


# The COVID-19 Pandemic through the Lens of Education in the Philippines: The New Normal

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## ABSTRACT

The present COVID-19 pandemic has brought extraordinary challenges and has affected the educational sectors, and no one knows when it will end. Every country is presently implementing plans and procedures on how to contain the virus, and the infections are still continually rising. In the educational context, to sustain and provide quality education despite lockdown and community quarantine, the new normal should be taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of the “*new normal educational policy*”. This article presents opportunities for responding issues, problems and trends that are currently arising and will arise in the future due to COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of education in the Philippines - the new educational norm.

**Keywords:** new normal, education, COVID-19, global pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most recent public health emergencies of global concern is the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which started in China and almost infected every country in the whole world. This disease is caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, previously known as 2019-nCoV) and has received global attention from growing infections and on how to eradicate the disease and flatten the curve of infections (Guo et al., 2020). Symptoms include cough, fever and shortness of breath which can be transferred through close contact with an infected person by coughing, sneezing, respiratory droplets or aerosols (Shereen et al., 2020). Though it affects people of all ages, it is most vulnerable to adults, children and people with underlying medical conditions (WHO, 2020b). As of this time, the number of infections and deaths is still increasing worldwide. In order to avoid the infection, containment, mitigation, contact tracing, self-isolation, social distancing, wearing of face masks, improved health care systems, hand-washing and surface cleaning is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b).

The fight against the threats to COVID-19 pandemic suffered profound effects and impacts on almost all sectors in the human race. These have resulted in the widespread disruption such as travel restrictions (Chinazzi et al., 2020), closure of schools (Viner et al., 2020), global economic recession (Fernandes, 2020), political conflicts (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020), racism (Habibi et al., 2020), and misinformation and controversies (Enitan et al., 2020), to name a few. One of the most affected is the educational sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic is still existent today, and there are no specific vaccines or

medicines to eradicate this disease. We need to live to the new normal; if not contained, we need to live with the disease as viruses are constantly evolving (Denworth, 2020). However, scientists are still on their way in studying and developing vaccines and presently in clinical trials (Cortegiani et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Gautret et al., 2020).

For almost two pandemic months, most countries around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce infections (UNESCO, 2020). This closure has affected more than 1.2 billion learners worldwide with more than 28 million learners in the Philippines (UNESCO, 2020). Responses like community lockdown and community quarantine of several countries have led students and teachers to study and work from home which led to the delivery of online learning platforms (Crawford et al., 2020). However, the implementation of online learning posed different risks, problems and challenges to both the teachers and students, especially in the higher education institutions (HEIs) (Bao, 2020). In the Philippines, there are 10,794 cases as of May 11, 2020 and is still increasing (DOH, 2020) with more than four million cases worldwide (Worldometer, 2020). In response to these situations, educational leaders decided to adopt the new normal in education. At the basic education, the Department of Education (DepEd) will be implementing the Learning Continuity Plan (LCP), which will be in effect School Year 2020-2021 and classes will open on August 24, 2020 instead of June 2020 (DepEd, 2020). In the higher education sector, the Commission on Higher Education, HEIs were given academic freedom and should implement available distance learning, e-learning, and other alternative modes of delivery to students (CHED, 2020). Several universities have opted to implement their own policies regarding

instruction and opening of classes starting August 2020. It will be the new normal in education and strengthening educational planning and health is a concern to provide quality, inclusive and accessible education for every student. Hence, this review paper has been developed in order to provide a clear lens of the new normal in education.

## THE NEW NORMAL: POST-COVID EDUCATIONAL PLANS

Within the new normal, the situation presents a unique challenge to every educational leader's decision-making process. Hence, to sustain the delivery of quality of instruction to every school, this article presents opportunities for responding issues, problems and trends that are arising and will arise in the future due to COVID-19 pandemic. The author has a keen interest in the current and future trends in the new normal education. According to Karalis (2020), what is worth studying after returning to normality, are the implications that have arisen for the day after, that is, what adjustments need to be made, the extent of the situation and to define the basic dimensions of education and learning in formal education systems and organizations amid educational disruptions.

### Wearing of Face Masks and Physical Distancing

Along with the current spread of COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing and face masks wearing to public and private schools are compulsory once classes are resumed or started. Governments around the world have issued policies and guidelines to implement physical distancing in order to flatten the pandemic curve (Greenstone & Nigam, 2020; Thunstrom et al., 2020). In addition, wearing of face masks or even personal protective equipment (PPE) as a public health intervention would probably intercept the transmission link and prevent communicable diseases (Huang, 2020). Thus, students, faculty members and non-teaching staff should be required to wear face masks and maintain physical distancing with each other when going to schools. In addition, they will be required to strictly follow hygienic practices, health protocols and other precautionary measures such as contact tracing, foot baths, sanitation and frequent handwashing. One of the challenges of schools is to reduce student-teacher ratio which will lead to problems like lack of classrooms and other physical plants and facilities, lack of teachers and lack of learning materials. Nonetheless, public health is a concern. Thereby, this recommends every learning institution to plan such measures and policies on physical distancing and wearing of face masks.

