

Opportunities from Unprecedented Challenges: The Lived Experience of School Leaders from COVID-19 Pandemic to Post-Pandemic Period

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the lived experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 or Coronavirus Disease pandemic to the post-pandemic period, aiming to identify, explain, and interpret their journey through this unprecedented period. The study was operationalized using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design to address the objectives alongside the Thematic and Hermeneutical Analyses in data analysis and interpretation. The study illuminates the school leaders' experiences, their explanations of those experiences, and their interpretation through a grand theme. It concludes that there are opportunities from unprecedented challenges for pursuing education, implying a positive perspective that unprecedented challenges are surmountable. Thus, school leaders should become driven to maintain the continuity of education amidst inevitable challenges in the future. Moving forward, this insight suggests research directions, including longitudinal studies of school leaders' cross-cultural comparisons to identify cultural influences on crisis management and mixed-methods approaches for a deeper understanding of crisis response strategies. Furthermore, evaluating the impact of technological interventions, leadership development programs, stakeholder engagement strategies, and education policies for crisis management are recommended areas for future research.

Keywords: *lived experiences, school leaders, COVID-19 pandemic, post-pandemic period*

INTRODUCTION

The current situation in Romblon's Educational Landscape, specifically the Elementary Basic Education in Looc District, Looc, Romblon, is marked by the aftermath of the COVID-19 -pandemic. The sudden disruption and shift to remote learning, implementation of health and safety protocols, challenged financial and learning resources, collaboration and communication challenges, learning performance and assessments, adaptability and flexibility challenges, and preparedness and planning have significantly impacted the education of these elementary basic learning institutions. The pandemic left the leaders of Looc District Elementary Schools with valuable lessons, challenging their approaches to navigating education in unprecedented circumstances.

The problem is situated within the geographical and cultural context of Romblon, Philippines, specifically at Looc District Elementary Schools. Looc District shares common features with the rest of the municipalities in the province of Romblon, such as its diverse population and unique educational landscape. Looc District Elementary Schools play crucial roles in providing elementary basic education opportunities to learners from various socio-economic backgrounds. However, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic upon the school leaders have underscored the need for targeted interventions and sustainable solutions to ensure that elementary basic education opportunities in Looc District, Looc, Romblon can continue to contribute to the socio-economic development of the province and the country under any challenging circumstances of the future.

Summary of Literature and Studies

School leaders are critically important key players in the school system when responding to pandemic challenges with solutions. In the study of Caño et al. (2023), they emphasize that school leaders must be able to build effective teams, foster a culture of collaboration

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and teamwork, and leverage the expertise and resources of others to achieve goals.

Along with the World Organization's declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020) due to the COVID-19 virus, education suffered disruption. According to Rani et al. (2022), such an abrupt disruption turned the world into a new arena immobilized by pandemic lockdowns, leading to the temporary closure of schools, colleges, and universities in almost all affected countries. About 90% of students from kindergarten through higher education experienced interruptions in their education (UNESCO, 2020). These then silenced the normality of many routine activities. Nevertheless, a few months later, COVID-19 Vaccines came and controlled the pandemic strike. This led to the resumption of education in the Philippines, including Looc District, Looc, Romblon, where DEPED or the Department of Education adopted the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BELCP) for the School Year 2020-2021 (DO 012, 2020). The BELCP provided schools with options for learning modalities. The new normal stepped in and had its part in the learning continuity a year later. We had a sudden and forceful entry to adapting to the 'new normal' characterized by work-from-home setting, parents home-schooling their children in a new blended learning setting, lockdown and quarantine, and the mandatory wearing of face masks and face shields in public (Corpuz, 2021). A few more times passed, and the post-pandemic came along. According to Zaman (2023), the post-pandemic period is distinguished by reduced pandemic occurrences. There has been a modification in the socio-economic environment, which has led to forced migration and constitutional instability. In the study of Estrellado (2021), it surfaced that the Philippine government and academic institutions maintain a hopeful outlook on the resumption of face-to-face (F2F) classes, including the policies and a contingency plan with a budget to address the widespread impact of COVID-19. Today, the District of Looc continues pursuing education from the past pandemic's shadows. How well the schools can go along with another inevitable unforeseen trial remains to be unfolded.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to interpret the experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period via an informed theoretical application.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following:

1. Identify the experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period.
2. Explain the experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period.

