

Knowing How It Works: Voices of Secondary School Heads on Local Government Special Education Fund for Technological Support in the New Normal



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ABSTRACT: Structured with qualitative-transcendental phenomenology, the study aimed at understanding the lived experiences of secondary school heads on the local government Special Education Fund for technological support in the new normal in the Division of Santa Rosa, Laguna, Philippines. The researcher utilized the framework of Moustakas (1994), which involved bracketing, horizontalization, theme clustering, textural description, structural description, and essence. From the verbatim transcriptions, 14 themes surfaced, which were intensively analyzed. The participants' lived experiences of receiving local government fund-derived technological support to match the demands of distance learning and implementation of basic education learning continuity were relative to intricate experiences, retorts on transitional education, knowledge of local government fund, perceived support and downsides, realization of fund accessibility and decision-making, meeting the demands of distance learning, and usefulness and impacts on school outcomes. Consequently, the participants' coping mechanisms in facing challenges and issues are manifested through prioritizing health and security, provision of sufficient and equitable technological support, congruency of actual needs, operative management schemes, strategic fund allocation, dynamism in training, workshops, and technical assistance, and collaboration towards positive support. The findings imply that in the new normal, the provision of local government for technological support in schools aided the successful implementation of distance learning via the virtual learning modality. The technological devices, such as laptops for teachers and tablets for students, helped a lot in complying with the required tasks while ensuring health and safety precautions.

KEYWORDS: distance learning, learning continuity, phenomenology, technological support, Special Education Fund.

INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries, the responsibility for improving the quality of basic education services in public schools is accounted for by the local governments and the Department of Education (World Bank, 2016). In the Philippines, the local government units as emphasized in the Local Government Code assist public schools in terms of operations, buildings, technological infrastructure, and others since they have the commitment, capability, and consistent functions in doing so, in addition to their role in addressing the weaknesses in the areas of education (Republic Act. No. 7160). Thus, equipped with adequate and stable funding through allocations from the Special Education Fund (SEF) for carrying out the needs of schools and upgrading the basic educational outcomes (Republic Act No. 5447).

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals struggled to ensure continuity of education due to encountered problems like lack of technological infrastructure, lack of access to computers and the internet, technical problems, pedagogical issues, teachers' lack of digital skills, lack of resources, difficulty in identifying the best learning modality, and lack of constant financial and material support (Aytac, 2020; Childhope, 2021). Accordingly, technological support such as digital learning at this time was considered a worldwide concern of schools that needed attention to promote successful compliance with the demands of virtual learning delivery of instructions as well as to provide meaningful learning experiences (Zayabalabadjane, 2020; De Villa and Manalo, 2020; Carstens et al., 2021). As explained by Armstrong-Mensah et al., (2020), lack of equitable access to technological infrastructures, together with a lack of preparedness in public schools in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in intensified school complexities, which hindered effective distance learning and, thus, were considered a major reason for the difficulties in attaining successful school outcomes. This conformed to the findings of Cruz, (2021) and Starkey et al., (2021), which identified inadequacy of information and communications technology (ICT) resources as the common issue among students, teachers, and parents, which made it constraining instead of engaging. These general conditions, according to the World Bank

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(2016), resulted in education sector difficulties and interruptions which prevented ensuring successful, equitable quality education that supposedly promoted lifelong opportunities for learners. Furthermore, the complexities and struggles of schools and teachers to adapt to online-based learning instruction solutions resulted in greater learning losses (Engzell et al., 2021). In line with the difficulties in public schools, Lalu (2021) revealed that the survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations showed only 58 percent of the enrolled school-age, 5–20-year old Filipinos used ICT devices for distance learning. Out of the total percentage, 27% of units were owned, 12% bought, 10% borrowed, 9% given, and 0.3% rented. Due to a lack of household financial capacity, 42 percent of them did not use any distance learning device. These statistics demand urgent technological support aimed at resolving the complexities of the students, teachers, school leaders, and guardians in this new normal setup (Dayagbil et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the current situation, digital technology tools were considered critical to matching the shifted educational landscape of schools because activities were moved online (Starkey et al., 2021).

