

Survival of the Fittest: Resiliency of Private Schools Amidst the Challenges of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused immense global disruptions to the education system, placing schools under significant stress. Private schools are more vulnerable to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. There were studies conducted to explore the challenges and resiliency in schools. However, there are no studies conducted to explore how private primary education schools cope with the challenges of the pandemic. This exploratory, retrospective single-case study explored and understood how private schools cope with the challenges of the pandemic. It utilized a semi-structured interview to gather data from a participant who is a school principal in one of the private schools that remained operational despite the challenges of the pandemic. Financial control, instructional, and social mechanisms are the themes that emerged from the data analysis. This paper concludes that private schools employ these mechanisms to have a practical continuity of learning amidst the challenges of the pandemic. The interconnectedness of the mechanisms implied that the resiliency of private schools is a product of concerted efforts from all the members of the education community supported by educational resources. This paper also highlighted some implications for policy-making and educational management, specifically on change and crisis management, and future research directions.

Keywords: Case study; Coping mechanisms; COVID-19 pandemic; Private schools; Retrospective

Introduction

Resiliency is the ability of schools to deal with turbulences in the organization, enabling them to become stable and remain functional in society. A system can return to its original condition or develop a new desirable state after disruptions (Swart et al., 2022). It is an outcome of successful adjustments and effective management of the schools towards the adversities of certain events.

In the first quarter of 2020, schools all over the globe encountered an unexpected event that tested their resiliency. The COVID-19 pandemic caused immense global disruptions to the education system, placing schools under significant stress. It is considered the most disruptive event, affecting approximately 2 billion learners in 200 countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The sudden global changes in the education landscape affected schools at all levels, both public and private.

With the global effect of the pandemic, schools have faced numerous challenges which are related to finances (Ramirez, 2020; Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Ahmadon et al., 2020; and Alam & Tiwari, 2021), teachers' well-being (Oros et al., 2020; Ramirez, 2020; and Gumarang, 2021), utilization of technology (Hayat et al., 2020; Gonzales, 2020; & Agaton & Cueto, 2021), support from stakeholders (Carvalho & Hares, 2020), and instruction (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). These challenges were primarily rooted in the shifting of classes to new learning modalities to ensure the continuity of learning amid school closures. As a result, schools exerted efforts and redirected their actions to respond effectively to these challenges and attain resiliency.

However, the challenges affected the public and private primary education schools differently. In other countries such as Afghanistan, Canada, Ireland, Pakistan, Panama, and Morocco, there was a halt in the provision of funds to support private schools in responding to COVID-19 (Carvalho & Hares, 2020). While in low-income countries, learners are transferring from private to public schools (Alam & Tiwari, 2021). This exodus of learners and lack of support from external stakeholders placed private schools under financial constraints for their operations depend on school fees and stakeholder support. Moreover, reports have shown that there are 25 countries where private school teachers are losing their jobs or having their salaries cut (Carvalho & Hares, 2020). As such, private schools are more vulnerable to the threats of the pandemic, considering the nature of their operation and the source of their finances. Private schools face the peril of shutting down when they cannot effectively deal with these threats.

The Philippines shares the same sentiments with other low-income countries around the globe. Alam and Tiwari (2021) presented that in the Philippines, there was an almost 50% decrease in enrolment for the academic year 2020-2021 in private schools. Similarly, the Department of Education (DepEd) confirmed the transfer of about one million private school learners to public schools since the pandemic's start in 2020 (Manila Standard, 2022). Moreover, the Federation Associations of Private Schools Administrators (FAPSA) opined that private schools could be spared from shutting down when subsidies are provided to them to sustain their operations, considering that funds are available through Fund Assistance for Private Education (FAPE) (Hernando-Malipot, 2022). As a result of these situations, DepEd reported that 425 private schools around the country were permanently closed due to the pandemic (Balinbin, 2022). Indeed, some private schools could not withstand the disruptions caused by the pandemic, which led them to cease operations and close permanently.

