

Resilience in the face of adversity: Exploring junior high learners' perspectives and experiences of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted education, revealing inadequacies and inequalities within the educational arena. This led to the emergence of blended learning as a necessary response, driven by integrating digital technology into teaching and learning. This paper explores the perspectives and experiences of junior high learners in the implementation of blended learning modality at a particular public high school institution in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. A qualitative approach using a single case study design was utilized, and the participants were selected using a purposive sampling procedure. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic data analysis method, the study generated three themes regarding learners' perspectives: the advantages of blended learning, limitations of blended learning for optimum learning, and ambivalent perceptions of learners towards blended learning. Moreover, five themes emerged regarding learners' experiences of blended learning: affective issues in learning, distractive learning environment, time constraints as a learning barrier, internet connectivity issues, and challenges of quality education in blended learning implementation. As a result, school administrators, teachers, parents, and the entire academic community should strengthen their collaboration to promote and ensure the attainment of quality education in the blended learning setup. The results of this study can also assist future related research in knowing how blended learning modality can be better implemented.

Keywords: blended learning, COVID-19, experiences, junior high learners, perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

The world faced one of the most unanticipated public health crises: the COVID-19 pandemic. This outbreak swiftly spread to nearly every country, prompting cities to enforce lockdowns while capturing worldwide attention within months (Tria, 2020). Despite the COVID-19-related risks associated with reopening classrooms, the Commission on Higher Education and the Department of Education in the Philippines introduced a flexible learning approach to ensure the continuity of education (Anzaldo, 2021). This, in turn, has led to a significant transformation in the way quality education is conveyed (Dziuban et al., 2018; Mheidly et al., 2020), with a substantial emphasis on utilizing blended learning approaches. Blended learning is a formidable solution encompassing diverse instructional methods that cater to varying needs. It is characterized as a dynamic learning approach that intertwines various engaging activities, combining online or e-learning, traditional face-to-face learning, and flexible modular or self-paced learning (Cabuquin, 2022; Cronje, 2020; Kumar, 2017; Prasetya et al., 2020). This multifaceted approach offers an

excellent educational advancement and adaptability avenue, making it the preferred setup during the pandemic (Gaol & Hutagalung, 2020; Singh, 2021).

Over the past few decades, the role of information communication technology has experienced significant growth, primarily driven by the emergence of blended learning. Keržič et al. (2019) assessed the effectiveness and practicality of blended learning in higher education; they indicated that learners view blended learning positively when there is a commitment from the instructor and ample social interaction among learners. The study also highlighted the importance of continuously developing teachers and mentors to ensure that they provide ongoing support throughout the blended learning process. Similarly, the study of Bouilheres et al. (2020) revealed a positive overall perspective among learners towards blended learning, highlighting the benefits of flexibility in choosing the time, location, and opportunity for repetitive learning.

Moreover, Raes et al. (2020) concluded that blended learning offers a more flexible learning mode than complete e-learning or on-site learning. However, this approach also presents pedagogical and

technological challenges. Therefore, it is essential to address these difficulties by developing guidelines and conducting additional empirical studies to examine and evaluate the various pedagogical challenges and their impact on learners' performance. In Russia, the study conducted by Larionova et al. (2018) also specified that in the traditional model, there was a decrease in the performance level of the learners when compared to blended learning. Contrary to some studies, blended learning may be more effective than traditional learning and does not hinder learner performance.

Amid this ongoing transformation in the educational landscape, learners grapple with uncertainty, unsure of their capacity to deal with the challenges that arise within the blended learning environment (Abdous, 2019; Boelens et al., 2017; Medina, 2018). Meanwhile, Mheidly et al. (2020) indicated that the blended learning struggle persists as technical issues and the unpredictable nature of internet signals further compound the difficulties learners face. Previous research has also shown that learners encounter various challenges regarding blended learning (Diep et al., 2017; Raes et al., 2020; Rasheed et al., 2020). These obstacles encompass a range of aspects, including limited opportunities for social interaction (Dangwal, 2017), the need to develop academic skills and independent learning abilities (Geng et al., 2019), technical requirements and proficiency, self-motivation, effective time management, access to study support (Suma et al., 2020), as well as financial constraints.