According to Ogunbiyi (2017), with the school alone, it cannot provide all its physical and financial needs. Therefore, the premise of partnering with the local government was the best option (Mallari, 2017) in shaping and molding the educational system of the country (Gipit et al., 2020). Hence, according to Alvarado et al., (2019), the more community stakeholders are strongly engaged in the educational programs and activities, the better the school will become. As stated by Di Pietro et al., (2020), learners who consistently fall behind and come from low-income families are less likely to have access to the necessary learning digital resources (e.g. a laptop/computer, broadband internet connection), are less likely to have a proper home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study or their own desk), and have not received direct or indirect support from their parents. In line with the paper of Kebritchi et al., (2017), revealed that challenges related to a lack of technological experience and skills among teachers and learners hindered the successful integration of ICT in the education system. Additionally, lack of funding, technological infrastructure, training, time, vision, and content as external barriers positively affected the internal barriers, such as technological pedagogical self-efficacy and learning-teaching activities (Akram et al., 2021). In addition, the absence of adequate preparation in schools and among teachers and a lack of curriculum guidelines were noted as factors that restrained students from receiving the appropriate learning instructions.

Despite all the complexities and struggles experienced, the use of the local government Special Education Fund was expanded through the power of the Joint Circular No. 2, s. 2020, aiding all public schools, including teachers and students, in their ICT needs for the implementation of distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Joint Circular No. 2, s. 2020). Moreover, the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte signed into law Republic Act No. 11494, or the "Bayanihan to Recover as One Act", on September 11, 2020, mandating strengthening the efforts of the Local Government Units (LGUs) in addressing the challenges brought by the pandemic. It was stipulated under this law authorizing the local government units to realign their respective local funds, including, but not limited to, their development fund, Gender and Development Fund, Sangguniang Kabataan Fund, and Special Education Fund, including the unutilized or unreleased subsidies and transfers. It is further stipulated that a portion of the Special Education Fund shall be used for the support of alternative learning modalities, digital education, digital infrastructure, and continuity plans (Republic Act No. 11494). Indeed, several city governments across the country have followed the mandated re-alignment of the said funds by allocating funds for digital tools such as android tablets with sim cards, laptops, and smart TVs, Wi-Fi devices, and other forms of support such as free internet subscriptions and internet allowances, and digital training for teachers, which are very useful in the new learning setups (Magallanes, 2020; DILG, 2020). Meanwhile, Mallari (2017) recommended the possible inclusion of a school incentive program called the Performance-Based Incentive System in the Special Education Fund allocation in order to make the school programs and projects responsive to the demands of the present generation and current situation. This incentive program is aimed at providing recognition to performing schools with a reward relative to the provisions of the Information Technology (IT) learning package and other instructional materials for further school development as well as for a positive response towards 21st-century education. Furthermore, the local government unit was given accountability and initiatives in determining the most appropriate modality of learning in every location to maximize teaching and learning, along with intensifying their support for the provisions of continuous and sustainable ICT materials and equipment to public schools by way of a Deed of Donation to further improve the quality of education across the nation (DILG, 2020; Malipot, 2020).

Being aware of the preceding evidences and bodies of literature, the researcher attempted to understand and describe the lived experiences of secondary school heads on local government Special Education Fund for technological support in the new normal to initiate policy dialogue with the local government and to the local school board representative of the Department of Education (DepEd) for continued technological support in public schools not only during this current situation, but also in the succeeding years to come in order sustain and further develop the 21-st century digital skills in the teaching and learning.

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METHODS

This research study was structured with descriptive phenomenological approach research design of Moustakas, (1994), as cited in the paper of Creswell and Creswell, (2018); Neubauer et al., (2019), and Natividad and Galicia, (2021). This research design focused at describing and understanding the secondary school heads' lived experiences of local government Special Education Fund technological support in the new normal education in the Division of Santa Rosa, Laguna, Philippines. This design illuminates and surfaces deep issues that provided adequate and accurate interpretation of factual findings, and at the same time allowed the participants' voices to be heard.