On the brighter side, there are still private schools that can manage the consequences of the pandemic. These schools attained their stability despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. These schools have manifested resilience despite the threats and challenges of the pandemic to their existence. As such, it is imperative to understand how these schools maintain stability and continue their operations.

Relative to this, there are studies conducted (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Solikhin & Munastiwi, 2022; Bagwell, 2020; Gonzales, 2020; Ozmusul, 2017; San Miguel, 2022; & Swart et al., 2022) to understand the resiliency in schools and how they cope to the challenges of the pandemic. However, there is a dearth of studies conducted to explore the coping mechanisms of private primary education schools. This paper argues that it is essential to understand how private schools cope with the challenges of COVID-19 because they are more vulnerable to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Also, Hodges et al. (2020) recommended that future studies should focus on understanding the experiences of vulnerable populations, which this study strongly considered. Hence, this exploratory, retrospective single-case study aimed to explore and understand how private primary education schools cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative approach utilizing an exploratory, retrospective single-case study research design. According to Swedberg (2020), exploratory research is utilized to understand new and unfamiliar research problems better. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent event in which there is limited knowledge of how private basic education schools addressed the challenges of the pandemic. Thus, exploratory research is utilized in this study because it aims to explore and understand how private schools cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

Also, this study is retrospective. Retrospective research is employed when data is collected after an event, and participants are asked to recall salient points about the event (Ranganathan & Aggarwal, 2018). As applied in the study, interview questions allowed the participants of this study to look back and reflect and identify and describe the challenges the school encountered during the pandemic and how they coped with these challenges.

Moreover, the method used in this study is a single-case study. A single case study is utilized when a researcher aims to describe, explore, or explain real-life situations or events of one individual, group, or institution within a specific period (Alpi & Evans, 2019). The study employed this methodology because only one private school was involved. This study investigated the school's situation during the pandemic through an interview with the school's principal. The in-depth investigation made on the challenges and coping mechanisms of the said private school was conducted during the second quarter of the school year 2022-2023, specifically in November.

Selection of the participant

The participant of this study is a private school principal with the pseudonym Principal A. This study purposely chose Principal A as a participant in this study based on their experience as a school principal, the type of school the participant manages, and the duration of management of the participant in the said school. Principal A started managing the school in 2019, which was before the global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, and is still with the institution at present. The service of Principal A in the institution is considered the longest among the previous administrators of the school. Principal A is considered a neophyte principal, but he managed the school during the pandemic years and was able to lead the school and maintain its existence in society.

Moreover, Principal A is not only an administrator but also a classroom teacher during the pandemic and even at present. Principal A facilitates learning and manages the school at the same time. With this dual responsibility in the school, Principal A interacts and deals with the different members of the education community – learners, parents, teachers, school personnel, and community partners. As such, Principal A was a witness to the challenges of the pandemic to the school and had detailed knowledge of how the institution coped with these challenges during the pandemic.

Setting

This study occurred in one of the small private schools during the second quarter of the school year 2022-2023. The school, which has the pseudonym, School X, is one of the few small private schools that remained operational despite the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to private education sectors.

The school at which Principal A is a principal is in the business center of a particular municipality. It is located near other prominent private schools in town. During the pandemic, there was a 50% decrease in the total number of learners, with only ten (10) teachers catering to all learners from nursery to grade 12 level. Also, School X is a family-owned and non-profit institution that relies on the learners' tuition fees, donations, and assistance from the government. With the situation of School X during the pandemic, it is more vulnerable to the threats and challenges of the pandemic compared to other private schools in the municipality.

Data Sources

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guide they made to gather pertinent data for the study. The researcher crafted the interview guide using apriori coding and subjected it to validation before utilizing it. The interview questions included open-ended questions on what are the challenges of the pandemic School X encountered and how did it cope with these challenges.

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the study participants. The interviews took place at the participants' most convenient times. The researcher discussed the procedure and scope of the study with each participant and obtained their signed consent before initiating the interview process. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent using a mobile phone. The researcher also made notes of the key points from the interview and asked clarification questions when necessary.

