

Online Teaching During COVID-19: A Tale of Two Cities

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on a collaborative research project initiated in 2022 by the authors based in Hong Kong and the Philippines. The overarching goal is to review and assess the impact that the prolonged use of technology for teaching has had on K–12 teachers. Through a narrative inquiry, the study seeks to encapsulate teachers' online teaching experiences: its efficacy, challenges, impacts on teaching, and other relevant issues. These narratives are compared against the backdrop of access to technology in Hong Kong and in the Philippines, as there are immense differences in IT infrastructure. It was found that technological advancement and preparedness did not guarantee smooth delivery of online teaching. In contrast, teachers' own personal circumstances, workload, stress, and mental wellbeing tend to have a much greater impact on themselves and their work.

KEYWORDS

Access to Technology, Anxiety, COVID-19, Emergency Remote Learning, Teacher Preparedness, Teacher Stress, Teacher Collaboration, School Suspension

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought fear, challenges, and major changes to all sectors of the world, and education was not spared from this. The pandemic caused schools around the world to suspend classes. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020, almost all countries made the shift to online instruction to comply with social distancing regulations (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020). Many schoolteachers were forced to teach online using new educational technologies. The two cities in which the current study takes place, Hong Kong (China) and Los Baños (The Philippines), are considered to be drastically different in terms of their IT infrastructure, mobile device ownership, and access to high-speed internet. The biggest dilemma is how to continue learning despite the pandemic. Likewise, managing and providing quality education is indeed a big task to accomplish in this kind of scenario.

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As online learning was initially seen as a temporary measure, the priority was to provide students with access to devices and internet connection. However, more often than not, equipping students with technology is only half the battle, as there are many issues associated with online teaching that teachers must grapple with on a daily basis.

With a growing body of COVID-19 review studies focusing on the wider impact that prolonged use of technology-mediated education has had on teachers and learners, the authors believe the findings of this narrative inquiry will offer additional insights into the degree of impact our emergency remote teaching (ERT) provision has had on individual teachers in developing and developed countries, the results of which would be useful for future preparedness and teacher education.

COVID-19 SCHOOL SUSPENSION IN HONG KONG AND THE PHILIPPINES

Hong Kong's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic first started in early 2020, as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. The government imposed restrictions on crowd gathering and businesses were ordered to close, including beauty parlors, sports facilities, entertainment, and recreation venues (Lee et al., 2021). Schools were also ordered to close during the spring term and employ online learning; they shifted to half-day in-person sessions in the summer term but closed again due to a third wave in July 2020 in Hong Kong. Schools reopened after the summer break in September 2020 with half-day sessions and closed again in early December 2020 due to a fourth wave. They reopened in February 2021 with half-day sessions. Unfortunately, the fifth wave started in early January 2022, which led to yet another school suspension lasting until early May. Schools then resumed half-day face-to-face teaching. In cases where a school reached a 90% vaccination rate, full-day mode could be resumed. Rather unexpectedly, however, students were allowed to go back to full-day classes in February 2023 irrespective of vaccination rate. This was soon followed by the cancellation of the mask mandate. This was soon followed by the repeal of the daily rapid antigen testing in schools, as Hong Kong lifted the last of its COVID restrictions in March 2023.

During the pandemic, even though the Education Bureau of Hong Kong only encouraged using online platforms as a way to deliver ERT, most primary and secondary schools in the city decided to continue online teaching in one way or another (Lau & Lee, 2021). While the vast majority of Hong Kong schools are equipped with a high-quality IT infrastructure on their premises as well as mobile learning devices they could loan to students (Lam, 2019), the same cannot be said beyond the classroom among low-income families who lack access to a high-speed internet connection at home (Yu, 2017). In fact, this has proven to be the biggest hurdle experienced by students (Ng et al., 2020).

The Philippines imposed lockdown restrictions similar to many countries around the world. Schools were suspended continuously for more than two years. Only in March 2022 did face-to-face schooling resume gradually. Teaching and learning in this new environment posed great challenges to Filipino teachers in the public school system (Robosa et al., 2021), wherein scarcity of gadgets and internet connectivity was evident and well-documented (Castroverde & Acala, 2021; Chin et al., 2022; Marquez et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Toquero, 2020). According to Cho et al. (2021), although 75% of Filipino households surveyed possess at least one smartphone, students only spend just over half an hour per day learning on their devices due to poor internet coverage, inability to afford mobile data plans, and the need to share devices among family members. As a result, since remote learning was imposed, many teachers experienced a great deal of stress from the workload demands associated with the remote learning setup (Talidong & Toquero, 2020). Thus, these aspects affect the well-being of teachers and test their resiliency in the learning process amidst all the adversities.

