

ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

Back-to-School: Challenges for the Philippines and responses from around Asia



Empty classroom in Malabon, Manila. Photo: ABS-CBN News

Public health, business and economies, work, and home environments have been greatly impacted by COVID 19. The pandemic has altered the priorities of all sectors and challenged the leadership and programs of every nation.

As schools reopen in the Philippines and the rest of the world, there is now acute

attention to the challenges confronting students and the entire education sector in the New Normal. As schools had to abruptly wind up in the first quarter of 2020, administrators and education officials quickly had to develop and implement alternative ways to continue the school year without sacrificing the health of students, teachers, non-academic staff, and even parents and guardians.

The objective is not just to carry on with classes. In these disrupted times, education - like work for adults - provides continuity and a sense of normalcy to students.

This article considers the challenges confronting the Philippine education sector and its primary stakeholders - the teachers, the students, and their parents - as classes resume this October. In the course of discussing the baseline considerations for this crucial phase in reopening the entire Philippine society, we also scan the wider Asia for other countries' plans, actions, innovations, and challenges in the education sector in the midst of COVID. Papers, reports, and interviews with Filipino teachers (in the Philippines and in neighboring countries) provide early reports and insights on the initial solutions, innovations, and experiments being implemented to varying degrees of success and limits.

There are common challenges in resources and needs, but also shared aspirations not only to adapt, but to embrace the new normal, actively plan for best practices and a Better Normal, while being honest and transparent with problems for which there are as yet no clear or definitive answers.

To reopen or not? And how and when?

The new SARS-COV-2 virus was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. By March 2020, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a pandemic. It has since spread to more than 110 countries and territories. In the Philippines, the first case of COVID- 19 was reported on January 30, 2020. The first local transmission was confirmed on March 7, 2020.

By April, Philippine government and education officials had stopped face-to-face classes, closed primary and secondary schools, and officially cut the school year short while implementing a hurriedly improvised grading system for the shortened term. Summer classes for college, however, pushed on, providing early experiments for online and distance learning. In general, it was the same story in the rest of the world. UNESCO says more than 190 countries had resorted to country-wide school closures by April. Globally, more than 1.5 billion learners were affected by COVID-19. In September, President Rodrigo Duterte had made clear that he will not allow the resumption of face-to-face classes until a viable vaccine for COVID-19 is found and widely and responsibly available, and Filipinos, like all citizens worldwide, are certifiably inoculated from the disease.

Until that time comes, the World Health Organization (WHO) reminds that any decision or policy regarding suspending or resuming classes - especially face-to-face learning - must proceed from a risk-based approach. The objectives should not only be to maximize benefits for students, teachers, staff, and the community, but also to help prevent a new or further spread of COVID-19.

The WHO acknowledges that school closures of course have negative impacts on child health, education, development, family income, and overall economies; corollarily, some of benefits school reopenings can provide include the social and psychological well-being of school-aged children, access to reliable information on how to keep themselves and others safe, and allowing parents to devote more of their own time for any precious opportunity to work.

When societies and schools do decide to resume classes, however, the WHO also reminds that there are prevention and control measures that need to be prepared and put in place. Health experts recommend various protocols that need to be in place to ensure the safety of the students and the community, information and mechanisms touching on and strengthening proper hygiene, screening of sick members of the school, protecting individuals that are considered high-risk, and physical distancing inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to that, Centers for Disease Control says planning and preparation are the most important actions for school administrations before reopening in-person services and facilities. Schools must know what to do when a member of the institution contracts symptoms of COVID-19. Promoting behaviors that reduce spread of the virus is essential, as well as maintaining healthy environments and operations of the schools.

Around Asia: Different Degrees of Success, Confidence, and Experimentation

Whatever the decision and experience of any country, the dilemma at every level of society remains clear and common. Education must somehow continue, but children must be protected from COVID-19 at all costs.

The decisions, experiences, and innovations on this matter have differed across countries, but all proceed from the same basic principles and premises. Asia Society Philippines did a quick scan of Vietnam, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore, for example - relying on published papers, media reports, interviews with Filipino teachers around the region - and obtained a few snapshots of what educators and officials in these other countries have implemented and experimented with so far.

Vietnam

Throughout the pandemic, Vietnam had been considered an outlier in its widely acknowledged success to have the COVID-19 situation under control. It never declared any widespread lockdown.

Schools there have in fact been open as early as May. Classes are conducted as per usual, in person and face-to-face. Still, social distancing measures, wearing of face masks, and proper handwashing are actively implemented and promoted as still the best defense against the disease. Some of the international schools in the country had to extend the previous school year until July to finish it. Other schools, however, were able to follow their school calendars hence they were able to finish the school year on time.

