

WORKING PAPER

Learning while Flattening the Epidemic Curve: A Policy Paper on the Resumption of Philippine Education amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippine government implemented distance learning through the Department of Education's blended learning and the Commission on Higher Education's flexible learning policies for the resumption of basic and higher education classes in the Philippines for the academic year 2020-2021. However, these policies were criticized as "anti-poor," with some sectors calling for an academic freeze instead. This policy paper examines these policies alongside its policy system through a stakeholder analysis. It then takes a look at whether the government's policies are the appropriate response to such policy concern. Three key alternative policy options are also evaluated. Based on the policy analysis, several recommendations are formulated with the end view of ensuring that education would not be neglected in the new normal. Among the recommendations is the implementation of a short-term academic freeze preceding the resumption of distance learning classes to provide ample time for capacity building.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic, Philippine education, distance learning, flexible learning, blended learning*



The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has plunged the world into uncertainties, including the education sector. The United Nations (2020) sums up the plight of the education sector amid the pandemic as follows: “from the onset of the pandemic, teachers were immediately tasked with implementing distance learning modalities, often without sufficient guidance, training, or resources” (p.14). The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2020), in fact, branded this pandemic as a “global crisis for teaching and learning” and emphasized the urgency of additional support for educators as “this pandemic highlights the need for more trained teachers” (p.2). The Philippines is no exception as the government grapples with the daunting tasks of containing the contagion and anticipating the gradual resumption of physical face-to-face classes. In the meantime, educational institutions adopted alternative means of distance learning, with the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as the most common channel of learning delivery, notwithstanding issues and challenges such as the digital divide (see Joaquin et al., 2020; Simbulan, 2020).

In response, the Philippine government undertook two approaches to continue education amid the restrictions imposed to stem the spread of COVID-19. The Department of Education (DepEd) implemented what it termed as “blended learning” through the issuance of DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2020 on 19 June 2020. On the other hand, the Commission on Higher Education’s (CHED) issued CHED COVID Advisory No. 7 on 24 May 2020. The advisory served as guidelines for what it called “flexible learning.” These two policy approaches are examined (1) as an *output*, particularly the features of these policies, and (2) as a *process*, particularly the policymaking process that produced such policies.

Policies as an Output

DepEd’s Blended Learning

DepEd developed its major response to the disruption brought by COVID-19 to the country’s basic education through the Basic Education – Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). The essential points of the BE-LCP are:

- 1) opening of private schools within the period provided by law;¹
- 2) submission of school learning continuity plan;
- 3) allowing of face-to-face learning only when the local risk severity grading permits, and subject to compliance with minimum health standards; and
- 4) adoption of various learning delivery such as but not limited to face-to-face, blended learning, distance learning, and homeschooling and other modes of delivery depending on the local COVID Risk Severity Classification and compliance with minimum health standards. (DepEd, 2020a, para. 2)

The BE-LCP specifies distance learning and blended learning as the learning modalities that would operationalize the said policy. DepEd defines “distance learning” as “a learning delivery modality where learning takes place between the teacher and the learners who are geographically remote from each other during instruction” (DepEd, 2020b, p.31). It has three types: (1) *modular distance learning*, which involves individualized instructions through self-learning modules (SLMs); (2) *online distance learning*, which allows interactive synchronous instruction through videoconferencing where learners may also download learning materials from DepEd Commons and DepEd Learning Resources Portal; and (3) *TV/radio-based instruction*, which converts SLMs to video lessons and radio scripts for television- and radio-based instructions through the government’s television and radio stations (DepEd, 2020b; Magsambol, 2020a). *Blended learning*, on the other hand, refers to “a learning delivery that combines face-to-face with any or a mix of online distance learning, modular distance learning, and tv/radio-based instruction” (DepEd, 2020b, p.32).

Furthermore, included in the strategies provided by the BE-LCP is the streamlining of the K-12 curriculum into the “most essential learning

¹ The law referred herein is Republic Act 7977 of 1994 or “An Act to Lengthen the School Calendar from Two Hundred (200) Days to not more than Two Hundred Twenty (220) Class Days,” which provides that “the school year shall start on the first Monday of June but not later than the last day of August” (Section 3, R.A. 7977).



competencies” (MELCs), which are “competencies that a learner needs in order to continue the subsequent grades, and ultimately have a successful life” (DepEd, 2020b, p.29).

CHED’s Flexible Learning

In response to the uncertainties of the academic year 2020-2021 in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, CHED pushes for *flexible learning* (FL) arrangements in higher education institutions (HEIs). CHED Chairperson Prospero de Vera stated that moving towards flexible learning is a practical solution to temporarily replace face-to-face or residential learning (Cervantes, 2020). For HEIs, the opening of classes for academic year 2020-2021 shall be based on the delivery mode of each institution. CHED COVID Advisory No.7 provided the resumption of classes any time after 31 May 2020 for HEIs using full online education; any time in August 2020 for HEIs employing flexible learning; and no earlier than 1 September 2020 for HEIs holding significant face-to-face or in-person classes (CHED, 2020a). HEIs using the old academic calendar (June-May) were encouraged to shift to the new calendar and start in August 2020 or later in the year.

The draft guidelines on the implementation of flexible learning offers strategies and modalities that may be adopted by both public and private HEIs in the country for the academic year 2020-2021. It defines “flexible learning” as:

the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions that address learners’ unique needs in terms of place, pace, process, and products of learning. It involves the use of digital and non-digital technology, and covers both face-to-face/in-person learning and out-of-classroom learning modes of delivery or a combination of modes of delivery (CHED, 2020b, p.2).