Global Shift Towards Online Teaching

Mehla et al. (2021) reminded us that the pandemic has caused a paradigm shift in terms of technology integration in education. As school closure affected nearly 1.6 billion students globally, the issue became a top priority for many governments worldwide. The authors highlighted that although people

had started using technology for teaching and learning prior to the pandemic, the ERT experience had accelerated the general acceptance of digital learning internationally, making it possible for education sectors to adapt technology use on a large scale (Mehla et al., 2021).

On the back of ERT emerges the need to manage this unprecedented paradigm shift towards online learning. As face-to-face teaching resumes, educators start to reflect on what they have learned from their ERT experience and plan online learning strategies to complement classroom instruction. For instance, Kohnke (2023) advocated using microteaching as a blended learning strategy to teach English online. Although microlearning is typically used in teacher training, it is optimum for online learning due to its scope. Teachers can introduce new contents through directing the learners to these bite-size microteaching snippets focusing on a small topic. Using text mining and Google Trend Analysis, Kansal et al. (2021) synthesized the trends and data on different online learning platforms and discussed their strengths and weaknesses, which could help educators to evaluate them for teaching in their own contexts. It is believed that these emerging studies will contribute to the theorization of post-pandemic online learning.

IT Competence and Support for Teachers and Readiness in Hong Kong and Los Baños

Since the early 2000s, the Hong Kong government has invested an enormous amount of resources to train teachers to be competent in using technology in the classroom. Pre-service teachers are required to demonstrate technical competency as part of their teacher training requirements. In-service teachers are offered similar training and workshops on new IT initiatives, such as blended learning (Ng et al., 2021). Ng et al. (2021) noted that in reality, as expected, standards among individual teachers vary depending on factors such as age and gender. However, surprisingly, even newly qualified teachers who have received adequate training did not feel competent or prepared for teaching online. As part of their teacher training was also delivered online during ERT, their own negative experience with ERT has made them feel less than confident teaching online (Moorhouse, 2021).

In terms of teacher preparedness and support given to teachers during ERT, Filipino teachers tended to be positive. Cahapay and Aoba's (2021) psychometric study of 1,065 K–12 teachers from Mindanao revealed that teachers had a high level of technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK) self-efficacy and continuance intention, which are crucial factors to sustain technology use for teaching during the extended period of ERT. Similarly, a study conducted by Bautista Jr. et al. (2021), involving 151 respondents, reported that teachers felt they received adequate support from their schools as far as practical use of educational technology is concerned. Although the authors of both studies cautioned that their data might not be generalizable due to possible data biases and small sample size respectively, it appears that Filipino teachers were generally confident about using technology in ERT, while they expressed concern about student motivation, ERT time management, and assessing learners remotely (Bautista Jr. et al., 2021).

Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to determine teachers' lived experience delivering lessons in an online environment during the pandemic, as well as their perceptions of its efficacy, the problems they encountered, and the concerns they have about the effects online delivery has on the quality of learning and teaching.

Objectives

The objectives of this study included the following:

- To understand the challenges faced by teachers in Hong Kong and Los Baños brought on by ERT.
- To investigate the extent to which these technical challenges made teachers stressed.
- To investigate whether there were other factors that led to stress among teachers.
- To identify lessons learned for future preparedness.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- What are the challenges faced by teachers related to the use of technology?
- How did teachers feel when they were asked to teach online?
- How did they resolve those issues and cope with stress?
- What was learned from the experience for future preparedness?

METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Narrative Inquiry Approach

This research used the narrative inquiry method (Kim, 2006). Drawing on an inductive method, the study takes on an interpretive qualitative approach to tell stories that reflect participants' realities through the negotiation of meanings embedded in the data collected. Further, narrative analysis is a collection of analytical methods used to evaluate textual or visual data provided in a narrative format. Narrative approaches are predicated on the fundamental premise that people use storytelling to organize and interpret their experiences and that their narrative accounts fulfil practical and meaningful functions. While structural analysis looks at how a story is written to accomplish particular communicative goals, thematic analysis explores the meaning that a story provides. Together with this basic typology, other options include dialogic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which emphasizes the context and sees stories as multivoiced and co-constructed, and visual narrative analysis, which interconnects words and images to create a cohesive narrative (Figgou & Pavlopoulous, 2015).

