

Coping Through the Unforeseen: Comparison of Adaptive Strategies on Learning Modalities of Students in Public and Private Educational Institutions

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Date received: June 25, 2024

Date revised: July 6, 2024

Date accepted: July 12, 2024

Originality: 92%

Grammarly Score: 99%

Similarity: 8%

Recommended citation:

Arquero, J. D., Dela Cruz, F.R., Soriano, A.C., Belmonte, A.K.A., Romero, J.M., & Villarama, J. (2024). Coping through the unforeseen: comparison of adaptive strategies on learning modalities of students in public and private educational institutions. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2(8), 472-478.
<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.0309>

Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted numerous studies on students' challenges; however, relatively little attention has been given to their coping mechanisms. This study qualitatively compared the adaptive strategies employed by students from public and private institutions during Online Distance, Blended, and Face-to-Face Learning. Grounded on Kolb's Learning Style Theory, this phenomenological research examined the various coping mechanisms utilized by Grade 10 students from public and private schools in the Philippines who were selected using convenience and snowball sampling methods. Data were analyzed following Colaizzi's method, providing a rigorous framework for interpreting the findings. Results revealed that private school students encountered significant academic difficulties due to isolation, relying primarily on self-driven coping strategies. In contrast, public school students faced challenges related to workload and socioeconomic factors, turning to hobbies, family, and peer support to manage their stresses. These findings highlighted the distinct differences in how students from various educational settings cope with pressures brought on by the pandemic. Future studies are strongly recommended to encompass broader parameters, extend over longer periods, and include more mature subjects to capture a broader range of experiences with different learning modalities. A comprehensive approach would provide deeper insights into students' coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies across educational contexts. This study underscores the importance of understanding the diverse coping mechanisms employed by students. It highlights the need for supportive measures tailored to students' unique challenges in different educational settings. Addressing these needs is crucial in developing effective strategies to support students' well-being and academic success in the face of ongoing and future educational disruptions.

Keywords: Blended Learning; Coping mechanisms; Educational Institutions; Full Face-to-Face Classes; Online Classes.

1.0 Introduction

People's instinct is to adapt to their surroundings when faced with certain circumstances. How does one cope with sudden changes? How does one manage to find ways to become accustomed to life in order to survive? This study focuses on the adaptability of Grade 10 students from private and public schools in the Philippines as they encounter various learning modalities. This research gears towards investigating the differences or similarities in how students adapt to new circumstances and if their situation is a massive factor in how they cope. Recent studies on learning styles and preferred learning modalities show a remarkable correlation between students' study habits

and preferred learning modalities in the new normal. Particular difficulties in these processes prevent or delay learning, preventing understanding.

Concerning this, people spend quite some time of their life at school. Their learning habits can be traced to how they face circumstances where they are left with no choice but to adapt to their surroundings, showing a significant relationship between the challenges and difficulties and coping mechanisms of students Candy et al. (2024) in the Philippines. That is precisely what happened with Grade 10 students when the pandemic hit. In 2020, when the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was worsening with every passing second, the country realized that education could not be halted any further, which then affected the educational sector of several provinces of the Philippines (Andriesse & Song, 2024). Thus, online classes began. As this becomes the new normal, a study on the proportion and determinants of depression among students showed that 79.2% of their participants experience moderate to severe depression. Students' coping mechanisms can be discovered based on their learning preferences.

While previous studies focused on online learning modality, which has not captured the face-to-face challenges of students, Rasheed et al. (2020) investigated the challenges in the component of blended learning as experienced by students, teachers, and educational institutions. Moreover, Graham (2013) highlighted the opportunities brought by online components, such as learning flexibility, cost-friendliness, and pedagogical richness. However, the findings emphasized that the world modernizes because of technology; therefore, those affected by this learning modality find it challenging to manage these issues. It further capitalized that the skills required for both students and teachers are changing daily (Villarama et al., 2023) and that technological advances are too fast for some educational facilitators to adapt. Hence, it makes education overwhelming for both digital and non-digital-born students.