3. Interpret the experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period via an informed theoretical framework.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to interpret the qualitative data. IPA focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences within their personal and social contexts (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Research Method

A qualitative phenomenological approach involved one-on-one interviews with ten semi-structured questions to explore the participants' lived experiences. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Hermeneutical Analysis were used to facilitate the comprehensive analysis and interpretation of data.

Research Locale and Time of the Study

The study took place in Looc District, Romblon, covering thirteen elementary schools. The research explored the lived experiences of school leaders from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period.

Population and Samples of the Study

The population included school leaders from Looc District Elementary Schools, specifically principals, head teachers, or teachers-in-charge who led their schools during the pandemic.

Population Selection Procedure

The purposive selection was used, selecting nine school leaders based on criteria such as experience in school leadership during the pandemic, health condition, permanent status, and willingness to participate in one-on-one interviews.

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interview questions were developed to gather detailed lived experiences from the school leaders. These questions served as a tool for collecting rich and comprehensive data.

Validation and Reliability of the Instrument

The interview questions were validated by three expert researchers using a ten-point validation checklist. For reliability, the transcribed responses were presented to the interviewees for verification, accuracy, and corrections.

Data Gathering Procedure

The qualitative data were collected following a one-on-one interview protocol with the study

Table 1. Themes of Experiences of School Leaders from the COVID-19 Pandemic to the Post-Pandemic Period

Responses	Codes	Themes of Experiences
Teachers had a challenging time	Challenge	Resource Challenges
There was no allocated budget	No budget	
Nothing was set aside for the unexpected arrival of the pandemic	Unprecedented event	
There were delays in the DEPED budget release	Budget delays	
Though the budget was available, printers were not available in the market.	Unavailable printers	
The things we purchased for printing were not enough	Insufficient Printing materials	
Teachers faced difficulties in producing modules due to a lack of supplies such as coupons, inks, and printers	Lack of supplies	
Insufficient number of printers	Insufficient printer	Educational Adaptation
Despite the challenges, we were able to continue educating our students and keep them safe.	Continued education	
As a school leader, I faced the challenge of adjusting to distance learning	Adjusting to modality	
How to conduct enrollment when there were no face-to-face classes?	Enrollment Problem	
DEPED provided an online orientation about learning modalities to choose from	Choosing learning modality	
DEPED sent a memorandum on choosing any learning modality that would fit the school situation.	Choosing learning modality	
Manage modular distance learning	Managing modality	
In choosing modular distance learning, teachers faced several problems like the delivery of learning goods	Delivering Learning	
As a school leader during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic period, I experienced several challenges like students had to learn at home using modules	Home Learning	
During the COVID-19 pandemic, educating learners became very challenging due to the health threats.	Health threats challenge education	
Combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the school.	Combating COVID-19	Safety and Health Measures
Protecting oneself from getting afflicted with the virus was another big thing at that time	Protecting oneself	
Teachers faced challenges in the, distribution, and returning of modules as no one was allowed to stay outside due to the pandemic.	No one stayed outside	
Along the modular distance learning, the school prioritized the safety and health of everyone involved in continuing education	Prioritizing safety and health	
Address concerns about the health and safety of students and teachers	Health and safety	
We cannot predict what the future holds	Cannot predict the future	Preparation
Anticipate and handle any emergencies	Anticipate	
As a school leader, it's crucial to be prepared for any eventualities in the future, as we can't predict what might happen.	Be prepared	
During my learning journey, I recognized the importance of being prepared for any circumstances	Being prepared	
Addressing unexpected circumstances like the pandemic.	Addressing unexpected circumstance	