Narrative inquiry, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested, is a research method for qualitative researchers to study, discover, and understand teachers' stories. Narrative inquiry is an optimal method for studies examining a single episode of an event (Kim, 2006). Through a collection of stories, participants' lived experiences—in this case, teachers—can be understood against the backdrop of a set of challenges created by the situation—here, the pandemic. Therefore, narrative inquiry is particularly suited for the current study as participants narrate their experience in the past and present, as well as make future predictions (Creswell, 2015). The collected narratives are arranged chronologically to reflect the complex nature of teaching and learning (Creswell, 2015).

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Two K–12 teachers from Hong Kong and two high school teachers from Los Baños were recruited by the authors from schools with which they have previously worked. An invitation was sent to teachers at the said schools, and teachers who volunteered to partake in the study replied. The criteria for selection were: a) schoolteachers with lived experience teaching their subject(s) during ERT; and b) those who were willing and prepared to share their stories (Creswell, 2015). As this is not a subject-specific research study, no restriction was placed on what they teach, grade level taught, or years of experience. In fact, it was felt that participants should come from diverse backgrounds so as to minimize possible data biases. Prior to being interviewed, the Hong Kong participants were informed that approval for the research project was obtained from their school principals, and in the case of participants from Los Baños, ethical approval had been granted from Laguna State Polytechnic University where the second and third authors work. The participants were then made aware that any data collected would be anonymized and used for research and publication purposes only and that they could withdraw from the study at any time they wished. Upon agreeing to the terms, participants signed a consent form with the abovementioned details and the researchers' details attached.

Participants in this study were instructed to tell their stories about using technology during the COVID-19 ERT. The number of participants was kept intentionally low. As Creswell (2015) remarked, a high-quality narrative study should focus on a single or a couple of individuals. By engaging a small

number of participants, this study allows detailed descriptions of the individuals' lives, enabling a deeper understanding of this particular experience.

The participants were interviewed by the authors in their respective cities between June and July 2022. This data collection point marked the completion of the second school year through ERT delivery. The authors felt that rich and interesting data could emerge from an unprecedented ERT experience. These interviews were conducted in participants' first language (Cantonese and Tagalog) so that language barrier would not be a concern (Saldaña, 2011). They were minimally structured and participants were encouraged to narrate their own stories as much as possible, but some instructions were deemed necessary to prompt further elaboration. Due to social distancing regulations, the interviews were conducted on Zoom following Salmon's (2014) online interview protocols. They lasted between 35 to 42 minutes in length.

As advocated by Kim (2006), the data were first transcribed and "flirted with" multiple times by the authors as a way to fully understand and accurately interpret the narratives. This step aids in the identification of emerging themes for coding (Kim, 2006). The data went through three iteration cycles carried out by the authors and their colleagues. They then processed these accounts in their own words. This procedure is known as restorying where gathered stories are rewritten in a chronological sequence so that a coherent story can be told (Creswell, 2015). As a validation technique, member checking was also conducted. Participants were invited to check their stories to ensure accurate interpretation. This measure ensures trustworthiness and credibility, both of which are crucial to this kind of qualitative research study (Creswell, 2015; Kim, 2006). None of the four teachers requested any amendments.

PARTICIPANTS PROFILES AND RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Table 1 outlines the profiles of the four participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Hong Kong	
Shing Male 37	Shing has 12 years of teaching experience in a local primary school in Hong Kong. His students are predominantly from ethnic minorities and newly arrived immigrant families of lower economic strata. He teaches math to Years 3 & 4 (aged 9 to 10) students in Hong Kong. He has experience using technology in the classroom. This includes PowerPoint, web tools, and interactive whiteboard. He described himself as a technically competent teacher who is "willing to try new stuff."
Betty Female 33	Betty has taught Chinese and Visual Art to students in Years 7 & 8 (aged 13 to 14) for 9 years. Her students are mostly from working-class backgrounds. She has some experience using computers and web tools in her teaching. However, she has never taught a synchronous lesson entirely online but is willing to learn. She uses some technology in the classroom, namely MS PowerPoint and websites to show images and videos linked to visual art as well as a text-based portal students refer to for background research (e.g. information about a particular artist such as Picasso).
Los Baños*	
Mike Male 32	Mike teaches oral communication, 21st-century literature, reading, and writing to senior high students. Mike teaches Science and English to students in Years 10 to 13 (aged 15 to 18). As an IT graduate, he feels confident about using technology and that these skills can be transferred easily to teaching. He asks students to make presentation videos in his subject and expects students to adapt well since they use technology regularly to make TikTok videos.
Patricia Female 28	Patricia has been teaching Filipino language and literature to students in Years 9 to 11 (aged 12 to 15) since 2017. Just before the pandemic, she received training in using web tools for learning in the classroom, though her experience using them in class was limited. Although she has a mobile phone, she admits that technology is not "big" in her life.

