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## Challenges and Opportunities: Department of Education's Response to Teaching During the COVID-19

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education in the Philippines and how the Department of Education (DepEd) utilizes blended and distance learning as part of the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to provide continuous learning. The article also discussed DepEd's implementation of BE-LCP and the opportunities it created.

**Methodology:** Journal articles, government reports, and news articles were reviewed. The data collection process included analyzing and synthesizing information regarding COVID-19's impact on Philippine education, DepEd's BE-LCP implementation strategies, obstacles, and opportunities.

**Results:** Results revealed that over 28 million Filipino students have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The DepEd implemented the BE-LCP, which includes blended and distance learning, in response to the crisis. The plan has encountered obstacles such as poor internet connectivity, module errors, and adapting to new applications. DepEd's response includes blended learning using high-tech and low-tech modalities to reach even the Philippines' most remote areas without internet access.

**Conclusion:** It is commendable that DepEd utilized the BE-LCP to provide continuous learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite implementation issues, the plan has allowed teachers and students to continue learning despite the pandemic. Blended learning is efficient for overcoming limited internet connectivity and reaching even the country's most remote regions. The study suggests that the DepEd continues implementing the BE-LCP and seeks new ways to enhance education in the Philippines.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Opportunities, DepEd, Response, Teaching, COVID-19

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, according to Vlachopoulos (2020) and Huang et al. (2020). In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global pandemic (WHO 2021). Certain virus strains have generated considerable concern due to their high morbidity and transmission rates. The deadly effects of COVID-19 have been felt in over 200 countries and territories worldwide (Flores, 2020; Muñoz & Sanchez, 2023).

As a result, COVID-19 has significantly impacted more than a billion students worldwide, including more than 28 million learners from the Philippines who must adhere to quarantine restrictions and remain at home (Joaquin, et al., 2020; Sanchez, et al., 2022). Due to the potential for virus transmission in educational settings, several schools worldwide have been forced to close. In this context, the Third World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 2022) brought together key stakeholders to lay the foundation for a new era in higher education. This dynamic and easily accessible framework attempts to address the problems humanity and the world face, focusing on the global disruption caused by COVID-19.

At the inaugural Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Ministerial Policy e-Forum, former DepEd Secretary Leonor Magtolis Briones, along with other Southeast Asian education officials, presented a variety of education plans intended to address the global impact of COVID-19. This aligns with the Department of Education's (2020a) commitment to provide all learners with opportunities for continuous learning (Flores, 2019; Sanchez, 2023a).



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Under the Philippines' short- and long-term strategies, Briones proposed the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) as a framework for the Department of Education to follow in providing education during the COVID-19 pandemic (DepEd Order, 2020b). Amid a pandemic, the BE-LCP seeks to protect the health, safety, and well-being of all students, teachers, and DepEd employees while providing education. BE-LCP is predicated on utilizing various learning delivery modalities, including blended and distance learning.

### Objective:

This study examined how the Department of Education (DepEd) utilizes blended and distance learning as part of the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to provide continuous learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. How has the Department of Education (DepEd) addressed the challenges of implementing the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What factors have contributed to the success or failure of the response of DepEd?

### METHODS

#### Research Design

This study used content analysis as a method. Different journal articles and research, government reports, and news articles were reviewed and analyzed. The data collection process included analyzing and synthesizing information regarding COVID-19's impact on Philippine education, DepEd's BE-LCP implementation strategies, obstacles, and opportunities.

#### Instrumentation

The researcher served as the main instrument of the study being in-charge of the overall analysis process.

#### Ethical Consideration

The researcher complied with all the ethical considerations in the study and all data collected were obtained ethically. In addition, the research is conducted with honesty and objectivity, and the results are reported accurately and truthfully.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

In gathering the data, journal articles, government reports, and news articles were reviewed. The data collection process included analyzing and synthesizing information regarding COVID-19's impact on Philippine education, DepEd's BE-LCP implementation strategies, obstacles, and opportunities.

### RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Utilizing technology as a tool for continuing primary education was a priority for the Department of Education (Flores, 2019; Dizon & Sanchez, 2020; Sanchez & Sarmiento, 2020). DepEd has chosen teachers who were prepared to be teacher-broadcasters by the country's top journalists to deliver lessons via DepEd TV (Montemayor, 2020), as not all areas of the country have internet access. By January 2021, the DepEd TV production team, which consists of more than 100 teacher-broadcasters and 72 production team members, produced 220 episodes per week covering all subject areas (Sanchez, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2023).

In response to the pandemic, DepEd also upgraded DepEd Commons, its online learning platform for public and private schools, to assist more students and teachers with distance learning. Errors were observed in the modules that teachers authored. DepEd issued Department Memorandum 00-1020-0138, which seeks to collect and compile errors discovered on self-learning modules, other printed materials, DepEd TV, DepEd TV YouTube Channel, and the DepEd Commons (Flores, 2022).