When the learners' safety was at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational setup in a particular public secondary laboratory school in the Eastern Visayas Region, Philippines, also relied on synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Junior high school learners must participate in online classes and discussions using Google Meet or Zoom. They also need to complete learning modules independently at their own pace. Further, the researchers observed a significant decline in the academic performance of previously high-achieving learners who excelled in face-to-face learning before the pandemic. This decline occurred when the educational system shifted to a blended learning approach. This observation highlights a notable knowledge gap in understanding the impact of blended learning on the academic outcomes of high-performing learners. As implementing blended learning has brought forth many issues and challenges, it raises questions about how learners have adapted to this new approach, their perspectives, and the necessary measures for its effective implementation. This further highlights an existing phenomenon, where the impact of blended learning on learner experiences, coping mechanisms, and the optimal strategies for its successful integration continue to matter.

Furthermore, several studies have been carried out to explore the implementation of blended learning modalities within the emerging paradigm of contemporary education (Bozkurt, 2022; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021; Cano et al., 2023; Choi & Park, 2022). Some of these studies implemented a quantitative approach, emphasizing perspectives and overall satisfaction while neglecting in-depth exploration of learners' experiences. Hence, a pressing need remains for more comprehensive studies encompassing diverse perspectives and experiences in various educational settings. Further research is essential to comprehensively explore these perspectives and experiences of learners within the specific context of public secondary laboratory schools. Likewise, this present study argues that understanding the viewpoints and experiences of learners in blended learning can offer

valuable insights for the broader educational community, specifically among secondary schools grappling with similar challenges yet choosing to keep their difficulties concealed. By shedding light on how learners perceive and navigate blended learning, this study aims to contribute meaningful knowledge and foster a more informed discourse among educators, administrators, and other stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design & Setting

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single case study design. It sought to explore the perspectives and experiences of junior high learners in the blended learning modality. Case study research explores a specific issue (i.e., implementation of blended learning) by investigating one or more cases within a defined system, such as a particular setting or context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In line with this approach, this study was conducted in the context of a public secondary laboratory school located in the Eastern Visayas Region of the Philippines. The selection of the school was based on its relevance to the research objectives and its representation of the target participants.

Participants & Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich insights and experiences related to the research questions. Purposive sampling allows the deliberate selection of individuals or cases with specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research focus (Zhao, 2021). Furthermore, the study comprised 20 junior high learners, as the point of data saturation had been reached with this sample size. To minimize bias and comprehensively address the influence of academic performance on learners' adaptation to blended learning amid the pandemic, the inclusion criteria compelled the selection of participants from various academic levels. By carefully incorporating learners from different levels, we intended to gather various perspectives and experiences on blended learning, enhancing the study's richness and diversity of insights.

Ethical Considerations

Similarly, we ensured that the rights of all participants throughout the study were safeguarded, including the rights to withdraw from participation, maintain privacy, and receive accurate information. Privacy protection measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of participant engagement and the data provided. Likewise, participants' details and identification were kept private, and their anonymity was upheld to ensure their safety. Honest agreements were made to maintain the study's integrity. Full consent was obtained from participants, ensuring voluntary and non-coerced participation.

Data Gathering Procedure

Meanwhile, to gather rich and detailed insights into the perspectives and experiences of junior high learners regarding blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to blended learning. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions allowing in-depth exploration and participant reflection. Probing questions were used to elicit further details and clarification. The instrument was designed to elicit comprehensive narratives and detailed descriptions of learners' perspectives and experiences. The researchers also played a pivotal role

in collecting and analyzing data, fully immersing themselves in the natural setting and conducting insightful interviews among the participants. Further, the data-gathering process for this study took place over six weeks, from November 2022 to December 2022.

Before the interview, participants willingly participated in the study by signing the provided consent form. They were given a copy of the interview questions in advance, allowing ample time to prepare and respond truthfully and confidently. The researchers scheduled the interviews based on the informants' willingness and availability. Additionally, the researchers captured the interviews through audio recordings, and in cases, where permission was granted, video recordings were also utilized. For virtual interviews conducted via the video communication platform Google Meet, screen recording was employed.

Throughout the interview process, the researchers exhibited courtesy from the beginning. They provided participants with clear instructions, explained the study's purpose, and asked appropriate questions to explore their perspectives and experiences regarding blended learning during the pandemic. The duration of face-to-face and virtual interviews was not restricted, allowing participants to elaborate on their responses based on the interview guide questions. The researchers attentively took notes to capture the significant points expressed by the participants.

