

## Pupils at Risk of Dropping Out in Modular Distance Learning: A Qualitative Inquiry

Linor B. Majestad  
linor.majestad001@deped.gov.ph  
Laureta Elementary School, Tagum City Division, Region XI  
Philippines

### ABSTRACT

The new average education transformed the classroom into a home school. This study aimed to find out the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of the pupils at risk of dropping out in modular distance learning. The participants of this study were the grade 6 pupils at risk of dropping out. Purposive sampling was used in this study to choose the participants from the elementary schools of Tagum City. The researcher employed a qualitative phenomenological research design using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions on gathering participants' information. Results showed that learners struggle in utilizing self-learning modules in this new normal education. However, some expressed that it shaped them into independent ones. They find ways to cope with those burdens happening in modular distance learning. Furthermore, learners did their best to study at home with the help of their family members. Findings suggest that constant teacher communication, parents' support, and proper motivation may be intensified to address the concerns of difficult lessons. Moreover, the Department of Education may provide programs to support the teachers, parents, and learners in enhancing modular study.

*Keywords:* pupils at risk of dropping out, modular distance learning, phenomenology

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal functioning of various activities worldwide, including learning and education. This global crisis is overwhelming the functioning and outcomes of the education system.

This affects all children on multiple factors, including their country, ages, family backgrounds, and degree of access to educational opportunities. The children lack daily access to school, basic support, lose out on group activities, team sports, and recreational activities (Garcia, 2020).

The shutdown of schools posed major challenges to students. The virus consigned nearly 55 million U.S. school children under 18 to stay in their homes, with 1.4 billion out-of-school or childcare across the globe. Many children struggle with academic stress and find it difficult to receive effective instruction (Kislitsyn, 2020).

According to the Department of Education, a new era of learning is to be experienced by the learners. They are to utilize self-learning modules at home with the support of their parents or guardians. The use of modules encourages

independent study. The benefit of using modules for instruction is the acquisition of better self-study. Pupils engage themselves in learning the concepts presented in the module. They develop a sense of responsibility in accomplishing the tasks provided in the module. With little or no assistance from others, the learners progress independently. They are empowered and learning how to learn (Quinones, 2020).

It will be challenging to identify which pupils struggle most and how much learning and development they have lost. A strengthened system based on meeting children where they are and providing them with what they need will be vital to lifting children (Agyemang, 2020).

When teachers measure and assess children's learning, they consider how children learn and acquire knowledge. Teaching and assessing children need to be done within a framework that understands that each child may have learned differently and different things. They were designing what is best to lift them to make up for the extended out-of-school sessions and disruptions (Cluver, Whipple, & Tarasawa, 2020).

Moreover, the researcher wants to determine the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of the grade six pupils on how they handle modular distance learning through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design study utilizing a phenomenological approach. Qualitative researchers approach the world from a very different perspective. It means that all the qualitative methods view the world as subjective rather than objective (Dodgson, 2017).

Creswell (2018) explained that phenomenology's purpose is to define the meaning of this experience, both in terms of what happened and how it happened. It allowed the researcher to dive into the views, understandings, and sentiments of persons who had witnessed or lived through the phenomena or circumstances in question. Therefore, the qualitative phenomenology research design was used in this study to determine the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of grade six pupils at risk of dropping out in modular distance learning.

### Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. It described the participants' interpretations of their experiences in modular distance learning. The participants are encouraged to respond to the provided questions through soft copy or hard copy. They were requested to participate in a face-to-face focus group discussion. Data analysis, themes, and common patterns will be formed from their responses.

This study used a phenomenological approach, which stated that it is an approach to qualitative research that describes the meaning of a lived experience of a phenomenon for several individuals. To describe the commonalities of the experience. Neubaurer (2019) added that this approach is positioned to help professionals or students to learn from the experiences of others.

### Research Participants

The participants of this study were the grade six pupils who responded to the questions prepared by the researcher. This study was participated in by 13 pupils at risk of dropping out in school and was selected through purposeful sampling. There were seven Grade 6 participants invited to the in-depth interview, but only six responded to the invitation. The participants answered orally, and the researcher recorded the conversations with their consent. There were 7 grade six participants in the focus group discussion, which was done physically with the consent of their parents. Data analysis is made after the IDI and FGD. Themes and common patterns were formed from their responses.

### Data Gathering Procedure

In gathering the data, first, the researcher made a permission letter duly signed by the researcher's school head. Second, asked permission from the office of the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS). Third, the researcher listed the names of possible participants in the study and approached them if they were willing to participate. Fourth, secured the parent's consent and informed assent to the participants since they are minors. Then they underwent orientation before conducting an in-depth interview (IDI) and focus group discussion (FGD). IDI and FGD aim to learn more about the interviewee's experience and viewpoint on a particular topic.