Three learning modalities may be utilized in the implementation of flexible learning and teaching: off-line, blended, and online learning (CHED, 2020b). In the adoption of a specific modality, determining the level of technology of teachers and learners is

critical. In the draft guidelines, such level is divided into three categories-high-level, medium-level, and low-level technology-depending on availability of technology, quality of internet connection, and proficiency in digital literacy (SEAMEO INNOTECH, as cited in CHED, 2020b, pp. 2,4).

Blended and Flexible Learning Policy as a Process²

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis of this magnitude, the established stages of the policy cycle can still be applied and contextualized.

1) Seeking Information to Define Societal Problems.

How can education then proceed amid a pandemic? The fundamental problems include:

- a. traditional face-to-face classes are both deemed harmful and a logistical problem;
- b. although online learning is seen as the alternative to face-to-face classes, it is impossible for everyone to immediately procure their own gadgets and access stable internet connection;
- c. if online learning is tapped as the primary learning modality, the already prevalent digital divide in this country would be made more apparent; if TV-based/radio-based instruction
- d. is the next alternative to online learning, producing TV or radio shows is costly;
- e. if the last alternative is the printed learning modules, the perceived ineffectiveness of self-learning may result from the learner’s unwillingness and the lack of guidance; and
- f. if blended/flexible learning proceeds, some students would not be able to participate effectively, thereby raising the concern on equity.

² The stages of policy process used in this section are adopted from Mendoza (1998, pp. 32-36).



The problem of pursuing education amidst a pandemic therefore is not only a question of methodology, but of quality and equity, which are the most important considerations in the learning experience of the students.

2) Agenda Setting. Starting March 2020, many student unions organized their respective online protests criticizing the abrupt shift to online classes to finish the school/academic year. Some segments of the student population called for mass promotion, which were heeded by some universities and most schools (Mercado, 2020). With regard to the opening of classes in 2020-2021 school/academic year, the President stated that there would be no face-to-face classes until a vaccine is produced and made available. Some associations of school owners misconstrued this pronouncement as suspension of classes and pleaded for the rethinking of alternative learning modalities. On the other hand, with the safety of their children as the top priority, many parent associations expressed support for the pronouncement (Mateo, 2020).

3) Search for and Analysis of Alternatives.

With the absence of the traditional face-to-face classes, both DepEd and CHED reformulated their learning policies as follows: a) online classes through videoconferencing; b) distribution of self-learning modules; and c) radio/television-based learning in the case of DepEd. The first option is regarded as the mainstream alternative learning modality of the new normal education. However, issues regarding access to stable internet connection and gadget/device and the prevalent digital divide could not be disregarded. On top of these issues are budgetary constraints due to the economic downturn induced by the pandemic. With regards to the second option, the quality of self-learning and the capability of parents and guardians to assist the learners must be pondered on. The third option is costly in terms of production and its quality is uncertain since it similarly points to issues on the quality of self-learning. These options are not three separate options

because they can be seen as comprising a hierarchy of alternative learning modalities and, therefore, each modality must be applied to the appropriate sector of learners in terms of socioeconomic considerations, learning quality, and access concerns, among others.

4) Deciding on the Best Choice. Since the aforementioned options are not mutually exclusive, the government adopted all of these into one package policy referred to as blended learning by DepEd and—excluding the TV-based/radio-based instruction—flexible learning by CHED. The Inter-Agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) already approved DepEd's proposal, which was supported by the President through his pronouncements (Aguilar, 2020). Later on, the President revealed his doubts on the policy stemming from the lack of resources needed for alternative learning modalities, especially the needed technology (Gita-Carlos, 2020).

5) Policy Implementation. Following consultations, DepEd and CHED have launched these policies. The government spearheaded the procurement of needed resources. The President himself expressed his strong will in pooling the resources needed by far-flung regions (Mendez, 2020). Moreover, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) said that some local government units (LGUs) are willing to provide public schools with tablets, laptop computers, and other gadgets to aid the learning of students. The DILG, however, reminded LGUs to comply with the respective specifications and standards for learning equipment set by DepEd (Chavez, 2020).

6) Policy Monitoring and Evaluation. As the situation during these times remains fluid, regular monitoring must be supervised by both DepEd and CHED through their respective regional offices. DepEd Secretary Leonor Briones assured that DepEd “will provide regular readiness assessment reports to the public” (Hernando-Malipot, 2020a, para. 16). On the part of CHED, Chairperson Prospero



De Vera “urged colleges and universities to immediately assess their situation and evaluate if they will be able to handle the implementation of flexible learning” (De Guzman, 2020, para. 7).

Blended and Flexible Learning in the Context of the Policy System

Policy Environment

The environment surrounding the policy of blended and flexible learning is problematic, haphazard, and sudden.

Socioeconomic Characteristics

Existing policies on education primarily bank on access to digital technology. Accessibility in terms of purchasing capacity and knowledge on usage is manifestation of varying socioeconomic factors. In 2015, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA, 2019) reported that the level of urbanization in the country is at 51.2% in 2015. This implies that the other half of the population are less exposed to modern technology. Telecommunication signals are unable to reach far flung areas. Moreover, the capacity to procure the needed technology is significantly hindered by the declining quality of life amid the pandemic. Results of the Social Weather Station (SWS, 2020) survey showed that 83% of Filipinos perceived their conditions have worsened. The socioeconomic challenge is thus two-pronged: many are yet to be fully exposed to technology and more are worse off today.

Technology

In addition to the capability of purchasing the needed technology, another facet that must be considered is the quality of technology present in the Philippines. This consideration stems from the country’s information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures that remain ineffective and inefficient. In 2017, the Philippines ranked 101st out of 176 countries in the ICT Development Index survey (International Telecommunication Union, 2017). In Akamai Technologies’ state of the Internet report in

2017, the Philippines, alongside India, once again had the lowest average connection speeds among Asia-Pacific countries (Akamai, 2017). One of the probable reasons for this is the long-established telecommunication duopoly in the country (Oxford Business Group, n.d.).