Following the interview, the researchers promptly transcribed the collected data. A copy of the transcription was provided to the participants for review and verification following the agreement between the informants and researchers. This process aimed to ensure transparency and honor the participants' involvement. Codenames, rather than real names, were used in the transcriptions to maintain confidentiality. The researchers and participants held all gathered information securely, safeguarding the data's privacy.

Data Analysis

The data were transcribed and examined using Braun and Clarke's thematic data analysis method to identify and organize emerging themes systematically. The main advantages of this method of data analysis are its flexibility in analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data were examined using the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2012) method, which are presented below:

1. **Familiarizing with the data:** The first phase of thematic or any qualitative analysis is familiarizing data. The researchers listened to the audio and video recordings and read the written transcripts. The researchers highlighted and took notes about the most critical points and items of potential interest.
2. **Generating its initial codes:** The second phase is when the researchers generate the initial code or the building blocks of the qualitative analysis. The researchers manually grouped the significant statements with initial codes. Codes are necessary to determine because they can provide an interpretation that lies beneath the semantic surface of the data.
3. **Searching for the themes:** The researchers searched for themes in the third phase. In this phase of thematic analysis, the researchers generated potential themes by looking through the initial codes and significant statements. Although this phase focused more on generating themes rather than observing or searching for them, it is still considered searching for the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

4. **Potential themes review:** After searching for the themes, the researchers review the potential themes in the fourth phase. The researchers checked the quality of the themes to determine if it is relevant to the gathered data. After this, the researchers were left with a handful of potential themes. The researchers merged themes to make a comprehensive discussion to address the research questions. The final rereading of the entire data set and review of each theme to determine the most important and most relevant theme to the elements of the data set was also done.
5. **Naming and defining the themes:** The fifth phase is naming and defining the themes. This is one of the most crucial parts of the thematic analysis as the researchers defined and interpreted each theme and its relevance to the data set. The researchers explained broadly what makes each theme unique with fine-grained details.
6. **Providing the final report:** The last phase is generating the final thematic analysis report. Making the final report of the data analysis of qualitative research is more complex than completing the analysis and writing about it (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It requires a thorough interpretation of the data, and it should provide a vivid and compelling narrative about the data, which is based on their analysis. The researchers avoided typographical errors, repetitions, or unnecessary complexities in clearly stating the final report.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The study generated three themes regarding learners' perspectives: the advantages of blended learning; limitations of blended learning for optimum learning; and ambivalent perceptions of learners towards blended learning. Meanwhile, five themes emerged regarding learners' experiences of blended learning, such as affective issues in learning; distractive learning environment; time constraints as a learning barrier; internet connectivity issues; and challenges of quality education in blended learning implementation.

Perspectives of Learners Towards Blended Learning

The adaptation of the blended learning modality revealed differing perspectives from the junior high learners at one laboratory school in the Eastern Visayas Region. Some learners shared that they favor implementing blended learning, some do not, while others stand in between. These perspectives of the learners on the adaptation of blended learning are presented in the following themes:

Theme 1: Advantages of blended learning

Some participants perceive blended learning as a more accessible, better, and flexible learning modality in the new normal education. The first perspective put forth by the learners is that because blended learning is more adaptable than traditional, it is a more effective and accessible learning method. This was discussed throughout the researcher's interviews, as seen in the lines that follow:

"It is a better option because other people are struggling in going to school as they do not have enough money to spare" (P1).

“Blended learning can be good for people who live far away; they can still learn lessons even without going to school” (P9).

“It is better because you can just relax at home. And you feel at ease when you are at home, and blended learning is fun” (P20).

“... it is much easier, and if it were implemented back then, for me, it would be easy” (P4).

One participant expressed that the blended learning modality is a better option because, during the pandemic, others have a lot of personal necessities at home that could result in their incapability to go to school. The other participant shared that the blended learning modality can be suitable for other learners, especially those who reside far from the school because they can still join their classes without needing to go to school physically, which is often a hassle for many learners. Hence, the blended learning modality's flexibility offers comfort and ease so the learners can study in their place of comfort.

The other participants also mentioned that they would have preferred it if blended learning had been implemented sooner since they think it would have made things much easier for the learners. One said that the blended learning approach makes learners feel comfortable and relaxed. This could indicate that other learners perceive the blended learning modality as a learning approach that is much simpler and finer. However, questions about the effectiveness of classroom education that blended learning can offer continue to emerge amid the pandemic. While Muller et al. (2019) and Paul and Jefferson (2019) reported minimal to no significant outcome differences between online and face-to-face curricula, other studies indicated blended learning as an efficient and practical approach to enhancing learning (Alvarez, 2020; Kintu et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020). However, it is crucial to continue examining how learners and teachers perceive learning when traditional methods are combined with blended learning (Makuu & Ngaruko, 2014).