*Since elementary school students in the Philippines did not use technology in ERT, only high school teachers were invited.

ERT ARRANGEMENTS FOR TEACHERS IN THE TWO CITIES

In Hong Kong, despite school suspension, staff were allowed to return to their workplace while observing social distancing measures (e.g. having no more than one teacher in a classroom). Like many other schoolteachers in Hong Kong, Shing and Betty were required to teach their ERT lessons from their own classrooms, and this arrangement was actually preferred. Although most Hong Kong homes are equipped with a high-speed internet connection, many teachers could not work from home effectively since they lacked a conducive teaching environment—both Shing and Betty have children who had ERT lessons to attend, making the home too noisy an environment for teaching.

However, in the Philippines, lockdown restrictions were much stricter. People were not allowed to return to their workplaces and had to work from home if possible. As a result, Mike and Patricia had to teach from their homes. This was not easy for teachers like them who have young children of their own to look after, especially as young children did not receive online lessons since they were deemed too young and instead were given paper-based learning materials. Further, childcare was needed from friends, neighbors, or relatives, which made it more of a challenge for these teachers.

RESULTS

In total, six main themes were identified across the interviews. They are initial attitudes towards ERT, challenges encountered by their students, challenges encountered by teachers, stress, coping strategies, and lessons learned and new opportunities. Similarities, as well as country specific nuances, are highlighted in each theme.

Theme One: Initial Attitudes Towards ERT

All participants had positive attitudes towards using technology in ERT at the initial stage of ERT. Although Betty was feeling a little apprehensive as she had not used technology for online teaching, she remained optimistic. Patricia also appeared less confident initially but, as a result of steep learning curves, rapidly became a confident tech user:

I felt a little lost. I worried about my own technological competence not being good enough, so I was nervous. I didn't know how students would react to ERT. But the key is to persevere even when you experience difficulties. I remember the first few lessons were pretty disastrous. I wasn't good with the tech. I wasted so much time just to find the share button, and then there was no sound when I tried to play a clip. Nevertheless, you become better. I was already more comfortable with the tech after a week. I'm still not an expert but once you know how to use it, then you'll be fine. I think the reason is that you don't want to look incompetent in front of the students. That was what pushed me to learn quick!

Mike was particularly enthusiastic about his initial online teaching experience:

At the beginning of the pandemic, my principal asked me to create online learning activities for the students. I felt fine because I have taught online before so I'm comfortable, not nervous. I was so excited [...] because we have attended IT training prior to the pandemic, including Padlet, Fripgrid, and Ampere.

Likewise, Shing was also excited about ERT. He had always wanted to try teaching synchronous lessons online but lacked the opportunity to do so. Therefore, ERT was a *welcome policy for him. He shared:*

I have had some training years ago using technology in the classroom. Although I did try to incorporate these technologies into my teaching, I felt there was a lack of support from the school on this and students weren't exactly thrilled when asked to do what they always perceived as extra homework online. I mean, OK, to them it is, but it's all related to learning enhancement. The pandemic is almost like a golden opportunity [sic] for me to implement these strategies into my teaching... Something good to emerge from something really bad! [laugh]

Although Patricia and Mike said their colleagues in Los Baños were optimistic about ERT, Betty reported a considerable number of Hong Kong teachers at her schools did not share such optimism:

In my school, some teachers opposed the idea of ERT from the outset. They thought Hong Kong students were not ready to learn online and were really worried about it. They had doubts about whether it would be possible to teach properly online. Actually, some of my teacher friends also questioned about that. You might think that only older teachers would be worried about ERT but no, many were young teachers. This is quite surprising given we already use technology like mobile phones every day.