Japan

In Japan, which has noticed a rise in COVID-19 over the past weeks, the current school year was pushed back a few weeks because of the pandemic. When classes did reopen, strategies were different for schools and districts. Social distancing measures and wearing of protective masks were uniform throughout the country, the decision and degrees of going online or in-person varied. In some high schools in Shizuoka Prefecture, where as of August there were only around 100 cases of COVID-19, administrators subscribed to online platforms like G Suite for Education to shift to stay-home classes. Google Classroom was introduced to the teachers and students. Some schools, however, opted to pursue face-to-face classes.

Teachers there say many schools were not ready for distance learning. While access to equipment and online platforms was not a problem, online teaching culture, capabilities, and practices were not uniform and in many cases weak. Where schools did reopen for normal in-person classes, protocols and practices had to be adjusted. Schools banned or discouraged pair or group works, minimized recitations, and widened seating arrangements from inside the classrooms to common breaks in cafeterias. These came on top of mandated checks of body temperatures, the wearing of masks, and stricter, more frequent disinfecting of school facilities.

For the teachers, especially those for whose classes recitations are crucial - for example, English instructors who need to teach and monitor pronunciations - the schools had to innovate given the limitations imposed by safety protocols. For example, when teaching or practicing the students' pronunciation, they no longer require live recitations. Instead, the teachers and students record and watch videos of their selves enunciating words and sentences, removing any necessity to pull down their masks during lessons.

Thailand

Thailand was a country of concern early in COVID-19 outbreak, given its popularity as a destination for Chinese tourists. It was successful in its interventions, however, and as of September 1, a hundred days lapsed without the country seeing any local transmission of the virus.

For its students, online summer classes started in May and June. The school year then resumed by July, allowing face-to-face setups. Safety measures such as wearing masks and checking body temperature upon entering the school premises were being practiced. Within classrooms, apart from socially distanced desks the students were welcomed with physical partitions atop their tables to further minimize contact with each other.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the New Normal, teachers were required to attend webinars and online trainings to gain more knowledge about online teaching and best practices. Materials - including course plans, goals, and instructional content - were also adapted for the new modes of learning, whether from home or in classrooms where physical interactions were limited and group works could no longer be encouraged.

Singapore

Singapore has already experienced a second wave of COVID-19 infections. But it is still managing better than most countries. Work from home is still encouraged and the norm, even as businesses have resumed. Schools, too, have reopened in the city-state.

To prepare for face-to-face classes, many protocols and procedures were implemented. Teachers and administrators brainstormed on what classrooms and schools in the New Normal would look like and work.

When the schools opened, the children were introduced to new routines such as safe distancing, wearing of masks, and more frequent washing of hands. But beyond these global standards, tables and floors are marked with colored tapes to not only encourage, but illustrate and direct, safe distancing. Children have designated spaces to sit during lessons. And class sizes are now smaller.

Back to School for Filipinos: Old Inequities, New Challenges

Regardless of differences in approach and confidence when it comes to face-to-face classes, online learning has become a critical part of the education system everywhere, and it has in fact suddenly become a pillar to all plans. It is safe to say that education as empowered, unleashed, and improved by digital platforms has long been part of most countries' Vision, but COVID-19 accelerated the disruption, to different degrees of success and pain.

Indeed COVID-19 and the education sector's pivot to distance and remote learning at first merely underscored already existing divides within and among different societies.

Inequities, between those who have computers and Internet access and those who could not afford either or both, simply became more glaring. But it also gave starting point and center to what has become the biggest challenge to the



Mother buys her son a new phone. Photo: Facebook

education sector and their constituent students and households - from those completely shifting to online classes, to those still left with the dilemmas of face-to-face learning and any other form of distance education that is not necessarily delivered digitally.

Even teachers are challenged. In Philippine public schools, many faculty members either do not have, or are not comfortable with, computers and online platforms.

On top of these, from South to Southeast Asia, especially in rural areas, very little of existing school curricula and materials were actually designed to be delivered and implemented over online platforms and digital gadgets. Teaching over Internet- and social media-based programs was imagined to signal a new and more powerful connection

between schools and students, but in the first rollouts of these programs, they have also made more pronounced the distance between students and their formal schooling, and for that matter, the gulf between privileged students and the actual majority of their fellow learners.

Mental health has also been of particular and rising concern throughout the pandemic, and the education sector again highlights specific challenges in this regard. A study by Nicholas Grubic et al, looked into the impact of COVID-19 on student mental health and well-being. Around 25% of their respondents reported symptoms of anxiety related to concerns about academic delays, economic effects of the pandemic, and impacts on daily life. Another survey by YoungMinds reported that 83% of young individuals say the pandemic worsened mental health conditions that were already existing, the malaise aggravated by school closures, restricted social connections, and disrupted routines.

