SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE MODULAR DISTANCE LEARNING APPROACH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TLE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT: *The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the education sector to implement various schemes to ensure learning continuity. For the basic education sector in the Philippines, Modular Distance Learning (MDL) is the widely used modality during this health crisis, especially in areas where the internet is inaccessible for online learning. The quality of distance education services can be analyzed through SWOT(Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis in order to assist faculty members in initiating meaningful change in a program, primarily for its improvement. Thus, this study was carried out to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that define the MDL approach implemented in Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) subjects for Junior High School in one of the public schools in Misamis Oriental, Philippines. This study is qualitative in nature with six key informants who are TLE teachers. The data was collected via interview. The thematic analysis method was used for data analysis. The strengths of MDL as identified by teachers include independent learning for students, positive relationship among teachers, students and parents and emphasis on most essential learning competencies (MELCs). Lack of learning support for students, late submission of outputs, difficulty in module printing and distribution and reliability of student responses were considered as weaknesses. Opportunities include independent learning for students and adaptability to the "new normal". Lastly, wider learning gaps and the opportunity for students to cheat were pin-pointed as threats of MDL.*
*Keywords***:** Basic Education, Learning Continuity Plan, Technology and Livelihood Education, Modular Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led educational institutions to adapt measures that would ensure safety of the students while implementing continuity of learning. The adjustments in the educational system were true to almost all countries in the world greatly affected by the pandemic [1]. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) adopted the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) beginning School Year 2020-2021 in response to the COVID – 19 public health emergencies [2]. As explained in this document, the BE-LCP is *"a package of education interventions that will respond to basic education challenges brought about by COVID-19".* Due to necessary adjustments in the delivery of instruction, the BE-LCP emphasized teaching the most essential learning competencies (MELCs) per subject. Essential learning competencies are defined as *"what the students need, considered indispensable, in the teaching-learning process to building skills to equip learners for subsequent grade levels and subsequently, for lifelong learning"* [2].

One essential element of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) is the adoption of various learning delivery options as but not limited to face-to-face, blended learning, distance learning, homeschooling, and other modes of delivery [3]. This plan was approved by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) for implementation. This action brought several opportunities and challenges that include, among others, policy implications, strategies, and issues arising from the new normal education and studies along with planning and implementation strategy of educational institutions, assessing online and modular learning systems, surveys, and development of instructional materials suited in times of crisis has been recommended [4].

Modular learning has been found to be the most preferred learning delivery of parents and students for their children based on the survey conducted by DepEd [5]. However, a number of issues and concerns were reported in the initial implementation of the BE-LCP, specifically on the modular learning approach. Problems raised by the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) Philippines on modular learning preparations included unavailability of print modules from the DepEd Central Office and reproduction costs of the modules [5]. The delivery of materials to students at home posed a great challenge to the teachers and parents answering the self-learning modules for their children were also found to be a concern [6]. In addition, studies have shown that the challenges encountered by teachers in the implementation of MDL were found to be the lack of school funding in the production and delivery of modules, students' difficulty to study independently, late submission of modules by the students, a lot of paper works aside from module preparation [7], insufficient time in module preparation and printing, struggle in module delivery, difficulty validating students responses and health risks during module delivery and student monitoring [8].

This study conducted a SWOT analysis of the modular distance learning implementation based on the perspectives of Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) teachers in Junior High schools in one public secondary school in Misamis Oriental. SWOT analysis is considered an important method to increase the quality of distance education and produce policies regarding the existing deficiencies [9]. It is also said to assist faculty in initiating meaningful change in a program and to use the data for program improvement [10].

Specifically, this study soughs to answer the following questions:
1. What are the strengths of the modular distance learning approach according to TLE teachers?
2. What are the weaknesses of the modular distance learning approach according to TLE teachers?
3. What are the possible opportunities for the modular distance learning approach according to TLE teachers?
4. What are the possible threats of the modular distance learning approach according to TLE teachers?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. SWOT analysis was performed among key informants in the study. Through

purposive sampling, six (6) key informants were purposively selected to participate in this study. These 6 key informants are TLE teachers teaching in the Junior High School during the pandemic, in one public school in the province of Misamis Oriental, Philippines. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, the key informants were asked about their perceptions on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of implementing the modular distance learning approach. Thematic analysis was then conducted for each of the 4 categories which are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the recurring themes generated from the interview responses.

Strengths. Based on the interview responses, teachers expressed the strengths of modular distance learning (MDL) as follows: independent learning for students, a positive relationship among teachers, students, and parents, and emphasis on most essential learning competencies (MELCs). On independent learning for students, one teacher articulated that *"Students who learn through modular distance learning have the opportunity to develop their capacity and become independent learners (T3)".* This conforms to the result of a study on the positive effects of MDL to learners, that is, learners answer their modules on their own and devise ways on how to understand their lesson and this eventually led for students to develop good study habits and the sense of responsibility in accomplishing the task provided in the modules [11]. Moreover, another study showed that students felt that learning at a distance developed their capability to think critically and engaged in the self-reflective learning process [2]. However, another study had contrasting results as students expressed that they struggled to learn independently due to excessive amounts of learning activities and the difficulty level of the tasks presented in the module [13].

