

Teachers' Perceptions, Preparations, And Challenges in the Implementation of Limited Face-To-Face Classroom Interaction in the New Normal

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Abstract: Teachers have varied perceptions in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction. Being the implementers, teachers go through series of preparations in ensuring its success while adhering to the guidelines imposed by the authorities to safeguard the health of both teachers and students. Varied teaching strategies and coping mechanisms were utilized to cater learners' needs and confront challenges. Challenges will always be part of the teaching-learning process, though teachers went on rigorous preparations in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction. However, it does not obstruct teachers' focus to cope with these challenges and to innovate strategies to help students achieve their academic success. It is revealed that teachers' flexibility, optimism, and their commitment to their profession, paired with support from the administration were of great help during the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal.

Keywords: Perceptions, Preparations, Teaching Strategies, Challenges, Limited Face-to-Face, New Normal, Classroom Interaction, Implementation

1. Introduction

The CoViD-19 pandemic has caused damage to many aspects of life and society (Dwivedi et al., 2020) that the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (WHO, 2020). This global public health catastrophe has compelled governments worldwide to reconsider their educational systems and choose the most effective delivery options for their learners (Dayagbil et al., 2021). Most countries have implemented quarantine rules to stop the spread and temporarily closed their educational institutions. Over a billion learners around the world have been affected as a result. Over 28 million Filipino students at all levels are among those who must stay at home and follow the Philippine government's quarantine restrictions (Joaquin et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Education is affected by the CoViD-19 pandemic (Tria, 2020). The nationwide closure of all educational institutions in the Philippines was one of the most significant actions to contain CoViD-19 (Santos, 2021). To safeguard students from being infected by the disease, the

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government's Department of Education has developed guidelines to implement online and modular distance learning delivery of instruction (DepEd, 2020).

Although the pandemic has driven a surge in the use of alternative learning methods, and improved learning consistency, there are still several issues in the teaching and learning process that limit learners' flexibility and development (Coman et al., 2020). Disruptions to classroom instruction can severely impact a child's ability to learn (UNICEF, 2020). The longer marginalized children stay absent from school, the lower their chances of returning. Children from low-income households are already five times more likely than those in the richest families to drop out of primary education. Being out of school raises the risk of child trafficking, online and offline sexual abuse and exploitation of minors, teen pregnancies, child marriages, violence, and other dangers (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021).

Extended school closures also jeopardize critical school-based services such as immunization, school lunch programs, psychological well-being, and psychosocial support, all of which can aggravate anxiety and stress (UNICEF, 2020; Mwiha, 2021). Students are at a significant disadvantage due to the abrupt shift in education from traditional on-campus study to remote learning, which may affect their performance (Rotas et al., 2020). Many students struggle to thrive in a remote setting where they lack direct supervision, emotional support, and access to technology (Ramirez et al., 2022). As policymakers debate when and how to reopen face-to-face classroom interaction, efforts must be made to ensure the safety of students, teachers, and school staff in a staged fashion, especially in following physical distancing (DepEd, 2020). Resources should be tailored to their specific needs. CoViD-19 will make it easier for the government to make face-to-face classes work with the government's public health standards. Schools should be approached with caution and extensive planning for eventual reopening and blended learning. There is an urgent need to put measures in place that allow schools to resume on-campus operations in a safe home and community environment (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021).

As it began piloting limited and voluntary in-person classes in low-risk areas, the United Children's Education Fund expressed support for the Philippine government in welcoming children back to school. The schools underwent rigorous preparations following the standards the Department of Education set. The assessment of the pilot implementation will provide insights and experiences on implementing face-to-face classes while adhering to the minimum safety and health protocols to prevent the transmission of CoViD-19 to learners during the conduct of classes (DepEd Memorandum, No. 085 s. 2021). In the operational framework for the resumption of face-to-face classes, the framework has adopted the four pillars, namely: (a) Safe Operations, (b) Teaching and Learning, (c) Including the Most Marginalized, and (d) Well-being and Protection where shared responsibilities from different government agencies are at hand (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021).

Moreover, the proponents looked into the perception of the teachers handling classes in the limited face-to-face. Thus, perception is elaborated so that this study's understanding further deepened. Perception encompasses the cognitive processes required for data processing. According to research, three variables influence the functioning of these continuous processes: the objects or events being experienced, the environment in which perception occurs, and the person perceiving (iEduNote, 2020). It includes all those processes by which an individual receives information about his environment—seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling (Reitz, 2017). What is perceived, however, is influenced by the perceiver, the thing,

and its surroundings. A personal, creative, and active process in which one attach meaning to sensory data to comprehend oneself and others better. Perception shapes one's understanding of the world and the ability to act in it (Howard, 2019). Teacher perceptions are the thoughts or mental images teachers have about their professional activities and their students, which are shaped by their background knowledge and life experiences, and influence their professional behavior (IGI Global, 2022). All these and more contribute to an individual's lens and how he or she views others (IRIS, 2022). The researcher believed that it is essential to acknowledge teachers' perceptions since teachers make decisions in teaching activities based on their experiences, perceptions, values, and beliefs about their roles, activities, and responsibilities in schools. Research has indicated that positive teacher attitudes and perceptions are fundamental to effective teaching. Teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes affect their practice and influence the students' performance (Cristina-Corina, & Valerica, 2012).