Physical Environment

The country is in the midst of a pandemic, with a virus that remains to be rapidly transmitted. Thus, the “new normal” is founded on physical distancing, staying at home except when essential, and avoiding heavily congested places. Therefore, the perennial problem of lack of classrooms will not be a factor. Proceeding with traditional face-to-face classes is discouraged to avoid South Korea’s experience of reopening schools and then closing them once again after a huge spike in the number of new cases (BBC News, 2020). Traditional physical classes, at least in the current context, are not permissible and, therefore, distance learning must be explored since it is the state’s priority not only to continue education but to manage the contagion as well.

Demographics

As of this writing, the general community quarantine protocols mandate that only those aged 22 to 59 years old are permitted to go out of their homes. Given this rule, it is not permissible for most students to physically attend their classes even in limited capacity. The restriction gleams from the fact that young people who may not be severely ill of COVID-19 could be potential carriers most especially if they are left unnoticed (Pomeroy, 2020).

Policy Stakeholders

The policy stakeholders are the ones operating in the policy environment because they either have an influence on the policy or are influenced by the policy. Using Anderson’s (1975, as cited in Mendoza, 1998, p. 175) classification of stakeholders, the *official stakeholders*, or those who have the legal authority in the formulation of public policies that address the COVID-19 pandemic, are as follows:



- 1) Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), composed of various government departments and agencies, which is the task force convened to serve as government's key policymaking body during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 2) President Rodrigo Duterte, who approves the resolutions of the IATF;
- 3) Department of Health (DOH), represented by its Secretary who acts as the chairperson of the IATF, acts as provider of expert opinions and information on public health and the status of the management of the pandemic and the country's health system;
- 4) Department of Education (DepEd) which is mandated to manage the basic education system;
- 5) Commission of Higher Education (CHED), the governing body for tertiary and graduate education;
- 6) the legislature, which, through its committees on basic education and higher education, conducts hearings to craft policies on distance learning and other related policies.

Meanwhile, the following are the *unofficial stakeholders*, who affect or are also affected by policies but do not have direct influence on formulating policies:

- 1) student unions and movements, such as National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP) and *Samahan ng Progresibong Kabataan* (SPARK);
- 2) teacher unions, such as Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) - Philippines and Teachers' Dignity Coalition (TDC);
- 3) school federations and organizations, such as Federation of Associations of Private School Administrators (FAPSA) and Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations (COCOPEA);

- 4) parent associations, such as National Parents-Teachers Association;
- 5) policy think tanks, such as the University of the Philippines (UP) COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team and Philippine National Research Center for Teacher Quality (RCTQ); and
- 6) other interest groups, such as Save the Children Philippines and Philippine Business for Education (PBE).

Linkages and Influences of the Policy Environment and Stakeholders

Stakeholder position is influenced and affected by the policy environment. First, the worsening socioeconomic condition of the country fuels the passionate calls of the progressive interest groups to not proceed with the opening of classes unless the pandemic is resolved or has at least subsided. The calls are founded on certain notions surrounding distance learning in the pandemic. One of these notions is that only face-to-face classes can bridge the digital divide across different socioeconomic groups of the learners. Second, technology motivates the advocates of distance learning to argue for additional support for the development of the country's ICT. This argument banks on the fact that online learning is just one of the many learning modalities proposed in these policies. Third, the pandemic renders attending school classes unfavorable during a public health crisis, but the government's mandate remains clear—education must continue. Fourth, the youth sector is said to be vulnerable to COVID-19 and could be a potential driver of the pandemic. The fourth argument worried most of the parents who place the safety of their children as the primary consideration.

Given these arguments, the main policy problem is finding the balance between the priority of continuing education and the appropriateness and quality of the modalities by which such priority could be pursued. The government argues that alternative learning modalities are the way to go while various stakeholders have expressed their concerns on its quality and most importantly, its equity of access.

Stakeholder Analysis

This paper employs stakeholder analysis by integrating Meltsner's (1978) Format 1 and Moharir's (1990) Format 2 (as cited in Mendoza, 1998, p. 182). Table 1 presents the motivations, relevance to the

issue, and source of power behind the respective positions of the stakeholders with respect to the policy problem of continuing education amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Stakeholder Matrix

Stakeholders	Motivations/ Value/ Beliefs	Issue Relevance	Resources/Power	Stand or Response on the Issue
IATF-EID	Contain the COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	The IATF approved that classes may open as early as June 2020. However, there must be no face-to-face classes before 24 August 2020 (Valente, 2020)
President Rodrigo Duterte	Contain the COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	The President supports alternative distance learning modalities, most especially DepEd's blended learning (PCOO, 2020).
DOH	Contain the COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	"Non-pharmaceutical measures along with the plan of the Department of Education to safely deliver lessons in blended platforms would complement each other" (Magsino, 2020, para. 5).
DepEd	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	"Education must continue whether face-to-face or virtual, with or without physically going to school" (Briones, n.d., para. 6). DepEd also affirmed the readiness of the country for blended learning, with 87% of teachers with gadgets at home and experience in distance learning (Lopez, 2020).
CHED	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	CHED pushes for flexible learning and assured that all preparations are underway (Cervantes, 2020).
Senate Committee on Basic Education	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	The committee chair opposes "academic freeze" (Bordey, 2020) but stresses that no learner must be left behind. He enjoins the DepEd to "ensure the preparedness of students, teachers, and parents in using their distant learning materials" (Senate of the Philippines, 2020a, para. 9).
Senate Committee on Higher, Technical, and Vocational Education	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	Recognizing the digital divide, the committee chair argues against mandatory online learning and proposes the creation of a "credit facility" to aid parents and learners to procure the needed technology (Domingo, 2020).
House Committee on Basic Education and Culture	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	The committee chair supports alternative learning modalities as long as the details and the policy itself is clearly communicated (Hernando-Malipot, 2020b).
House Committee on Higher and Technical Education	Continue education amid COVID-19 pandemic	High	Formal authority	The committee chair filed House Bill 6706 "to provide assistance for the upgrade and rehabilitation of ICT infrastructure and connectivity of state-run HEIs" (Luci-Atienza, 2020, para. 6).