Fifth, the researcher conducted an IDI and FGD to the 13 grade six pupils using the research questionnaire guide and voice recorder to record the conversation.

Sixth, the researcher transcribed the data *verbatimly*, translated, and thematically analyzed it.

### Data Analysis

In analyzing qualitative data, it followed the idea of Wong (2018). Data analysis is a process of reading the transcripts for how many times to increase understanding about the phenomenon and look for similarities and differences to find the themes and develop categories.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze information and systematically gain knowledge about the phenomenon. It can help the researchers move from a broad reading of data toward discovering patterns. As suggested by Boyatzis (2017), there were five processes of thematic analysis: (1) Collect data from different sources, (2) Coding data in which the code should be clear and concise, (3) Code validation to ensure the integrity of the codes, (4) Themes or frameworks identification, and (5) Information consolidation and finalize the themes. Employing the trustworthiness of this study, follow the suggestions of Lincoln and Guba (2019). They cited the importance of evaluating the worth of the study, like establishing its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

After the interviews were conducted with 13 grade six participants, the researcher analyzed the data. It has been translated, transcribed to introduce the emergent themes. They were formed based on the participants' in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. The themes formulated from the core ideas they answered are the details of struggling learners, intervention, family support, and character building.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The participants' involvement was entirely voluntary. They had the option to withdraw their participation at any time during the study if they felt uncomfortable. The confidentiality of research participants' information was maintained, as was the anonymity of participants.

The participants were given informed consent/assent and fully informed about the objectives, methods, and benefits of the research as comprehensively as possible within the framework of the study. The researcher ensured that the participants would be physically, emotionally, and socially ready and not feel awkward in answering the research questions.

The researcher correctly cited the literature used in this study. There was no clue in the research of deliberate misreading of what had been done, no making up of data and outcomes, or

purposely putting forward false conclusions.

## **RESULTS**

Presented below were the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of pupils at risk of dropping out in modular distance learning. It includes the emergent themes supported by the participants' responses from in-depth interviews and focus group discussion.

### ***Experiences of Pupils-at-Risk of Dropping Out in the Modular Distance Learning***

The in-depth interview and focus group discussion were done to gather the experiences of the grade six pupils at risk of dropping out in modular distance learning. It is shown in table 1 the major themes for this section.

The results showed in the IDI and FGD with the participants that one of the major themes is getting family support. IDI-01, IDI-03, IDI-04, and FGD-04 shared that the family had a great influence on the academic accomplishments of the participants. Their parents were the facilitators of learning and needed them to study self-learning modules. The second theme revealed during the interview is accomplishing the module independently. IDI-03 shared that he accomplished answering the modules alone because he had a goal of graduating from elementary. He worked hard because of his objective. Agreed by FGD-01 said with similar experience in studying with minimal supervision developed his sense of independence. Since technology is rampant in this generation, IDI-02 shared that he explored using the internet as the third theme in editing video in his performance task. The same experience was shared by FGD-02, finding comfort in accomplishing her assignment through the google site. Shared by IDI-05, IDI-06 FGD-03, and FGD-07, the fourth theme, which is struggling with difficult topics, challenged them to find ways to solve hard lessons in the module. The fifth theme is using modules with discrepancies. IDI-04 shared that she used modules with unreadable texts and blurred images. She called up the teacher and asked for the

correct module. FGD-01 also shared that he utilized rumbled pages of the module. He asked assistance from his sister to help him arrange the pages properly.

### ***Coping Mechanisms of Pupils-at-Risk of Dropping Out in the Modular Distance Learning***

With the challenges that the participants experience studying modular distance learning, the following major themes shown in table 2 reveal during the collection of information in IDI and FGD.

It is evident to the participants that they are persevering to finish the study despite today's pandemic. IDI-02, IDI-03, IDI-04, IDI-05, and IDI-06 shared that they strive to answer the activities in the module even in the absence of their professional teachers. FGD-02 and FGD-03 expressed that studying at home did not hinder their learning. Self-study with the assistance of parents gained self-learning.

The second theme is developing study habits. IDI-02, IDI-03, and FGD-04 shared that they independently answered activities in the modules. Since their parents were working and did not have enough time to assist them. IDI-01 and FGD-06 shared that they practiced multitasking in modular learning. Videoing self while doing chores for their performance tasks.

