

A Narrative Inquiry on the Challenges and Coping Mechanism of School Leaders in Higher Learning Institutions Amidst Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The current study seeks to discover the experiences of the school leaders towards their challenges during a pandemic and their coping mechanisms to provide quality education to the institution's students. The researcher applies narrative inquiry to a qualitative research design. A total of six deans and associate deans were selected as research participants through purposive sampling. Via an interview guide during the interview, the researcher gathered data and presented it using narratives. The results revealed that school leaders encountered many challenges, particularly in the immediate readiness of evaluation tools, accessibility of technology, relationships with coworkers, the University's learning continuity plan implementation, the execution of the course, and the systematic implementation of procedures. In contrast, the efforts made by the school leaders to battle the pandemic outbreak are vital for the education system to cope, including the delivery of webinars, training, and workshops, the availability of a plan for continuous learning, and the University's assistance to stakeholders. It is recommended that higher education institutions design and enhance their learning continuity plans, ensure that the manuals are appropriately disseminated, undertake curriculum enhancements for those programs requiring review, and follow the administration's instructions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 afflicted all higher education, not just in Wuhan, China, where the virus originated, but also in other countries. Notwithstanding the COVID-19 problems, educational alternatives are performed to continue educating all learners. Education is influenced by COVID-19 principles, the necessity for viable approaches, and how it can adapt to future problems [1]. In addition, there is a more significant need for academic institutions to refine the curriculum's techniques and make it much more receptive to the student's educational needs further than the traditional classroom [2], as Toquero [3]

reiterated that as progression makes its way, change must embrace, Likewise, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on school systems and their responsiveness to Covid-19 limitations, comparing accessible data with international statistics derived from continuous monitoring of education systems. During the pandemic, global organizations acknowledge the disruption of traditional educational processes and the emergency switch to online learning [4]

Several studies describe not just a formal change to flexible learning but also a significant technological shift that enables the use of the unique opportunities afforded by digitalization, which is particularly crucial when teaching students. Comparing the discourse of worldwide professional and analytical findings on the difficulties of education within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to the discourse of scientific discourse, a theoretical investigation is a distinguishing characteristic. It is conceivable to rebuild the direct, indirect, and latent hazards posed by the pandemic through research on alterations in the learning process [4]. In addition, implementing flexible learning is intended to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic. There is a belief that introducing online learning introduces numerous barriers to the learning process [5].

The higher institution continues to deliver formal education and adjust to the pandemic outbreak. This also impacts the programs related to the academic calendar, instructional methods, and procedures of higher institutions are likewise affected by this pandemic. In particular, the chosen higher institution, with the Commission on Higher Education, has initiatives to ensure the continuity of education and the delivery of high-quality instruction. It involves the implementation of adaptable teaching and learning methods. Curriculum implementation oversight is the responsibility of school leaders [6]. Amid this pandemic, they face numerous obstacles, and higher learning institutions are promoting flexible learning as a component of a better education.

The researcher wants to determine the respondents' experiences regarding their challenges during the pandemic and how they cope with continuing to deliver quality education in the heart of the institution, the students. Culajara [7] reiterated that leading and managing are interconnected to reach organizational goals. This study primarily benefits the school leaders who will enhance their leadership and management in challenging times of the pandemic, environmental calamities, and health crises. This study would also help other stakeholders, particularly students in the instruction center.

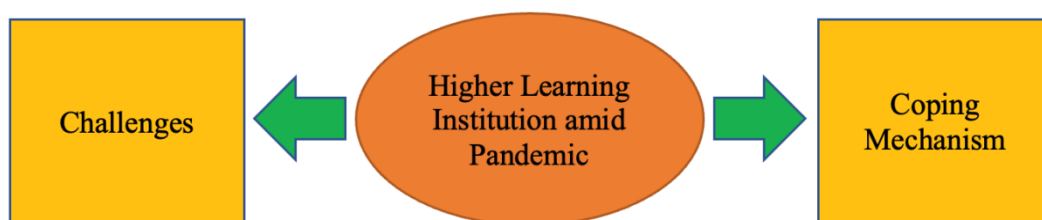


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The illustration shows the relationship between the variables the researcher wants to explore. The chosen Higher Learning Institution's challenges and coping mechanisms are the scope and limitation of the present study. This could be the source of information for the administration in crafting an action plan for better implementation of quality education in the institution, particularly in challenging times.

Research Questions:

1. What challenges did you meet during the pandemic in your curriculum supervision?
2. What are Higher Learning Institutions' coping mechanisms during the pandemic?