After the interview process, the interview transcripts were organized and translated. The researcher utilized intelligent verbatim transcription to further understand the challenges of the pandemic and the coping mechanisms of the school. They also used a repertory grid to organize and analyze the collected transcripts. Following this, the researcher utilized thematic analysis to identify common themes.

Data Analysis

To analyze the gathered data, the researcher extracted essential ideas from the participant's responses. The researcher utilized thematic analysis to analyze gathered data and generate meaning and themes based on the aim of the study. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research that involves the analysis and interpretation of data sets to identify and understand meanings from repeated patterns.

The researchers employed an inductive approach of thematic analysis in analyzing the gathered data. The inductive approach in qualitative data analysis is used when codes and themes are developed from the analysis of the data set (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). There are no predetermined codes and themes; instead, codes and themes emerge as data sets are analyzed. The thematic analysis conducted in this study started with the data set and ended with the generation of common themes.

The data gathered from the conducted interview was prepared and organized using transcription and data reduction. Transcription was conducted by carefully listening to the recorded interview with the participant to come up with a written verbatim. After transcribing, data reduction was utilized to develop a more comprehensive data set. The researcher placed summarized transcribed data in a repertory grid for a more organized data analysis.

Following this, the researcher utilized to highlight sections of the transcribed data. The highlighted sections of the data were used to generate codes that represent the content and meaning of the data set. Codes were deeply analyzed and interpreted to develop a sub-theme that would represent the significant ideas of the generated codes. The sub-themes were analyzed to investigate their connections and classified accordingly to develop the most appropriate common themes. Themes unify common meanings and patterns in a data set.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research signifies that the findings and themes that emerged from the investigation are valid and reliable. This study utilized member checking and peer debriefing to establish the trustworthiness of the research findings. The analyzed data was presented to the research participant and to a peer researcher to establish the credibility of the study's results.

Results and Discussion

Private schools, like any other educational institution, encountered challenges during the pandemic. Private schools need to design mechanisms on how to deal with these challenges and be able to overcome them. In such ways, they develop their ability to survive the threats of the pandemic and become resilient amidst its challenges. Private schools cope with the said challenges through financial control mechanisms, instructional mechanisms, and social mechanisms.

Financial Control Mechanisms

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis is financial control mechanisms. This theme includes the techniques by which private schools properly monitor, allocate, and utilize their finances. Private schools employ financial control mechanisms to deal with the challenges they face which are related to the cost of operations and sources of funds during the pandemic. The decreased number of learners enrolled in the institution during the pandemic is the primary cause of financial challenges for private schools. The respondent mentioned:

“Our enrolment dropped by 50%; before the pandemic, we had approximately 300 learners, but during the pandemic, we only have almost 150 learners. With this, we need to reduce the number of teachers and have some budget cuts on our operational expenses.”

Relative to this, the study of Alam and Tiwari (2021) presented that in the Philippines, there was an almost 50% decrease in enrolment for the academic year 2020-2021, with only 2 million learners re-enrolled in private schools out of 4.3 million. Also, the study of Gabay (2022) supports the finding of the study that low enrolment in private schools remains one of the significant challenges they encounter. Meanwhile, Brammer and Clark (2020) emphasized that the income of educational institutions on tuition fees is essential in supporting and maintaining the school's operations. Hence, the primary source of income for private schools is the school fees of learners, which fuels the operations and activities of private schools. With the decrease in enrollees during the pandemic, private schools struggled to survive and overcome the threats of closures due to financial constraints.

As a corollary to the financial challenge of private schools, school personnel, especially teachers, were compensated through a no-work, no-pay scheme. As a financial control mechanism, the payment scheme aided the schools in budgeting the limited funds they have for the different needs of the school and in continuing its operation. The respondent expressed:

“There was an impact on the salary of teachers. The school implemented a no-work, no-pay scheme, and work schedules. Teachers were scheduled to report on specific days, and the school would just compensate for the number of days rendered. Also, teachers and other school personnel agreed to this payment scheme we implemented because they also had no choice during that time; it was difficult to look for a job during that time. Moreover, we do not have any choice, too.”

