant challenges in the assessment of student performance. The lack of face-to-face interaction and the reliance on self-learning modules (SLMs) have made it difficult for teachers to monitor their students' progress effectively. Additionally, the use of PMDL has highlighted the need for innovative assessment practices that are appropriate for this mode of instruction.

Despite the growing interest in understanding the challenges and opportunities of assessment in the context of distance learning, there is still a limited body of research on the experiences of high school teachers in the Philippines specifically with regards to PMDL. To address this research gap, this study investigated the experiences of high school teachers as they assessed students' performance during the delivery of PMDL in the Schools Division of Puerto Princesa City. The main objective of this study was to explore the experiences of high school teachers in assessing the academic performance of learners during the implementation of Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL). The study sought to gain insights into the difficulties and obstacles that high school teachers face in assessing their students' progress in a distance learning environment. By exploring the experiences of high school teachers in PMDL implementation, the study intended to contribute to the literature on the challenges of assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive

phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of secondary school teachers as they assessed their learners in the New Normal. The research aimed to investigate the challenges that teachers encountered while assessing their students' academic performance in a distance learning environment. The participants for this study were 15 secondary school teachers, who were purposively selected using a non-probability sampling method. The researcher developed and validated the interview protocol, which incorporated open-ended questions to enable the participants to provide answers in their own words. Three pilot interviews were conducted to validate the interview questions.

The researcher obtained a Permit to Study from the Schools Division Office of Puerto Princesa City. He then sought permission from the heads of schools that implemented Printed Modular Distance Learning, and informed consent/waiver was obtained from each participant before data collection commenced. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of data, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any complication. The actual one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted via Google Meet, as face-to-face interviews were not permitted by the Schools Division Superintendent at that time. During the interviews, the researcher employed bracketing, which involved setting aside his own experiences, biases, and pre-conceived notions in order to understand how the phenomenon appeared to the participants. The conversations were recorded with participants' approval, and transcribed.

The treatment of data included cool and warm analyses, with the cool study involving identifying important statements, phrases, and sentences from the participants. Warm analysis clustered and categorized the data, using highlighted words to generate emerging themes. The study design and data collection methods were intended to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The use of a descriptive phenomenological approach allowed for the exploration of the experiences of secondary school teachers in assessing their learners in the New Normal, while the validation of the

interview protocol and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity helped to address potential biases and ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Assessment is an essential component of curriculum implementation, allowing teachers to monitor and measure learners' progress and adjust their instruction accordingly. It also provides learners, as well as their parents and guardians, with information about their progress. Therefore, assessment remains significant even in the implementation of Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL). According to participants, formative and summative assessments are still present in PMDL. Formative assessments are included in the self-learning modules (SLMs), while summative assessments are conducted as validation activities, which are separate from the SLMs and are given after a certain period. However, the participants encountered different challenges in both the module activities and the validation activities.

Unanswered or partially answered modules

The participants in this study reported that the difficulty lies in the fact that some students do not even attempt to answer the activities in the modules. Instead, they simply write their name and resubmit the module without answers. It is common for some students to receive the modules but return them untouched after a week. Participant 15 shared his thoughts on this issue, stating:

"During the assessment phase, the challenge was that some of my students did not even try to answer the activities in the modules. They simply wrote their names and resubmitted the modules without any answers, even though answer keys were available at the back of their modules. This posed a significant challenge for me as a teacher."

Participant 15's claim is backed up by participant 1:

"Another thing that was really painful as a teacher was seeing late submissions or late returns of the module, and all that

was written on the module was the student's name. So, there were students who returned their modules, and I didn't even know if they opened or read it because none of the activities were completed or answered. There were students who didn't even open their modules. They would get it one week and return it the next week, and it still looked brand new. Sometimes, there was no writing on it, not even their name. The paper was blank, and they returned exactly what was given to them."

The challenges faced by teachers in implementing Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) are highlighted by the statements above. These challenges can be attributed to a lack of adequate learning resources, limited parental support, and a bad learning environment, which are common issues faced by students in remote learning (Cahapay & Rotas, 2022). The issue of incomplete modules, either completely unanswered or partially answered, is a significant challenge for teachers to assess the performance of their students. Additionally, overcrowded activities can detract from the learning value of lessons, and a lack of learning scaffold can further contribute to incomplete modules (Sundarasan et al., 2020). Teachers need to be creative in designing their modules and activities to maintain student engagement and involvement in the learning process (Stone, 2021). Providing a supportive and happy learning environment is crucial to ensure that students can participate in remote learning comfortably and productively (Baticulon et al., 2020). These challenges highlight the need for continued improvement and innovation in remote learning approaches to ensure that students can receive a high-quality education, even in challenging circumstances.