Teaching in a face-to-face setting differs from teaching in a digital setting in terms of affordances (Jensen et al., 2020). UNESCO's Futures of Education Commissioners believed that there is no education without human interaction, so teachers must interact with their students by whatever means possible (Iyengar, 2020). CoViD-19 has been infecting the country for more than two years, and it is just now beginning to recover from the widespread devastation it has caused. Today's challenge in the Department of Education to its' learning institutions is the introduction of limited face-to-face classroom interaction while following the government's public health guidelines and recommendations.

Nevertheless, the introduction of limited face-to-face classroom interaction may have brought many challenges and is not without risk to both learners and teachers, who indeed are the first people responsible for carrying out the transfer of learning (Montemayor, 2021). Hence, this scenario has pushed the researcher to study teachers' perceptions, preparations, and challenges in implementing the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study explored teachers' perceptions, preparations, and challenges of limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal. It also explored teaching strategies or techniques used to deliver the lessons. In addition, it also presented teachers' coping mechanisms in dealing with the challenges brought by the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

To determine teachers' perceptions, preparations, and challenges in the implementation of limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal, this study employed a qualitative research design using a single case study. This investigates and comprehends the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a social or human issue. Emerging questions and processes are part of the research process, as are data acquired in the participant's environment, data analysis that builds inductively from specifics to broad themes, and the researcher's interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2017). Triangulation of data is further emphasized; where the researcher used various sources to establish the validity of data gathered.

2.2 Research Environment and Participants

The study is conducted in one public High School in the Division of Ozamiz City, Philippines. The school was the only secondary pilot implementer of the limited face-to-face in the district and was considered as one of the low-risk areas in the city. The study is participated by ten faculty members who had classes during the implementation of the limited face-to-face classes for Junior and Senior High School.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers were the principal research instrument, assisted by an interview guide, observation, and record analysis. The interview replies of the participants were used as preliminary data, analyzed, and interpreted. The instrument focused on eliciting responses from teachers based on their direct experiences concerning the introduction of limited face-to-face classroom interaction; this was done to guide the researcher in gathering data.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Primarily, the researchers secured permission from the Division Superintendent to conduct the research. Then, the researchers informed the public school district supervisor, school principal, and head teacher about the survey objectives and methods to attain consent for research instrument distribution to the teacher-participants. Informed consents were also sent to the participants intending to inform them about the study's purpose. In the conduct of the data gathering, safety-health protocols were strictly observed. Lastly, data responses were analyzed.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed and interpreted using Creswell's (2017) approach. Field notes and other materials have been there to add understanding to the introduction of such materials to enable the preparation of reports in analyzing the data. The activities included organizing and preparing the data for analysis, where the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews from the participants. The researcher read and comprehended the full data transcriptions and other notes. The researcher then started to code and write words representing the data gathered, chunking them into bits to organize distinct categories or themes, then used these in interpreting the data gathered to make sense in answering the questions. The researcher further emphasized that since some of the responses were in vernacular, these responses were transcribed and translated into English.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Teachers' Perceptions in The Implementation of the Limited Face to Face Classroom Interaction in The New Normal

The first research question sought to uncover the teachers' perceptions in the implementation of limited face-to-face interaction in the new normal. The study results revealed that teachers have varied perceptions over the implementation of limited face-to-face, which is what is expected from them. Three themes emerged from the responses: Teacher enthusiasm, adjustment period, and health risk. Most of the teachers

were happy and excited to finally be able to meet their students. However, the concern for everyone's health is still evident.

3.1.1 Teacher Enthusiasm

From the interview conducted with the participants, it was found that teachers are excited to meet the learners personally. The participants said:

“I am excited because I have now students to talk with and discuss the lesson.” - TP1

“I am excited because we now have the learners after two years.” - TP3

“I am excited because finally we get to meet the students face-to-face.” - TP4

“I was also excited to meet new faces of learners for this school year.” - TP9

“I am more excited because I can talk to the learners. I can see their reactions - TP10

Many of the participants were more than happy to finally be able to experience teaching again in an actual classroom, seeing the familiar and new faces of learners. The participants said:

“Happy because I can now teach the learners face-to-face.” - TP2

“I am happy that the department has already agreed to open the school for a limited face-to-face class.” - TP6

With much excitement, teachers expressed their thought and being happy to finally meet the learners personally. Students too were thrilled to be part of the teachers' discussions. As the head affirmed, “We can actually see the expressions of the students and teachers as well. They were happy to be back to school and meet each other. They were able to meet their friends too, since they missed each other, that's for sure.” It is believed that teachers' emotions are necessary components of the learning process and can significantly affect students' academic progress (Becker et al., 2014). Teacher enthusiasm is the simultaneous occurrence of positive affective experiences, enjoyment of one's work as a teacher, and behavioral expressions of these experiences. Mainly non-verbal, not only motivate, inspire, and excite learners but also improve learning, learners' achievement (Keller et al., 2016), and students' emotions (Dewaele, 2021). It has been identified that one of the defining features of good teachers is teacher enthusiasm and a key indicator of instruction quality (Kunter et al., 2011).