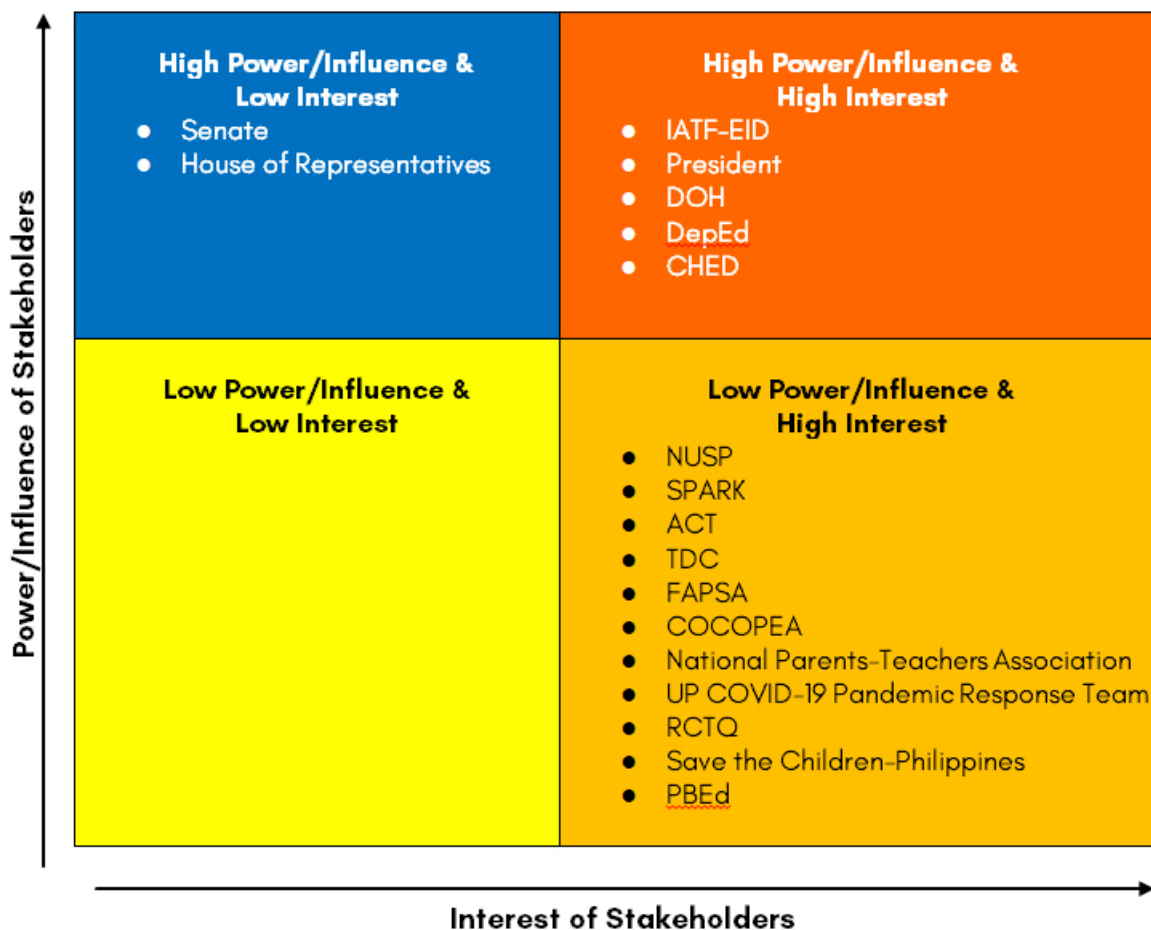


National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP)	Address the pandemic first before discussing the opening of classes	Moderate	Support/complaint	NUSP “asserts that flexible learning, the proposed alternative to on-campus classes, is anti-poor and too burdensome for Filipino families in this time of crisis” (NUSP, 2020, para. 7).
Samahan ng Progresibong Kabataan (SPARK)	CHED disregards the students’ welfare in their policy	Moderate	Support/complaint	SPARK condemns CHED’s <i>flexible learning</i> as businesses-as-usual approach which “means a return to regularly scheduled exploitation and suffering, with the added bonus of needing an Internet connection to keep up” (SPARK, 2020).
Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT)	Address the gaps in education and the socioeconomic crisis brought by this pandemic before opening classes	Moderate	Support/complaint	Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT)-Philippines contended that DepEd’s policy disadvantages the poor and “allows the government to delay or forego building safe schools and resolving the crises in the Philippine education system” (ACT-Philippines, 2020, para. 1).
Teachers’ Dignity Coalition (TDC)	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Support/complaint	TDC supports President Duterte’s pronouncement of no vaccine-no classes and affirms DepEd’s blended learning as long as preparations are satisfactorily in place (Galvez, 2020).
Federation of Associations of Private School Administrators (FAPSA)	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Support/Complaint	FAPSA said that its member schools are determined to open classes by June and further delay “will kill smaller private schools due to revenue losses and exodus of teachers, among others” (Hernando-Malipot, 2020c, para. 12).
Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations (COCOPEA)	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Support/complaint	COCOPEA believes that “academic freeze” is detrimental in the long run but government support is needed for the opening of classes (Hernando-Malipot, 2020d).
National Parents-Teachers Association-Marinduque	Continuing education amid COVID-19 is a challenge to parents	Moderate	Support/complaint	Signal for online learning and as well as TV/radio-based instruction is difficult, most especially in far-flung areas (ABS-CBN News, 2020).
University of the Philippines (UP) COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team	Delaying the physical opening of classes up to December will slow down the spread of COVID-19	Moderate	Expertise	UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team recommends the opening of physical classes in December, but alternative modalities must be implemented in the meantime (UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team, 2020).
Philippine National Research Center for Teacher Quality (RCTQ)	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Expertise	RCTQ supports DepEd’s blended learning (RCTQ, 2020).
Save the Children-Philippines	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Support/complaint	With consideration of the youth’s safety, Save the Children-Philippines supports DepEd’s blended learning (Save the Children-Philippines, n.d.).
Philippine Business for Education (PBE)	Continue education amid COVID-19	Moderate	Support/Complaint	PBE supports both DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning (PBE, 2020).