Table 1. Themes of Experiences of School Leaders from the COVID-19 Pandemic to the Post-Pandemic Period(cont'd)

Responses	Codes	Themes of Experiences
Became more resilient and prepared to overcome challenges	Resilient and prepared	Resilience and Preparation
As a school leader, I learned not to give up on the challenges and prepare	Not giving up and prepare	
The MLGU, under the leadership of the mayor also did a great job in helping the school with medical supplies like facemasks, gallons of alcohol, and others	MLGU gave help	School-Community Collaboration
We asked for help from barangay officials in the distribution and return of modules	Distribution and return of modules	
Teachers and parents regularly followed up on the students' tasks	Following up	
The Barangay Local Government Unit was also helpful	Helpful BLGU	
Parents supported	Parental support	Parental Involvement and Support
Parents became more active in being partners of the school	Active parent partners	
The parent leaders stepped in	Parent leaders	
During the full face-to-face classes a large number of learners hardly read and do basic numeracy skills, particularly those in the primary grades	Poor literacy and numeracy skills	Home Learning Concerns
The retrieved modules showed that almost all learners provided correct answers in the modular tasks	Almost all learners gave correct answers in modules	
There were low literacy and numeracy learning performances or no learning at all during modular learning	Learning Performances	
It appeared that many of the outputs were not their work but instead were completed by parents, older siblings, or even neighbors.	Not the learners' work	
During the time of using the modular learning modality, teachers were concerned about the learning performance of the learners.	Concerned about learning performances	
Helped teachers manage the stress and pressure brought by their work	Manage work stress	
There was no stable internet in the area, and most children did not have gadgets like cellphones and laptops, technology intervention	No internet and gadgets	Technology Deprivation

participants using ten semi-structured questions anchored on the research objectives. A voice recorder was used to capture responses. Significant physical gestures and vocal changes were noted during the interviews. After the conduct of one-on-one interviews, transcribing responses verbatim was done and reviewed multiple times for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Initially, the researcher studied related literature and lectures on qualitative data analysis to understand how to avoid biases. The researcher eventually stood at the midway point, acting as a hybrid interpreter of the

data to address concerns about biases. Next, the Thematic Analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for the first two specific objectives, where the researcher familiarized himself with the data by reading the transcribed responses several times. Next was converting significant ideas into codes. Then, codes were combined into themes. After this, the themes were reviewed by returning to the transcribed responses for validation. Analyzing the importance of themes was done next. Finally, the themes were reported. For the third specific objective, Hermeneutic Analysis facilitated the interpretation of the study participants' themes of experiences and explanations of their

Table 2. Themes of Explanation of the Participants' Experiences

Themes of Experiences	Explanation/Action Taken	Themes of Explanation
Resource Challenges	The teachers took the initiative to solicit donations from possible donors around the community, such as parents, neighbors, and others. We kept in touch with individuals who could help augment our needs until the budget arrived We posted on Facebook our need to have more printing materials where well-off parents extended their financial help.	Resourcefulness
	The teachers took photos of the modular tasks and sent them to the pupils using an Android cellphone and available internet signal.	Sharing
Educational Adaptation	Teachers just did the spirit of sharing the use of printers.	Sharing
	Safety and health protocols were put in place for the benefit of both children and parents and everyone followed them just to continue education	Compliance with Protocols
	I attended division-initiated online training, which identified modular distance learning as the top priority delivery mode	The Need to Attend Relevant Training
Educational Adaptability	Teachers conduct house-to-house enrollment with precautionary measures I met with my teachers to talk about the learning modality and reached a point where I pushed to choose modular distance learning We agreed to use modular distance learning and allocated some funds from our MOOE to purchase a printer for module reproduction.	Decisiveness
	Teachers used group chats and other online communication means to manage the chosen modality We made adjustments, especially in connection with the module reproduction just to continue with the modality	Being a Solution-Seeker
	Along with using the modality, we implemented systematic procedures that followed the existing public health and safety protocols	Flexibility and Compliance with Protocols
Safety and Health Measures	The BLGU officials were asked to help in distributing and retrieving the modules in designated areas in barangay sitios.	The Need for Stakeholders' Coordination
	Used the materials given by the MLGU to control the spread of the virus Embraced vaccination	Using Precautionary Measures The Need for Vaccination
	Followed the protocols imposed by the authorities. As a school leader, I made it mandatory for parents to ensure that their children strictly comply with the community and school's health protocols	Compliance with Protocols Mandatory Compliance with Protocols