Module submissions with partial responses were also a problem. Teachers found it difficult to assess their students' performance when they had not completed all of the tasks in the modules. Some students did not answer all the activities, possibly because they did not have anyone at home to help them, and thus left the activities blank. Usually, they would leave a certain activity unanswered or incomplete. This was a prevalent difficulty, especially for those

activities that were not in the answer key, such as in essay-type questions. Participant 14 recounted the following:

"I experienced the challenge of incomplete module submissions from my students. It was difficult for me to evaluate their performance when they did not answer all the activities in the modules. This issue was prevalent, especially for essay-type questions that were not included in the answer key."

Participant 14's assertion was supported by statements from participants 8 and 7:

"Another issue that arose was that some students were unable to copy answers from the answer key, possibly due to a lack of support at home. As a result, they left some activities blank or incomplete in their module submissions. Despite submitting the module, some activities were left unanswered or undone. This was a common challenge that I encountered." (P8)

"The issue of unanswered activities was a common problem, particularly for questions that were not included in the answer key, such as essay-type questions. (P7)

During the implementation of Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL), one of the challenges encountered was that learners did not complete the requisite number of activities in the Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) due to overloaded activities. Furthermore, a bad learning environment made it difficult for students to participate in remote learning comfortably. Students' comments repeatedly highlighted this issue. Creating a happy and supportive learning environment was always a challenge in remote education, particularly for the most disadvantaged families (Baticulon et al., 2020). This problem jeopardized study productivity and student attention (Stone, 2021).

Modules answered by parents or others

The participants in this study who implemented Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) observed that it was often unclear whether the students themselves were answering the modules or not. They noticed that in

some cases, it was apparent that the module had been completed by someone else. Despite frequent reminders to students and parents via messenger, text, or phone calls, some parents still did the activities on behalf of their children. This gave the impression that learning was not taking place. Participants could identify the handwriting of their learners and believe that parents answered the activities because they were worried that their children might fail the subject. Participant 2 shared the following:

"As someone who implemented Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL), I noticed that it was often easy to tell whether the students themselves were answering the modules or not. At the beginning of the year, I would sometimes be impressed with a student's work, thinking, "Wow, this student is really good. I didn't expect that." However, as time went on, it became more apparent that someone else was completing the modules. You could tell because the handwriting was different, for example. Over time, it became clear that someone else was doing the work."

Statements from participants 5 and 12 backed up participant 2's claim:

"Even though I would frequently remind the students and their parents through group chat, text messages, and phone calls that the students needed to be the ones reading and answering the modules, it was still common for parents to do the activities on behalf of their children. This was despite the fact that you could clearly see that the students themselves were not doing the work. It was evident that parents were completing the activities because their handwriting was different, for example. It was not ideal for parents to be the ones answering the modules, but there were times when it was clear that they were doing so. According to the parents, they had to answer the modules because they could not force their children to study, and so it seemed like learning was not really taking place." (P5)

"There were instances where parents were the ones answering the modules instead of the students. This was because it was easy to recognize the handwriting of the students, and it was evident that the modules were completed by someone else. Parents may have answered the modules out of fear that their children would fail the subject area. However, this practice was not ideal as it did not promote authentic learning and was not a sustainable solution to the challenges faced in PMDL." (P12)

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role that parents play in their children's general development and education. With the absence of a classroom teacher, parents have become crucial learning facilitators and para-teachers, providing instructional help as needed (Grobler, 2022). Parental involvement is strongly encouraged and anticipated in these challenging times. Luana (2021) has listed several methods for parents to assist their children in answering modules, including explaining concepts, giving examples, correcting their children's inaccurate answers, and 'Googling' the answer. However, it is important to note that providing immediate and correct answers may not help learners truly understand and learn. Therefore, parents should focus on guiding their children to arrive at the correct answers through critical thinking and problem-solving. Parents have a significant role to play in their children's education, especially in the context of remote learning. By providing instructional support and guidance, parents can help their children to succeed academically and develop a lifelong love for learning.

Copying answers from the answer key

According to the participants in the study, when parents could no longer force their children to complete the modules, they would often direct them to the answer key at the back of the module. Instead of reading through the module, the learners would go straight to the answer key section. They would briefly glance at the answers and then copy them, even including incorrect answers and responses such

as "answers may vary." Participants shared their observation that this practice seemed to be common among the learners. The learners would copy the answers from the answer key, without even attempting to understand the concepts or apply critical thinking skills. This approach to learning could hinder their overall academic progress and limit their ability to develop essential skills for future learning and success. As stated by participant 5:

"At times when parents were unable to compel their children to complete the modules, they would tell them to check the answer key at the back of the module. Consequently, the children would skip reading the module and go directly to the answer key section. This practice was observed among the learners."