The third theme is releasing stress. IDI-01, IDI-04, IDI-05, FGD-05, and FGD-06 shared that numerous modules per week got them pressured because of the various activities to be done as instructed in the modules. They engaged in planting with their parents. They participated in cooking or baking. Some basic skills have been developed in this pandemic time. Another way to release stress was to play outdoor games with friends to unwind.

The fourth theme is managing time. IDI-02, IDI-03, and FGD-01 shared that their parents followed the schedule of picking and returning self-learning modules every Tuesday. They see to it that they answered the activities in the modules within the time duration. IDI-04, IDI-06, FGD-01, FGD-02, and FGD-03 expressed that they made a daily schedule to avoid work cram. Time management helped them gain accomplishment daily.

The fifth theme which transpires during the interview with the participants is resolving module concerns. IDI-03, IDI-04, IDI-07, FGD-01, and FGD-02 said that they contacted their teachers to consult on the technical problems of the module. They knew that teachers were the writers of the module, so they believed their queries would be entertained.

### ***Insights of Pupils-at-Risk of Dropping Out in Modular Distance Learning***

Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion, the grade six pupils shared their insights in handling modular distance learning. Table 3 shows the major themes in this section.

It transpires during the interview that learners want gadgets to use in their study. IDI-01, IDI-02, IDI-06, FGD-04, and FGD-05 shared that cell phone or laptop is a great help because they can join the online class and search in Google explore the apps.

The second theme is improving oneself. IDI-04, FGD-01, FGD-02, and FGD-07 shared that they wanted training in the use of technology because they knew how useful it is in this recent time.

The third theme is spending time with family. IDI-03 and FGD-01 expressed that they appreciated much the effort exerted by their parents from getting the modules, assisting in answering the module, and facilitating the modular learning. After which, parents teach basic skills to learners like baking, planting, and doing chores.

The fourth theme is appreciating the teacher's effort. IDI-04, IDI-06, and FGD-03 shared that they appreciated the teachers' effort in writing, printing, sorting, and arranging the modules intended for the pupils. Though physical contact is impossible, the constant communication of their teachers was relevant.

The fifth theme is hoping for the future. IDI-05, FGD-04, and FGD-06 shared that they aim to be vaccinated. The protection and benefits brought by vaccines were their strongholds. They hoped for face-to-face learning because formal education in school is incomparable.

## DISCUSSION

The viewpoint of Mills (2021) stated that the modular approach situated students to learn in the comfort of their homes. The possibility that they worked on the modules for mere compliance, not for the sake of learning.

Palmer (2020) stressed that learners with different needs have their challenges. They need more attention and understanding, considering that lessons require the presence of facilitators. They should pay attention to their parents or guardians as their facilitators. They gave a chance to listen to their parents to continue learning.

However, Gilreath (2020) expressed that some students attended modules independently, but some needed assistance to understand the lessons in the prescribed modules. Others, even with facilitators, still have difficulty comprehending the lessons and thus can hardly proceed to the following lessons. Submission deadlines for modules further create pressure on students, especially when they fail to meet them.

The concept of Torto (2020) is that students consider distance education to be highly aware of their learning style and learning environment that best fits their needs. A typical distance learning environment requires pupils to be autonomous, self-regulated, and independent. As learners research distance learning programs, they should be vigilant of their level of need for community, autonomy, availability of opportunities to learn effectively and personally meaningful.

As Wong (2021) suggested, parents were vital partners in educating learners. This is true today since face-to-face classes are not allowed amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Learners without resources to attend online classes are provided with learning modules that they will use to continue in school for this School Year 2021-2022.

### ***Implications for Teaching Practice and Further Research***

In modular distance learning brought challenges to the learners because of its rare experience. The Department of

Education directs the planning, implementing, and evaluating of the educational process. Find ways to lighten the burden of this modular distance learning. Consider some suggestions and recommendations raised by the parents and learners. School heads would come up with an appropriate solution to meet a variety of problems and challenges in ensuring the effective and efficient operation of modular distance learning.

Teachers should design the course and set the needs of learners. Assume responsibilities for preparation and presentation of learning tasks. Immediately consult with learners to correct problems and keep track of their tasks. Monitor, assess, and evaluate learners' performance.

Parents continued the unfailing love, care, untiring support, and effort to teach the learners. Do not be discouraged in handling education for your children. Prolong patience and perseverance. Always think of a better future for your children.

Learners should strive more to learn, even in modular distance learning. Adopt the changing procedure of the study. The changes happened in education, such as distance learning and the increase in the diversity of students. Distance learning seems comparable to face-to-face courses in terms of performance-based outcomes. But satisfaction levels of students enrolled in distance learning are much lower than studying face-to-face environments and are vulnerable to drop-out.

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