Table 2. Themes of Explanation of the Participants' Experiences(cont'd)

Themes of Experiences	Explanation/Action Taken	Themes of Explanation
Resilience and Preparation	Have a contingency plan	Contingency Plan
	Having the Lord Almighty at the center and prepare	The Need for Spiritual Resilience and Preparation
Preparation	We should always prepare ahead of time for any national emergency	The Need to Prepare Ahead of Time
	It's important to set plans in advance	The Importance of Advance Planning
	I recognized the importance of being prepared for any circumstances	The Importance of Preparing for Circumstances
School-Community Collaboration	Fostering resilience to handle difficult situations The mayor solicited donations from benevolent families to provide the school with the necessary equipment to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the school."	Fostering Resilience A Support System
	We asked for help from barangay officials in the distribution and return of modules by assigning them to every dropping area per sitio which they supported.	The Need for Stakeholders' Coordination
	We encouraged parents to ask questions or seek clarification when needed about their children's home-learning	Encouragement for Participation
	The BLGU is providing the school with medical supplies and helping in implementing health and safety protocols in the community.	BLGU's Engagement with the School Efforts
	Parents gave support when asked to donate some amount for purchasing printing supplies Parents keeping up their part in the delivery and retrieval of learning outputs.	A Support System
Parental Involvement and Support	Although it was taxing for parents to help in the distribution and retrieval of modules, they were willing to become partners with the school in bridging the learning gap.	Commitment
	There was less improved learning or worse was the downgrading of basic skills like reading and numeracy.	Downgrade in Basic Skills
Home Learning Concerns	There are parents with poor educational attainment or those who had not attended school that affected their way of helping children's home learning.	Parents' Poor Educational Background
Teachers' Well-Being	When teachers are given time to have symposium on work stress management, this brought relief and added confidence to them in facing the taxing work brought about by the pandemic	Good Effect of Stress Management
Technology Deprivation	Not many have electronic gadgets and internet connection because most families in the area had low economic status.	Low Economic Status

experiences, giving way to the overall concept of their lived experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was integrated throughout the processes to ensure a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher observed the highest possible ethical attributes during this qualitative study to maintain reliability, validity, and trustworthiness in all parts of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study illuminates the school leaders' themes of experiences, themes of explanations of their experiences, and the grand theme in the study's theoretical framework. Their themes of experiences reflected in Table 1 are as follows: (1) Resource Challenges which, according to the first study participant, "Teachers had a challenging time in having no allocated budget for the unexpected arrival of the pandemic." (2) Educational Adaptation, just like what the second study participant said, "I faced the challenge of adjusting to distance learning." (3) Safety and Health Measures according to the second study participant, "Protecting oneself from getting afflicted with the virus was another big thing at that time." (4) Preparation and Resilience according to the fifth study participant, "As a school leader, it is crucial to be prepared for any eventualities in the future, as we cannot predict what might happen." (5) School-community collaboration just like what the fourth study participant said, "They asked for help from barangay officials in the distribution and return of modules." (6) Parental Involvement and Support as the fourth study participant disclosed that "Parents became more active in being partners in the school." (7) Home-learning Concerns as the ninth study participant disclosed, "During the time of using the modular learning modality, teachers were concerned about the learning performance of the learners." (8) Teachers' Well-Being, as the eighth study participant emphasized, "There was a need to help teachers manage the stress and pressure brought on by their work." Finally, Technology Deprivation, as the fourth study participant mentioned, "There was no stable internet in the area, and most children did not have gadgets like cellphones and laptops." The themes of the experiences of the school leaders display significant challenges to pursuing education under unprecedented circumstances, such as the pandemic strides that passed.

