

Strategic Educational Leadership Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In the future years, it is expected that the educational system will continue to evolve in terms of methods, approaches, strategies, and policies. Consequently, there is a strong need for school leaders to develop innovative and globally competitive plans to overcome the limitations and challenges in transitioning to the new normal. This qualitative descriptive phenomenological research explores the strategic plan aligned with the basic education learning continuity plan (be-lcp) implemented by school leaders in the philippines. A total of five (5) private school principals were purposefully selected. Varied forms of qualitative data such as online individual interviews and primary source documents were analyzed using a triangulation method. Analysis of the data generated a noteworthy strategic management model called the 4-m model. Ultimately, strategic educational leadership is the driving force that would foster relevant changes through commitment and determination for educational success.

Keywords: strategic management, educational leadership, learning continuity plan, covid-19

The education system is in the process of drastically adapting and evolving as we face the detrimental effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic. We embrace the demands of a new paradigm of instruction as we shift from traditional learning where face-to-face instruction is implemented to an online learning modality where the widespread use of Internet-based applications, mobile technologies, as well as various multimedia tools and platforms cater the needs of digital learners. Online platforms include Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous classes (Gangahagedara et al., 2021; Mravik et al., 2021), Kahoot! and Nearpod, which allow instructors to create engaging

presentations with images, videos, and interactive activities that would lead to the improvement of the instructive-educational process (Shehata et al., 2020; Toma et al., 2021), and Google Docs, Google Sheets, and Google Forms as tools to design, deliver, and grade online exams (Huynh & Khatiwada, 2021). It is evident that emerging technology and online learning platforms are essential to the success of teaching and learning in the 21st century that would improve or possibly replace outdated contents and methods used in the traditional teaching and learning process (Cahapay & Anoba, 2021; Cuaton, 2020; Onyema, 2019). It is anticipated that the educational system will continue to change in terms of the methods, approaches, strategies, and policies for education in the coming years (Pachauri, 2021). Accordingly, there is a strong need for school leaders to develop innovative and globally competitive strategies to overcome the limitations and challenges in transitioning to the new normal.

In a study conducted by Huynh and Khatiwada (2021), it was emphasized that the abrupt transition to online teaching has brought many challenges to educational institutions. It is noteworthy to magnify the obstacles that instructors encounter in their online teaching and come up with the best practice to deliver high-quality online teaching. The fundamental changes that have occurred in the education system require concrete actions in order to increase the adaptive capacity of the educational system. Consequently, strategic leadership is a core component also of leading effectively in the era of Covid-19 pandemic. This entails that both leaders and followers have to work collaboratively to share the responsibility of finding imperfect solutions, while recognizing that it may take a long time, with some process of trial and error, to find best solutions (Ibeawuchi et al., 2021). This validates how vital it is for leaders to be competent in the field so that they can effectively build a culture of trust, empowerment, and respect as an integral part of strategic leadership. It is the duty of school heads as educational leaders to prepare and provide a clear instruction that consolidates all efforts (Lemoine & Richardson, 2020; McLaughlin & Ricevuto, 2021). Thus, school leaders are responsible for the future course of action and direction to which an educational institution is going. This is aligned with the study conducted by Yokus (2022) where it was emphasized that educational leaders in times of new normal should develop a leadership model that underlie empowerment, involvement, and collaboration. It was further revealed in the study that analytical and strategic thinking is still

important for educational leadership for the new normal as educational leadership generally requires making data-driven decisions and risk-planning of the instructional and organizational process.

The provision of substantial evidence of strategic planning made by school leaders in addressing the global pandemic as they make informed decisions and recalibrate their program is called for. Educational institutions must have contingency and disaster plans that prepare them for any emergency that may arise and affect the continuity of the educational process. This is supported by the recommendation of Nadiah & Cabauatan (2021) in their recent study where they emphasized the need to conceptualize and come up with a coherent and responsive action plan to address the limitations and challenges of online learning. This is aligned with the study of Bondar et al. (2021) where he stressed the advantages of demonstrating effective planning and strategizing to address and mitigate risks associated with emergencies, including the global pandemic. It is therefore imperative to devise a strategic plan and distinguish online learning as a fundamental component in this plan because it has proven its vital role in saving the educational process amidst the global pandemic (Aladsani, 2021; Onohwakpor, 2023).