3.1.2 Adjustment Period

Returning to teaching after years of distance learning, teachers perceived that the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction poses changes and a period to adjust to the new situation of teaching amid the pandemic. The participants responded:

“I am adjusting because for a longer time, we have this modular learning.” - TP1

“It needs adjustment for it is another battle we have to win every day. For years that we were used to having module only and not interacting with the students.” - TP2

“I am still adjusting towards the limited face-to-face. I am thinking about changes from the modular learning.” - TP4

“It was actually a moment of being unprepared of the battle considering that we only had a very short period of time to prepare everything.” - TP9

Teachers, especially the class advisers were the ones who made a lot of adjustments for they had most of the responsibilities from classroom preparation and to constantly monitoring the learners. As the head shared, “Yes, there were adjustments. Especially to the parts of the advisers. It’s like, these guidelines and other things need to be accomplished like the monitoring of learners and parents’ vaccination, attendance, preparation of health kits and all. But they also understood the process because it’s for the safety of everyone inside the school.” In response to such conditions, it involves adjustment to assessment procedures (Kalloo et al., 2020). Being the best version of oneself through adjustment means responding to social change with courage, confidence, and vigor. Every person attending school should strive to be their best for their fulfillment and the distinctive contribution that the rapidly changing society needs from them. The emphasis in education is on creativity, personal privilege, responsibility, application of the intelligence technique, ongoing evaluation of democratic principles, and use of those principles (Cooper, 1958).

3.1.3 Health Risk

Participants perceived that teaching during the pandemic poses a risk to both the teachers and the students. Teachers express concern as it may jeopardize their health and safety, especially the students. The participants revealed:

“I am worried because the students' health and our health also as teachers will be at stake knowing that CoViD-19 is still around.” - TP4

“I am also a little bit concerned and bothered with how they would want this limited face-to-face to be implemented in a way that it will not jeopardize our health and security.” - TP7

Some teachers channeled their concerns for their health and safety to the school heads pertaining to the opening of limited face-to-face classes in the presence of the pandemic “Some teachers were hesitant at first. They were hesitant to the idea of vaccination too for they were afraid of the possible effects. But they got vaccinated later. However, they were still concerned with the outcome of the limited face-to-face classes, especially when it comes to their health and for the students, as well.”

Teachers express their concern about teaching in the presence of the pandemic. Face-to-face classes during the CoViD-19 pandemic have caused teachers to experience anxiety regarding infection and education (Wakui et al., 2021). A health risk is a possibility or likelihood that something will negatively impact someone's health in some other way. Risk does not guarantee that something negative will occur. It is only

possible (Wein & Hicklin, 2016). Like most people involved in the introduction of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, students were more excited to finally be back to school and meet their classmates and teachers whom they had missed for two years. As they mentioned, although they have the thought of being at risk, attending classes and listening to the teachers' discussions is how they can comprehend the lessons well compared to them being at home. Moreover, in the context of an individual's perception, the study's theoretical framework stresses that people are not just reactive to environmental events or situations they are in. However, they are also self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating (Bandura, 1986, 2001). As persons directly involved in the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers dwell on their feelings and other internal dispositions and what courses of action they might take to what comes next.

3.2 Teachers' Preparations for the Limited Face to Face Classroom Interaction in the New Normal

Before implementing the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, the school and the teachers followed the minimum health standards set by Department of Education and Department Of Health. The themes revealed in the interview conducted concerning the teachers' preparations for the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal, classroom structuring, instructional planning, and emotional setting.

3.2.1 Classroom Structuring

Teachers must ensure their classroom is set to conduct limited face-to-face interaction. In structuring their classroom, teachers see that they are following the limited face-to-face classroom setup guidelines. The research participants narrated:

“I set up my classroom. Since it’s limited, there should only be 15 chairs, so I took out the remaining chairs and other things that are not necessary. I also put up signages on health protocols such as wearing of facemask, APAT-DAPAT, social distancing and other CoViD-19 signages.” – TP2

“Setting my classroom based on the Inter-Agency Task Force guidelines like social distancing and wearing of masks.” – TP4

“Number 1 of course, was the classroom set up because from the word limited, last time I had let's say 30 students, so I have to divide them into 2 sets of 15 in order to comply with the minimum health protocols prescribed by Department of Education and Department Of Health. Then, I see to it that chairs are distancing, then health supplies are present like masks and alcohols and all...” – TP5

“The signages; the required items that need to be in the classroom. I just made sure that there are signages, the chairs are properly distanced and clean every day. So, every time they enter and exit the classroom, it should be cleaned. And their health kit is complete – alcohol, wet wipes, facemasks, and others.” – TP6

“I had structured my new classroom by repainting the walls, modularium, and my students’ chairs. Posting of CoViD-19 signages and beautifying my classroom were also done. Though it was so tiring to start from the very beginning, it was also fulfilling to see a newly structured classroom ready to be occupied by the learners.” – TP9

As teachers, preparation for the pilot implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, was anchored to the general guidelines as stipulated in DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021 or the Operational Guidelines on the Implementation of Limited Face-to-Face Learning Modality, pertaining to the school and classroom set up. As stated, 7.1.1.2.1. Classrooms shall be arranged to ensure safety of learners from COVID-19 transmission following the prescribed classroom layout. Physical arrangement of chairs and other furniture inside the classroom shall ensure proper physical distancing. Those seats that will be occupied shall be 1 to 2 meters apart while those which will not be occupied shall be marked with an “X”; 7.1.1.2.2. After ensuring that the required physical distance of seats in each classroom is observed, the school shall also take into consideration the required maximum number of learners per class; 7.1.1.2.2.4. Grades 7 – 10: maximum of 20 learners in a class; 7.1.1.2.2.5. Grades 11 – 12 maximum of 20 learners in a class; 7.1.1.2.5.1. All classrooms must have working electric fans, and windows and doors shall be open at all times to maximize natural airflow.

