

A Metamorphic Experience of Students-at-Risk-of-Dropping-Out in the Printed Modular Distance Learning in Time of COVID-19 Pandemic



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ABSTRACT. Inevitable educational challenges were brought by the COVID-19 pandemic affecting one of the most vulnerable groups, the Students-at-Risk-of-Dropping-Out (SARDOs). Public Senior High Schools provided printed self-learning modules (PSLMs) delivered to and collected from the students, including SARDOs as part of the Philippines' printed modular distance learning (PMDL). This research inquiry in the realm of social science grew out of context faced by the working SARDOs in the COVID-19 ravaged era of PMDL. This phenomenological study had examined, explored, and heard the silent voices and lived experiences of working SARDOs in their quest for learning. This study had utilized Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. Participants were chosen using criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling technique. They were eight (8) Grade 12 identified SARDOs based on the Family, individual, community, and school (FICS) Analysis. The data were collected through unstructured in-depth interviews. The iterative process was followed until a saturation point was reached. The gathered data were analyzed utilizing Moustakas (1994), Modified Stevick (1971)-Colaizzi (1973)-Keen's (1975) method. The study revealed that SARDOs were hurdling difficulties at the beginning of PMDL, including health and psychological issues and the digital

divide. These difficulties led to adapting to the newness, including tapping resources for learning, prioritizing, and compromising. Achieving expected and unexpected outcomes were reached, including the attainment of skills and competencies and the gap in the learning acquisition. Realizing new perspectives was the resolution of the transformational journey of SARDOs, which includes the power of grit, perseverance, tenacity, and critical hopefulness. The lived experiences of these SARDOs in the PMDL in the middle of the pandemic is not just an obstacle course on its own but instead an arduous metamorphic experience that metamorphosed them into resilient and solution-driven learners that aimed higher to reach their academic goals.

1.0. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had created one of the largest disruptions of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries and all continents (The Economic Times News, 2020). The closure of schools had severely impacted education norms globally (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). The education disruption owing to the pandemic has had and will continue to have significant impacts on students' dropping out beyond education (Department of Education [DepEd], 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNICEF], 2020). Boyacı (2019) had found out that when adolescents are forced to take on adult responsibilities or have to take a job to help out their family, it decreases their likelihood of staying in school until graduation, significantly increases the likelihood of a Students-At-Risk-of-Dropping-Out (SARDOs).

In the Asian and ASEAN countries, the advent and drastic change brought by the COVID-19 pandemic led to inevitable challenges to the global academic community (Huang et al., 2020). In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) provided links through the Learning Resource Management and Development Services (LRMDS) in which schools can access and download the modules for massive printing giving the students prescribed a number of modules to be accomplished at home to present equal access to learning because of the standard implementation of printed modular distance learning delivery of education (Talimodao & Madrigal, 2021).

Through the Schools Division of Negros Occidental, the DepEd Regional Offices had monitored



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the status and situations of the working SARDOs. Currently, there have been few phenomenological studies about the lived experiences of working SARDOs in the printed modular distance learning (PMDL) of public schools. This study had unraveled the plight of SARDOs utilizing Stevick's (1971)-Colaizzi's (1973)-Keen's (1975) Method amid the pandemic.

This research inquiry grew out of context being faced by the working SARDOs in the onslaught of the pandemic. The researcher unraveled the journey of SARDOs and their experiences in this pandemic and how they coped and surpassed this pressing situation, especially in their struggle to achieve education while working at the same time.

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of SARDOs in a public senior high school in their quest for learning amidst the situation and opportunities to the educational system brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a Husserlian descriptive phenomenological research design based on Edmund Husserl utilizing the modified Stevick (1971)-Colaizzi (1973)-Keen (1975) method, popularized by Moustakas (1994). The participants of this research inquiry were eight (8) Grade 12 students in printed modular distance learning (PMDL) of a public senior high school in a municipality in Negros Occidental. They were determined using a purposive sampling method with the inclusion criteria to identify the appropriate participants of the study. The inclusion criteria included identified SARDOs based on the Family, Individual, Community, and School (FICS) Analysis data of the school, ages 18-21, and working students with varied nature of work. With the approval of the gatekeepers, the orientation of the participants was then administered, focusing on the background, objective, procedure, potential risks, and benefits of the study. Furthermore, the informed consent was secured from the participants after all concerns had been cleared and understood.

The data were gathered through an unstructured in-depth interview adhering to all the minimum health and safety measures. The interview was conducted individually to substantiate the experiences of the participants. To ensure confidentiality, the pseudonyms of the eight (8) were Leo, Benjie, Emily, Rosie, Jelo, Sabrina, Jennifer, and Brock. There was only one overarching question to start the unstructured interview process. From the participant's answers, non-directional probing questions were served as a guide to ensure the consistency of the content and substance of the interview (Petalla & Doromal, 2021).