Related Literature and Studies

The education pandemic presented numerous obstacles to all organizations [8]. The activities of higher education institutions are being negatively impacted, and the situation may last for an extended period. Under these conditions, it is essential to transition to online classes and enhances educational processes at all levels of an organization [9]. With its rapid global spread and concomitant death toll, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented global public health emergency not witnessed in the last century. The unknown is the duration of the catastrophe and disturbance to normalcy [10].

Conversely, school leaders work in a double approach that manages and leads schools amid the pandemic. They are increasing their roles regarding safe schooling and laying the framework for future education while concurrently extending their function of the instructional leader towards the online instructional leader. The techniques of government communication made it difficult for school leaders to prioritize and compromise ever-changing government policy guidance with the limits of school facilities, the well-being of students and personnel, and the needs of communities [11].

Likewise, as the vanguard of our educational system, teachers experience more significant work stress than some other professions, even under ideal conditions [12]. While teachers were previously exposed to some pressures that negatively impacted their emotional well-being, the pandemic presented new problems that increased the likelihood that they would experience emotional distress [13]. Several elements are believed to influence the effectiveness of learning modalities, whether online or remote and the performance of all teachers' and students' knowledge and skills, even though many educational institutions worldwide have already adopted online learning [14].

According to the research, school administrators were preoccupied with organizing the training and webinars of teachers and technical preparatory work for distance education [15]. Two months later, their focus shifted to the adaptability of the students and the evaluation of their accomplishments. Additionally, the survey found that school administrators with much more work experience collaborated less with public governments and were backed primarily by their communities and schools [16]. In addition, teachers were introduced to various lectures, workshops, and webinars through an online platform, technological capability, and mental health, mostly during outbreaks. Regardless of age or decades of experience, teachers have an attitude toward professional development and improvement [17].

Particular research expands a process that connects leaders' inspirational interaction towards direction-giving and compassion to coworkers' organizational commitment during crises by connecting theoretical perspectives from various disciplines, including public affairs, communication style, psychology, and management [18]. A study indicates that the circumstances generated by COVID-19 have prompted significant anxiety among students, parents, and teachers over assessment, the inadequacy of distance learning, and student overload [14]. There are also opportunities to improve the quality of the education system, including assistance of educators, parents, and families and practical advice for entities who work in the field of education [19].

2. METHOD

Research Design

The researcher employs a qualitative approach to research. Similarly, this research concentrates on the challenges and coping strategies of school leaders during the pandemic era of education. This study employed narrative inquiry, which consisted of a comprehensive assessment of the structure and content of the respondents' experiences and stories. Narrative inquiry was identified as an ideal tool for studying intra- and interpersonal processes [20].

Participants

The research participants were chosen using purposive sampling, consisting of Deans and Associate Deans as school leaders of higher learning institutions or six respondents. These respondents, as leaders, experienced the challenges and coping mechanisms in supervising their college, particularly their teachers.

Table 1. Respondent profile

<i>RESPONDENTS</i>	<i>SEX</i>	<i>YEARS IN SERVICE</i>	<i>YEARS IN DESIGNATION</i>
<i>SL1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>SL2</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>3 and 1/2</i>
<i>SL3</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>SL4</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>SL5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>SL6</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>14 1/2</i>	<i>14 and 1/2</i>

*SL=School Leader

Instrument

The researcher employed a guiding interview which served as the tool for the researcher's investigation. Validation is performed on the guide questions to verify that the interview guide discusses and addresses all relevant study data. Indeed, interviews convey information about the perceptions and experiences of participants concerning a given topic [21]. Before the study is conducted, the instrument will be pilot tested to identify flaws, limitations, or other structural issues and allow the researcher to make substantial revisions [22].

Data Collection and Analysis

The participant's responses to the interview guide were obtained via an in-person interview. To facilitate comprehension, the questions were translated into the respondent's native tongue. So that respondents can express their perspectives on the topics, vernacular responses are permitted. Interviews are essential as a pattern of persistence where the interviewer solicits answers from the researcher's questions, and the respondent offers answers vital to the research work's credibility.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher discussed the gathered data and analyzed it based on the participant's answers to the given questions. It will explore the challenges experienced by school leaders and coping mechanisms to surpass the pandemic.

Challenges Experienced by School Leaders in the Time of Pandemic

The deans or associate deans experienced several problems during the pandemic. Based on the responses of the participants, the instant availability of evaluation tools, technology, relationships with their coworkers, implementation of the learning continuity plan of the University, course implementation in their respective classes, and systematic implementation of procedures.