### Strengthening Online Learning Platforms

Nowadays, we all are staying in our homes due to the lockdown policy implemented by the government. However, learning should not halt. Different countries worldwide have introduced various answers during the pandemic to continue the education process - the introduction of distance learning. These are online learning platforms such as google, TV broadcasts, guidelines, resources, video lectures and online channels were introduced (UNESCO, 2020). With schools to re-open its doors the following school year, it's vital to plan how schools will be able to pursue their mission of implementing quality education to every student. As school is a public place where crowd is unavoidable and children are vulnerable, there is a need to strengthen policy in terms of the delivery of instruction - to provide opportunities for online learning platforms. Numerous innovative programs have been

proposed by the different learning sectors in the Philippines. The Department of Education emphasized that it would not necessarily mean that teachers and learners will go to schools and learn inside the classrooms and devised various modalities to ensure that online learning a choice among all others in this new learning environment (DepEd, 2020). Similarly, in the higher education institutions, new normal would be virtual classrooms. The Commission on Higher Education suggested to strengthen online platforms and blended learning such as but not limited to google classroom, messenger, zoom, edmodo, Facebook and YouTube (CHED, 2020). In addition, both will adopt numerous learning delivery options such as but not limited to face-to-face, blended learnings, distance learnings, and home-schooling and other modes of delivery (CHED, 2020; DepEd, 2020). However, the implementation would pose such problems on students who have limited internet access, no gadgets and the poor. According to the report of Akamai (2017), the Philippines has the lowest internet connectivity in Asia. Besides, such challenges would be equity gaps, students security and safety, quality of learning compromised and poor assessment results (Winthrop, 2020). Changes on the grading system, assessment and evaluation of student's performance will also be a challenge to every administrator. In addition, laboratory activities in sciences and other subjects that require performance such as Physical Education and culture and arts would be limited to paper and pen test, unless schools will require students to be physically present to be assessed through performance tests. In addition, extra-curricular activities in school such as scouting, proms, sports intramurals, contests and foundation day will be reduced and discontinued. In terms of teaching, teacher training to online instruction, blended learning and distance learning is also recommended in order to adjust to the new instructional format (Toquero, 2020). Teacher competencies in both pedagogy and technology should be reinforced. This transition to the new normal, from the four corners of the classroom to the borders of virtual reality, every learning institution needs to study how successful online learning is in providing quality education and outcomes-based education to students (Basilaia & Kvakvadze, 2020).

### Strengthening Research and Development in Health

Schools need to strengthen research and development in terms of health. One of the functions of every higher education institution is to contribute to the generation of knowledge and its application through research and development endeavors. Higher education needs to demonstrate competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency by strengthening research activities in the field of health and pandemic (Toquero, 2020). Aligned with the plans of the WHO, every institution should accelerate innovative research and development programs to help contain the spread of the pandemic and facilitate care for those affected. Next is to support research priorities that contribute to worldwide research platforms in hopes of learning from the present pandemic response to better prepare for the next unforeseen epidemic (WHO, 2020a). Within these global changes, it has affected the overall education institutions and there is a great need to study on how each sector in the government will evaluate the scenario, plan, adapt and implement such policies and programs in responding to this crisis.

### Program Creation and Health Integration

The creation of new program offerings related to health, medicine and research is also a need in higher education. As the demand increases for doctors, nurses and medical technologies at present, HEIs should increase and scout students opportunities to study programs related to

the pandemic's eradication. In addition, health education should be integrated into courses and subjects in both basic and higher education, strengthen school medical services, hygienic practices and mental health (Toquero, 2020). Integrating health literacy to education is more needed than in these days when COVID-19 crisis is still evident today (Abel & McQueen, 2020). This educational approach would lead everyone to address future health issues such as global pandemic.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This review paper highlights policy implications, strategies and issues that will arise in the new normal education, particularly in the Philippines. Several implications have been discussed when the new normal comes, namely: wearing of face masks and physical distancing, strengthening online platforms, research and development and program creation and health integration. This article will serve as a reference for future studies related to responding COVID-19 crisis in the educational sector, particularly in the Philippine context. Future studies are recommended such as planning and implementation strategy, assessing online learning systems to schools, a survey on online platforms, project proposals and capstone projects, program creation, community assessment, revision of curricula, development of instructional materials and many more.

## CONCLUSION

The education sector is one of the highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, where there are still a growing COVID-19 infections as of now, this study presented some of the new normal situation in the school setting. However, there were some posed challenges and issues presented while recommending several approaches on the new normal. Schools at all levels, therefore, need to address these concerns and carefully evaluate plans and procedures on the implementation of the new normal. Collaboration is the most important at these difficult times. We should help form the post COVID-19 education, stepping to the new normal. The author, therefore recommends that the opportunity and challenges presented should be grasped and taken a serious concern. The challenge herewith is on how to provide and deliver quality education amidst exceptional times, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and on what extent are we going to become prepared when another crisis comes in the future.

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