Theme 2: Limitations of blended learning for optimum learning

Some participants shared that the blended learning modality promotes optimum learning less than the traditional face-to-face learning approach. This could mean a disparity between the learning that learners gain through blended learning and the traditional face-to-face learning approach. Contrary to the previous theme, the learners also shared that the blended learning modality was more difficult because of the struggles and hardships they had to come across. Participants stated that:

“There were a lot of personal things going on at home. I think learners should learn in an environment that is more conducive to learning” (P18).

“... it is harder to comprehend because you tend to become more ashamed when asking questions. So, it is hard to hear what the teacher is trying to say or what they are trying to explain” (P9).

“For me, it was not effective because I barely had enough time to answer my learning modules ... I have household chores to attend to” (P3).

The participants mentioned that the implementation of blended learning was complex for them. One participant further expressed that learners should study in an environment, where they feel safe or at least

comfortable since, at home, many personal issues could reduce attention. Another participant also shared that studying at home was challenging due to the time conflict between studying and doing household activities. Participants were also prone to becoming reluctant to ask queries necessary for online learning.

The participants argued that the traditional form of learning offers a more comprehensive education than the blended learning approach. Some participants said:

“Teachers are not strict when it comes to blended learning... you can just choose not to attend the class, and the teacher cannot do anything about it because others could make some excuses” (P9).

“I still do not like the idea of blended learning; it is not helping others who have low comprehension skills” (P13).

“It is not helping me think critically as I immediately search for an answer on the internet whenever I struggle to answer my assignments ... I was having trouble when my teacher asked me to explain it” (P11).

“I do not like it because I do not get to interact with my classmates and teachers” (P8).

The participants also exemplified that not all can provide themselves with the requirements needed to accommodate the blended learning modality. One participant also remarked how difficult blended learning is for those with poor comprehension skills since they are urged to learn the lessons independently, with minimal teacher guidance and supervision.

Likewise, some participants uttered that optimum learning is not attained through the blended learning approach because learners become more reliant on the internet and other available online resources. This could affect learners' development of critical thinking as they only exert a little effort to answer problems independently without relying on the internet. Similarly, one participant expressed dissatisfaction with the blended learning modality, as it simply increases the possibility of academic dishonesty. As further articulated by another participant, learners prefer the traditional face-to-face modality since it actively promotes holistic learning, and learners can understand the lessons better because of teachers' presence and the independence to internet connectivity. Additional tasks brought on by online learning may also prevent the learners from being able to concentrate on their academics. Some participants expressed that:

“... I feel like a learner can focus more on face-to-face classes and not on online classes because they will have a lot more tasks to do, engage more, and then learn better” (P7).

“Blended learning modality is kind of confusing ... There are times that our schedules are getting messed up because there are times you have to go to school, sometimes you have to attend the Google Meet ...” (P13).

This response from a participant could also mean that blended learning may not be favorable to the learners' academic endeavors during the pandemic. Their preference for traditional learning could also be attributed to their learning needs, like being able to regularly

interact with their classmates and ask questions of their teachers for immediate feedback, which is limited to blended learning. The sudden shift from face-to-face to blended learning during the pandemic caused the participants to oppose the blended learning setup.

Theme 3: Ambivalent perceptions of learners towards blended learning

The participants' third perspective emerged towards the blended learning modality. During the interview, some participants expressed varied opinions about blended learning in the context of the pandemic. The two prior themes run counter to one another, and this third theme indicates that learners have both positive and negative perceptions of blended learning. Some participants mentioned that:

"There are just a lot of pros and cons in the blended learning" (P1).

"I feel like blended learning can be both positive and negative. It is positive because the learners have time to do their module, to stay at home and relax" (P3).

"Some learners can perform well with blended learning, and some cannot. It depends maybe on their learning style" (P17).

"It depends on the learner because sometimes we feel like we understand the topic more if it is face-to-face because the teacher is right in front, and we are not shy to ask questions ... However, blended learning can also be beneficial because you can maximize your time" (P20).

Some participants concurred that the blended learning method can work both ways. For example, some participants felt it could be advantageous because the learners would have more time to complete their modules and activities. Conversely, some argue that having the teacher present in front of them enhances their comprehensive understanding of the lessons during in-person learning.