Evaluation Tool

The evaluation tool is one of the problems experienced by the respondents on how they will assess their teachers and materials during the synchronous and asynchronous classes. They believe that they need to change the evaluation tool as soon as possible to evaluate the output of everyone, particularly their teachers and students. However, even though they do not have an evaluation tool, they still trust their teachers. SL1 reiterated, "*...I still do not have a tool that I use to supervise. It is like the trust they teach in their homes*". The University also has teaching effectiveness provided by the office of Curriculum and Instruction Development, where the students give ratings and comments on how their teachers taught them. SL5 stated the hindrance of this teaching effectiveness as he mentioned that "*...the responses that I get limited feedbacks, not all students are willing to give comments*". It means that not all the students are willing to provide their comments and suggestions to their teacher because it may affect their school's standing, or they are not interested in it.

Technology

Technology is essential in the education system during the pandemic because it changes the learning modality from face-to-face to online. The respondents shared that the availability of technology like computers, laptops, or even smartphones is the primary problem they experienced regarding technology. Not all students are capable of providing gadgets to sustain their studies. The other issues were the skills in using technology. SL1 mentioned that "*...there are some of us who do not are used to this technology, but let us try. I oriented virtually how to use and learn this google classroom*". Aside from the training and workshops provided by the University, her college initiated learning how to navigate google classrooms. SL3 also conducted webinars with experts to share their knowledge with their teachers. Seasoned teachers are suffering in using technology because they are not used to it. SL3 articulated to his co-teachers that "*... even though we have an experience like this, we still have to fulfill our duty to teach, although we all are not used to this kind of platform*". In addition, the supervision of their teachers is very tough. SL4 stated, "*...the technology has become a challenge on how are you going to supervise if you do not know the technology at all*". Technology is very significant in the pandemic, where all the transactions are online, even creating a classroom, a link, and a google sheet form (SL1).

Relationship with Colleagues

Their relationship is also affected by the pandemic, where they do not see and bond. Some respondents become a dean or associate dean three months before the lockdown. They called their selves as pandemic deans.

SL2 stated, "...you are their dean online, and I do not know the people here yet. I want to ask them *what we want to do to deliver quality education*". The control of the implementation of everything in leadership and management is affected. SL5 agreed that the closeness of faculty is affected as he mentioned that "*...our closeness was affected, especially to the new faculty*". To resolve this issue, they had a monthly faculty meeting. However, their participation in school activities, like when every office is busy in COPC, is also affected. SL5 added that "*...the only people I worked with were the program coordinators because the only concern of the teachers was to teach*".

Likewise, SL3 articulated that "*...no organization is perfect, no leader is perfect, and the team is not perfect*". The human relation in the faculty is what they want to do. They want to be a college as a whole and united. Furthermore, to answer this issue, they want to conduct team building (SL3); it is part of their action plan.

Course Implementation

During the pandemic, when everyone is shocked, and there is no learning continuity plan, everyone is challenged on how the course will implement when there is no time to go outside their homes. It is rigorous, and all fear going outside because of Covid-19. SL2 shared that the thesis conduct and on-the-job training (OJT) were the most challenging for her. There is a limitation on how they will process this course. SL4 agreed that they also experienced the challenge in OJT. SL4 mentioned that "*...OJT because it is forbidden to come out*". Their solution was to get speakers to discuss topics or competencies they can use in NC2. In addition to the regular students, they provide links that motivate them to attend and watch the webinar.

On the other hand, the problem experienced by SL3 was the curriculum itself. The number of hours in a laboratory and an OJT is questionable in the accreditation period. With this, they started reviewing the CMOs and mandates for curriculum enhancement.

Implementation of Learning Continuity Plan

There is also a problem when implementing the learning continuity plan of the University, as observed by the respondents. The free choices of the teachers given on what learning modality is the primary issue concerned by SL5. They do not have control over their faculty. SL5 declared, "*...I had a problem that time is the order in our learning continuity plan that the students and teachers have to work asynchronously and synchronously*". Some of the faculty are just posting video links and giving instructions to the students. The problem was that they could not oblige them to conduct synchronous classes because they had choices. The feedback from the students is the basis of all his statements.

On the other hand, SL6 articulated that the problem was complying to finish the required hours. In addition, they did not touch the clinical hours; they just ended the lecture hours, affecting the graduating students. Nevertheless, this is for sure, as SL6 stated that "*...Once we are allowed to do clinical, we will pursue it*".