The participants of the study were composed of 10 public secondary school heads in the Division of Santa Rosa City, Laguna, Philippines. Their positions vary from Principal 1 to Principal IV, respectively. Moreover, they were selected through the purposive criterion sampling technique, which was useful in ascertaining and picking information-rich occurrences relative to the center of the study and phenomenology of interest (Cresswell and Creswell, 2018; Neubaer et al., 2019; Natividad and Galicia, 2021). This technique was also used in ensuring collection and documentation of individual participants' deep knowledge and understanding, along with meaningful responses relative to the research problem and phenomenon. Furthermore, this technique also provides the researcher with the justification to make generalizations from the sample being studied, whether such generalizations are theoretical, analytic, and/or logical in nature. In line with this, according to Polkinghorne, (1989), as cited in the paper by Creswell and Creswell, (2018), and Natividad and Galicia, (2021), suggested that a minimum of five (5) to a maximum of twenty-five (25) individual participants who had already experienced the phenomenon be included in this study. The inclusion criteria in choosing the participants include those who 1) have experienced receiving local government special education fund technological support; 2) are currently active as a school head for at least two (2) years to twenty (20) years in the Division of Santa Rosa City, Laguna; 3) have openness in sharing experiences toward successful school outcomes brought about by allocated or donated funds and materials; and 4) have voluntarily signed the waiver of participation. Additionally, the study utilized a predesigned interview guide containing the research questions to be asked, which are general and open-ended, as cited in the papers by Lopez, (2018) and Natividad and Galicia, (2021). This interview guide was self-made and semi-structured, which followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) and Natividad and Galicia's (2021) processes in conducting a phenomenological study. This semi-structured interview promoted flexibility in asking questions during the interviews and, hence, enabled the participants to give answers according to their own understanding and insights.

The study applied the systematic approach of analyzing data and procedures (Natividad and Galicia, 2021) as well as in understanding precisely the guidelines for assembling textural and structural descriptions. The approach was directly anchored to transcendental phenomenology which consists of the following steps: a) identifying the phenomenon to study, b) setting aside the experiences, and c) collecting data from the 10 public secondary school heads who have experienced the phenomenon. Moreover, the approach in analyzing data was done by condensing the information into significant statements or quotes and then combining them into clusters of themes. This was followed by developing a textural description of the experiences (e.g., what the participants experienced), and a structural description of their experiences (e.g., how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context). And then, immediately followed by combining the textural and structural descriptions conveying overall essence of the participants' experience of local government special education fund technological support in schools. Moreover, providing the essence of the lived experiences of the participants was considered the overall aim of this transcendental phenomenological study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This study also applied the establishment of research rigor, verification, validation, and validity (Natividad and Galicia, 2021). Accordingly, research verification was achieved through in-depth literature readings, sticking to the phenomenological method of inquiry, suspending past experiences, keeping research notes and journals, utilizing a sufficient sample of participants (Creswell and Creswell, (2018); Natividad and Galicia, 2021), and conducting multiple interviews, as well as clarifying the responses of the participants, until data was refined. Thus, validation was reached through multiple data collection (e.g., observation, casual interview, in-depth interviews), and data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative-phenomenological study looked into the lived experiences of secondary school heads in the Division of Santa Rosa City who experienced receiving local government special education fund-derived technological support in the new normal of education.

1. As to the lived experiences of public secondary school heads on local government Special Education Fund (SEF) for technological support in the new normal education.

Theme 1: Intricate experiences in the new normal. As revealed from the statements, intricacies of the participants' roles were generally relative to their task and position, which adds burden and stress due to the bulk of work they needed to accomplish in

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order to comply with the demands of adapting the distance learning modality. Their challenges doubled and became overwhelming at the same time, which made it very exhausting. They also felt that their roles already exceeded their abilities to manage the situation in fulfilling successful implementation of the basic education continuity plan while adhering to health and safety protocols. The foregoing are evident in the following:

I can say that being a school head was really a difficult job most especially in this new normal setup. It added so much burden and stress for us leaders. Since there was a sudden shift, I and my team were alerted to prepare emergency action plans relative to the pandemic process in order to adjust with the demands of the situation to continue the learning-teaching process. Likewise stressful when I feel that the demands already exceeded my abilities to manage them accordingly (P1).