Another participant stated,

"actually it depends on the learner ..." (P7),

which is backed up by another participant's statement that

"some learners can perform well with blended learning, and some cannot" (P15).

Considering the statement from which this was inferred came from participants of both poor and high performing during the implementation of blended learning, it also reveals that each learner's response to the modality varies. Some participants contended that although blended learning may not be their optimal choice, it can prove beneficial for some and intellectually stimulating for others.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, blended learning has emerged as a prominent alternative for teachers and learners to overcome challenges during difficult times (Balida et al., 2021). However, the study by Balci (2017) noted that teachers and learners showed mixed responses to implementing blended instruction, although teachers generally hold a positive perception of this approach. Nevertheless, continuous evaluation and exploration of blended learning methods are crucial for optimizing educational outcomes. Further, Asarta and Schmidt (2020) examined learners' previous experiences with blended and online courses; they asserted that

acquiring previous experiences did not yield any notable effects on their learning outcomes. In addition, focusing on its impact on learner performance and experience, Otto (2018) indicated that virtual mobility was a successful learning approach, with learners having a positive overall experience.

Experiences of Learners Towards Blended Learning

This study likewise explored the adaptation of the blended learning modality in the case of junior high school learners, and the data that was gathered revealed the unpleasant and negative experiences the learners have faced in implementing the blended learning modality. Furthermore, the themes that emerged through the gathered narrative data set are, as follows.

Theme 4: Affective issues in learning

There have been various affective issues that the learners experienced during the implementation of blended learning, such as anxiety and depression, family problems, and pressure and motivation issues. Some of the participants indicated that:

"During the pandemic, I struggled with mental health issues and pressure, so I was not able to study in a blended learning setup. I felt that it was ineffective because I could not learn something" (P3).

"During online classes, I felt nervous to ask questions... But in face-to-face, I can request the teacher to explain the lesson once more and ask questions for clarification" (P17).

"There are also mental issues that I have been through, especially in 8th grade, where the depression started because everything went downhill. I used to be an honor student, but when the pandemic started, I lost my motivation to study my lessons, which caused my grades to be low" (P13).

"At first, I was excited that the classes would be conducted online because it was a struggle for me to go to school every day waiting for jeepneys or any means of transportation. I wanted to stay at home to learn. But as time passed by, I became bored and lonely. I missed the times when we had to gather ourselves when it came to performance tasks and having fun inside the classroom. We were not allowed to see each other face-to-face since there was still quarantine and COVID" (P19).

While implementing the blended learning approach, some participants encountered mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. One of the participants recounted feeling consistently nervous at the start of classes due to the anxiety-inducing "introduce yourself" sessions. Furthermore, another participant expressed dissatisfaction with the blended learning format, deeming it ineffective for their optimal learning. The situation took a negative turn with the introduction of the blended learning method.

One participant confirmed that they previously faced difficulties posing questions within the blended learning model, which they now find possible. The participants openly acknowledged their perpetual nervousness and reluctance to ask questions. Similarly, another participant conveyed their apprehension about raising concerns during online classes due to anxiety, ultimately leading to mental and emotional well-being challenges. This could be linked to the fact that

during the initial phase of blended learning, there needed to be more interaction between the teachers and the learners, contributing to the learner's lack of confidence in their ability to participate in class.

Meanwhile, some participants provided firsthand accounts of their experiences with implementing blended learning. Initially, the participants embraced the idea of online classes due to the convenience of studying from home, eliminating the need to commute. The appeal of self-directed learning was strong. However, as years of studying from home continued, the participants' enthusiasm decreased. They started to feel a sense of monotony and a longing for the social interactions that occurred during group tasks and performances. The participant candidly expressed that, over time, they began to experience a sense of isolation at home. This underscores the notion that the blended learning approach offers distinct advantages over traditional in-person learning, but the disadvantages might eventually outweigh the benefits.

To combat feelings of isolation, some alternatives, such as social presence and interactivity, have been suggested to enhance the learning experience and alleviate learners' depression without peer interaction and guidance. As blended courses continue to grow, it is essential to address the issue of learners' melancholy and loneliness, as these negative emotions can adversely affect their education (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Cummings et al. (2017) indicated that active learning discussion could foster a positive connection with peers and promote interaction and participation among learners. Implementing feasible methods to reduce these negative emotions is crucial in enhancing the overall learning experience in blended courses.