The learning environment may impact teachers' identities and instructional strategies (Keiler, 2018). Classroom structuring is based on the idea that every classroom must be appropriately set up and furnished to promote student learning. The materials used for structuring and decorating must be chosen based on their educational worth and ability to facilitate classroom discussions. The same applies to maintaining its order and cleanliness (DepEd Memo on Educational Facilities Manual 2010).

3.2.2 Instructional Planning

Teachers planning their lessons include what their students will learn and how they will learn. During the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers have to go over the Most Essential Learning Competencies, use modules and prepare instructional materials using the television, PowerPoint presentations, and worksheets. The participants revealed:

“I prepared the module, the lessons, the instructional materials, the tv, power point presentations, and more on the worksheets. I prepared individual activity sheets.” – TP3

“I also give them supplemental materials to help them in learning and at the same time, I make use of the digital technologies particularly Facebook. I send video lessons through our group chat, and some important reminders and guides as well.” – TP5

“I have to go over with the Most Essential Learning Competencies, so I have to prepare the lesson plan for that. I usually prepare for long-term like good for 3 weeks of lesson plan. I prepared my presentations in advance. I prepared activities to make them feel at ease like... getting to know, or self-introduction, because they still do not know each other. My goal that time was a welcoming atmosphere following the protocol prohibiting the group activities.” – TP6

In ensuring the teaching and learning delivery, the teachers were expected to plan and conduct lessons in accordance with DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021: 7.2.2.2. The primary learning resource that shall be used for face-to-face learning are textbooks. These may be supplemented with readily available self-learning modules (SLMs) and learning activity sheets. Teacher-made learning materials may also be used to help deepen learners' understanding of the lesson. 7.2.2.3. It shall be ensured that all teachers have the Teacher's Guide on specific grade level/s and learning area/s that they are handling. Likewise, teachers shall develop activity-based materials for mastery of learning delivered during face-to-face classes. Also, the use of assessment rubrics shall be encouraged as a form of ongoing assessment to monitor learning progress and evaluate effectiveness of instruction. 7.2.2.7. Since physical distancing shall be observed during the face-to-face sessions, teachers may allot the instructional time to: 7.2.2.7.1. Explicitly teach the "least learned/mastered" content and performance standards. 7.2.2.7.2. Conduct authentic classroom assessment of learning 7.2.2.7.3. Review the previous lessons. 7.2.2.7.4. Provide remediation/intervention. 7.2.2.8. Group work that requires physical interaction shall not be allowed during face-to-face classes to avoid close contact with one another.

Planning involves intricate cognitive and behavioral procedures to achieve objectives and techniques for effective, relevant instruction (VanTassel-Baska & Baska, 2021). Instructional planning ensures that teachers are appropriately prepared to achieve the educational goals of all students. Additionally, instructional planning entails working with co-workers, administrators, families, and other professionals to foster student growth and development, focusing on the students' cognitive, social, mental, and physical well-being (Stepniak, 2019).

3.2.3 Emotional Setting

The reintroduction of face-to-face classes amidst the pandemic poses fear to every teacher, not just for themselves but the students as well, thinking that they will be exposed to the virus and infection. Part of the preparations they must make is to prepare emotionally and not let fear win. The research participants replied:

"Emotional preparations. As what I have said earlier, there will be changes because we are used to the modular approach in teaching especially during the pandemic, now it would be limited face-to-face, so I am setting my emotions... I am stabilizing my emotions." – TP4

"I have to prepare myself: my mental health, emotional, and physical. I have to prepare every aspect of myself." – TP6

"I am scared of CoViD-19. So, I really prepared myself. Though I am afraid, I have to think positively to let go of fear." – TP8

The Department of Education and Department Of Health also safeguard the mental health of teachers as they also prepare themselves and their emotions in participating in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction. As stated in DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021; 7.4.4. Psychosocial Support. To provide psychological support to the learners, teachers, and personnel. 7.4.4.4. The Schools Division Office (SDO) shall set up a hotline/online platform to provide counseling

services to learners, teachers and personnel who require counseling services. In the absence of an RGC, learners, teachers and school-based personnel shall be referred to this platform for counseling services.