Gleaning from this matrix, a consensus on the government's policy of distance learning is observed with some reservations. The formal stakeholders, mainly the national government agencies, such as DepEd and CHED, have already set their priority on the said policy. However, the progressive interest groups remain critical most especially on the policy's equity of access, which, they argue, exacerbates the already dire situation of the education sector in the country. In fact, continuing education amid COVID-19, which is the consensus among most of the stakeholders identified in the matrix, is not the primary motivation of these interest groups. Rather, they assert that the government must exhaust all efforts in stabilizing the public health crisis in order to return to traditional face-to-face classes. Despite their opposite stance on the issue, the influence of the progressive stakeholders is moderate compared with the consensus of continuing education amid COVID-19 through alternative distance learning modalities.

A power/influence-interest grid is presented in Figure 1. First, the key government agencies, such as DepEd and CHED, are in the high power/influence-high interest quadrant, which indicates that the policies they formulated and would implement have greater leverage. Policy formulation and implementation are essentially part of these agencies' mandate and authority. Second, despite having similar high power/influence as a branch of government, the legislature has a relatively lower interest compared to the executive at least on the issue in continuing education amid a public health crisis. This relatively low interest is shown through its power of oversight, such as that on DepEd's blended learning and CHED's flexible learning. Since the legislature is in the quadrant of high power/influence-low interest block, and since it is the national government's main policymaking body, it is furnished with proofs of preparation and clearer communication of the policies. Third, being key stakeholders in educational concerns, the unions

Figure 1. Power/Influence-Interest Grid





and associations of students, teachers, parents, and schools have a high interest in the issue, even though they are afforded with lower power/influence. Nonetheless, the consensus among agencies and branches of government is not strikingly different from that of the informal stakeholders, except the progressive interest groups. The prevailing sentiment is that continuing education should be prioritized amid the public health crisis. However, the dominant position also pushes for alternative distance learning modalities, which includes online learning, an area largely criticized by the progressive interest groups.

A Closer Look at the Policy Concern

Structuring the Problem

In the new normal, the government faces difficulty in implementing policies that help continue education amid the pandemic. Thus, the main problem is, “How can education continue during a pandemic?” Using Dunn’s (2014) multiple perspective analysis as a problem structuring tool, this paper seeks to answer the question by identifying the antecedents or the causes, the components, and the consequences of the problem of continuing education amid COVID-19.

Technical Perspective

The pre-existing weaknesses of the Philippine’s education system are prevalent. As evidenced by the impact of past risk emergencies and disasters on the country’s education sector, the traditional face-to-face learning delivery has always been vulnerable to disruptions. In part, this is due to the system’s inability to modify standards of learning such that alternative learning modalities can be readily and effectively adopted (Aldama, 2020).

The digital divide is also an impediment to the successful implementation of alternative learning modalities in the country. The digital divide pertains to “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety

of activities.” (OECD, 2006, para. 1). In other words, the digital divide excludes sectors that do not have access to ICTs and individuals who are unequipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to adapt to these technologies.

The online learning modality, in particular, exacerbates the inequalities between privileged and disadvantaged students. The latter are forced to acquire gadgets and sources of internet connection beyond their means or, otherwise, to drop out from school (Aldama, 2020). As of 2019, only 46.88% of Filipinos are using the internet (World Bank Group, n.d.). Furthermore, teachers often fail to innovate learning methods that are inclusive for learners in diverse contexts (Aldama, 2020) due to their basic ICT skills proficiency (Caluza et. al., 2017). Moreover, ICT infrastructure in the country is inadequate. Since the Philippine government does not actively invest in ICT infrastructure, most of the investments are made by private telecommunications companies (Crisanto, 2017). Even so, the “debilitating bureaucracy and permitting issues” that these companies experience worsen the ICT infrastructure deficiency (Crisanto, 2017, para. 9).

Organizational Perspective

The efforts of schools to continue operating despite the public health emergency is hampered as the government struggles to effectively and efficiently implement alternative learning modalities. A study in the United States warns that “pandemic-related learning loss” may “undo months of academic gains” from the previous school year, excluding students whose home environments cannot cover independent learning (Kuhfeld et al., 2020 as cited by Terada, 2020, para. 1, 3). Aside from being a major health concern, the COVID-19 pandemic also worsens poverty and hunger issues (Dayrit & Mendoza, 2020). Moreover, the health policies enforced to mitigate the outbreak prevent many Filipinos from earning a living, as evidenced by the 7.3 million Filipinos who became jobless in April 2020 (Rivas, 2020). The economic recession worsens prevailing socioeconomic inequalities and the digital divide, which then threatens to widen the gaps in education. These and other more complicated problems are rooted in the government’s “reactive, ad



hoc, and inadequate” COVID-19 response (Quintos, 2020, p. 1).