Theme Two: Challenges Encountered by Their Students

Technology-Related Challenges and Motivation

Teachers used a combination of software, LMS, VCS, and web tools. These include PowerPoint, Padlet, TikTok, YouTube, Flipgrid, and Ampere. The choice of technology for each teacher depended on, or was perhaps limited by, factors such as age, access, competence, and connectivity.

Shing's school, for instance, did not use web tools or software extensively because his young pupils did not have Google accounts to access Google Classroom. Second, they were too young to be able to use some of the tools, and it would have been impractical and time-consuming to give them training remotely. Shing commented:

I know there are schools that use Google Classroom and there are many ready-to-use resources available, but because of our students' circumstances and lack of access, it wasn't possible to take advantage of them. You need an adult to be with them or at least be available to help them operate the devices and things would often go wrong. So we just kept things very simple for them. Zoom was easy enough – we just went through PowerPoint slides with live commentary. It seemed just like teaching in the classroom.

Through the interviewees' own observation, online learning was not always conducive to learning. Teachers provided accounts where their students struggled, both in Los Baños and in Hong Kong, with connectivity being the worst, followed by technical issues and isolation. Shing had a small group of students who would have major problems with connectivity. While hardware was not an issue, they had no access to high-speed internet:

Although we loaned them each an iPad, they had no high speed WiFi at home, which was inadequate for live online lessons on Zoom. As a result, they reported major lags and even being logged out of the system multiple times a day. I felt bad for them but couldn't help much!

In Los Baños, Patricia's students had neither the hardware nor software for ERT, which severely limited the kinds of digital learning tasks they could engage in:

My students had no laptop so they used mobile phones to connect to online platforms. What's more, there were many functions they couldn't use on mobile phones, such as MS Word and Excel. They had

no money to buy a license. They couldn't participate in chats either for some reason. Some students couldn't even afford to buy credits for internet data. As a result, they couldn't take part at all.

Mike's students even lost their motivation to learn because of poor connectivity:

Although students are able to make presentations using YouTube or TikTok as they use that to make videos for leisure, they are unwilling to participate due to lack of stable internet connection. Their connection often dropped in the middle of an activity. It must be very frustrating for them, not just me!

Lack of Interaction With Peers

Betty and Shing talked about frustrations among their students related to feelings of isolation:

Some of my extroverted students felt sad and lonely being stuck at home and they couldn't see their friends. Recess just wasn't the same—you can't relax in the playground or mingling with friends but sit in the living room in your own home. I'd say this is a much bigger problem than we thought. (Shing) Young children in particular found it hard to stay home and learn. They had all that unspent energy not going anywhere. They then became restless in lessons. Very few could concentrate well without adult supervision. (Betty)

This resonated with their counterparts in Los Baños. Patricia and Mike remarked:

*Filipino teenagers are very sociable and chatty. Even though they used social media to keep in touch, there was a feeling of unhappiness and stress I could sense among my students. It is hard to be physically separated from your good friends. I feel the same, too! (Patricia)
I felt a little depressed not being able to teach them in the same physical space, although they were pleased to see everyone online, they said they would rather be having lessons at school with their peers. (Mike)*

Theme Three: Challenges Encountered by Teachers

Teachers experienced many issues when teaching online, namely with technology and course administration. Cheating seemed to be a common problem for teachers in both cities. Shing felt frustrated about not being in control as he normally would in the classroom:

At home when no one was supervising, I could tell some of my students were using a calculator as they could answer questions very quickly. That would not have been allowed in a face-to-face class. In addition, I could not see the steps students used to solve math problems so I couldn't check whether students had grasped the concepts.

Mike was also disappointed about possible cheating when conducting online assessments:

Some students took advantage of ERT and cheated in exams. Most of them got almost perfect scores, this wouldn't be possible in the classroom. It has made my job extremely difficult as exams became meaningless. I just don't know if they're learning.

Students' lack of technical competence surprised Patricia:

I thought all young people were willing and able to use video making tools but I was wrong. I was shocked by how much some of them struggled even with the very basics, like where to place the camera, lighting, speaking clearly... they just don't know how to make a good presentation video. Some can't even use the tool properly - their videos ended abruptly.

This view was shared by Betty, who thought her students would be more than comfortable using technology to learn. Things, however, did not go as smoothly as expected. Her students had similar problems when using Zoom. Most were extremely reluctant to switch on their camera. Betty said, "I suspect they were busy doing other things they'd rather not show me, like playing games or napping!"