In light of the Covid-19 crisis, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) during the COVID19 through DepEd Order No. 12, series of 2020. The BE-LCP has been designed with a legal framework responsive to the new normal, keeping in mind the constitutional mandate to ensure educational continuity amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of basic education. It highlights the design of a learning delivery strategy and operational direction that ensures the health, safety, and well-being of all learners, teachers, and stakeholders. It ensures the learning continuity through K-12 curriculum adjustments, alignment of learning materials, deployment of multiple learning delivery modalities, provision of corresponding training for teachers and school leaders, and proper orientation of parents or guardians of learners. Afterwards, part of the legal framework is to monitor and evaluate the learning continuity plan (DepEd, 2020). This is supported by the study conducted by Abril and Callo (2021) where their findings and conclusions stressed the need to follow-up or conduct a study that would focus on school leaders devising a scheme for monitoring quality assurance to satisfy standard needs and requirements and ensure monitoring and evaluation for continued success and quality on implementing the Learning Continuity Plan (LCP).

There is a limited number of studies focusing on the Philippines as a case study to consider planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating educational policies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). Moreover, it is significant to note that most of the published studies so far in the Philippine context focused on virtual learning and planning in higher education contexts (Asio, et al., 2021; Moralista & Oducado, 2020; Nadiah & Cabauatan, 2021; Pawilen, 2021; Toquero, 2020). Hence, this study aims to explore the strategic plan aligned with the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) implemented by educational leaders such as school principals in the Philippines and answer the research question: How was the BE-LCP planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated in educational institutions?

METHOD

Research Design

The methodological framework of this study was qualitative in nature and followed a descriptive phenomenological approach. It focused on the description of participants' experiences and described, not just explained, the participants' lived experiences. Qualitative strategies, such as online interview and primary source collection, were used to gather rich descriptive data of lived experiences of the participants and their direct actions associated with experiences to enhance understanding of the particular situation of the study inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

Population and Locale of the Study

The participants of the study were five (5) principals of Maranatha Christian Academy (MCA) branches in Luzon, Philippines, respectively. MCA is a private, non-stock, nonsectarian Christian school that adopted distance education or remote learning as its alternative learning delivery system for school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Purposive sampling was conducted for this study. The inclusion sample selection criteria set includes being a school head with first-hand experience in the course of action and responsibility pertaining to planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) of a private educational institution offering Basic Education Programs in the Philippines. In a phenomenological research tradition, the size of the participants can be between 2 and 25 as long as the overall perceptions among the participants' lived experiences were described (Alase, 2017).

Materials and Instrumentation

In this study, varied forms of qualitative data such as online individual interviews and primary source documents were analyzed. Interview questions were open-ended and general to understand the strategic framework in terms of planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the LCP facilitated by the participants in this study. Open-ended questions and conversational inquiry allowed research participants to talk about the topic in their own words, free of the constraints imposed by fixed-response questions that are generally seen in quantitative studies (Guest

et al., 2013). Moreover, the participants were asked to provide documents like photos and videos that supported the data that they provided.

Data Gathering and Procedure

The procedure for implementing the data collection was carried out after an online consent form was obtained from the participants. Data collection in this study was carried out through in-depth online individual interviews and primary source documents. Individual interviews were conducted in a duration of 45 to 60 minutes via Zoom, a cloud-based video communications app that allows virtual video and audio conferencing. At the start of the interview, the participants were reminded that the interview will be recorded and participation in the study will be voluntary and that the participants could withdraw anytime without any consequences. The interview duration was approximately sixty to ninety minutes per interview session. Afterwards, the participants were asked to send documentations such as photos and videos via email as supporting data for cross reference. It is important to note that some of the participants who were not able to join Zoom meetings opted to answer the interview questions via Google forms due to time constraints and tight schedule. A declaration of consent was accomplished before the participants gained access to the interview guide.