The themes of explanations of school leaders' experiences in Table 2 highlight the following: Resource Challenges were addressed through resourcefulness, including soliciting donations and sharing resources;

Educational Adaptation involved compliance with health protocols, decisive actions, and stakeholder coordination to ensure continued education; Safety and Health Measures emphasized precautionary measures and vaccination; Preparation and Resilience underscored the need for contingency planning; School-Community Collaboration and Parental Involvement were crucial in supporting educational efforts; Home-Learning Concerns and Technology Deprivation highlighted disparities in learning environments; and Teachers' Well-Being focused on managing work-related stress. These themes of explanations of the school leaders' experiences show multifaceted approaches and concerns in addressing prevailing circumstances during the pandemic strides

The school leaders' themes of experiences and explanations of their experiences relate to some reviewed literature, such as budget constraints and insufficient materials, which are addressed by soliciting donations and resource sharing (Caño et al., 2023). The abrupt transition to modular learning and stringent health protocols requiring effective educational adaptations and stakeholder coordination align with the Department of Education's Learning Continuity Plan (DO 012, 2020). Emphasizing preparation and resilience, these leaders developed advanced plans and contingency measures, reflecting the resilience needed in educational settings discussed by Estrellado (2021). Collaborative efforts with local government units and active parental involvement were crucial for maintaining educational continuity. Challenges like poor literacy, numeracy skills, and technology deprivation also highlighted the need for targeted interventions and robust support systems, underscoring the essential role of effective leadership and community collaboration in overcoming educational disruptions. Moreover, the studies by Šapale et al. (2021), Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023), Aberle and Hoekstra (2020), Estrellado (2021), and Bello et al. (2022) collectively highlight the challenges faced by educational institutions, the critical role of leadership in crisis management, and the importance of adaptability and resilience in navigating disruptions in the education sector. The study's findings corroborate the identified themes from the literature, such as resource constraints, challenges in transitioning to remote learning, the importance of equitable access to educational technology, and the need for proactive crisis management strategies. The strategies employed by school leaders, including collaboration with stakeholders, proactive decision-making, and adaptation to alternative learning modalities, resonate with the recommendations proposed in the reviewed literature. The accounts lead to the grand theme of the study's theoretical framework in Figure 1, stating that