Common and Special Needs

Resilience and adaptability are crucial, and so the Philippine's Department of Education has strained to prepare for School Year 2020-2021. The sector's burden begins not with technology, not with content, but with a major shift in enrollment patterns. Some private schools reopened to smaller student populations as early as August.

Meanwhile, as classes in public schools officially restart in October, all projections are for the absent enrollees from private schools to show up there. The DepEd sees the migration of private school students to government-subsidized public schools. Hundreds of private schools nationwide have in fact closed or announced plans to cease operations, hit by a precipitous decline in enrollments as well as higher costs expected with the mandated shift to distance learning.

Among the orders and parameters set by the Duterte government: No face-to-face classes until a viable vaccine against COVID is certified and released. Until then, the government will only allow and support distance learning methodologies - whether delivered digitally, broadcast over the airwaves and a network of community- or province-based stations, and/or implemented over learning kits packaged and (particularly in the most isolated and poorest communities) physically delivered and collected - ostensibly subject to health protocols - between schools and homes.

This blend of online, broadcast, and modular learning is designed to ensure the safety of both the students and the teachers. But with the rushed adaptation and/or development of curricula and materials for the blended modalities, gaps and even risks (especially for the physical materials to be passed on) are unavoidable realities.

A quick scan of public and private schools around the Philippines provide snapshots of challenges as well as common efforts to adapt and comply with government mandates to employ modular distance learning, online classes, and blended learning, or the combination of remote and traditional classroom setups, in the current COVID-disrupted environment.

Common to everyone:

- problems in access and affordability of the hardware and software to go online reliably and sustainably;
- the logistics and health protocols for offline components of modular learning;
- the redevelopment and adaptation of teaching content and materials for electronic or digital transmission;
- lack of preparedness or comfort in new and experimental methods of teaching; unresolved questions on monitoring, evaluation, and grading of students' (and teachers') performance;
- the potentials, impact, and limiting effects of the disrupted home environment on online learning;
- rising anxiety and mental and psychosocial challenges among teachers, students, and parents;
- and an acknowledgment that more issues and unanticipated scenarios can only inevitably arise as classes resume, especially where special education needs are concerned.

In any case, with little choice, administrators and officials have developed and started

experimenting with various platforms.

Electronic Platforms: What's adequate, what's not, and what's filling the gap

One such platform is DepEd Commons. It has been available to educators and learners as an online learning resource. DepEd Commons does not incur data charges, so users who rely on mobile data can freely access the website whenever they need to.

Meanwhile, DepEd is also working with public and private television, radio, and cable operators to broadcast educational materials and instructions as part of the Department's Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan.

With private sector and civil society support, meanwhile, the hope is that other gaps can be mitigated. Telecommunications companies are helping national and local governments to subsidize and ease data charges as well as expand actual reach and access, while private groups and citizen-led movements are raising resources to augment that same delivery of data access, and what government and LGUs can provide by way of gadgets such as tablets and laptops.

Early problems, long-term challenges, and the scramble for best practices

Teachers working in elementary, junior and senior high, college, and universities, and even schools offering Special Education, even in runups to the official October opening of public schools have started sharing crucial insights on how the Philippine education system is coping or straining with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technological - and financial - barriers

In public and private schools nationwide, the basic barrier to hurdle is students' and teachers' access to gadgets and data. For most, these are funded personally. They either already had or bought their own equipment, and are paying for their own data plans. Some in fact had to acquire laptops with higher specifications to handle the expected load and requirements of online classes.

On a certain level, the reach and accessibility of data providers is a technological barrier beyond the control of teachers, students, and even school districts. Technical difficulties posed by unstable software, Internet lags, and power interruptions also pose problems that are not for school districts or administrators to solve.



Teachers in Batangas climb roof for better internet. Photo: GMA News

But beyond the question of whether or not gadgets, software, and the Internet are available and accessible in a particular area, this is at root less a technological issue as just a new expression of an old hurdle: financial barriers to the provision of teaching and learning resources. Indeed, this is best illustrated by access and reach problems not related to gadgets, programs, and data. For public schools even traditional MOOE funds - allotments for Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses - to cover expenses for paper and ink are not enough to meet the needs for modular and blended learning that would require the delivery, collection, and even rotation of physical materials. They have had to rely on donations, solicitations, fundraising, and money from their own pockets. It is a problem even for private schools. While certified Learning Management Systems have been paid for by the schools, resources such as paper and ink are also at least partially paid for out of the pockets of administrators, teachers, and parents. And it is not just about delivering resources. Some schools report being unable to even completely prepare and reproduce enough modules due to the lack of production materials and even computers and copying equipment. In Cagayan De Oro, it is also a concern that some modules may not reach some of the students since the parents are not capable of getting the modules themselves or because they have no means to access the information for the upcoming school year. The teachers and administrators are looking into the possibility of house visits and delivery of modules to the households.