The findings was supported by Dias-Lacy and Guirguis, (2017), mentioned that lack of support from the department resulted to a higher level of stress and frustrations among school principals and teachers. The stress and anxiety felt were attributed to curriculum challenges, balance between personal and work demands, overloaded responsibilities, and preparation of emergency action plans. Moreover, Rotas and Cahapay, (2020), affirmed that stress and challenges were commonly encountered by school administrators on the implementation of distance learning modality in most developing countries.

Theme 2: Retort on transitional education. As explained by the participants, the abrupt transition in the education system to virtual learning resulted in the disruption of the normal teaching-learning, which brought apprehensions and uncertainties to school leaders because they were emotionally and mentally stressed on what to do in order to respond positively with the challenges of new normal, and how to provide digital tools necessary for virtual education given the unprepared condition of their schools.

Honestly upon knowing, I felt uncertain on what to do due to insufficiency of technological infrastructures in our school that may definitely fail to support the learners and teachers' needs in their virtual classes. Likewise, I don't know how to provide the necessary equipment necessary for distance learning (P 2).

I felt uneasy and sad in the sudden shift from physical to virtual classroom because I know that our school lacks preparedness and sufficient technological infrastructures, teachers and students lack sufficient technological equipment like ICT gadgets, lack of trainings, and poor access to internet connections (P4).

As explained by Downey et al., (2018), sudden shift from offline to online learning greatly affected all public schools with higher difficulties in adapting the new normal set-up, since they lack sufficient number of technological infrastructures in supporting the needs of all their learners. Although schools were determined and trying their best to adapt to ensure continuous education, still, efforts were not enough and on average, students experienced aggravated learning inequalities and learning losses.

Theme 3: Knowledge of local government SEF. As revealed by the participants, this fund comes from the city government allotted for the improvement of schools, operations, and support to quality basic education. During the COVID-19 pandemic period, this fund was aligned for the provision of technological devices or gadgets, which assisted teachers and students in their continuous delivery of education through distant means.

In my understanding, the local government Special Education Fund (SEF) is a fund coming from the city government allotted for the improvement of the schools (P1).

My understanding was that this local government SEF fund is used for the provision of technological devices or gadgets that will aid teachers in the continuous delivery of education through distant means and help students experience instruction using digital media (P2).

As stated in section 272 of RA No. 7160 - stipulated that the Special Education Fund (SEF) was allocated for the operation and maintenance of public schools, construction and repair of school buildings, facilities and equipment, payment of electric and water bills, payment of salaries, allowances and benefits of teaching and non-teaching personnel, establishment and maintenance of extension classes, creation of teacher items, educational research, purchase of books and periodicals, teaching aids, other instructional materials, and sports development in amounts determined by the local school boards (Republic Act No. 7160; Republic Act No. 5447; Mallari, 2017; Joint Circular No. 1, s. 2017). Likewise stated under Joint Circular No. 2, s. 2020, which mentioned that the acquisition of computers, laptops, tablets, printers, scanners, television, and radio peripherals to assist teaching and learning were charged against the local government special education fund.

Theme 4: Perceived support and downsides. With regard to the participants' experiences, local government units through their

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Special Education Fund supplemented a sufficient number of technological resources such as laptops for teachers and tablets for students both in public elementary and secondary schools in the City of Santa Rosa, Laguna, Philippines, in response to the dilemma of accessibility to distance learning in the new normal. With this, all students were able to keep pace with the distance learning modality. Despite this, there were responses relating to downsides, such as the difficulty of their learners in attending their online classes due to no access and/or poor access to internet connection, along with the unstable signal. The realities were associated with a lack of or limited financial resources among their students, since the majority of them belong to low-income family households.

The Local Government Units (LGU) provided laptop and printer for each teacher, tablet for each learner, and laptop for ICT personnel use, SIM card for each learner, digital duplicator or duplo machine for bulk printing of modules (P3).

SEF pursue the acquisition of computers and laptops for teaching and non-teaching personnel, and tablets for students to aid them in their online classes in the new normal situation (P 10).