This statement was supported by participants 7 and 12:

"In fact, there were instances when students submitted their papers with answers arranged in the same order as the answer key located at the back of the modules." (P7)

"The learners would look at the answer keys and then go back to the questions, circling them and copying even the incorrect answers from the answer keys. They would even copy responses such as "answers may vary" directly from the answer key." (P12)

In response to the advent of online groups uploading answered self-learning modules (SLMs), the Department of Education (DepEd) emphasized that correction keys in the modules are not meant to be used for cheating (Hernando-Malipot, 2021). DepEd Secretary Leonor Magtolis Briones urged parents, teachers, and students to assist in stopping cheating, as it affects the development of values and morality in children and degrades the quality of education that the Department is working to improve. Similarly, Undersecretary for Curriculum and Instruction Diosdado San Antonio emphasized that while SLMs contain a correction key, it is not intended to be used to "cheat and circumvent true learning" among learners. Therefore, the Department of Education urged

field offices to take prompt steps to protect academic integrity and honesty among students. The Office of the Undersecretary for Curriculum and Instruction, identified different measures to encourage academic honesty and protect learners' integrity in a document sent to Regional Directors. However, San Antonio stressed that when dealing with academic dishonesty, teachers, parents, and school administrators "must employ prudence, show good judgment, and treat learners with respect and fairness."

Cheating and academic dishonesty are serious issues that can have adverse effects on the development of values and morality among children and degrade the quality of education. It is essential for all stakeholders involved in education to take steps to promote academic integrity and ensure that learners are acquiring knowledge and skills through authentic means.

Copying answers from the Internet

The participants also recounted instances where the modules contained essay questions for which there were no answers in the answer key. Instead, the learners would copy and paste the answers from the internet or other sources. Upon receiving the modules, the participants noticed that some students' answers were blatantly copied from external sources. Participants shared their observation that this practice seemed to be common among some learners. They would copy answers from the internet without even attempting to understand the concepts or apply critical thinking skills. This approach to learning could hinder their overall academic progress and limit their ability to develop essential skills for future learning and success. Participant 13 stated:

"Sometimes, for essay questions in the modules without answers in the answer key, learners would copy and paste answers from the internet."

This assertion was supported by participant 5:

"In the modules, it was sometimes inevitable that the learners had to provide their own answers, such as for essay questions. Upon receiving the modules and checking them, some learners had copied their

answers from external sources, such as the internet.”

Academic dishonesty has been a persistent issue that has increasingly concerned teachers, school systems, and society. One form of academic dishonesty is plagiarism, which is defined as the act of presenting someone else's words or ideas as one's own. The frequency of this problem was highlighted in students' essay assignments (Greetham, 2017). Plagiarism has been encountered by several institutions in various nations around the world, and it is defined in a variety of ways (Maurer et al., 2006). This can include misrepresenting someone else's work as one's own, copying ideas and/or phrases from someone else without proper attribution, failing to put a quotation in quotation marks to direct citations, incorrectly interpreting information, and changing words but copying a source's sentence structure without proper attribution.

During the introduction of distance learning programs, plagiarism continued to occur, with some learners copying answers from the internet (Menshawey et al., 2022). This practice of copying answers can hinder learners' academic progress and limit their ability to develop essential skills for future learning and success. Therefore, it is important for teachers and educational institutions to promote academic integrity and encourage learners to avoid academic dishonesty by relying on legitimate sources and developing critical thinking skills.

Modules without learners' names

In addition to the issues mentioned above, there were instances where the modules did not have names on them. The participants of this study observed that some of the returned modules were actually unnamed, creating a problem for them. Despite reminders to write their names, some learners still failed to do so. This made it difficult for the participants to keep track of the learners' progress and provide meaningful feedback. It is important for learners to take responsibility for their work and ensure that they provide necessary information, such as their names, to facilitate

efficient and effective learning. Participant 14 described her experience as follows:

“There were modules without names, so we were left to guess who they belonged to. Most of the returned modules had no names, making it extremely difficult for us to identify the owners. This made it challenging to provide accurate feedback and track the learners' progress.”

Her experience was supported by the narration of participant 7:

“One challenge that we couldn't avoid was the issue of returned modules without names. We always reminded the learners to write their names, but some still failed to do so.”

Student submissions without their names can have significant implications for educators and learners alike. Without proper identification, it becomes challenging for educators to provide accurate feedback and track the learners' progress effectively (Barkley et al., 2012). This can also lead to confusion and delays in grading and assessment. Learners may miss out on valuable feedback and opportunities for improvement, which can affect their academic progress negatively (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Additionally, the lack of ownership and accountability can promote a culture of academic dishonesty, as learners may be less likely to take responsibility for their work (Bretag et al., 2018). Therefore, it is crucial for educators and learners to prioritize responsible behavior and take steps to ensure that all submissions are properly identified with the necessary information, including names, to facilitate efficient and effective learning.