Free resources to build on

The good news is that once online, the possibilities and options do open up. Free material and programs are vast and innumerable. Both teachers and students - and for that matter, parents - do also start with basic online behaviours and platforms that provide baseline commonalities to build on: familiarity with Microsoft or Google

programs for productivity, for example, or Facebook and chat apps for collaboration; YouTube for video content, and even prior to Zoom and Teams, there was already widespread comfort with video conferencing over apps like Messenger, Viber, and WhatsApp.

The new classroom: Concerns about content and teaching methods

The next hurdle then is content and the actual methodologies for teaching. Educators are confronted with immense adjustment challenges. They must think of ways to be more strategic in delivering the lessons, keeping the learners attentive, and establishing rapport. But outside the literal four walls of the classroom, many are in unfamiliar territory.

Much is lost by way of the two-way and one-to-one communications and relationships refined and even taken for granted over decades and even centuries. The little but numerous moments of personal interaction between students and teachers and teaching assistants are absent, and seemingly irreplaceable.

While online teaching teases with new possibilities, the experience and practices are still new and inevitably shallow. Direct interaction is lost even over webcams. In general, anxiety grows on all sides. Practically all of the Philippines' current teachers were trained to deliver lessons in classrooms. For parents and students, meanwhile, many questions regarding feedback by way of tests, evaluations, grades, and even the concepts of being "present", "absent", or "late" given the new modalities of attendance are left unanswered even as classes begin in earnest.

Mental Health

All of the above impact on the mental health of every constituent and stakeholder in the education sector.

Even ahead of the reopening of schools, teachers were already overworking themselves to adapt and get up to speed with the New Normal. Trainings, webinars, meetings, module development, parent orientations, and even just keeping up-to-date with the latest and ever-changing government protocols related to COVID safety were overwhelming even before they actually met with their students.

Meanwhile, throughout the months-long lockdown, the Department of Health has noted rising trends in anxiety and mental health concerns among the youth. The unfamiliarity and stress of virtual classroom setups shoe-horned into already stifling and equally unfamiliar quarantined home environments - where parents, too, have to adjust to their own issues arising from work-from-home arrangements or, for that matter, the partial or total loss of work - these are all expected to heighten anxieties and put pressure on the mental health of students and, for that matter, their guardians.

Even prior to COVID-19, the Philippines already had a dearth of psychosocial and

psychiatry professionals, and in schools, that has been expressed as a shortage of guidance counsellors. In the current climate, that limitation is exacerbated with limited knowledge and understanding of how to provide mentorship, guidance, and psychosocial support under the same disrupted system classes will struggle to cope. Finally, on all sides - teachers, students, and parents - the monitoring and evaluation of performance and progress under these new, untested, and unstandardized environments will leave many questions unanswered, again adding to everybody's anxiety.

Special Needs

No doubt not every scenario has been anticipated, and unanticipated situations will inevitably continue to arise. Indeed, most of what have been discussed so far pertain primarily to the general education environment as schools reopen this October.

On top of all that, special needs students and schools will be dealing with their own particular dilemmas.

For learners with hearing and visual Impairment, teachers will have to additionally convert their Alternative Delivery Mode Modules into inclusive digital format in audio, sign language, and image descriptions, to cater to the different needs of each individual. In some cases, health protocols also dictate more extreme (and limited) options. Special schools for children with autism, for example, already have limited pools of qualified teachers. For students with more severe autism, highly trained, personal, and physically present mentorship may be required; but remote learning mandates on the one hand, and on the other, tutoring constraints at home (parents untrained for teaching or limited by their own work-from-home situations), could essentially lead many to no option but to wait for face-to-face classes to return.

What lies ahead

Philippine education officials acknowledge that more issues will inevitably surface as schools reopen and situations arise at every level. Another way of looking at that is that things should only improve as experience with modular, online, distance, and blended learning grows.

Classes will not operate in a vacuum, however, not even as government has resolved to avoid face-to-face education until a vaccine becomes widely available. Philippine efforts to reopen the entire economy and society will still require more citizens going out of their homes and interacting with each other. Wider and more aggressive implementation of established health protocols to limit the spread of COVID-19 will hopefully be effective, but there will always remain risks with every circulation of human activity. The physical delivery of learning kits and modules, for example, makes teachers and their assistants vulnerable with every visited house in their rounds, and those households, in turn, will have to be mindful with every visit.

What this means is that the pressure to provide and perfect the resources and systems demanded by the New Normal can only grow. Along with that should also expand the accountability and responsibility of every sector, not just government, to fill in the gaps as they become exposed. In the course of doing so, emerging problems and best practices must be monitored and chronicled well, as the Philippines - as any society - has no choice but to learn and improve on the fly.

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