Personal Perspective

Key decisionmakers concede that learning must continue with due emphasis on safety and quality. While progressive interest groups echo this sentiment, they also stress that the health crisis should be urgently addressed to secure the reopening of face-to-face classes, which is more conducive for quality, safe, and equitable education.

Developing Alternatives

The government’s policies of blended and flexible learning yielded mixed results. It is, thus, interesting to look into the following alternative policy options on the state of education amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Academic Freeze

Sape et al. (2020) argues that an “academic freeze” is the most plausible option for students, teachers, and school administrators. This option echoes the sentiments of progressive key stakeholders in consideration of the risks brought about by COVID-19 and the difficulties in learning associated with the digital divide. The academic freeze is a response to address the concerns of disadvantaged students who have limited access to ICTs. It also recognizes that reopening classes would burden economically challenged families, given that many workers were laid-off and small businesses were halted. Aside from economic or accessibility factors, it also considers the detrimental effects of the pandemic to the physical and mental health of students (Sape et al., 2020). On the other hand, the chair of the Senate Committee on Basic Education, opposes academic freeze; he argued that marginalized students would be left behind more and small private education institutions would be severely affected if the policy is implemented (Bordey, 2020).

Self-Learning

Modular learning, which is one of DepEd’s modalities for blended learning, excludes other options, such as online learning and TV-based/radio-

based instruction. Under this alternative, students will be provided with various educational tools and learning materials that they need to attain target learning outcomes. For this method, the Center for Teaching Excellence (n.d.) suggests the importance of assessing the students’ readiness to learn, set learning goals, engage in the learning process, and evaluate the learning. Central to this option is asynchronous learning. In this modality, learners can learn at their own pace without pressure from synchronous learning, which can only be realized through online platforms at this time. However, this option also needs access to ICT tools. DepEd Commons, an online library of educational resources developed by the DepEd, may help increase the effectiveness of self-learning.

Limited Face-to-Face Classes

The CHED chairperson Prospero De Vera (2020) announced that, with the guidance of the DOH, the agency is crafting guidelines for limited face-to-face classes (30% to 50% capacity) in low-risk areas, in which approval is subject to various health requirements. The Federation of Associations of Private School Administrators (FAPSA) suggests that face-to-face classes can be held twice a week for qualified areas (Hernando-Malipot, 2020e). A French study suggests that the risk of infection among students and teachers in schools is low (Institut Pasteur, 2020). In support, American epidemiologist Benjamin Linas (2020) argues that “the risks of [reopening face-to-face classes] are uncertain, but the benefits are clear” (para. 46).

Analyzing the Options

The abovementioned policy alternatives are then evaluated alongside DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning through Dunn’s (2014) *decision criteria for policy prescription* in the aspects of *effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness* (pp. 198-205).

Effectiveness

This criterion measures whether a policy option “promotes the achievement of a valued outcome of action” (Dunn, 2014, p. 198). Although the academic



freeze seeks to continue education, it will only do so when the pandemic ends or has already stabilized. While self-learning activities help students continue education, there are concerns on its effectiveness. One study shows that “non-gifted and talented students may benefit more from traditional education than self-directed learning” (Leddo et al., 2017, p.18). Moreover, the hesitation posed by some key stakeholders regarding the limited face-to-face classes may hamper implementation efforts. Therefore, DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning are the most effective among the policy options as its multiple modalities seek to maximize the number of learners who can continue attending classes during a pandemic.

Efficiency

This criterion could be evaluated through the comparison of opportunity costs (Dunn, 2014, p. 198). Academic freeze may be inefficient, owing to the costs that the policy entails (e.g., lack of graduates for the following years, closure of schools, loss of jobs of many educators and school employees, etc.). Self-learning may lead to job losses as only a handful of educators are needed to craft the modules and assess the performance of the learners. Limited face-to-face classes incur additional costs linked to adherence to health protocols; its greatest opportunity cost is the threat of COVID-19 transmission among students. The modalities of DepEd’s blended learning, as well as CHED’s flexible learning, are deemed costly for parents, teachers, and even for the government. Nonetheless, these opportunity costs are reduced through the printed modules modality, which makes the policies on hand at par with self-learning in terms of efficiency.

Adequacy

This aspect focuses on the relation of a policy’s cost and effectiveness, which is the ratio of effectiveness to costs (Dunn, 2014, pp. 199–200). In this case, the academic freeze is ruled out. The effectiveness of self-learning is uncertain while its cost is moderate when compared to academic freeze. Limited face-to-face classes are effective, but the costs involved are also high. The DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning

ensure effective learning continuity and flexible costs by employing multiple modalities. Therefore, the policies of DepEd and CHED emerge as the adequate response to the policy concern.

Equity

This criterion poses the fundamental question: “how can a policy maximize the welfare of society, and not just the welfare of particular individuals or groups?” (Dunn, 2014, pp. 202–203). The academic freeze manifests the yearning for the safe return to traditional face-to-face classes but at the expense of halting the entire educational sector for an uncertain time, an option that is inequitable. In comparison, self-learning continues education, but the costs markedly differ between students who are gifted and those who are not, and between those who have access to additional sources of knowledge and those who have little or no access at all. The benefits of limited face-to-face classes remain inadequate while its costs (e.g., health risks) are high. In contrast, the flexible learning policies by DepEd and CHED maximize benefits by offering various modalities that make learning flexible, thus minimizing the costs involved in the process. The learners and the parents have various modalities to choose from, based on what they deem appropriate to their socioeconomic status and learning considerations, among others.