The modified Stevick (1971)-Colaizzi (1973)-Keen (1975) method popularized by Moustakas (1994) was used for data analysis. It was relevant to the sample criteria following the phenomenological reduction. The phenomenological reduction included 1) bracketing, 2) horizontalizing, 3) organizing invariant qualities and themes, and 4) constructing textual descriptions and the textural description or description of the text was examined from varying significant perspectives that were called imaginative variation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The textural-structural description was generated from each participant by repeating the above steps, and the textural descriptions were integrated into a universal description of group experience (Yildirim & Şimşek, 2011).

3.0. Results

The metamorphic experiences of the SARDOs led them to transform into learners who persevered amidst the hardships and blockage along the road of learning were thematically described into four (4) themes: and eight (8) sub-themes as follows:

Hurdling of difficulties. The beginning of PMDL was noted with the hurdling of difficulties of the SARDOs. These difficulties of the SARDOs at the start of the PMDL modality include health and psychological issues and the digital divide.

Health and psychological issues. These issues include stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by the SARDOs. The SARDOs hurdled the hardships of the PMDL modality, and to its extent, their health was at stake. Participants tackled PMDL's impact on mental health as stated in their narratives.

When modules PMDL modality started, and I didn't have any interactions with my classmates, including my teachers and school, I am stressed at home, especially if I could not grasp the lesson, it made me overthink if I will continue with these same modules modality or stop getting

new modules because it has a huge impact on my mental health. I do not have anyone to share my problems. I do not have anyone to help me on the spot. I need to wait for my classmates' and teachers' responses to properly grasp the idea about the lessons for that week [teary-eyed] (Leo line 114-120).

I am experiencing anxiety; I am worried and nervous of what will be the outcome of my grades and the impact it has on my parents [teary-eyed] (Benjie lines 120-121).

Digital divide. The digital divide that included technology glitches in the internet connection and gadgets was also the difficulty that needs to be hurdled by the SARDOs. As attested by one of the participants:

Modules are difficult because I cannot, because of ... [pause, thinking]. If there is no internet connection, I cannot answer the printed modules (Benjie lines 142-143).

I strived to have a cellphone for my usage in this modality to communicate to my teachers and classmates if there are things to answer, things to answer in the modules, and to ask my teacher (Jelo lines 15-16).

Adjusting to the newness. The journey of SARDOs in the PMDL led them to adjust to the newness of the new normal learning modality. These adjustments and adaptations of the SARDOs include tapping of resources for learning, prioritizing, and compromising.

Tapping of resources for learning. This is evident in the experiences of students in the PMDL modality. These social resources of the students include asking for help from classmates, siblings, and subject teachers.

Not all learning tasks in the module are... [short pause, thinking] individual. We have groups, especially in Research, and we teamed up. Even though the activity is an individual activity, there will always be the time that I will ask questions to my classmates that are more knowledgeable about the topic and were able to finish that set of printed self-learning modules (Leo lines 130-133).

I ask my teachers (long pause, thinking) about lacking messages in the printed self-learning modules and how to answer them (Benjie lines 42, 46).

I ask my older siblings if they are knowledgeable of the content of PMDL [smiling] (Rosie lines 216-217).

Prioritizing and compromising. SARDOs learned to allot proper time management to prioritize and compromise for PMDL amidst their hectic personal and work schedules. This is a coping mechanism that they need to learn if they want to graduate and have good passing grades, as stated by one of the narratives:

In my line of work, early in the morning, I will work on my job. After that, I will rest for 30 minutes before I go home. At home, I will gradually answer my modules... Through this, I believe I can balance my time (short pause, thinking) and health without getting sick. In this way, I can still do my work and answer my printed modules [smiling] (Jelo lines 220-225).

Achieving expected and unexpected outcomes. The climax of PMDL was gradually reached, and it spans achieving expected and unexpected outcomes. Expected outcomes that include attainment of skills and competencies for the students have already aspired. However, amidst the preparations and quality assurance, there will always be inconsistencies that will result in unexpected outcomes that include a gap in the learning acquisition.

Attainment of skills and competencies. The SARDOs attained this in the PMDL modality. The need for skills in manipulating and utilizing communications and technology was needed in the education 4.0 era of our age's industrial and educational revolution. They learned to use emails, social media (ex. Facebook, messengers, etc.) for communications, technology through search engines,

Google, entertainment YouTube, and modern gadgets for them to be at par with the requirements of submitting their written works, outputs, quizzes, and other performance and learning tasks.

I learned skills that focus on technology, trained myself to use online platforms for soft copies, and use Microsoft word, downloading that requires online platforms and technology. If I have queries about my subjects, I search google, YouTube, and other services online that provide information about the content of modules. I've enhanced my computer skills in managing and manipulating technology [serious facial expression with relaxed voice] (Brock lines 170-172, 181-184).