If everyone uses a minimum bandwidth internet connection during online class, it will be difficult to access the internet connections (P 4).

In the Philippines, schools represented by the school heads, teachers and students afforded access to ICT devices for their distance learning in the new normal since local governments took initiative in allocating these resources from their Special Education (DILG, 2020; Malipot, 2020). According to Magallanes, (2020), the city government of Santa Rosa City, Laguna responded to the demands of blended education by distributing 36,830 android tablets to its public school students and teachers. Out of 36,830 tablets, about 15, 900 units were issued to the elementary pupils, 16,516 units for the junior high school students, and 4,414 units for the senior high school students.

Theme 5: Realization of fund accessibility and decision making. In this theme, the statements of the participants made it clear that accessibility to local government Special Education Fund promoted improvement and maintenance of schools, along with the operations. Indeed, it was also revealed that this fund was aligned to support quality basic education needs in response to the new normal condition. More so, responses also reiterate that when it comes to fund allocation, they lack knowledge of the process since they are not involved in the decision-making, rather, only highly intellectual officials are directly engaged. Decisions were just cascaded to them during their meeting with the Schools Division Office (SDO) head.

We gave request and information as to need and support to the validation of request. But when it comes to the decision on the prioritization of school needs, it was made by the higher officials (P 5).

I would say that we were not consulted in the planning of the fund but we can write a letter anytime address to the city mayor and noted by the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS) for whatever the school is needed but subject to the approval of the SDS and City Mayor based on the urgency and allocations per school (P1).

As reported by World Bank, (2016), individual schools do not know the exact amount of financial support provided to them by the local government from SEF allotments. This made it difficult in assessing the precise amount of local government special education funds that directly benefit the public schools. Findings of Ochada and Gempes, (2018) explained that school principals were used to prepare School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in a hit or miss way as a basis in the preparation and allocation of local school board budget obtained from the special education fund. Besides, all public schools together with their respective school heads are infrequently involved in the local government funding decisions.

Theme 6: Meeting the demands of distance learning. In this theme, it was explained by the participants that their teachers and students learned, and developed competence through acquiring additional knowledge and skills from exploring various platforms and modalities, which they applied in their teaching and learning tasks in the new normal to successfully meet the demands of distance. They have used various applications and features of their ICT devices confidently and critically at full range, which prepared them to deal with the current situation.

I can say that with the provisions of technological support from the local government, both teachers and students developed knowledge and skills through exploring their gadgets, which somehow prepared them in their digital learning tasks. Also, I can say that they are already equipped for distance learning because they were able to use various applications and features of their devices confidently and critically at full range. For instance, the teachers downloaded information and lessons whereas, learners have accessed their digital learning modules (P 4).

As explained by Armstrong-Mensa, (2020) that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, information and communications technology support through internet access emerged as the most recent method used in distance learning. With this, learners

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were able to obtain instructions and enriched their learning experiences through navigating the features of a computer, thus, encouraged them to join and listen live, and asynchronously connect to their teachers, and most likely were able to answer activities and problems without being physically present in the classroom (Klein, 2020; Armstrong-Mensah, 2020). Yet, with the technological resources provided to the teachers such as laptops, websites, and televised resources, they were able to comply with their online professional developments through utilizing and applying various online applications and modalities (Starkey et al., 2021).

Theme 7: Usefulness and impacts on school outcome. The responses of the participants depicted the usefulness of the ICT devices in aiding teachers and students in their teaching and learning. They used the devices for studying, searching for good information, communication, ease of workloads, regular submission of outputs, regular attendance in an online class, and access to teaching and learning materials, along with good source of sustainable activities. All these brought enhancement to teaching and learning, and digital literacy skills that positively contributed toward attainment of successful school outcomes.

My perception regarding local government SEF-derived technological support greatly impacted successful outcomes in terms of improved teaching and learning in the new normal education. Teachers were able to develop digital literacy making them creative and innovative, and engaging. Technological support allowed them to improve further their teaching pedagogies and were able to communicate effectively with their students along with giving extended assistance to students who finds difficulty in understanding the given tasks or activities. Students on the other hand, with the help of the tablets provided have allowed them to develop various learning styles, improved their motivations to learn more, including improvement of their academic performance (P 1).