Responsiveness

This criterion looks into the policy’s responsiveness to the demands of the interest groups (Dunn, 2014, p. 204). Our stakeholder analysis reveals that these groups want education to continue without compromising safety and quality. Meanwhile, academic freeze cannot be considered as responsive at all. Self-learning mainly addresses the demand for safety. Limited face-to-face classes still fall short in terms of safety, but they are the closest possible option to traditional face-to-face classes in terms of mode of interaction between students and teachers. The flexible learning policies of DepEd and CHED address the demand for safety although adequate preparation and evaluation of these policies must be made.



Appropriateness

“Questions about the appropriateness of a policy are not concerned with individual criteria but with two or more criteria taken together,” such as equity and efficiency (Dunn, 2014, p. 204). The academic freeze fails the test of efficiency. Self-learning can be efficient yet ineffective. Limited face-to-face classes can be the most equitable but inefficient amidst the pandemic. The flexible learning policies by DepEd and CHED are deemed as the most appropriate response to the policy concern of continuing education amid a pandemic as it can be equitable and efficient through its many modalities.

Ultimately, weighing the options against the criteria points to DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning as the policy options that best address the current policy concern. These options are followed by self-learning, limited face-to-face classes, and academic freeze. This policy prescription is further examined in the succeeding section.

Short-Term Academic Freeze followed by Blended/Flexible Learning as the Best Option

Despite the appropriateness of the blended and flexible learning policies, DepEd and CHED fall short in preparation based on the statements of the Chair on the Senate Committee on Basic Education (Ramos, 2020; Magsambol, 2020b). Recognizing this view, the researchers prescribe the necessity of a brief academic freeze to afford more time for this adjustment in educational policy. In view of the potential closure of smaller educational institutions, the authors propose a two-month academic freeze. Saturday classes and/or later class times could be instituted to compensate for the disruption of the succeeding school year. To minimize production costs, TV-based/radio-based instruction should only be used for particular competencies that cannot be taught through other modalities.

This policy option accurately responds to the demands of key stakeholders to advance the continuation of safe and quality education amidst the pandemic. The current flexible learning policies by DepEd and CHED ensure safety, while this

paper’s policy proposal—short-term freeze for more preparation—seeks to assure quality of education amid the pandemic. Both options advance national interest by upholding the Constitution, which states that “the State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all” (Sec. 1, Art. 14, 1987 Constitution).

The policy option recognizes the need for and appropriately supports the organizational integrity of the schools. The motivating principle behind the additional short-term academic freeze is to have more time for capacity building. In the duration of the academic freeze, the government must provide subsidies and other forms of assistance (e.g., training for teachers in smaller schools and universities). Regular evaluation would be spearheaded by DepEd and CHED in their respective jurisdictions to ensure that their policies are properly implemented.

The policy option makes a realistic means-ends linkage. Through the additional time for support and capacity building, schools and universities can adequately transition to blended/flexible learning. However, the government must consider giving incentives and subsidies to these educational institutions.

The policy option properly integrates into an overall system of state policy. The IATF’s approval is essential. Furthermore, DepEd and CHED constantly coordinate with IATF and DOH in the health protocols necessary for the gradual resumption of limited face-to-face classes.

The policy option has a positive benefit/cost ratio. The benefit of safe and quality continuity of education outweighs the cost, which consists mostly of the needed technology and other necessary adjustments. Nonetheless, among all the alternative policy options surveyed, the benefit/cost ratio of DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning is way better than all of them. This is once again attributed to the variety of modalities that these policies offer and therefore the cost is deemed flexible based on what is appropriate to the circumstances of the students.



The policy option is politically feasible and/or palatable to the majority of the abovementioned stakeholders compared to alternative means for achieving the same result. This option minimally modifies the policies that are already adopted by the government. It is more politically feasible as it is a policy proposed by the State and its aspects are favorably evaluated through the policy prescription criteria used in this paper. However, there is a legal impediment to the prescribed short-term academic freeze, which is Republic Act 7977.

Why is the Best Option Not Adopted?

The first hindrance to the abovementioned policy prescription is Republic Act 7977, which mandates the opening of basic education classes to start within June to August. This reflects one striking peculiarity of the Philippine policy system, i.e., its being mainly precedent-bound.

Amendments to the RA 7977 cannot be dealt with quickly, as the policymaking process is bicameral in nature. Without the President's certification of this amendment bill as urgent, the amendment will have to go through the legislative process and may not be signed into law in the time when it is much needed.

A short-term academic freeze could not be properly adopted given this constraint. The strong conviction of the leadership of both DepEd and CHED to continue education is likely to be their driving force in ensuring that face-to-face classes would open soon. With the incremental and institutional nature of the Philippine policy system, needed adjustments are difficult to legislate and implement with urgency.

Conclusion:

Towards Better Philippine Education amid COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

The main thesis of this policy paper seeks to answer the question: how will education continue amid the COVID-19 pandemic? The government responded to this daunting task through DepEd's blended learning and CHED's flexible learning. The former features various learning modalities, mainly online learning, TV-based/radio-based instruction, and modular learning, while the latter offers both

online and offline learning or a blend of both alongside the option of limited face-to-face classes. These policies, which are rooted in their respective institutional mandates, offered various modalities in consideration of political and technical feasibility.

The complexity of continuing education amid a public health crisis stems from the problematic policy environment. The socioeconomic, technological, physical, and demographical characteristics of the policy environment reveal both the digital divide—the key obstacle to the online learning modality—and the seemingly hazardous reopening of the traditional face-to-face classes. Despite the mixed feedback, the consensus towards the priority of continuing safe and quality education is established among the stakeholders with the exception of some progressive interest groups.