In support of the respondents' statement, Alam and Tiwari (2021) and UNESCO (n.d) opined that private school teachers are the most affected part of the education sector during the pandemic. In most countries, the pandemic affected the salaries of private school teachers in which they received salary cuts, and worst, nothing at all (Alam & Tiwari, 2021). At the same time, Carvalho and Hares (2020) have reported that private school teachers in at least 25 countries have lost their jobs or have had salary cuts. The global impact of the pandemic has affected private schools, as evidenced by the salary reduction of teachers. With the payment scheme, private school teachers were more vulnerable to financial problems due to their low income.

In the Philippines, private school teachers have agreed to receive salary cuts because of low enrolment (Coconuts Manila, 2020). This mechanism may sound inconsiderate, but private schools had no choice but to adopt and implement the no-work, no-pay scheme. Private school teachers agreed to this payment scheme because they need a source of income, and finding a new job during the pandemic is difficult because of the global economic crisis.

Furthermore, cost reduction strategies were also measures implemented in the financial control mechanism of private schools. Recurring ideas from the interview analysis build up cost reduction strategies, which include budget cuts on supplies and printing learners' modules. The respondent said:

“We have some budget cuts on the supplies of the teachers and the school. We consider what is essential, like printing modules. We do not print the whole module. Instead, we choose the important ones to limit the number of pages and have lower expenses on the materials needed in printing modules.”

The statement of the participant means that private schools use their limited funds for what they consider priorities and essential for the school to overcome the financial challenges posed by the pandemic. However, it can be noted that, despite the cost reduction, the quality of the materials and services remains the same. As an implication,

private schools have learned to be more effective and efficient in managing their finances through better decisions in allocating and utilizing them.

In connection with this, the study of Solikhin and Munastiwi (2022) suggested that private schools should practice wise financial management to meet all school needs, especially in the teaching-learning process. Further, the study concluded that one of the strategies school principals employed in managing schools' finances during the pandemic is fund efficiency. School principals need to assess in which areas funds should be utilized and which areas to reduce. As such, private schools utilize cost-reduction strategies to attain fund efficiency and to finance the different activities of the school.

Instructional Mechanisms

Another coping mechanism that aided private schools to continue their operation is instructional mechanisms. Instructional mechanisms refer to the activities and strategies that supported the teaching-learning process and reinforced the continuity of learning during the pandemic. This mechanism emerged from the flexible task management and technology upgrade of schools. Private schools developed this mechanism as a response to the challenges they faced in the implementation of the new learning modality during the pandemic. These instruction-related challenges include difficulty in learning modules, teachers' work overload, and technology. As Principal A said:

"Learners and parents had a difficult time understanding the module; these learners are those who do not have an internet connection and cannot attend online classes. Even in the school, internet connectivity is a problem, and other resources are insufficient, and some are outdated."

"Overloading is one of the challenges for teachers because of their preparations for modular and online learning."

This study's finding aligns with the study of Agaton and Cueto (2021), which found that learners and parents have encountered challenges in the use and availability of technology and instruction in the new normal. Also, work overload is a challenge for teachers, which contributed to the stress teachers experienced during the pandemic (Oros et al., 2020 & Gumarang, 2021). The shifting of learning modalities coupled with the use of technology has put teachers, parents, and learners in situations in which they struggled to make necessary adjustments to keep pace with the changes caused by the pandemic.

Hence, flexible task management allowed private schools to effectively monitor and manage the various tasks of teachers and learners while implementing distance learning modalities. This strategy helped the private schools shift modalities and plans when abrupt community quarantines were imposed. In addition, private schools crafted and executed task schedules to guide the teachers in their workloads, lessen their difficulty, and monitor teachers to identify who among them needed assistance. As for the learners, task schedules helped private schools monitor their progress in answering the modules and attending their online classes. In addition, flexible task management allowed the synchronization of activities and fostered teacher-learner interactions. The respondent said:

"We made a schedule of tasks for teachers. Since they are overloaded, we made the checking and implementation of lesson plans and classroom observations less demanding. This strategy is for teachers not to be pressured and will have more focus on delivering their lessons."