Furthermore, other participants also mentioned the family problems that they have faced during the blended learning modality, as can be seen in the lines below:

"... family problems can affect a student, especially when they are only at their home; others have time management problems as well" (P7).

"My mother used to compare me with my cousins because I used to get low grades and I was not able to become an achiever" (P12).

"I used to get scolded by my parents for not being able to pass my homework" (P13).

In the blended learning implementation context, a participant conveyed their emotions stemming from the experience. One participant expressed their feelings about the period when the blended learning approach was implemented. This participant recounted how their mother often compared them unfavorably to their cousins due to their inability to achieve higher grades. This experience left the participant disheartened but determined to excel in in-person learning. Similarly, another participant shared their experience during blended learning, where their parents reprimanded and even resorted to punishment for late homework submissions and lower grades. These responses can be categorized as affective issues, as they impacted the learners in both constructive and detrimental manners; some found them motivating, while others saw them as discouraging factors.

Moreover, a participant highlighted how family-related challenges can influence learners due to the emphasis on remote learning within the blended learning model. Consequently, students are required to engage in their studies from home. The participant also noted that time

management difficulties are prevalent among other learners. This suggests that students face challenges while studying at home within the blended learning framework, a scenario less likely in traditional face-to-face learning.

Other participants also noted the pressure on the learners during the imposition of the blended learning modality.

"I think it affected how I was not motivated to do anything because of the pressure to the point that I did not want to do assignments anymore because I was depressed then. Moreover, I have been trying to find motivation, I have done workouts and kept myself busy painting, yet nothing ever worked for me to be motivated in my schoolwork ... it affected me not having emotional support, especially when I needed it the most" (P16).

"I was not bothered doing my assignments because it was just an online class and activities were also given online. Most of the time, I procrastinate. I only do my tasks when it is already due" (P20).

One of the participants redirected their focus from self-care to pursuing higher grades, leading to significant consequences. This participant felt immense pressure due to their perceived inability to excel academically. Another participant argued that conventional in-person learning outperforms the blended learning approach, highlighting that students experience less stress in face-to-face classes. Furthermore, a participant disclosed that their overwhelming pressure during blended learning demotivated them from completing their school assignments. Despite putting forth their best efforts, they faced constant setbacks. The heightened pressure, possibly worsened by the abrupt transition caused by the pandemic, led to a neglect of their health, well-being, and academic performance.

In contrast to prior experiences, one participant pointed out that their inability to focus on learning stemmed from an absence of pressure, eventually leading to distractions. This highlights how the blended learning approach can result in either excessive or minimal force, neither of which is particularly advantageous for learners. Furthermore, this underscores the notion that blended learning methodology can contribute to emotional challenges among students, significantly affecting their academic achievements and mental and emotional well-being. These participant responses also suggest that the home environment might be more conducive to fostering children's dedication to education. Due to the constraints imposed by the pandemic and the nature of blended learning involving online studying at home, learners have responded negatively to it.

Theme 5: Distractive learning environment

This is the second set of experiences that the participants shared during the in-depth interviews. Some participants emphasized that the blended learning modality is prone to many distractions. Thus, one of their experiences during its implementation was the distracting learning environment issues, which, are as follows:

"Numerous distractions made it difficult for me to follow discussions in the blended mode. My siblings were constantly making havoc, and noisy neighbors worsened the situation" (P15).

“While my sister and I were trying to focus on learning, we could not help but hear the commotion in our house. It was incredibly distracting, particularly for me, as I tend to be insensitive and easily get sidetracked. This greatly hindered my ability to concentrate and learn effectively, especially during the blended learning with modules” (P18).

Several participants have concurred that the blended learning approach is susceptible to distractions. According to one participant's account, maintaining academic focus proved challenging due to disruptions in their learning environment. The participants noted a shift in their performance compared to previous years when blended learning was not in effect. Another participant emphasized that struggling with a noisy environment or having loud peers made concentrating notably hard. Several other participants highlighted that studying at home is particularly prone to diversions from disruptive siblings and noisy neighbors. A few participants also shared that household chores and responsibilities were also factors that led them to distraction. These are shown through the following lines:

“I was not able to finish my assignments because, at home, I was always told to do household chores” (P15).

“One of my struggles is being unable to attend online meetings due to being occupied with housework. Being at home leaves me with many tasks, making it difficult to balance chores and school. I do chores at night, which are exhausting and affect my sleep” (P16).