In essence, acknowledging the challenges of students during the different phases of education and analyzing how they cope with unveiling if it showcases any difference due to their environment may be of help in future studies as it serves as a basis for considering the general well-being of students in terms of learning through various capacities in an ever-evolving academic landscape in the Philippines and abroad. Therefore, this study aimed to compare the coping mechanisms used by public and private educational institution students who have experienced various learning modalities: online, blended, and full in-person classes. In addition, it is targeted to uncover the students' experiences from online classes transitioning to full face-to-face classes, mainly to make adjustments in the implemented learning modality and provide a suitable learning mode that compliments students' adaptive strategies.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This phenomenological qualitative research analyzed the coping mechanisms employed by Grade 10 students in public and private educational institutions in the Philippines who participated in online classes, blended learning modes, and entire face-to-face class setups during the academic year (AY) 2022-2023.

2.2 Research Locale

Two public and private schools, San Jose City, Science City of Muñoz, and Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines, served as research locales.

2.3 Research Participants

Two students of different sexes from each participating public and private school were selected for semi-structured interviews through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. These techniques enabled researchers to engage with populations that are typically difficult to sample effectively. A total of 12 participating students, six male and six female students, served as respondents.

2.4 Research Instrument

This study employed ten semi-structured interview guide questions that were checked and validated by three experts and teachers (Language, Research, and Social Science). Following the ethical guidelines for conducting research, voluntary participation and consent in responding to these questions were ensured.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedures

The purpose of the study was discussed with the respondents, and their permission was obtained before the interview. A schedule of interview sessions and consent forms were secured to record the respondents' answers.

The data was analyzed thematically following Colaizzi's method. Before categorizing the themes, the researchers continuously assessed the responses, noting their similarities and differences. The categories were organized based on clusters of related responses to address the main issues raised by the study. Data cross-checking was employed to validate the results further.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research study was evaluated by the Central Luzon State University (CLSU) Ethics Research Committee (ERC) on March 14, 2023, with approval code 2023-167.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Theme 1. Hobbies as an outlet for releasing emotional and mental stress

In pursuit of mental and emotional soundness, engaging in a hobby, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as the activity one does for personal pleasure and satisfaction when not working, is a common practice for most. In fact, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority in their 2018 Census of Philippine Business and Industry: Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, 4,087 establishments in the country engage in arts, entertainment, and recreation activities. This includes learning a new skill, doing outdoor activities, entering the world of books and linguistics, or unleashing one's inner artist through drawing and painting.

The COVID-19 pandemic ignited the interest of society to utilize hobbies as a way of mitigating the depression and anxiety brought on by the sudden isolation from the outside world (Villarama et al., 2022). Taking the time to pursue hobbies is one of the best predictors of lower levels of depressive symptoms, and such "simple" coping strategies may help in battling anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown (Fullana et al., 2020). As the class set-up shifted from pre-pandemic face-to-face classes to online distance learning (ODL), students had to find ways to lessen this unforeseen change's emotional and mental strain. With that, the need for effective coping strategies was introduced, and pursuing a hobby was one of them. Most participants from public educational institutions engaged in books, linguistics, and arts as a means of mitigating the stresses brought by the ODL set-up that they had to deal with.

"As I have said earlier, reading books (something I do during my healing time) became my coping mechanism."

"Back then (during ODL), I did not go out but usually played the guitar."

"I kept drawing and creating art during those times."

"When my mind is in chaos, I weave to relieve myself."

In a study by Hartono (2022), having a hobby is a fundamental way to lessen stress as it provides joy and works as a stress reliever when one focuses on the hobby. One common hobby is related to arts and crafts; making art involves the complex dialog and connection between emotion, cognition, and the senses, therefore enhancing stress management. Whether in arts, language, or music, engaging in an activity that allows complete focus and concentration and providing a solemn healing time can be a way to battle the emotional and mental strain that the unforeseen changes in education bring.