This policy issue and the flexible learning policies that strive to address it are revisited with the aim of pointing out flaws and proposing some amendments. The government offers various modalities that afford flexibility for students, teachers, and schools. However, these modalities fail to consider the systemic gaps in the education sector. Gleaning from the assessment of policy options, DepEd's blended learning and CHED's flexible learning still came out to be the most appropriate response to the policy concern as analyzed through Dunn's (2014) criteria for policy prescription. Nonetheless, capacity building is needed for more effective implementation of the policies. Thus, this study sees the implementation of a short-term academic freeze, which should run at most two months, as a necessary addition to the policies implemented by DepEd and CHED to give time for preparation for the rollout of the shift in learning modalities.

In view of the foregoing, this paper finds the criticisms on the government's distance learning policies, such as anti-poor and dangerous to the students' welfare, perhaps misinformed. Most of the criticisms, which include concerns on equity of access, are focused on online learning, which is only one of the learning modalities offered. Academic freeze, although appealing, is not the solution to the policy concern of education continuity amid



COVID-19, but an evasion from it. The main caveat of this seemingly student-popular policy option is that its negative consequences will impact the students and the whole of the education sector even when the pandemic is already resolved or stabilized. This uncertainty will affect the learning and knowledge of students, the closure of educational institutions, loss of jobs in the education sector, and other unintended consequences.

Recommendations

In sum, the following recommendations may help address challenges to continue education amid the pandemic and, in general, to address persisting issues and concerns in the Philippine education system.

- 1) **Amend Republic Act 7977.** RA 7977, which mandates that “the school year shall start on the first Monday of June but not later than the last day of August” (Sec. 3) must be amended. The amendment should include a provision which states that in times of crises, such as the current pandemic, the opening of the classes could be flexible. The key government agencies that respond to educational concerns amid the pandemic, particularly the IATF, DepEd and CHED, will be able to set the date for the opening of classes when the safety of the schools, teachers, and most importantly, the students is already ensured. The President could certify urgent this amendment bill to fast-track its approval. In the future, this amendment will afford the entire education sector, both the government and its non-governmental stakeholders, flexibility in confronting other causes of disruption of education.
- 2) **Use a pass/fail grading system.** In consideration of the different modalities of the government’s distance learning modalities, a pass/fail grading system would balance these differences in various modalities. According to Dunch (2020), a pass/fail grading system “keeps all students in the same boat where grading is concerned” (para. 5). This

recommendation is also timely during this time of crisis. As University of the Philippines Diliman Chancellor Fidel Nemenzo (2020) puts it, “the grading scale we used before the pandemic cannot properly measure the performance of students in a time of upheaval and disruption” (para. 10).

- 3) **Reopen face-to-face classes gradually.** The proposal for limited face-to-face classes, if approved, could be realized in 2021. The first semester of the school/academic year 2020–2021 should be facilitated solely through distance learning modalities. The return to face-to-face classes must be gradual, most especially in low-risk areas where there are few or no cases of COVID-19.
- 4) **Encourage public participation in formulation of education policies.** Participation in public policy making is important especially when it concerns an issue as significant and as complex as continuing education amid a pandemic. Recognizing the digital divide in the country, online surveys do not fully capture the stakeholders’ sentiments. Key stakeholders, such as teacher and student unions, currently have less influence on policymaking.

Better stakeholder engagement could be realized through a government-facilitated policymaking forum. With appropriate representation of every key stakeholder, the crafting of policy will be clearer with inputs from stakeholders with higher stakes in the policy concern. Currently, informal stakeholders that have a high stake on the policy are drowned by the massive influence of formal stakeholders. Participatory policy making gives way for alternative stand points to enter the discourse (see Bacarro & Papadakis, 2008).
- 5) **Support education institutions.** The Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations (COCOPEA) is seeking for various forms of aid from the government to keep private schools afloat and to ensure a



smooth transition to new normal education (CNN Philippines, 2020). The authors support the Senate Committee on Basic Education proposal “to include the private schools to the Department of Finance’s (DOF) small business wage subsidy (SBWS) that grants Php5,000 to Php8,000 to qualified workers from small businesses affected by the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ)” (Senate of the Philippines, 2020b, para. 2) and to expand the Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education (GASTPE) program, instituted through Republic Act 6728, which “provides financial assistance to learners and teachers to help decongest public schools” (Senate of the Philippines, 2020b, para. 5).

6) Bolster ICT in the Philippines. Beyond pushing for alternative distance learning, the government must also bolster the nation’s ICT infrastructure. This pandemic reveals that it is high time for the State to prioritize the development of ICT, not only in response to the new normal, but as a step towards the technology-driven development. Allocation of more public funds for ICT will help jumpstart policies on alternative learning. Second, the government should decouple the industry’s duopoly by fast-tracking the entrance of new telecommunication competitors.

7) Continue research and development in distance learning. Policies on distance learning must not be abandoned once this public health crisis subsides. Research and development of distance learning modalities must continue as they can address disruptions in the education system. Moreover, distance learning should always be part of the contingency plan of the education sector in times of crisis. School administrators should put premium on developing their respective learning management systems to lessen the need for paper documents and to protect learning materials and resources.

8) Address systemic gaps in education.

Many of the challenges that accompany the policy concern of continuing education amid COVID-19 are long-standing problems in the education sector. Massive education reform should also be initiated once the crisis situation subsides and the government’s fiscal capability stabilizes. In its 2020 report on education and policy responses in the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank pointed out that the post-pandemic recovery is an opportunity to “build back better” education systems, which can only be realized by government financing (p. 33).

Education must and will continue, but not at the expense of those who will be left behind. DepEd’s blended learning and CHED’s flexible learning offer different learning modalities to provide flexibility among the education stakeholders who are all significantly affected by the pandemic. Although imperfect and not as effective as the traditional face-to-face classes, these policies may help the education sector adapt to the challenges of the times and continue towards a better normal.

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