Emotions are considered an adverse and complex phenomenon (Hartikainen et al., 2022). Others consider emotions to be the continuous mediators between events, social situations, and a person's behaviors and experiences in their surroundings (Frenzel et al., 2021). Emotions are involved when faced with the need for change (Issah, 2018). It has been noted that emotions are essential to teachers' professional lives. Their emotions affect students, their learning, and the teachers themselves and their teaching (Wu & Chen, 2018). Teachers' emotions may arise from factors at school, the community, and a societal level (Chen, 2020). The school's administration mentioned that before the students' attendance in school for the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, they expect the teachers to be fully prepared, from their classroom setup to planning their lessons. These expectations give teachers direction for their preparation and eventually lead to attaining their goals (Bandura, 1986; LaMorte, 2022).

3.3 Teaching Strategies or Techniques Teachers Have Used to Deliver the Lesson in The Limited Face to Face Classroom Interaction

Teaching strategies are methods teachers used to deliver course material to keep students engaged and practicing different skills. In this study, it was found out that in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers still use the same teaching strategies they used to practice in the regular face-to-face classes, only they are discouraged from applying group activities to observe social distancing. The interview revealed the following themes: integrating technological teaching aids, sustaining motivated and interactive learning environment, and alleviating learners' learning gaps are still there in continuance to the mission to provide quality education.

3.3.1 Integrating Technological Teaching Aids

The use of technology in teaching is not new to the educational process. However, in this new normal teaching and learning, technology's importance has been emphasized. In the interview conducted, the participants revealed:

“I prepared more on videos about my topic.”– TP2

“I made use of visual materials such as DepEd TV learning videos since students can learn best through visuals. I considered it as a best practice because non-readers then can actually understand the lesson in history through the pictures, videos, and stories shown on TV. I prepared video clips, power point presentations and others that will help ease my teaching process.” – TP9

Everything a teacher does is for the benefit of the learners. And as learners described their experiences in the conduct of limited face-to-face classes, they stressed that their teachers made use of the smart television available inside the classroom especially in presenting PowerPoint for discussion, “Most of our teachers during the limited face-to-face discussion used television.”; “There were teachers that are using PowerPoint presentation.” Students are taught using various visual resources, including movies, screenplays, TV shows, photos, and more (Ruzimbaevich & Ruzimbaev, 2021). Teacher expertise in

utilizing technology to create and deliver engaging teaching materials is referred to as technical knowledge of integration in teaching materials. Students can learn and understand the content more rapidly if technology is used that is relevant to the instructional material's features. As a result, the effectiveness of technology use greatly impacts how well students learn. The use of video media to teach concepts and engage students in the learning process has proven successful (Malik et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Sustaining Motivated and Interactive Learning Environment

Limited number of students and the adherence to health and safety protocols against CoViD-19 did not hinder teachers from making students' learning interactive and motivated. The participants shared:

“Reporting activity for them also to share their ideas and performance-based type of activities. I include them in the teaching process. I do not do all the talking; students also must have their participation. So, I still manage to keep the class interactive without group activities.” – TP3

“Activities such as quizzes, answer sheets and I also make use of the modules before.” – TP4

“Group activities were prohibited. In fact, when I give them individual activities, and as for activities that require practicum or performances, I require them to do it at home where they can move freely and tell them to record it or send it to me directly or through our subject group chat.” – TP5

While looking into the DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, teachers utilized various activities that will foster student engagement and cooperation in adherence to ensuring the teaching and learning delivery as stipulated in the guidelines; 7.2.2.1. The school authorities shall ensure that the learning resources needed for the blended learning are sufficient. While on face-to-face set-up, teachers shall maximize the use of all available resource materials and optimize the time for learners' engagement, collaboration, and socialization while observing the health and safety protocols.

And as students shared their experiences during their face-to-face learning, they mentioned that, as they were excited to be back to school, they were eager to participate and be part of every activity the teachers gave them, “We are excited to participate in the activities, compared to answering the modules by ourselves”. This also gave them the opportunity to ask questions about certain topics that are unclear to them, “Most importantly we would be able to ask questions about some topics directly to our teachers”. It is believed that students gain knowledge by actively participating in the process of knowledge acquisition, which includes receiving information, processing it, applying it to problems, and communicating what they have learned (Brown University, 2022). Students learn content more effectively and can better use and extend their new knowledge when collaborating on learning assignments. Additionally, this method encourages learning among students with various backgrounds and learning preferences. Additionally, active learning techniques are more entertaining for both the teacher and the learners (Berkely University, nd).

3.3.3 Alleviating Learner's Learning Gaps

For two years of losing social interaction due to modular distance learning, learning gaps among learners are the concerns of most teachers handling face-to-face classes. Part of the teachers' teaching strategy is addressing these gaps. The participants said:

“I used reflective strategy, where I allow my learners to write individually their own views on what part of the lesson they liked the most, or what part of the lesson that confuses them – from here I can determine what I need to cover up.” – TP6

“One of the activities that I conducted in class are pronunciation activities. I will give them a set of words and then based on their background knowledge, they'll pronounce these words and how they know about it.” – TP7

One of the most important actions to take in the conduct of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction is to assess learners' understanding and to determine the learning gaps to be able to carry out interventions, when necessary, as stipulated in Operational Guidelines on the Implementation of Limited Face-to-Face Learning Modality, “Teacher-made learning materials may also be used to help deepen learners' understanding of the lesson” and “Teachers shall develop activity-based materials for mastery of learning delivered during face-to-face classes.” (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, p. 17). Teachers are working hard to ensure that every learner masters the essential learning competencies (MELCs) in the new educational system as education officials look for ways to support their people. To make their teaching-learning engagement as relevant and fruitful as in past years, teachers are working to address the learning gaps of their students. To successfully master the competencies outlined in the program, any gaps should be addressed as quickly as possible (Torres, 2021). Finding out exactly where and what those gaps are, and which learners struggle with them is the first step in addressing the learning gap.