"Learners have a list of their tasks to do, and we have a checklist to monitor the completion of the different learning tasks. With this, teachers will be able to update the learners and give necessary assistance."

As support to this finding, the study of Prager et al. (2022) concluded that flexible scheduling is an effective strategy for organizations to attain economic resiliency during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the study of Ahmed et al. (2021) proved that collaboration between teachers and students is one of the flexible strategies utilized in education sectors to manage the pandemic. Flexibility in task management allowed work and activities in schools to continue despite the changes caused by the pandemic. With the flexible task management of the school, a synchronized and smooth transition of teaching-learning activities is possible during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the utilization of flexible task management implies that private schools considered the welfare of both teachers and learners during the pandemic. Teachers and learners both play significant roles in the continuity of learning and the success of the implementation of new learning modalities.

Another component of the instructional mechanism is the upgrade of technology. The COVID-19 pandemic is an abrupt event that disturbed the teaching-learning processes. With the shifting of learning modality from physical to online classes, technology is a requirement to deliver instruction despite the closures of schools. However, at the start of the pandemic, schools are ill-equipped with resources, specifically technology, which is vital in performing their societal functions. As a response to this, schools have taken measures to improve the technology they use in delivering

curriculum content and in ensuring that learners achieve the learning competencies. This implies that technology is a crucial component of the teaching-learning process during the global closures of schools. The respondent mentioned:

“During the pandemic, the school utilized its savings to install a faster internet connection and upgrade computer units. The hardware and software of the computer units were updated - camera, microphone, applications, and others, to support teachers in using online platforms in delivering their lessons”.

“Some parents purchased laptops and internet connectivity services to help their children in their online classes.”

The study by Rahayu et al. (2022) revealed that learning with technology depends on internet connectivity. In virtual classes, internet connectivity allows individuals to connect to the web and with others. A fast and reliable internet connection ensures productive teaching-learning interactions. As such, schools, teachers, and learners should be equipped with the necessary technology and fast internet connectivity to participate effectively in the teaching-learning process.

However, the sudden shift in learning modalities has globally stressed education systems, primarily because they were unprepared to implement online or blended learning (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). As such, schools need to prepare to integrate technology into education, one of which is upgrading technological infrastructures (Starkey et al., 2021). Schools need to improve the technology they are using to keep pace with the global transition of classes to new learning modalities.

Social Mechanisms

Social mechanisms also helped private schools adjust to the changes caused by the pandemic. Social mechanisms are the strategies utilized to establish a support system through the involvement of different stakeholders in the adoption and implementation of the new normal in education. This mechanism implies that even private schools need a helping hand from community partners to enhance further the efficiency of implementing new school policies and procedures. Private schools developed this mechanism from the challenges they encountered due to inadequate support from community partners and low enrolment due to the transfer of learners. The respondent mentioned:

“We encountered insufficient support from community partners, especially from the government. There were no subsidies from the government provided to us; even our teachers did not receive any. Maybe they were thinking that we are private schools and do not need this assistance from them. In the barangay, officials do not inform us during community quarantines, and sadly, they almost forgot us.”

“Learners are transferring to public schools during the pandemic, and it affected our operations as a private school.”

In other countries such as Afghanistan, Canada, Ireland, Pakistan, Panama, and Morocco, there was a discontinuance in the provision of funds to support private schools in responding to COVID-19 (Carvalho & Hares, 2020). In the Philippines, the Fund Assistance for Private Education (FAPE) is for helping private schools; however, this assistance aided by the government does include all private schools (Hernando-Malipot, 2022). Private schools are struggling to survive during the pandemic by their means, and due to their low income, assistance from the government would be of great help to them.