As reported by the OECD, (2019), teachers' use of digital technologies, along with online digital tools ensured improvement of their pedagogical practices that are coherent to the learners' needs, competencies, and digital literacy. With the tangible technology support, learners were able to obtain instructions and enriched their learning (Klein, 2020; Armstrong-Mensah, 2020). Additionally, successful school outcomes in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic was attributed to the digital technology applications (Starkey et al., 2021; Cabigao, 2019).

2. As to how school head-participants face the issues and challenges of the local government Special Education Fund (SEF) for technological support in the new normal education.

Theme 8: Prioritizing health and security. The statements of the participants made it clear that distance learning allowed them to appreciate the concern of their department. This concern prevented them from being exposed to sickness during delivery and retrieval of students' learning modules. Provisions of special education fund - derived technological support as well as choosing distance learning signified relief and being grateful, since these allowed students to continue learning, teachers continue to teach, and school heads to do their jobs well while staying safe and secured at home.

With the provisions of gadgets by the city government in cooperation with DepEd, it gave us actually a relief and grateful that the Department opted for distance learning. This resulted for students to continue learning, teachers teach, and were able do our jobs well while staying safe at the comfort of our homes. Being exposed to sickness and deaths of friends and loved ones allowed us to appreciate the concern given to us by DepEd (P2).

As explained by Kaul et al., (2020), health and security, and well-being of the teachers, students and families were the top priority concerns. Staff members managed work from home style to manage properly their work without being compromised. Additionally, it was also explained that building a safe and trusting working environment for the personnel reciprocated better and broader responses addressing the needs of the community.

Theme 9: Sufficiency and equity of technological support. Surfacing in this theme are the participants' experiences of receiving sufficient and equitable local government fund-derived technological support that aid in ensuring DepEd's mission of successful implementation of distance learning and basic education learning continuity plan amid COVID-19 pandemic. The technological support allocation was considered sufficient, especially the number of laptops and microphones for teachers who were already in the service before the pandemic happened, along with the number of tablets for students who enrolled early. On the other hand, as explained by the participants, allocation for technological resources in every school was data driven, specifically based on the enrollment data.

Well, in terms of technological infrastructure such as structure and technological services, I can say that it was not sufficient. But when it comes to technological resources like ICT devices with software, all teachers and students have received

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sufficient numbers. Allocation of these technological infrastructures was based on the available data record of the school during enrollment (P 1).

I must say that all schools were given sufficient technological devices for distance learning. Also, supports given by the local government was timely and relevant in the needs of current condition (P 9).

Findings were opposed by Armstrong-Mensah et al., (2020) mentioned that lack of equitable access to technological infrastructures in public schools during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic was considered a major reason for struggling distance learning and failure in school outcomes. Moreover, findings of Cruz, (2021) and Starkey et al., (2021) revealed that inadequacy of information and communications technology (ICT) resources was also identified as a common issue among students, teachers, and parents, which made it constraining instead of engaging.

Theme 10: Congruency of actual needs. As said by the participants, they were provided with actual technological resources they need for the implementation of distance learning modality. They also said that during their management committee meeting, opportunity to voice out their needs were given to them in order to identify the top priority needs of their schools. Likewise, they were asked to submit request for the best and suited modality to be used. Through careful planning and consolidation done by the local school board representative of the Department of Education and the local government chairperson, provisions and budget allocation charged to the Special Education Fund was made.

In terms of infrastructures such as the technological equipment, the actual needs of the teachers and students for distance learning were provided (P 1).

Well, their provision answered our needs of providing technological resources and learning materials in the most economical ways for the school (P 2).

The local government unit through SEF allocation provided the actual technological needs of our school in the new normal education (P 3).

According to Gonzales, (2021), a partnership between the school and the community external stakeholders brought a productive outcome towards actualization of support like provisions of ICT devices, and successful implementation of modular distance learning across the country during the pandemic period. Moreover, purchases of schools in agreement with the priority need to be obtained in the SEF budget were indicated in the approved SIP and Division Education Development Plan (DEDP) with corresponding program, activity, and project (Mallari, 2017).