Theme Four: Stress

All four teachers reported feeling burned out and stressed at times. Betty recounted the pressure and stress of having to perform her best:

I constantly tried to improve my ERT lessons, looking for online resources. so that they could learn better, but it is also very tiring. I had no time for myself. It's important that as a teacher I find time to relax. Well, I suppose being online changed nothing. I was stressed before. I am stressed now! Perhaps this is typical of Hong Kong teachers. And technology probably made it worse!

Shing felt burned out having to work after hours due to the increasing workload:

I was a subject lead and colleagues tended to rely on me to create digital teaching materials. Since I didn't want to disappoint them or the students, I would spend most nights working late, and it had taken its toll on my health, particularly on my eyes. I would wake up feeling terrible. It wasn't good at all, but there wasn't much I could do!

Mike and Patricia talked more about the challenges they had with family. Mike recounted having to juggle ERT and caring for his family:

I was in the hospital caring for my sister after her operation. I had to teach inside the hospital. The doctors felt bad for me having to teach under those circumstances. It was challenging because the internet connection was bad, I didn't have a desk, and the environment was noisy with hospital staff constantly coming in and out of her bed area.

Patricia recounted her personal issues working from home. She had to juggle between being a teacher and a mother. She enlisted the help of her mother to supervise her children while she taught at her school, but there was a lack of support and supervision at home for her children. She shared:

While I was lucky my mother could look after the kids when I went to work, there were things she wasn't able to help when technical problems occurred. For example, when the internet connection was lost, my son couldn't log back on, and she didn't know what to do, so she called me, and I was in class. I called back later and gave her instructions on how to log back on, but it wasn't successful.

Family chores were less of a problem for Betty and Shing as they had a domestic helper at home to help with housework:

I can't imagine what life would be like without my helper. I am so thankful for that. This allowed me to return to school to work where I could concentrate on teaching. I could also spare time to study with my kid. (Betty)

I guess we are lucky to have a helper and elderly family members around to lighten the workload at home. I couldn't handle working a full-time job AND looking after my family. I couldn't do that before and I can't do that now. It's nothing new – Hong Kong teachers are overworked! (Shing)

Theme Five: Coping Strategies

The participants were asked to share strategies to cope with the difficulties they mentioned. They commented on lesson preparation, perseverance, and sustaining motivation.

Lesson Preparation

In Shing's school, teachers would have regular weekly meetings with colleagues and department heads to discuss what and how lessons are to be taught. Since ERT was only meant to be a temporary measure, the school's approach was simply to get through the semester and cover the syllabi as much as possible. She noted:

As a result of the school policy, we didn't change our approach in teaching. Remember, we would only have half day school when teaching remotely, there was a mad rush to teach them everything, so there was little room for new and creative learning tasks.

Betty also worked with her colleagues closely during ERT. Her school also adopted a similar approach, viewing ERT as a temporary measure, but teachers felt the need to make lessons more engaging as they taught teenagers. According to Betty:

We felt that it would be much better not to work on our own as we needed more brain power for sure to make learning fun online. We don't have the same level of control online as we do in the classroom. You can't tell them off when they don't pay attention. You need to win them over. Teenagers only respond well if they become interested in what you present to them. It's no different to how they behave in person really, only that you are not in charge when teaching online!

When ERT continued, however, teachers got used to it. They started owning the lesson a bit more. They would create their digital tasks and share them with colleagues. Shing considered that extremely helpful:

It's wonderful that colleagues started to share teaching ideas and resources. Some ideas came from their friends teaching at other schools. You know, after a while, teaching online becomes very formulaic. It's good that some people even invested time to find online resources from overseas and put together lessons.

In the Philippines, however, teachers were not always able to co-plan lessons since the teachers themselves were also affected by the lack of reliable internet access. As Patricia put it:

My lessons had to be interactive, so I had to look for websites and plan activities. because even with a stable wi-fi connection, educators too experience problems in communication due to electricity loss, internet connection loss, etc. so I had to prepare for class all by myself.

Teachers appeared to be much more autonomous in Mike's school:

Since we couldn't always meet and talk about the lessons, we kind of went our own way. As I understand it, teachers created very different online lessons. That was fine by me. We don't really have to teach in the same way. Teachers should be treated as being professional and knowledgeable. I mean... we don't do that face-to-face, so there is no reason to start a new trend during ERT.