Disregarding the fluctuations in internet connectivity, the participant revealed an enduring struggle to complete assigned tasks due to household chores and responsibilities demanding their attention. A parallel experience was shared by another participant, who expressed the difficulty of juggling both duties and school, citing the challenge of balancing these commitments. This was compounded by sleep deprivation and lack of rest due to the time and attention required by other responsibilities. These instances reinforce the idea that the home environment during the pandemic could be more conducive to effective learning, as learners find it hard to concentrate on their studies amidst these distracting circumstances.

Theme 6: Time constraints as a learning barrier

The participants shared the third set of experiences during the in-depth interviews. In connection with the previous set of experiences, participants also stated that they had encountered time-constraint issues. These can be read on the following lines:

“I rush through my assignments to save time and ensure rest, aiming to complete the remaining tasks the next day. However, this approach drains my energy due to the overwhelming number of activities needed” (P11).

“I faced some challenges as I had to juggle multiple subjects simultaneously. Alongside that, I also struggled with the other subjects, which led to a cramming situation” (P5).

“Keeping up with deadlines can be challenging, and adjusting to the schedule can also pose difficulties” (P10).

Proposing a solution to meet deadlines, one participant suggested expediting tasks to ensure the timely completion of required activities. This participant also emphasized the importance of prioritizing sleep to enable the fulfilment of pending charges the next day. While discussing challenges faced during blended learning, another participant highlighted the complexity of handling multiple subjects, each with demanding tasks requiring dedicated time and attention. This suggests that the participants recognized time management as a potential cause of their cramming, considering the struggle to manage tasks for different subjects. Moreover, these adversities, acting as obstacles to effective learning, are intertwined with the time limitations that likely contribute to emotional concerns and the prevalence of a distracting learning environment.

Blended learning has significantly grown in demand in the past decade, addressing the issue of instructional efficiency (Clark & Post, 2021; Sinclair, 2011). Consequently, there is a need to understand the factors that impact learner satisfaction and its effect on continued learning in blended modalities. Previous studies likewise identified time constraints and lack of motivation as critical factors contributing to learners' challenges in online education (Ee et al., 2018; Jónsdóttir et al., 2023; Kim & Frick, 2011). Having good time management is perhaps one of the most formidable challenges for students, as it relies entirely on self-motivation.

Theme 7: Internet connectivity issues

This is the participants' fourth set of experiences during the in-depth interviews. The participants stated that the internet connection holds a great responsibility in implementing blended learning modality, which is a big issue since the internet connectivity is not always stable. It is one of the reasons why some learners need more time to finish their activities or learning modules. These are articulated on the following lines:

“There are moments when I find myself unable to complete my modules simply because we do not have a reliable internet connection. It is incredibly frustrating” (P3).

“I struggled immensely with using a laptop and attending classes via Google Meet because of our house's unstable internet connection issues. It was annoying dealing with the frequent internet connectivity issue” (P6).

“The main hurdle is the unreliable internet connection, often frustratingly low. It frequently prevents me from joining classes due to connectivity issues or insufficient load” (P9).

“There are instances when the internet lags while I am attempting to complete activities. I find myself left with no choice but to wait impatiently for the internet connection to be restored” (P20).

One participant conveyed their feelings regarding the substantial workload that requires completion yet is hindered by poor internet connectivity, thus impeding their capacity to meet their learning responsibilities. Additionally, another participant disclosed struggles with adaptation due to limited familiarity with educational technology, notably laptops, at the time. This could be further explained by the fact that the learners negatively impacted by the shift in the learning

environment needed sufficient assistance to engage in asynchronous or online classes.

Another participant added that their residence is susceptible to typhoons, leading to disruptions in internet connectivity. Consequently, learners needed to invest more effort and adapt to fulfil their responsibilities within the blended learning approach. The challenges tied to participants' internet connectivity can be attributed to the technical difficulties arising from the sudden transition to online learning following the complications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the learning environment.

Theme 8: Challenges of quality education in blended learning implementation

This is the fifth and final set of experiences the participants shared during the in-depth interviews. The participants stressed that they have experienced issues of low-quality education. These are articulated on the following lines:

"I rely on *YouTube* and its tutorials to tackle the learning modules provided, but sometimes the answers cannot be found there. In those instances, I turn to *Brainly* for assistance. However, when it comes to Math, if I struggle to comprehend, frustration sets in, and I resort to using *Photomath* or seeking help from my older cousins" (P1).