Treatment of Data

In an effort to attain a comprehensive understanding of the strategic leadership framework of school heads in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the qualitative data was analyzed following a three-step procedure. The first step involved knowing the data. The second step involved bringing the data into focus. The third step involved categorizing the data into themes. After themes were developed, patterns were identified from the themes in order to establish a smaller number of categories (Palaologou, Needham & Male, 2016). To establish reliability, the researchers used triangulation of data sources for comparison (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Specifically, data source triangulation was selected since it involves the collection of data using the same method but from different sources. In qualitative research, where two or more data sets are used for corroboration, the study gains impact (Farquhar & Michels, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were applied in the whole process of this study. Participants were asked to accomplish an online consent form prior to partaking in this study. It was emphasized that participation in this research was voluntary. Moreover, the participants were assured that their identity will be concealed and respected to maintain privacy with regards to gathering and storing of data. All collective knowledge and data that were disclosed throughout the study were kept with utmost confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the qualitative analysis of this study, four main themes were revealed: Magnify, Modify, Monitor, and Measure. Hence, these will be referred to as the 4 – M Model (See Figure 1), a noteworthy strategic management model emerged to describe the strategic educational leadership carried out by private school principals in the Philippines.



Figure 1. The 4-M Model

Magnify

Significant shifts and advances have to be made in the education sector. Transitioning from a traditional face-to-face to an online learning modality is widespread. The demand for remote learning requires an inevitable need to magnify what needs to be done so that it can be addressed accordingly. This is part of the school's effort to plan the best possible option for their stakeholders.

Principal 1: *"A survey form was disseminated online to parents and students. Based on the results of the survey, we were able to see the bigger picture in terms of the educational demand caused by the pandemic. The school considered hybrid delivery modality, employing two major learning tools: the online learning platform and modular-based mode of delivery."*

Prior to the official start of classes, all stakeholders were consulted to determine their readiness and needs. It was emphasized that Hybrid Delivery Modality in the form of online learning platform and modular-based mode of delivery is a sought-after option among private schools. This allows teachers to facilitate learning in a distance learning delivery through modular and online platforms. This is possible through extended essential support of administrators and other support staff to provide all resources available so that teachers can make lessons ready for use by students to facilitate self-paced learning with the help and guidance of their parents. It is becoming clearer that preparation can give significant benefits. It will have a substantial impact on how institutions can strategically prepare, and plan ahead and truly assess the situation, taking into consideration the long-term repercussions of the challenges and limitations of online classes.

Strategic planning in education provides an effective and balanced distribution of educational resources by analyzing the network of relations between the school and its environment, determining the goals, and making action plans to achieve these goals.

Modify

Private schools are restructuring their system of education in an evolving environment. The current situation of the pandemic posed challenges that include policies on the redesigning of lessons and assessments, the limitations on technological resources, and the effects of other anticipated factors. Living in the digital age in the era of a global crisis paves way to the importance of innovation in the field of education. We take it as a chance to revise and modify the conventional way of content and delivery and transform it to a global standard that would cater to the new era of learners. The commitment to provide quality assurance with respect to a massive overhaul of the educational setting is viewed as shifting to an effective online modality that caters to the need of digital learners. It is the role of school leaders to guide the school community and facilitate necessary changes that will take place encompassing the school's vision-mission, curricular goals, and objectives among other equally important considerations that have been set.

Principal 3: *"We are redesigning our program and restructuring it based on the demand of the new normal. The school had set up an online centralized system to be used during online classes. We also assembled two departments in charge of improving and creating useful educational contents in our Online Learning Zone as the Learning*

Management System for delivery of education online. These are the Information Technology Support Services (ITSS) department and the Multimedia Educational Resources Innovation Team (MERIT)."

Furthermore, there is an increasing inevitable demand for training and development among school heads, faculty, and staff. There is a necessity for adaptive learning and teaching environments, digital learning innovations, and pedagogically sound teaching and learning designs that will only be made possible through transforming these challenges to opportunities by means of collaborating and accommodating practical training. All members of an educational institution must be synergistically involved in improving teaching strategies, policies, and delivering lessons through different modalities.

Principal 2: *"We have continuous training programs for teachers and school heads to boost professional development and cope with the new modalities. Aside from the technical know-how, we also have programs for psychosocial support and mental well-being. The guiding principle for these trainings is the sustained process of improving first the internal structure of the institution so that necessary modifications and improvements will be made in preparation for a successful implementation."*

Fundamental training and development programs are continually being addressed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital proficiency and psychological and emotional self-regulation of teachers are put into the spotlight. This should serve as the foundation for further rearrangement of the educational process in educational institutions, demonstrating that the readiness of the internal workforce is significantly modified to cater the demands of the new normal. With that said, training and development to enhance an educator's competency is significant to continuously provide quality education to learners. Although it is important to note that there are relative points of similarity and differences on how educational strategies and policies are being implemented in varied private schools, it only goes to show that educational experts and education policymakers are called to re-evaluate the readiness of existing education infrastructures and be open to change.