Gap in the learning acquisition. This was experienced at the climax of the PMDL modality. The SARDOs experienced unsubstantial and insufficient content of the PSLMs. They were all certain about the perceived insufficiency of learning that they had experienced, as stated by their narratives:

Difficulty in the lessons because the selected modules have an insufficient idea. (short pause, thinking) Sometimes, I would chat with my teachers about the modules' content, whether it was right. Whether I need to comprehend this content of the modules because sometimes it seems there is no relevance in our class, and I need clarification from my teachers. Sometimes, the modules are just thin in their content (Leo lines 96-100).

It is really far compared to normal. The gap is so great in the PMDL ... (short pause). When the situation was still normal, I can easily go to a person and ask for help with my assignments, projects, or activities, but today it is very hard, why? It is (short pause, thinking). It is strict. There is a possibility that the person I am talking to has the virus, and there is a possibility that I will be victimized by the virus (Jennifer lines 359-362).

Realizing New Perspectives. The new modality led them to realize new perspectives in learning that will signal the dawn of a new persona that is holistically prepared to venture into the new arena of learning acquisition.

Power of grit, perseverance, and tenacity. SARDOs' power of grit, perseverance, and tenacity were commendable. They learned the value of perseverance in learning. They have the grit. They have the tenacity. The never say die attitude, as stated in their narratives that states:

The first thing that comes into my mind is, am I going to drop out? (short pause and thinking) The situation is very hard. The one thing that is ingrained in me is that if I will not continue my studies, what will be my future? If I decide to stop, what will be the outcome of my life? I always have this conviction to myself that I need to study. I need to finish my SHS education (teary-eyed, shivering voice) (Jelo lines 208-211).

It was also in my mind, the thought of dropping out, but I won't. I will continue to graduate. (teary-eyed) I will persevere amidst the hardships. I will not drop out. (Forceful voice) I will just persevere in this modality (sighed). It takes the power of grit, perseverance, and tenacity. (Sabrina lines 324-326).

Critical hopefulness. At the end of the new normal trek of the SARDOs, they have this critical hopefulness for a brighter academic journey. At the end of the tunnel, there will always be the light that shines so bright that even the eyes will take difficulty staring at it, so the saying goes. These were their narratives:

I am worried, but I always put in mind that I can, I can solve this, I can handle this module, and I can learn from this modality. I hope for better things to come (Emily lines 41-44).

4.0. Discussion

Hurdling of difficulties. The beginning of PMDL genuinely brought inevitable change to the foundation of the usual delivery of education (Lee, 2020).

Health and psychological issues. Prior work has documented the role school services have in delivering mental health and other forms of health care for students (Ali et al., 2019). In a general

review, Brooks et al. (2020) looked at the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. Psychological effects of the pandemic and quarantine measures are evident among all groups of people, including fear of disease and fear of the future, especially concerning educational attainment (Choi et al., 2020). For students, especially those with mental problems, the daily school routine is psychological comfort, and when schools were closed, mental health symptoms were expected to increase (Lee, 2020).

Digital divide. Educational leaders are beginning to identify critical barriers students are facing, and one issue continues to be the digital divide (Anderson & Kumar, 2019). Across the world, seven million school-aged children live in homes without internet connectivity (Walters, 2020). Most compelling of the digital divide, perhaps, was that students reported not being able to complete coursework because of a lack of access to adequate digital resources, and this may need to be re-conceptualized and more broadly understood as an overall student engagement gap that has serious, far-reaching implications for vulnerable students or SARDOs (Lake, 2020).

Adjusting to the newness. Newness in Distance learning has often been seen as possessing an innovative delivery approach in teaching and learning practices—the key to which lies in the delivery of instruction for working learners (Thah & Latif, 2020).

Tapping of resources for learning. Adolescents' social resources and the major spheres in students' lives led to social support that includes a sense of community with mentors, parents, friends ((Tartakovsky, 2010; Pulkkinen et al., 2011). Adolescents' social resources and the major spheres in students' lives led to social support that includes a sense of community with mentors, parents, friends (Pettit et al., 2011). Sense of community has been associated with dropping out of school (Itzhaki et al., 2018). A mentor network support from an older person who offers support, guidance, and encouragement was found to be linked with vulnerable students staying in school was correlated with youth support (Panganiban & Madrigal, 2021). An emotional connection, sense of belongingness, the ability to influence, and the belief that the needs of the individual will be addressed because that student is part of the community and as defined "sense of community" plays an important role in an adolescent's development (Brooks, 2019).

Prioritizing and compromising. Students are often tasked with additional responsibilities within the family unit those educational leaders may not adequately understand both in terms of how the tasks may influence the student's learning and engagement and what the roles might mean in terms of the student's role identity system choosing what to prioritize and compromising (Marsteller, 2020).