"I faced significant challenges answering my modules. Sometimes, the teacher provided only papers and PDF files during online classes without examples or explanations. Sadly, the explanations in the PDF files were difficult to comprehend" (P2).

"One major disappointment was the lack of knowledge gained. It seemed like all we did was mindlessly copy and paste. Reading was rarely involved; instead, we copied and pasted information from online searches" (P19).

"I did not pay much attention during online learning, taking it for granted and considering it unimportant. In 8th grade, I struggled due to not truly listening in class during my 7th-grade year. This has left me troubled and facing difficulties now" (P12).

"Based on my experience, transitioning from face-to-face classes to sudden online classes was challenging. Learners faced difficulties as answers were readily available on Google, diminishing the learning experience. Unlike face-to-face classes, where teachers provide direct instruction, answers cannot be searched online" (P14).

Another participant highlighted their struggle in comprehending math lessons, attributing it to the exclusive use of online learning modules provided by teachers. The participant emphasized the necessity of in-person instruction for effective learning. This could be due to the requirement for specific prerequisites among participants engaged in the blended learning approach, including the importance of direct interaction between learners and educators. Additionally, a different participant expressed dissatisfaction with blended learning, asserting no genuine understanding occurred. This sentiment was based on the perception that implementing blended learning primarily involved copying and pasting answers from the internet. As learners

have access to resources and tools that might compromise the integrity of their academic efforts, the remote nature of this learning method presents increased opportunities for academic dishonesty.

Another participant conveyed a sense of regret regarding their engagement during the blended learning implementation. They admitted to not giving adequate attention to the conducted online classes, resulting in the need to play catch-up in discussions and subsequently experiencing current struggles. This highlights an additional drawback of the blended learning model: a noticeable reduction in the scope for teacher intervention. Furthermore, another participant shared insights on the challenges of online learning, citing multiple reasons such as the reliance on consistent internet connectivity poses a significant hurdle, the increased likelihood of cheating or seeking answers online presents ethical concerns, and the virtual setting falls short of facilitating optimal learning. Consequently, these observations imply that the blended learning approach yielded greater success for learners had it not subtly fostered tendencies towards complacency and academic dishonesty.

As a final point, some of the participants also expressed that some of the teachers were not able to optimally fulfil their obligations as the enforcers of quality education, which is disclosed, as follows:

"Unfortunately, there are instances when students seek teacher guidance to grasp the lessons better but often face delayed or unanswered responses. It is discouraging when messages go unnoticed, or teachers choose not to acknowledge or answer them, leaving students without the support they need" (P14).

"Sometimes teachers would assign activities or homework without providing any instruction. They instructed us to complete the tasks and submit them afterward. So, I struggled to answer those activities, and I felt like I was not gaining any knowledge from it" (P16).

The participants revealed their reliance on the Internet due to their teachers' inability to respond to their private messages. This sentiment is reinforced by another participant's explicit statement, indicating that their messages either go unnoticed or intentionally unanswered by the teachers. Additionally, a few participants noted that certain teachers refrained from conducting online classes, opting solely to distribute activities and tasks. Among them, one participant highlighted the expectation for teachers to provide valid justifications for their absence, even if not attributed to laziness. Furthermore, learners collectively believe teachers could have performed better in blended learning. Given the constraints of the new normal learning environment and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the reduced regular interaction between learners and teachers considerably adversely impacted the educational quality imparted. Consequently, this suggests that the implementation of blended learning introduced issues related to the provision of subpar education.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the study's findings, the narrative data set revealed varied perspectives on blended learning. While some participants found it easier and more effective, most expressed that blended learning does not facilitate optimal learning. Alternatively, some participants believed that blended learning could have advantages and disadvantages. Despite

the contrasting viewpoints, the learners shared similar negative experiences. Furthermore, learners emphasized the crucial need for mental and emotional support and a focus on delivering higher-quality education to implement the blended learning approach successfully. Hence, the study suggests that it is vital for teachers to prioritize providing learners with the utmost quality education, irrespective of the imposed learning modality. Parents also play a crucial role in meeting the needs of learners, including providing essential mental and emotional support. Additionally, fostering social interaction, particularly in the blended learning modality, is essential and should be actively encouraged. It is imperative to comprehensively assess learners in all aspects, placing equal importance on academic performance and overall well-being. School administrators, teachers, parents, and the entire academic community should strengthen their collaboration to promote and ensure the attainment of quality education in the blended learning setup.

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