The MDL was also found to bring positive relationship among the teachers, students, and parents. One teacher said that this approach has *"Build trust and relationships between teachers and students as well as between teachers and parents as a result of constant communication and follow-up with the students (T1)".* Another teacher mentioned that *"Parents were also involved in the modality; they can monitor students'*

progress and development. Parents were able to observe where their children needed help and where they were doing well (T2)." A study conducted on the effect of MDL on the effects of MDL in the academic performance of learners however, revealed, that one of its negative effects was limited teacher-learner interaction that led the learners to not be interested to learn and refuse to explore their potentials on their own [11]. Conversely, the same study showed that MDL has been an avenue for greater parental involvement of parents to their child/children.

Lastly, the emphasis on MELCs was believed by the teachers to be a strength of MDL. The MELCs were part of the provisions of the BE-LCP which narrows down all the possible essential lessons, concepts, and skill sets that a student must know, acquire, and understand, even if the classes will be conducted through different modalities sans face-to-face physical classroom interactions [14]. A study conducted on TLE teachers' experiences using modular distance learning during the pandemic revealed that teachers provide students with learning materials containing different activities based from the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) [15]

Weaknesses. One of the weaknesses reported by teachers about the MDL is the lack of learning support for students. One participant mentioned that *"Students who have parents who cannot read or understand do not benefit from modular learning? Students struggle to find someone to help them learn because there is no teacher around to facilitate learning (T3)".* In fact, a study found out that parents are having a very serious problem in terms of communication especially on the indicator that states *"I am not knowledgeable enough when it comes to having a system in facilitating instructions to my child/children*" [16]. Another study revealed that learner-respondents are one in declaring that they are having difficulty learning by themselves and that they need more reference materials and more guidance from parents and teachers [17]. The same challenge was reported by teachers from different schools due to various reasons that include late claiming of modules [8] and too many activities in each module [7], among others. Several studies reported that printing modules has been one of the challenges encountered by teachers using MDL [5, 18, 19]. One participant from this study complained that

S Strengths	W Weaknesses	O Opportunities	T Threats
▪ Independent learning for students ▪ Positive relationship among teachers, students and parents ▪ Emphasis on most essential learning competencies (MELCs)	▪ Lack of learning support for students ▪ Late submission of outputs ▪ Difficulty in module printing and distribution ▪ Reliability of student responses	▪ Independent learning ▪ Adaptive to *"new normal"*	▪ Wider learning gaps ▪ Opportunity to cheat

Figure 1: Recurrent themes in the context of the SWOT paradigm on modular distance learning.

"*Module printing is exhausting, especially when you are going to provide one copy for 100 plus students by subject (T1).*" In addition to module printing, the distribution of modules was also found to be a weakness of MDL. Teachers had a hard time reaching out to some of their students and even the parents. In addition, "*parents do not follow the module distribution and retrieval schedule (T4)*".

Since the teachers have no way of monitoring how students respond to the modules, the reliability of student responses was found to be a drawback of MDL. One study found that teachers observed that some answers did not come from the students but from other adults in the family [20]. In fact, a study reported that elementary pupils asked for help from their parents, relatives, or siblings in accomplishing the modules [19]. Moreover, teachers' reported that parents' writing was recognized by the teachers in the submitted modules [20].

Opportunities. The chance for students to independently learn was found to be an opportunity relevant to MDL. Indeed, the modular method helps learners acquire better self-study or learning skills [21]. Through MDL, students progressed on their own and are more empowered to learn [21]. In addition, MDL is seen to be adaptive to the *"new normal". Indeed, the MDL* materials make it accessible for remote areas that have difficulty in terms of internet connectivity [22].

Threats. In terms of threats, TLE teachers expressed that the use of MDL could lead to **w**ider learning gaps. Student challenges involved difficulty understanding the module contents and assessment instructions which could also be because of overloaded remote learning tasks and poor learning environment [23]. In addition, teachers are concerned that students have the opportunity to cheat with MDL. In fact, as reported by teachers, other adults in the family sometimes answer students' modules [20] and students ask for help from their parents, relatives, or siblings in accomplishing the modules [19].

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The strengths of MDL as identified by teachers include independent learning for students, a positive relationship among teachers, students, and parents, and emphasis on most essential learning competencies (MELCs). Lack of learning support for students, late submission of outputs, difficulty in module printing and distribution, and reliability of student responses were considered weaknesses. Opportunities include independent learning for students and adaptability to the "new normal". Lastly, wider learning gaps and the opportunity for students to cheat were pin-pointed as threats. Future directions on the implementation of MDL post-Covid are also discussed in this paper.

The strongest message from a SWOT analysis is that, whatever course of action is decided, decision-making should contain each of the following elements: building on strengths, minimizing weaknesses, seizing opportunities, and counteracting threats [24]. With the results from this study, it is recommended that the school stakeholders revisit the implementation of MDL.

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