Nonetheless, there is a board exam, and the requirements are strict with their college. The program can be closed if the result is below the passing rate for three consecutive years. Moreover, that is the reason why they are so strict.

Teachers' Attitude

The teachers' attitudes may also affect the outcome of the learning organization. Moreover, following the respondent, this is also one of the problems experienced during the outbreak of Covid-19. The faculty's challenge is delivering the message online (SL2). There are minimal or few problems in the faculty during the pandemic. SL4 declared that "*...there are still teachers who did not teach their students*".

Furthermore, their actions were to call attention to and discuss the instances. However, the SL3 also shared that "*...there is one who does not teach, and the strong decision I made was that I did not give him a load*". This decision is very seldom, according to him. It is conformed to the actions made by their teachers. To the teachers who did not report to the school, they call to come to school so that at least they can see and talk to them. They can ask personally what is happening in their google classrooms.

Moreover, SL6 imparted that teachers must be passionate and willing to do their best to teach their students, even if it is online. SL6 revealed that "*...how can we give the learning that we should give to the students for when the board exam comes, theoretically wise, how can they absorb again that our real concern is learning of students because we are creating future professionals, we do not just want them to be professionals, we want them to be great professionals, to be sensible professionals*". This show that everyone must be eager to impart their knowledge and skills to the students.

Procedural Implementation

The implementation process in all manuals and work eye is also the problem experienced by one of the respondents. SL6 shared that "*...I struggle with communication letters. We have a Work eye, but it is not followed because we do not have a system; our Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) takes one month before coming back to us*". The pandemic affects as well the process or the system. It hinders the ability to finish one activity or another project. In addition, their college insisted on conducting limited face-to-face for their students. They have consultative meetings with their parents, students, and teachers to discuss this matter. SL6 mentioned that "*...I insisted that we take the face-to-face. Did I write a mock letter? Mock face-to-face is just for preparation, but gradually we let them in, let them in, let us say 30% of the class first, then another 30%, another 30%*". To be able to happen this, they have to comply with the IATF protocols and requirements in disaster risk reduction management and protocols and they complied. Furthermore, their college started to implement limited face-to-face gradually.

It describes the technological challenges, social relationships, political aspects, and ecological core difficulties facing schooling after the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the most significant challenges after a pandemic will not be connected to its impacts but rather to foster societal and ecological awareness [23]. In the current study, it is evident that the respondents experienced the mentioned difficulties in the institution. It is essential to continue and reform the practices. Technological problems, in the manner of the desire

to expand the repertory of technical means of teaching, and social obstacles, in the shape of the requirement to reestablish connections, were crucial during the outbreak phase, and their most significant influence was immediately apparent. [24] revealed that the pandemic increased awareness of the obstacles everyone may face when rapidly changing to online learning exclusively, notably in some countries with low resources, poor Internet connectivity, and lousy home learning environments. [25] claimed that Covid -19's impact on higher learning institutions cannot be overstated. They discussed the issues concerning higher education, including poor internet access and a nonconductive residential learning environment. Aside from internet connections, gadgets' availability is the students' primary problem. Likewise, it enabled the identification of the issues experienced by higher education within that overall transition towards distance education as a global pandemic: the requirement to acclimate students and instructors to work remotely, drop the education quality; a shift in the role of the instructor in the process of learning; and a digital divide between the young and old generations of teachers [26]. Dayagbil et al. [27] added that during school lockdowns, it was discovered that teachers modified their teaching and learning strategies following the institution's policies. Specifically, learners can master educational content using current information and communication technology. Most of the respondents agreed that there is learning synchronously or online. However, one of the respondents also claimed that online learning is just compliance to finish the number of hours.

Coping Mechanism of the University in Surpassing the Pandemic

To cope with the pandemic, the actions made by school leaders are very significant in the education system. There is always a loophole, but the important thing is the continuation to learn, restructure, and correct errors and omissions. The emerging themes were the conduct of webinars, training, and workshops, the availability of a continuous learning plan, the support system from the University, and the things that need to improve for the next academic years.

Webinars, pieces of training, and Workshop

The University is resilient (SL1). They conducted a series of training and webinars for the teachers. SL4 added that "...they gave a seminar on how the learning modality will be used, how to upgrade our syllabus, then our course guide, and then how we can give grades to students". The University conducted the SWOT analysis.