Theme 11: Operative management schemes. As seen by the participants, this scheme helped prevent lack of preparedness at the school level since their top priority needs to meet the demands of distance learning were supplemented, and addressed through efficient, effective and collaborative efforts. The proactive measures of the Department of Education representative and local government mitigated the challenges and issues brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. More so, with the innovative and ever-evolving plans in the aspect of proper scheduling, adjustment and alignment of needs, and strict compliance allowed participants who are in the fields to adapt and implement the basic education continuity plan.

Through leading the teachers in creating an innovative and ever-evolving plans that will ensure attainment of a successful teaching and learning outcomes amidst new normal situation. Also, proper planning of programs and projects to be allocated in the SEF budget. Increase coordination with the Schools Division Office (SDO) and local governments for efficient and effective handling of the challenges and issues of SEF-derived technological support in the new normal setting (P 1).

According to Arar and Nasra, (2020), explained that School-based management (SBM) was considered a strategy and a movement towards autonomy when it comes to shared-decision making and partnership within the school community ensuring effective school improvements and outcomes. Significantly, as an effective movement, it empowered individual local schools promote greater building decision-making and authority to manage properly their own processes and operations (Arar and Nasra, 2020; Ochada and Gempes, 2018).

Theme 12: Strategic fund allocation. As stressed by the participants, difficulty on direct accessibility and allocation of the local government fund-derived technological support in their schools were strategically resolved through their initiatives in preparing the school improvement plan where in their top priority needs, programs and projects to be budgeted were included. They also submit letter of requests as to their needs directly to the city mayor, noted by the Schools Division Superintendent, and then followed by increasing coordination for approval and provision.

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I always do a pre-assessment of priorities. Since SEF fund is allocated annually, procurement of technological needs and other equipment in school is included in the school Annual Implementation Plan and School Improvement Plan. I also submit request prior to the budget year so that it is included in AIP of Local government. This request is submitted to the division office for proper coordination (P 3).

As explained, the school heads of public elementary and secondary schools in collaboration with the community education stakeholders prepare and submit the DepEd approved three-year School Improvement Plan (SIP), along with some requests for funding, to the local school boards for checking, discussion, and consolidation of all requested budgets indicated by the schools in the city or municipality, and then coordinated to the local government units' municipality or city local school boards for review and approval of the SEF budget through a resolution for possible future translation of school-level allocated programs and projects (Joint Circular No. 1, s. 2017; Mallari, 2017).

Theme 13. Dynamism on trainings, webinars, and technical assistance. Participants' statements regarding experiences with suitable training, webinars, and continuous technical assistance provided by local government and the Department of Education allowed them to maximize the functionality of fund-derived technical resources. Dynamic teachers and students explored features and applications of the gadgets and led them to become digitally skilled. Also, with constant monitoring and assessment, improvements in teachers' pedagogy as well as improvements in students' academic performance in the new normal education were observed.

They provided a lot of trainings and webinars to support the school heads, teachers, parents and students to cope and adjust with the new normal education. These supplemented their needs to maximize the utilization of the SEF-derived technological resources (P 1).

Teachers improved their teaching pedagogies, while students have improved their academic performance (P 7).

According to Peterson et al., (2018), collaborative efforts between the government and school heads necessitate provisions for learners' to achieve proper guidance and motivation that leads toward active learning amidst the pandemic. This was done by supporting the teachers in their endeavor by providing them with digital tools that they incorporated into their pedagogical practices.

Theme 14. Collaboration towards positive support. Surfacing this theme are the experiences of participants in receiving financial, material, and technological support for successful translation of their ICT needs for distance learning, programs and projects for the overall success of school outcomes. Collaboration with community stakeholders by way inviting, welcoming, and allowing them in the school's planning and decision making, as well as in leading them towards alignment of the school's priority needs and educational objectives gave them the direction on what to do, how to help, and how to immediately provide knowing that the end beneficiaries are the learners amid current situation.