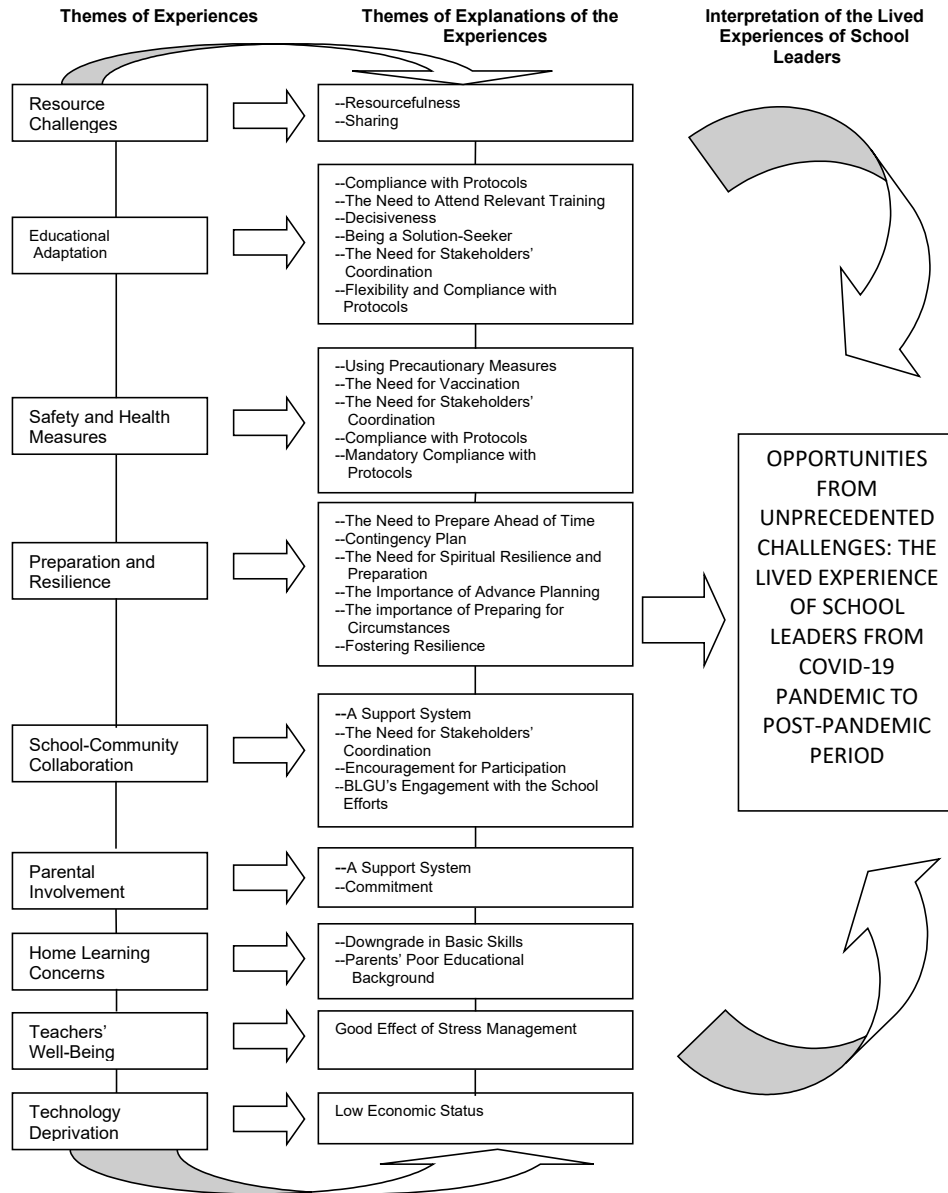


Figure 1. The Theoretical Framework of the School Leaders' Lived Experiences from the COVID-19

unprecedented challenges like those from the past pandemic still provide opportunities for school leaders to hold on to in pursuing education. The study by Francisco and Nuqui (2020) supports this, stating that the pandemic opens a stronger school community and external partnerships, especially with parents and guardians, so schools create opportunities. This conforms to the themes of explanations of the school leaders' experiences.

This dissertation extends beyond academics to practical educational policy and leadership development applications. It significantly contributes to the existing body of knowledge by bridging the gap between theory and practice. The study informs the need for evidence-

based decision-making in education policy and leadership development, contributing to the resilience and sustainability of educational systems in the face of unprecedented challenges.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, it is concluded that unprecedented challenges like those from the past pandemic still provide opportunities for school leaders to hold on to in pursuing education. The study participants proved it with their themes of explanations on their lived experiences where they manifested

resourcefulness and sharing, being solution seekers, need for stakeholders' coordination, fostering resilience, getting a support system, and commitment. These insights imply a positive perspective that unprecedented challenges are surmountable. Thus, school leaders should become driven to maintain the continuity of education amidst inevitable challenges in the future.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions of each author to this study are outlined as Crisby N. del Mundo, Lead Author; Dr. Emelyn R. Villanueva, Co-Author.

Crisby N. del Mundo conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the results, and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Emelyn R. Villanueva provided invaluable guidance, support, and constructive feedback throughout the research process. Dr. Villanueva's expertise and mentorship significantly contributed to refining the research methodology, interpreting the findings, and enhancing the overall quality of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that no financial, personal, or professional relationships with other individuals or organizations could be considered a conflict of interest.

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