Modules with illegible handwriting

Another issue that the participants encountered was illegible handwriting from some learners, making it impossible to read their responses, especially for essay questions. This made it difficult for teachers to understand their answers and provide accurate feedback, hindering effective assessment of the learners' progress. As mentioned by participant 14:

"The handwriting of some learners was illegible, making it extremely difficult for me to read their responses, particularly for essay questions. This made it challenging to assess their understanding and provide accurate feedback."

This verbatim was backed-up by the recount of participant 9:

"At times, some learners' handwriting can be difficult to read, especially for the essay questions, making it hard for me to comprehend their responses and assess their understanding accurately."

Illegible handwriting by learners can have significant implications for both educators and learners. It can make it difficult for educators to understand the learners' responses, especially for essay questions, which can hinder accurate assessment and feedback (Graham, 2018). Additionally, it can lead to delays in grading and assessment, negatively impacting the learners' academic progress (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Poor handwriting can also decrease the quality of feedback and limit learners' opportunities for improvement (Skar et al., 2021). To address this issue, educators can promote legible handwriting and provide necessary resources to ensure that all submissions are accurately assessed and feedback is meaningful. By prioritizing legible handwriting, educators can facilitate efficient and effective learning for all learners.

Bulk of Modules to be Checked

Another issue faced by the participants of this study was the overwhelming number of modules that needed to be checked by educators. One participant had to check modules from over 300 students per week, while another had forty students in each of the five sections they were responsible for. The sheer volume of modules that needed to be checked made it challenging for educators to provide meaningful feedback and assessments to learners. While it is crucial for educators to check and record learners' progress, the number of modules to be checked can be too much to handle, making it difficult to finish checking them all in a timely manner. This can be quite taxing

for educators, and it can negatively impact the quality of feedback and assessments. Participant 4 said:

"One challenge that I faced was the issue of learners submitting modules for previous quarters while I was checking the current quarter's modules. This disrupted my schedule and made it difficult for me to manage my workload effectively. For example, if I was checking module 3 for the current quarter, some learners would submit modules from previous quarters, such as modules 1 or 2, adding to my workload. This made it challenging for me to finish checking all the modules in a timely manner, especially when handling a large number of learners. It could take up to two or three weeks to return the modules, adding to the delay in providing feedback and assessments."

This was reinforced by the statement of participant 5:

"Among the five sections that I handled, there were 40 learners in each section. So, that's 40 times five. It was really overwhelming to check all those modules. It was important to check, record, and assess them to know where learners improved, but it was too much work. Sometimes, it was impossible to finish checking all the modules, so I had to ask for help. It was like I spent all my time checking and recording, leaving me with little time for other tasks."

The bulk of modules to be checked by educators can have significant implications for the quality of education. Checking a large number of modules can be time-consuming and overwhelming, making it challenging for educators to provide meaningful feedback and assessments to learners (Liu et al., 2014). This can lead to delays in grading and assessment, negatively affecting the learners' academic progress. Additionally, educators may feel overworked and burnt out, resulting in decreased job satisfaction and lower quality of teaching (Newton, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to consider strategies to manage the workload of educators and ensure that learners

receive timely and effective feedback and assessments. By prioritizing manageable workloads for educators, institutions can promote efficient and effective learning for all learners.

Based on the results of the study, the following challenges were reported regarding the assessment process during the implementation of PMDL:

1. The submission of unanswered modules by some learners.
2. Learners forwarding incomplete sets of modules, incomplete answers, or failure to complete certain activities.
3. The occurrence of modules that were answered by parents or other family members.
4. Some learners copying answers directly from answer keys and the internet.
5. The challenge of checking modules without names, which could lead to difficulties in identifying the owners of the modules, and illegible handwriting, which could make it difficult for educators to understand the learners' responses.
6. The bulk of modules to be checked, leading to delays in grading and negatively impacting the learners' academic progress.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges identified in the study, the following recommendations are suggested to address these issues and optimize the assessment process:

1. Provide clear instructions and guidelines to learners regarding the completion and submission of modules to avoid the occurrence of unanswered or incomplete modules.
2. Regularly monitor the quality of the modules and provide feedback to learners to ensure that they are submitting complete and accurate responses.
3. Encourage learners to answer modules independently and discourage the participation of parents and other family members in the assessment process to ensure its validity and reliability.
4. Develop effective strategies to prevent learners from copying answers directly from answer keys and the internet, such as providing open-ended questions that require critical thinking and analysis.

5. Implement policies that require learners to write their names legibly on their modules and to ensure that their handwriting is clear and understandable to facilitate the assessment process for educators.
6. Develop effective workload management strategies for educators to ensure that the bulk of modules to be checked is manageable and to avoid delays in grading and providing feedback to learners.

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