Monitor

Monitoring is an important aspect of quality assurance which allows an institution to keep track of what is going on. All policies, measures, planned processes, and actions used to maintain and improve educational quality are included in quality assurance in education. When an institution develops an active effort to closely monitor its strategic plan, it establishes commitment to continuing progress. As part of the mechanism of adapting to the new normal, it is considerable to establish a committee composed of qualified and competent members to provide technical direction for planning and implementation as well as assuring stakeholders will have access to the relevant learning resources and information for each of the school's Alternative Delivery Modalities.

Principal 5: *"An Alternative Distance Modality Committee (ADMC) was created to plan and identify resources and essential elements for implementation of the learning modalities. They also make sure that appropriate learning resources offered and facilitated by the school are well disseminated, understood, accessed and made available to parents and students and that the necessary technologies are engaged and made available in a timely and efficient manner. The committee keeps an eye on technical procedures, documentation, and standard policies."*

Measure

Quantifying the impact and effectiveness of an implemented program is a critical process. It sets the tone for future decision making and the direction to which an institution will be going. Strategic coordination and clear communication between the school and stakeholders in an effort to continuously improve the implemented program is highly relevant. Consequently, this will only be achieved if there is effective communication with everyone involved in the process.

Principal 4: *"Survey forms containing all the data requirements relative to the school implementation of Alternative Delivery Modality and school-based initiated interventions for continuous improvement were disseminated online to the parents, students and teachers. This serves as the data collection tool to assess the effectivity of the program."*

Collating immediate feedback on the efficacy and weaknesses of delivery implementation at the school level is relative to the school-based initiated interventions for continuous improvement. Collaboration and cooperation with the stakeholders - students, parents, teachers & staff, administration, and other support systems operationalize the continuity of learning despite difficult times. All of these are part of assessing the leadership management of school heads that would address the evolving educational needs of learners.

The efforts of strategic management by school leaders can be very grueling because of the demand to conduct elaborate planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, it requires strong leadership considering how the process of educational change has to be part and parcel of the vision mission of the school. In educational institutions where school leaders are expected to develop strategic programs to adapt to the new

normal, it is indispensable to transform and create opportunities for success. Anybody can plan, but not everybody can be strategic. Effective strategic planning in the new normal is definitely of the essence to ensure that working in an educational setting means developing proficiency in digital skills and being acquainted with digital platforms that can accommodate a new breed of learners resilient enough to adapt to online learning modalities.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic prompted an immediate transition in the way quality education is offered. Educational leaders are compelled to envisage innovative approaches as means of strategic planning. The school leader fulfills a big responsibility to ensure that modifications are feasible, well-coordinated, and on-track. This is where strategic planning becomes so crucial because it sets the tone for optimizing efficiency when it is implemented. Afterwards, there should be monitoring and evaluation so that we can decide further if our decisions will benefit the institution or would pose more threats. If so, we can either continue or revise. The developed 4-M Model encapsulates the strategic educational leadership utilized by school heads in the new normal. It is a continuous cycle that leaders must face in order to sustain the mission-vision, goals, and objectives of the institution aligned with the direction they want to go. School leaders are urged to reassess their leadership style which is best suited to fulfill the organization's mission-vision that would foster collaboration and innovation because they have a vital role to play in determining the institution's future path. Ultimately, strategic educational leadership is the driving force that would foster relevant changes through commitment and determination for success.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, it is then strongly recommended to advance the study at a larger scale of participants to generalize results at a wider perspective. Furthermore, focusing the educational strategies performed by teachers, parents, and students is deemed beneficial to corroborate initial findings. Comparison of strategic educational leadership between private and public schools can

also be considered leading to a more comprehensive perspective on how strategic leadership can be developed and improved. Even when the pandemic conditions are no longer present, it may be vital to continue with strategic educational efforts. Expanding hybrid education and strategic management models in different settings will be a significant step forward. This study can help individuals working on professional development and designing strategic management models addressing the demands of the new normal.

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