Achieving expected and unexpected outcomes. The struggle was real for the SARDOs in the PMDL modality but gearing towards the end of the tunnel, the attainment of coveted outcomes will be enlightened once more (DepEd, 2020).

Attainment of skills and competencies. Vulnerable students or SARDOs also need to acquire communications and technology-based skills for PMDL to benefit them (Blaschke, 2012). It has highlighted that the generation of eighteen (18) years old learners and above at the end of the first decade of the 21st century was both more technically knowledgeable than any previous intake of students and that they have very high expectations of what technology can offer and how they could utilize it to access their learning (Ellis & Goodyear, 2013).

Gap in the Learning Acquisition. One study was conducted in Education with the end goal to interpret the sentiments of all stakeholders concerning the modular approach in education, and there have appeared concerns such as how education is achieved in the absence of professionals who will supervise learners while studying at home (Rasti-Behbahani, 2021). Another gap that needs to be addressed in the implementation of printed modular distance learning includes the need for a change in learning culture, including re-adjusting, re-strategizing, re-aligning with educational goals, and having independent learners prioritizing the utilization of adjustment and philosophy of the learning process in order to strengthen attainment of quality learning (Mathew & Ebeelloanya, 2016).

Realizing New Perspectives. Maintaining the learners' new perspective, particularly young Secondary Senior High School learners including SARDOs, was critical as the COVID-19 pandemic had opened an entirely new set of ravages to the learning system (Turner et al., 2020).

Power of Grit, Perseverance, and Tenacity. Students were more likely to stick with challenging tasks and assignments when they had believed that their growth mindset was determined by their

effort improving grit, perseverance, and tenacity for SARDOS (Snipes et al., 2012). Grit indulged to unravel the dimensions of self-control, resilience, perseverance, and conscientiousness, ideas that had recently been debated as the core to students' academic or learning success (Hodge et al., 2018). The best strategy to develop and strengthen grit, perseverance, and tenacity is to promote privileges for students to work and develop on long-term goals (Laursen, 2015). In the final analysis, though it may seem overwhelming to think about systems change, it will take students' grit, perseverance, and tenacity to become triumphant (Zakrzewski, 2014).

Critical Hopefulness. Critical hopefulness cultivates and understands psychological empowerment processes, so it is striking that it may be rare that people maintain a high level of hopefulness about their ability (Amir et al., 2020). Specifically, younger adults were more likely to be classified in the "critical and hopeful" cluster (Christens et al., 2013). Younger people may tend toward greater optimism despite the growing inequality, achieving critical hopefulness in earlier phases (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016). SARDOS have the realization of critical hopefulness for a brighter academic journey (Christens et al., 2018).

5.0. Conclusion

The journey of SARDOS in the PMDL modality was an inspiring transformational journey of vulnerable students empowered to develop their potential amidst the stagnation, hardships, and difficulties that they had experienced in the PMDL modality that was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst the perceived gargantuan obstacles and struggles, proper action must be taken to overcome and become triumphant in an academic journey. The printed modular distance learning served as a metamorphic experience with a transformational journey for the SARDOS from the hurdling of difficulties, adjusting to the newness, achieving expected and unexpected outcomes, and realizing new perspectives. They had metamorphosed into learners that had aimed higher to reach the wagon of the stars of their dream. From vulnerable and problematic students, they have become resilient, positive, productive, and solution-driven learners who will exhaust all positive and best ways to benefit from the transformative learning journey. Learners that had never given up amidst the insurmountable difficulties of the new normal PMDL modality. They had accepted the challenge to learn amidst the pandemic, and they were triumphant. They had exuded the never say die attitude. The trek was tough from the very start until the end, but they had the guts to do solutions and actions that they needed to utilize to surpass the trials and obstacles along the way. It was an arduous journey. They were like hikers and mountaineers that had endured the hardships of the rocky trekking of the mountains of challenges, and they were successful in reaching the peak of gratification and success. The PMDL truly was a metamorphic experience for the SARDOS.

This phenomenological study had explored the lived experience of SARDOS in the PMDL. The study involved Eight (8) Identified SARDOS who had fit the criteria and were more than willing to be involved in the study.

Future directions of the study are the following; first, this explorative study may contribute to the innovation of initial strategic interventions that will strengthen the SARDOS attainment of purposeful goals and objectives of the new normal learning modalities in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic. Second, a similar study may be conducted but may focus on SARDOS in the Online Learning Modality (OLM). Third, SARDOS in the limited face-to-face classes of the department. Through these, online learning modality and limited face-to-face classes would provide a meaningful and rare glimpse of the lived experiences of SARDOS. Fourth, a comparative study of similar purposes may bring a much unique and extra-dimensional perspective of the differences and similarities among the metamorphic experiences of SARDOS in the printed modular distance learning, online learning modality, and limited face-to-face classes.

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