Theme 2. Socialization and its effects

The impact of the pandemic has been felt worldwide across different sectors of society. High school students, for example, have been affected by school disruption, shifting to different learning modalities and physically socializing. Students' frustration with their distance learning experiences adversely affected their emotional and mental outcomes. Thus, socially connected people provide social support, which is essential for mental and physical well-being. Social support is the perception or experience of being appreciated and cared for by others and being part of a social network that can be relied on to aid one another when needed (Villarama et al., 2024; Wills, 1991).

"Because when we get together, it is fun. Sometimes, we also work together on assignments."

"My friends and I are talking to each other to forget our problems for a while."

"My friends, since they are the ones who are witnessing what is happening at school, I went to them."

Students seek help from their peers to cope with stress. Their relationships and communication with their friends are their way of coping.

"Sometimes when I need help, my sibling, but when it is closer to me because he is my brother, it is like a plus that he will help me and then support me."

Family members may serve as every student's support system as a coping strategy. Specifically, they rely on their siblings because of their bond and connection to understand what each other needs when encountering mental and emotional strain.

Theme 3. Relying on oneself: The effect of intrapersonal relationship

The pandemic brought new challenges to face worldwide. Two whole years of uncertainty haunted students as they sought to find stable ground through the obscurity of the pandemic. In the thick of uncertainty, students often had to rely on themselves to navigate their workloads, life, and personal exploration. With the sudden onset of the pandemic, students had little time to adjust their surroundings and relationships to adapt. Students were forced to rely on themselves as it was challenging to find the means to get support from others, especially with the nature of the lockdown.

"I just pushed through on my own as there was nobody else to help because of the lockdown."

"I did not have anyone to vent my struggles to, just myself."

Students turned to themselves for motivation and assurance through online classes as a coping strategy. They turned to their hobbies, music, habits, and emotions to deal with the stress induced by the online class and its new set of unfamiliar workloads and challenges.

"I just do my hobbies when I am sad. When I cannot take it anymore, I will do my hobbies."

"I give time to myself like [...] anything, anything I want, then when I am fine, that is when I go back."

This reliance on oneself ultimately boiled down to isolation and solitude to focus only on one's weight in problems. Interaction with others proved too draining to be worth it anymore; weighing their options, students imposed a lockdown on themselves.

"Back then, when there's problems at home, I locked myself in so they would not see what I have been doing."

"I isolate myself. Like I will go out on my own, eat, and such. When I am tired, I will eat out on my own. Isolating myself. There are also books."

After the lockdown subsided and face-to-face classes resumed, the students could retain their intrapersonal relationships—however, the ability to reconnect with others allowed for the waning of self-dependence.

"My friends and I just talk to forget our problems briefly."

"It feels easier when you have someone with you doing work."

"I go to my friend's house sometimes since I have a car."

The importance of a healthy interpersonal relationship was highlighted by Aswin et al. (2022), where it was found that interpersonal intelligence leads to improved scores in mathematics. The ability to find motivation through oneself is associated with resilience during the pandemic in the form of grit, though Bono et al. (2020) did not affect academic functioning. Rotas and Cahapay (2021) found that students who underwent online learning coped through the stresses of lockdown by regulating themselves and turning to their hobbies and outlets to distract themselves from the weight they had to carry to survive the pandemic.

Theme 4. Socioeconomic Status: The gap in socioeconomic standing

Educational inequality occurs in multiple forms. Van and Mijs (2010) discussed its existence through the inequality of educational opportunity in terms of the influence of social background on students' test scores and learning. It opened various struggles and opportunities for students, especially during ODL, and has become one of the factors for their preferred learning mode and affected their capability to cope.

Socioeconomic status played a vital role in students' education quality during ODL. Private school students are commonly privileged in terms of access to proper school materials, such as technology, an essential component of ODL. This led to a preference for ODL as the most manageable workload for private school students to handle among the three learning modalities.

In contrast, most participants from public educational institutions have limited access to and prior knowledge of technology, which hindered them from seeing the beauty of online education and ODL being the least manageable workload.

"I did not have any gadgets to use in online class; I just borrowed from someone who has."