One of the emphases of Social Cognitive Theory is reinforcement and behavioral capability (Bandura, 1986). Teachers use varied teaching strategies to reinforce learning among the students and help strengthen their understanding to attain academic achievement by teaching them what to do and how to do it. When interviewed, learners said that teachers' strategies during their limited face-to-face classroom interaction help them understand the lessons that are difficult for them to comprehend. They also enjoyed the activities teachers gave inside the classroom compared to only reading their modules at home without their teachers facilitating them.

3.4 The Challenges Teachers Have Faced in The Implementation of the Safety Health Protocols and Delivery of the Lesson in The Limited Face-To-Face Classroom Interaction in The New Normal

It is recognized that providing in-person education in the context of the CoViD-19 pandemic poses numerous challenges and risks (DepEd and DOH Joint Memorandum No. 01; s. 2021). Despite the thorough preparations that the school and the teachers have made, challenges are still undeniable, specifically in implementing the safety health protocols and delivering the lesson. With these, five themes come into view: Learning gaps, limited time to accommodate learning, lack of student engagement, and financial constraints.

3.4.1 Learning Gaps

As the limited face-to-face classroom interaction commenced, teachers identified relevant gaps that needed to be addressed. Some of these gaps are mentioned by the teachers during the interview. The participants said:

“There were other students who can’t read, and others lack participation.” – TP2

“The level of thinking... the level of comprehension regarding the students. There is quite a difference before the pandemic. Students now, they need to be... Constantly backing-up information in order for them to understand the topic properly. Their level of comprehension is a little bit frustrating.” – TP4

“The learning gap brought by the modular learning modality is really a challenge for us teachers. There are even non-readers, and they are the biggest challenge.” – TP9

A significant challenge for teachers and students alike is how to successfully address the identified learning gaps during this pandemic period as we embrace the various distance learning modalities (Torres, 2021). Learning gaps are typically what separates what students should have learned by a particular grade compared to what they have already learned. These Learning gaps frequently increase, thus if there are not addressed right away, students may lose ground more and more behind due to the abilities and they lack knowledge that they do (Full Spectrum Education, 2019). Learning gaps occurred when students failed to pick up a skill and went on to a new lesson without doing any remediation. Due to the classes' progression from simple to complicated competencies, any basic skills that have not been acquired will hinder learners to master higher level competencies as well a gap between what is considered typical mastery level and what is in store for them in their upcoming classes (Torres, 2021).

3.4.2 Limited Time to Accommodate Learning

In the research setting, students were divided into two groups in the observance of social distancing. Teachers claim that time is not enough for learners to master a skill or content. They shared:

“The challenge I also feel was the split classes. The time is not enough for 2 groups.” – TP1

“Time is not enough to teach students especially the non-readers.” – TP2

“Because you want to make sure that your students learn from your class but then you are crippled by the fact that you cannot just do anything you want to do with them. That's the most challenging part actually, there's a lot of things you want to do in class but you cannot do all of them because you cannot jeopardize their safety.” – TP7

“The slow pacing of lesson is actually a challenge considering that there are many essential competencies to be covered within a quarter.” – TP9

In accordance with DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, “The number of classes in each school shall be organized in such a way that each class will be able to attend face-to-face classes every other week.”; “All face-to-face classes shall be conducted half-day, preferably in the morning where learners are said to learn best.” (p. 16). The school administration sees to it that the guidelines were strictly followed. However, as per experienced by some students, during their interview, as much as they want to stay at home, but when it comes to learning, they want to maximize their time learning at school in order to finish the discussion of topics. One of the greatest hurdles to any change process is time (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2001). Increasing instructional time in schools can greatly help students achieve better for both individual learners and the entire student body as a whole, with a focus on populations of pupils that are at risk. However, if the time provided for instruction is limited, thus, results to less efficient school performance (Farbman, 2015).

3.4.3 Lack of Student Engagement

Since group activities were strictly prohibited in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers struggled to motivate learners to participate individually. Thus, resulted to lack of student engagement. The participants concluded that:

“I cannot make group activities... like roleplay and poem.” – TP3

“Less participation and performance among the students. It’s really a fact that there are students who do not want to participate individually. There are students who are motivated to participate in group activities.” - TP8

“Others do not participate... no matter how many times you ask them, it’s because they felt shy, it feels new to them.” – TP10

Although some students’ lack of engagement in class may be due to absence of group activities and some students’ level of comprehension, however, teachers were only following the protocols in order to safeguard learners from the transmission of the virus, “Group work that requires physical interaction shall not be allowed during face-to-face classes to avoid close contact with one another.” (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, p. 17). Student engagement is the drive and effort students put forth within their learning community, which can be seen through a spectrum of behavioral, cognitive, and affective characteristics. Various structural and internal factors, such as the dynamic interplay of interactions, learning activities, and the educational environment, all impact it. The likelihood that students will channel their energy back into their learning increases with their engagement and empowerment in the learning community. This can result in various short- and long-term effects that can further encourage engagement (Bond et al., 2020). Student engagement results to student academic achievement progress (growth) in math, reading, and all subjects combined (Reckmeyer, 2019). Due to the reduced number of students and the need to follow CoViD-19 protocols, face-to-face teaching affects the learning process in practical or hands-on sessions during CoViD-19. The inconvenient nature of smaller groups in big learning venues and the necessity of physical distance has most certainly hindered learning efficacy. As fewer students, there are fewer opportunities for significant peer-to-peer relationships. Through collaborative learning, they can have fewer observations in practical contexts (Khan et al., 2021).