One component of the social mechanisms of private schools is intensified marketing strategies. For private schools, the utilization of marketing strategies during the pandemic was intensified to win back their learners and encourage others to enroll in their schools. With the desire to increase their enrolment, private schools involved the different members of their education community both in the natural and virtual world. This mechanism indicates that private schools have utilized the power of social connections in advertising the school's name. The respondent expressed:

“We have intensified the use of social media platforms and different marketing strategies. There were times during the pandemic when we went out and went to public places to distribute flyers. We also asked for help from our parents, other private organizations, and alumni to promote our school.”

Marketing strategies are utilized in education to promote the services schools provide and increase public interest. According to Sujatmikanto et al. (2022), schools have taken innovative marketing steps to respond to the pandemic, one of which is establishing good relations between schools and the community. Strong support from the community will ensure better results and gain community trust.

Lastly, strengthening community partnerships is a constituent of private schools' social mechanisms. Private schools have conducted several orientations and meetings with parents and other stakeholders to discuss their roles in the new normal education. Private schools also asked for help from the government units not only for financial or any

resource assistance but also to ensure compliance with safety protocols and for proper information dissemination. The respondent stated:

“The school gave the necessary assistance to parents to guide them in the learning modality of the school. The school discussed to parents and barangay officials their roles, and we asked for their help. For assistance, the school asked for the help of government agencies like DOLE (Department of Labor and Employment); it is for our teachers that they may also receive financial aid from the government.”

Community partners are critical elements for schools to meet the demands of the pandemic through the resources and assistance private schools alone cannot provide due to financial constraints. They are also critical ingredients that support the teaching-learning process during the pandemic. Rosmilawati et al. (2021) stated that support from community stakeholders promotes collaboration through sharing of skills, networks, and programs to respond to the situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion and Implications

This study enabled the exploration of the coping mechanisms of private schools to the different challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These coping mechanisms include financial control, instructional, and social mechanisms, which helped private schools respond to the challenges of the pandemic, attain stability, and continue their operations. From the results of this study, these mechanisms are geared toward a common ultimate goal of education during the pandemic, which is the effective continuity of learning. Thus, these mechanisms are not independent of each other, but they are related to one another.

The interconnectedness of these mechanisms implies that the resiliency of private schools is a product of concerted efforts from all the members of the education community supported by educational resources. This interconnection further implies that school leaders can have effective change management when school administrators collaborate with the different stakeholders through proper communication, agreement, and coordination to implement new policies and procedures successfully.

Furthermore, the financial challenges of private schools during the pandemic greatly affected teachers. Private school teachers worked more than the requirement during the pandemic, and yet they are not well-compensated because of the financial constraints of the school, in which they had no choice. This situation implies that authorities should craft policies to address the concerns of private school teachers, especially on financial matters. These policies should value and promote the well-being of private school teachers.

Lastly, this study amplified the challenges private schools encountered as presented in the different research studies. It also highlighted that through these challenges, private schools developed mechanisms that contributed to the organization's management of change and crisis, which resulted in more responsive, adaptive, and resilient private schools. This implies that the pandemic should not only be considered a threat but also an opportunity for organizations to grow and develop. Thus, school leaders should further develop their crisis and change management skills, for they are essential elements in dealing with unexpected events and challenges to schools and in transforming threats into opportunities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study did not utilize the triangulation method to establish the credibility of the results of the study, which limited the researcher to enrich further the data gathered from the participant of the study. Also, time constraints limit the researcher to consider and gather data from other qualified participants in the study.

Future researchers may consider conducting a similar study on public schools, and a comparative study may be executed to enrich further the data on how educational institutions, both public and private, cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Moreover, a quantitative approach may also be employed to determine the extent of practice of the identified coping mechanisms during the pandemic. This approach will generate quantitative data to support the qualitative data gathered in this study. Furthermore, since the participant of this study was a neophyte principal during the pandemic, a study may also be conducted to investigate the leadership styles of neophyte principals that enabled them to handle and lead the schools through the posed threats and challenges of unforeseen events.

Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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