Magsambol (2020) and Rasheed et al. (2020) revealed that new requirements in blended learning rise as the world modernizes and technology emerges. There is an apparent gap between those who can purchase essential school materials in the new educational sector. However, despite the distinction between the two, students from both educational institutions experienced difficulties understanding lessons due to the diversion of focus and absence of physical teaching.

"We do have modules that the teachers are discussing; however, I get distracted by other apps, which divert my attention from listening to the discussion."

This is supported by the study of Hazelrigg (2020), who stated that using technology in class, such as laptops or phones, was distracting to almost half of the students in the survey.

Theme 5. Role of Educational Institutions

Education plays a significant part in one's life in terms of heightened knowledge and understanding. Shaping a child's mind until it is in the full-shaped form to be filled with the intelligence they would collect along the way. The role of educational institutions is not to be disregarded as they supply knowledge instruments that one may need as they continue to their future. However, in light of the abrupt adjustment the world had to make when the pandemic hit, it cannot be denied that the role of these institutions was halted. Moreover, it was a hardship that every student had to face. These circumstances led to multiple studies regarding the mental toll it took on students, and the results are beyond comparison.

Circumstances such as the absence of in-person teacher assistance, the proper teaching of subjects needed to be learned in the educational system, and the overloaded workload students had to carry until their education institution was ready for a face-to-face class—all of these were factors of the heightened depression rate in the world. According to a scientific brief reported by the World Health Organization, during the pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression escalated by a massive 25%. Taking into account that this was only the first year of the pandemic,

"I do not understand some of the modules because they were not taught."

"You must still understand and learn the lessons because it is only online. It is not being taught."

Further, in in-person teaching, students must fully grasp the idea of their lessons. Not to mention that these hardships were limited to the students and the whole educational facilities, such as teachers. However, amenable attempts were made not further to hinder the flow of knowledge through education. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) interpreted how difficult it was to switch from a face-to-face learning modality to sudden online distance learning, yet these educational institutions made appreciable attempts.

Upon certainty, the role of educational institutions can be expanded to the curriculum that should be established as early as possible in one's life. Following the expansion of the roles, it can be specified in the curriculum and discipline of moral philosophy, visual perception, anecdotes, observation learning, and peer influence (InsightsIAS, 2019). However, the role of educational institutions is not only limited to academic purposes; it can also be amplified to cultural and socioeconomic topics (Huwaida, 2018). In further support of the statement, Huwaida (2018) also stated how the young generation is capable to a great extent, and the educational institution they are enrolled in can either hinder this or be the stepping stone to reach the said extent.

4.0 Conclusion

Students from private and public educational institutions have experienced significant challenges in acquiring knowledge in the three learning modalities. Physical interactions and communication with peers, family, teacher-student, and student-teacher played vital roles in their experiences in both hardships and opportunities in learning through the different teaching approaches. Students from private educational institutions experienced academic struggles that revolved only around the concept of 'isolation' itself. Their experiences concentrated on how online and flexible teaching affect the quality of learning. Meanwhile, students from public educational institutions have more flexible academic struggles, which revolve around isolation, heavier workloads, and socioeconomic status, tremendously impacting their situation, quality, and coping.

The study showed that students from public educational institutions utilize their preferred adaptive strategy better than students from private institutions; most rely on themselves and their academic privilege, which lessens their struggles to cope. It also showed that most of the students' adaptive strategies are about nurturing their hobbies and the reliance on their family and peers as outlets for releasing emotional and mental stress and their support system. This study revealed that the world is always unexpected; people experience different hardships and cope with them depending on their current situation, so keeping an eye on this topic should help one overcome their micro and macro academic challenges.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution to every part of this research. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this paper.

6.0 Funding

This research did not receive any particular financial assistance of any kind.

7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

8.0 Acknowledgment

The student-authors wish to express their profound gratitude to their research adviser, Professor Joseph Agbuya Villarama for the guidance throughout the process and to the Ethics Research Committee of Central Luzon State University (CLSU) for their comprehensive ethical review and approval of this study.

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