3.4.4 Financial Constraints

Finance is a huge part of every day's life. In preparing for the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers shared that there should be enough budget especially in the classroom structuring. It would be much better if the supplies and resources are readily available in times of need. The participants shared:

“One will be the financial aspects, like the materials that will be needed in the implementation of the limited face-to-face”. – TP8

Although necessary materials such as facemasks, alcohol, toilet paper, thermal scanner, etc. were readily available for teachers and students' consumption, however, these things are consumable especially alcohol, and facemask; materials needed for classroom structuring such as paint, signages, lavatory for handwashing and payment for labor. Thus, teachers may use their own money to buy such. But teachers also emphasized that this was only for the start of the implementation because the supplies came in later. As the head depicts her experience, she shared that, “During the preparation process, especially for the classroom structuring, some teachers used their own supplies while waiting for the delivery of the supplies. But during the start of the classes, teachers and students were well-provided.”

Lack of proper financing is one of the obstacles to the active development of entrepreneurship (Zahorskyi et al., 2020). The amount of one's own knowledge and financial skills, as well as one's income, are among the many variables that influence the quality of one's financial behavior (Bozena & Gagat, 2019). In this case, financial constraints may be a hindrance to properly implement what is expected from the teachers in relation to the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal. The school heads agreed to the challenges mentioned by the teachers during the interview. They revealed that teachers are particularly challenged by the few students' lack of engagement in class due to gaps in learning. They assume that these students may have felt embarrassed when asked to participate because they could not fully understand the topic, and some are non-readers.

3.5 Teachers' Way of Dealing with the Challenges in the Implementation of the Safety Health Protocols and Delivery of the Lesson in the Limited Face-to-Face Classroom Interaction in the New Normal

Nothing is certain in everything one does; no matter how much preparation one has gone through, there will always be challenges. These challenges can be related to anything or to anyone involved or part of making things restored and better. In the implementation of safety health protocols and delivery of the lesson in the implementation of limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal, teachers have faced challenges yet find ways to deal with them for the good of everybody involved in it. With these, the following themes have been revealed: Flexibility, optimism, commitment, and administrative support.

3.5.1 Flexibility

The challenges mentioned above paved the way for teachers to adjust to the new learning setup where they need to divert from their old teaching style – from being strict in implementing rules to being lenient and

more understanding. Being open to changes in the teaching-learning process and being patient in devising new assessment tools. The participants narrated:

“Before, during the old normal, I was very strict in implementing my rules and my grading system. But now, I was very understandable and lenient with my grading so, I did not impose very strict rules when it comes to grades.” – TP1

“With regards to the lessons, particularly on the activities and tasks, I have to contextualize it so that it would cope with the nature of the lesson and of course, the situation.” – TP5

“There is a need to device assessment that can be done at home; like letting them note the process of cleaning their nails. Just a simple one, then guide questions were given to assess their understanding. Performance tasks should not be heavy.” – TP6

“Flexible and be open to changes because you will always encounter problems.” – TP7

“Be flexible. We just take it one day at a time. we should provide whatever requirements they have asked us.” – TP10

These teachers, no matter how exhausting their job is, they always make sure to give their best to fulfill anyone’s expectations when it comes to the teaching and learning process. With the new set up of education, teachers were trying to figure out ways to ensuring quality education despite minor changes and challenges. Teaching with flexibility is more crucial than ever since a learning environment is dynamic and full of fresh ideas, discussions, and interruptions (Netcom, 2017). A flexible mindset has always been necessary for a successful teacher. Teachers modify habits and beliefs to provide their students with the greatest possible education possible (Mahinay et al., 2022; Naparan, 2020). When March 2020 arrived, flexibility reached a new level, and teachers were tasked with completely revolutionizing traditional schooling (Mulder, 2022).

3.5.2 Optimism

Despite challenges and unprecedented changes, one of the qualities teachers share is optimism. Teachers believed that this, too, shall pass. They believed that learners deserved to be understood and were doing everything they could for them. They responded:

“I have to think positively towards the students.” – TP3

“I need to widen up my patients and try to understand the situation of the students- where they're from.” – TP4

One of the significant values teachers carry with them is the idea of positivity. Teachers' beliefs work as cognitive filters to sift through ideas and deeds (Hoy et al., 2008). Optimism is an individual difference variable that measures how much optimism people have for the future (Cañada et al., 2022). In times of adversity or struggle, higher levels of optimism have been associated with better subjective well-being (Carver et al., 2010) that can be related to good mood, perseverance, achievement, and physical health (Peterson, 2000). Teachers' sense of academic optimism is their belief in efficacy (Hong, 2017; Reyes et

al., 2023). Academic optimism in schools is a collective construct that includes the cognitive, affective, and behavioral facets of collective efficacy, faculty trust, and academic emphasis (Beard et al., 2010).