DepEd teachers were impacted when the pandemic struck. Thus, according to Dayagbil, et al. (2021), teachers adapted their teaching and learning strategies to the Department's policies. Due to limited or nonexistent internet connectivity, most students struggled to complete required learning activities using technology as a medium for instruction and learning overwhelmed many non-tech-savvy educators. They have utilized new applications, including Zoom, Google Classroom, and Google Meet. DepEd launched DepEd Teaches, an online program comprised



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of episodes focusing on steps and initiatives for overcoming the obstacles in providing education in the new normal (Department of Education, 2020c).

Aucensillo (2021) argues that the sudden transition from face-to-face to virtual education has caused anxiety among students and parents, particularly in the Philippines. Students struggle to adjust to the new norm in education because of COVID-19. According to Rotas and Cahapay's (2020) findings, students experienced the following during the pandemic: unstable internet connectivity; insufficient learning resources; electric power interruptions; vague learning contents; overloaded lesson activities; limited teacher scaffolding; poor peer communication; conflicting home responsibilities; a poor learning environment; financial-related issues; physical health compromises; and mental health struggles. During the current global crisis, this contextual evidence speaks to the multifaceted challenges faced by students in a developing nation (Sanchez, 2023b).

### **Opportunities Created by DepEd's Response to COVID-19**

DepEd adopted blended learning – both high-tech modalities – online platforms and apps – and low- or no-tech modalities – TV, radio, SMS, and printed self-learning materials – to reach even the most remote areas of the Philippines without internet access (Philstar.com, 2021). As a result, opportunities for teachers to continue teaching and learning are created.

This article corresponds to the research conducted by Toquero (2020) where she presented and proposed a few recommendations and opportunities for higher education to address COVID-19-related educational issues. These recommendations also apply to the Department of Education; however, the majority, if not all, are already in place and being implemented to meet the educational needs of all students. She emphasized the following solutions to the encountered challenges: a. Include Environment and Health Courses in the Curriculum; b. Strengthen Environmental Policies and Hygiene Practices; c. Incorporate Online Mental Health and Medical Services; d. Migrate Courses; e. Align Curriculum Competencies; e. Migrate Courses; Strengthen Research Efforts, Data Monitoring, and Evidence-Based Practices; Scale Up Online Learning Teacher Training.

### **Integrate Environment and Health Courses in the Curriculum and Strengthen Environmental Policies and Hygiene Practices**

Before the pandemic, DepEd activated a program known as WINS. The Department of Education (2016c) developed Wash in Schools Policy (DepEd Order No. 10 s. 2016) as a comprehensive program for personal health care and environmental sanitation via a set of standards for proper and correct health practices in schools – to cover water, sanitation including food handling and preparation, hygiene including Menstrual Hygiene Management, deworming, health education, and capacity building. Consequently, the Department hopes to close the hygiene and sanitation gap to keep more children healthy and in school.

### **Incorporate an Online Mental Health and Medical Services**

Recently, the Department of Education (2021d), through the Disaster Risk Reduction Management Service (DRRMS), launched a mental health helpline system consisting of contact information for various organizations to assist students, teachers, and the general public in times of mental and psychological distress. DepEd Memorandum No. 072, series of 2021, instructs all DepEd offices to include and promote the national and regional helplines of Circle of Hope Community Services, Inc., COVID-19 Mental Health Responders from the Masters Psychological Services, Hopeline PH, and The 700 Club Asia in events and programs.

### **Migrate Courses, Align Curriculum Competencies, Scale-up Teachers' Training for Online Learning Instruction**

For SY 2020-2021, DepEd has published the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) Department of Education (2020e), which field implementers will utilize nationwide. In addition, DepEd has begun several programs and initiatives designed to expand the training of teachers for online learning instruction. During the mid-year In-service Training (INSET) Week, the Department of Education, Department of Education (2020f) launched DepEd Teaches to further assist teachers in the new normal brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This move is important as it values employees' need for further professional development which is crucial for efficient delivery of services to the clients (Sanchez, 2022).



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## Conclusion

The tagline of DepEd, "No Filipino student will be left behind during the crisis," says it all. This complex and challenging pandemic period has created opportunities for everyone, including the academic sector. Accordingly, DepEd's responses reflected its catchphrase. Even during times of crisis, the Department has gone too far to ensure that students receive proper instruction and education. As suggested by Toquero, the policymaking and implementing agency should strengthen its research efforts, data monitoring, and evidence-based practices to have a data source for its future programs and policies. DepEd must be more innovative, proactive, and open to new ideas to cater to the requirements of every single student.

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