Learning Continuity Plan

The SL2 is excited to share that the University already has the framework when the pandemic outbreak happens. She stated, "...we immediately have a framework in which you have no basis, as we said for as to have or to formulate effective framework, you must have a basis". She added that everyone must remember that this is the first time they have experienced covid.

So, they could immediately formulate a framework so that it was disseminated adequately to all, and they are compliant with that framework, which guides them. In addition, The University's learning continuity plan is a big help, particularly in the grading system that has been given where is the student consideration (SL3). He also stated that the "...learning continuity plan is very beautiful, very appreciative". Nonetheless, SL6 corresponded to SL3 that the University is very compliant and has a complete operation manual.

Support System from the University

The University provided the regular faculty amount of PhP 500.00 monthly to add to the internet fee bills, as the respondents mentioned. SL1 articulated that "...they give us something like an Internet fee, different technology webinars, Self-paced Learning Module (SLM) template". SL4 agreed that they gave them some allowance for the internet fee. Likewise, SL5 stated that "...the university's project is excellent, their giving aid to our teachers, the president's initiative to turn our bus into a laboratory because our students used it, CD's initiative to send back our displaced students because the pandemic reached here them in Sta, Cruz". These support systems from the higher officials are very evident in the shared experiences of the respondents.

Globally adopted closings of school or alternative learning modalities, home quarantine, and social distancing generate abrupt anxiety for all stakeholders. During quarantine, these strategies include collecting information, taking preventative actions, and utilizing other coping methods to combat anxiety [28]. The respondents claimed that in the hardships of the time, the institution is very resilient, particularly in complying with requirements. Despite the exhaustion and anxiety, the administration's policies and principles should guide and support the institutions' adaptation to distance learning: technology access for students, regular observation and feedback, and providing the highest-quality curriculum and instruction [29]. With this, faculty may gain from implementing various coping strategies and practices for the new standard of education after reading this material. In addition, institutions are asked to strengthen curriculum practices, organize webinars and video conferences on mental well-being, and develop educational policies to boost colleges' and universities' administration and curriculum systems [30]. There is very evident in the respondents that the institution provides a series of training and workshops addressing the needs of the pandemic in concerns of instructions. They provide a learning continuity plan, the basis of actions to be implemented in school. Teachers consider the data valuable for implementing appropriate approaches to improve the observed difficulties, especially in its most crucial aspects [24].

4. CONCLUSION

The researcher analyzed the collected data based on the participant's responses to the questions. It examined the obstacles faced by school leaders and their coping strategies to overcome the pandemic. The results revealed that deans and associate deans face several challenges during a pandemic. In light of the responses of the deans and associate deans as school leaders, the immediate availability of the evaluation tool, technology, their relationships with coworkers, the implementation of the University's learning continuity plan, the implementation of the course in their respective classes, and the systematic implementation of procedures are challenges experienced by them.

Moreover, school leaders have complications by the lack of an appropriate evaluation method to evaluate their faculty and course materials during synchronous and asynchronous classes. They feel that the evaluation tool must be changed as quickly as possible in order to evaluate the performance of everyone, especially their students and teachers. They have shifted from face-to-face to online learning, and technology's importance is recognized in the educational system. With this, the availability and accessibility of technology such as computers, laptops, and even smartphones posed the most significant challenges. Meanwhile, due to the pandemic, they could not interact

and form bonds with one another, which impacted their relationships. When there is no plan for learning continuity yet, everyone is uncertain how the curriculum will be implemented when they are not allowed to leave their houses. Moreover, when the learning continuity plan is available, as noted by the respondents, there is also a difficulty with the timing of the University's implementation, a problem encountered by one of the school leaders, and the implementation procedure across all manuals.

Conversely, to cope with the education system, the steps taken by school leaders to combat the pandemic are crucial. Emerging themes included the delivery of webinars, training, and workshops, the availability of a plan for continuous learning, the University's support system, and the things that must be improved for the upcoming academic years. The school leaders' challenges and coping mechanisms are evident in the existing studies and literature, as mentioned and discussed before. There will always be a loophole, but what is crucial is continuing to learn, restructure, and remedy mistakes and omissions.

Based on the shared experiences in challenges and coping mechanisms, the following are at this moment recommended; Universities and Colleges with a comparable learning environment should use the results of this research to design and improve their learning continuity plans to limit the pandemic's adverse effects, the dissemination of the manuals must be adequately disseminated to all stakeholders, conduct curriculum enhancements for those program needed to review and follow the procedures given by the administration.

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