3.5.3 Commitment

Amidst difficulties brought on by the pandemic, teachers remain true to their obligation and oath to educate the young ones. They responded:

“Commitment to the service.”– TP2

“What inspires me to continue is my oath to my profession. To teach the children. Passion to teach.” – TP4

“I just remind myself that this is my job and I will do what must be done because through this job, I earned for a living.” – TP9

Commitment to one’s profession is one of the things that drives teachers to continue doing their duties as teachers. In the face of shifting needs and interests, commitments make people's conduct predictable, making it easier to plan and coordinate group actions involving several agents (Michael & Pacherie, 2015; Quinco-Cadosales, 2018). Additionally, commitment encourages cooperation by causing people to be willing to participate in joint efforts that they otherwise would not be if they and others were not committed to doing so (Michael et al., 2016). In teaching, teacher commitment is an internal force that motivates instructors to continue their involvement in the school by devoting more time and effort. This readiness to support the school fosters an emotional bond between instructors and the institution, motivating them to look for methods to advance their careers as teachers and create a productive learning environment that enables students to achieve their goals. Teachers' commitment to their craft is essential for children to succeed (Altun, 2017).

3.5.4 Administrative Support

Coping with the challenges was made easy with the help and support of the people involved, especially the support from the administration. As much as possible, the school's administration, in collaboration with the Division office and the local government unit, ensured that the teachers and students were well provided for. The participants shared:

“The school provided the health kits. They prioritized it. We are very lucky that we are well-provided. They have constant monitoring.” – TP6

“We asked to help each other in making the preparations. Since we are one of the pilot schools for limited face-to-face, these were provided by the school. We also received a budget from the department of education, from the division office in purchasing these health kits.” – TP7

“Our administration played a great role.. with him, you cannot feel the work pressure. Maybe that’s one of the factors. Even though we are the pilot implementor in our district, we deal with it lightly, with less pressure.” – TP10

In the opening of the limited face-to-face, the school was provided with the resources needed for the success and continuance of the implementation, “Funds to be used in the pilot implementation of face-to-face classes shall be sourced from the respective agencies’ budget subject to existing guidelines and accounting and auditing rules and regulations.” (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, p. 27); as well as support for students and teachers for their health and safety, “LGU shall ensure availability of medical personnel and standby vehicle for use when need or emergency arises.” LGU and the community shall observe measures to ensure safety of learners and other school personnel. This shall include access to COVID-19 testing kits and medical facilities.” (DepEd & DOH Joint Memorandum Circular no. 01, s. 2021, p. 26).

Local government units (LGUs) and the private sector, among others, extend their help to government schools with their knowledge of their limited resources, particularly during these difficult pandemic times. In a news statement, Education Secretary Leonor Magtolis-Briones highlighted the collaborative work of LGUs and outside partners in aiding DepEd's provision of digital learning support this academic year. More than 475 LGUs, NGOs, and outside partners collaborated with school division offices (SDOs) in the first month of 2021 to give students, parents, guardians, teachers, and staff access to learning materials (DepEd, 2021). It is good to know that various forms of assistance are coming in to support people's efficiency in delivering services mandated to them to fulfill in the service in DepEd. Thus, morale within the organization is lifted to tackle the adversities of this school year, especially on how to strategically address the needs of the learners in various learning areas (Torres, 2021).

In dealing with the challenges in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers held on to their belief of flexibility, optimism, and commitment that in order to achieve a certain outcome which is attaining a successful implementation in the introduction of the limited face-to-face classes, one must have faith in their capabilities to plan and carry out action (Bandura, 1986). In this sense, self-efficacy plays an important role to teachers when coping with the challenges. Teachers' faith in themselves gave them the confidence to exert effort and stay motivated in the pursuit of their goal. In addition, the support from the people around them gave them hope and motivation to continue their quest and provide a favorable outcome expected from them. In the interview conducted with the school heads, they shared that as much as possible, they tried every means possible to support their teachers emotionally and financially by providing teachers and students the resources necessary for attaining their goals through the school funds.

4. Conclusion

Teachers have varied perceptions about implementing the limited face-to-face classroom interaction in the new normal, depending on the facts they hold on to and the experiences and situations they have been in. Classrooms were organized, and safety health protocols were posted to protect all concerned individuals and not to discriminate. Teachers' teaching strategies were based on the learners' needs and experiences in such a way that it will help them improve and succeed in their academics no matter the challenges brought by the pandemic. These challenges can be considered as growth and learning, not discouragement. Moreover, in the implementation of the limited face-to-face classroom interaction, it is not only learners who adjust, teachers too. Preparation is always tangled with challenges, and teachers have their way of dealing with it. For teachers, when faced with trials, it is important to maintain a positive attitude and

remain committed to the profession and find ways to alter practices to adapt to new circumstances or conditions; paired with the support of everyone involved.

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