We adapt to the challenges and issues at hand. Help from stakeholders are welcomed (P 2).

The school's top priority is our learners, and we keep on finding ways to address and meet their needs especially now that we are adjusting in the new normal education. We strengthen collaboration with the local government through sending them requests for the provision of our technological resources to meet the demands of distance learning (P 6).

According to Hussein et al., (2018) mentioned and identified that community involvement played a big role in the financial commitment of the school, teachers' motivation at work, maintenance of school infrastructures, learning materials for students, salaries of teachers, and rehabilitation of school buildings. Moreover, it was further affirmed by Alcuizar, (2016), that support from stakeholders and good funding promoted effective teaching and learning process. The success of the school system was believed to be the result of shared responsibilities and good communication from the government, parents, school, community, and school administrators (Sumarsono et al., 2016).

Essence. The reality of local government special education fund technological support in the Philippines as shared by the collective accounts of the selected participants from the public secondary schools in the Division of Santa Rosa City, Laguna was an affirmation of their committed and devoted community experiences to the presence of local government fund allotment for technological support in the new normal. Although struggling in the early stages of the phenomenon, the participating school heads were confident, ready, and firm to stand for their mission through widening their roles in establishing active and strengthened collaboration with the community stakeholders through increased coordination and follow-ups to the higher ups, and sourcing for technical assistance from the department itself and to private organizations to provide training and workshops,

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and additional technological support for the enhancement of digital literacy skills and competence to match the demands of distance learning. Undeniably, provisions for technological devices in schools have allowed school heads, teachers, and students to comply with the demands of distance learning from the sudden transition. It brought relief since it promoted continuity of learning without compromising the health and safety of school community members. Conversely, there were downsides identified, like no access and/or poor access to internet connections and a lack of financial capacity for the majority of the students since their families belong to low-income households, which meant relying only on mobile data connections. These downsides generally cause major struggles for the current education system. But with the determination, dedication, and proactive responses of school leaders and the local government, these struggles have been mitigated.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The lived experiences of the participants of the local government special education fund for technological support in the new normal were intricate experiences as to their roles, retort on transitional education, knowledge of local government fund, perceived support and downsides in distance learning, realization of fund accessibility and decision making, meeting the demands of distance learning, and usefulness and impacts on school outcome. The coping mechanisms of the participants to deal with the challenges and issues of the local government fund for technological support in the new normal of education were prioritizing health and security, sufficiency and equity of technological support, congruency of actual needs, operative management schemes, strategic fund allocation, dynamism in trainings, workshops, and technical assistance, and active collaboration towards positive support for successful school outcomes. The findings imply that in the new normal, the provision of a local government special education fund for technological support in schools aided in the successful implementation of distance learning via virtual learning modality. The technological devices, such as laptops for teachers and tablets for students, helped a lot in complying with the required tasks while ensuring health and safety precautions. Successful school outcomes, in terms of improvement in the teaching and learning process, were achieved amid the new normal conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The complex experiences of school leaders as a result of their critical roles in confronting the new normal should be addressed properly by accepting the current situation bravely and employing low- and no-tech modalities to reach the most marginalized students. The Department of Education and the local government should support the emergency distance learning systems in public schools, such as online learning, radio, and blended learning, which require full accessibility of resources and are considered a long-term solution. Both should also focus on funding flexibility for necessary alignment in terms of purpose, priority needs, and condition in order to support future greater needs of schools and solve existing weaknesses in the area of education. Additionally, a One-Stop Portal for Teaching and Learning Resources should be provided in all public schools to ensure students without access can fully participate. They should also provide an innovative digital school model that offers a framework for schools to examine their own practices with digital technologies. On the other hand, the local government units' decision-making should be directed to schools so that drafted policies become more responsive to their local needs. The local school board authority of the Department of Education must communicate accurate information to the school heads regarding local governments' plans and assistance for public schools, including the amount of financial support from the Special Education Fund for the school heads to ensure precise budget allocation for programs and projects and for the fulfillment of the school's commitments and obligations. Lastly, school heads, local school boards, and local governments should strengthen adherence to and practice of transparency and accountability.

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