Perseverance

Patricia described how she would cope with challenges:

Lack of experience, frequent changes, and less cooperative students were just some of them challenges that I faced. I tried to calm myself and discover what more I could offer to my learners just to maintain that essence of schooling even though we are in the safety of our homes.

Shing also shared techniques on how he coped with ERT:

At times I would feel really tired. It seemed that you were attached to work and never get off even though you might not be physically at school. You worry about your students. Are they learning? Are they doing well, etc. but you just need to take your mind off things. I would play computer games in my spare time, talk to my daughter, and read books. Then I would feel better and would be ready to get back to work.

Betty and Mike said they would turn to their hobbies whenever time allowed, which were practicing yoga and watching movies respectively. Mike added, "I also enjoy jogging, but we couldn't run far with pandemic restriction," whereas Betty said, "Some of my friends asked whether I could teach them yoga online. That proves everyone was stressed out in some way."

Sustaining Motivation

All teachers recounted similar episodes of students not participating in online lessons. They sympathized with students having to pay attention to a device for such a long time, but there was not much they could do.

Not being able to support weak students was particularly frustrating for Shing and Betty. With school being drastically cut short to half-days, there was no time to spare for students after class. Shing tried to resolve this issue but results varied: "I have tried to contact their parents to follow up but wasn't always successful. They have to work and cannot do much to help their kids."

Theme Six: Lessons Learned and New Opportunities

As time went by, teachers had become more comfortable using technology and noticed similar improvement in their students' IT literacy over time. Shing identified an opportunity to empower students with learner autonomy:

Some students have become self-directed learners. I asked them to research the topics we covered in class and share links to websites and videos on the LMS discussion board. This should be continued of course. I plan to incorporate self-directed learning strategies in future lessons, giving them time and resources to learn new things online, with my guidance.

Betty was also happy to use some of the things she learned in future lessons:

Some of the tasks I used, such as peer evaluation, would be useful to adopt when we go back to in-person teaching with some online components. ERT has given me some good ideas and freedom to teach how I want.

However, the Filipino participants were not entirely happy about their experience using technology and casted doubts about teaching online moving forward. Patricia's initial enthusiasm waned as time went by:

Now I am ambivalent about using technology during ERT. I mean, this is something we must use out of necessity. Given the choice of course it is better to teach face-to-face, although now I would do some of the learning tasks online, like quizzes. It's just a fun way to do something extremely dull, but certainly not everything, that would be too much. Discussions, for example, are better done in person.

Mike expressed that he would prefer a more systematic way to teach online:

I believe that now is the time to review everything that was done during ERT and carefully evaluate these learning tasks, strategies, and policies centrally so that decisions can be made moving forward. Most of us prefer a much more top-down and systematic approach that they could rely on.

DISCUSSION

The results highlighted several serious issues arising from ERT that require careful consideration, both as a reflection on the pandemic experience and for future preparedness.

First, when it comes to technical difficulties, teachers and students in both cities experienced connectivity problems when using online platforms. Hong Kong schools might be well-equipped with high-speed Wi-Fi infrastructure, but this is not the case for the homes of low-income families. Filipino students suffered even more as the cost of data remained prohibitive for the vast majority of students. Until reliable and free WiFi becomes widely available, this issue will unfortunately continue to plague ERT initiatives, thus hindering future development of online learning in the country. (Cho et al., 2021; Marquez et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2021)

Second, despite improvement in technical competence, participants experienced difficulties engaging students who became unmotivated over time, as reported by Bautista Jr et al. (2021). They ghosted lessons and learned techniques to avoid being detected when doing other things during synchronous sessions. More worryingly, cheating also became rampant. Teachers felt powerless as they were not able to physically intervene in such negative behaviors. This would be a legitimate issue to consider if assessments were to become a bigger part of online learning.

Third, students' academic progress is a major concern among all participants in this study as teachers cannot effectively help those who lag behind during ERT. Although parental help could be enlisted, this is not always successful (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Lau & Lee, 2021). Further, with minimal pastoral support, students felt isolated, which in turn, might lead to depression, which is a serious problem that warrants urgent attention (Joensen et al., 2022; Owens et al., 2022).

Fourth, the pressure on teachers to constantly improve their online teaching skills has taken its toll on their personal lives, especially for those who have family commitments. It is difficult for them to take time off work since they are expected to work from home. As seen in Mike's case, he felt compelled to continue teaching even when his sister was in the hospital (Chin et al., 2021; Talidong & Toquero, 2020). For future preparedness, governments should consider providing appropriate personal development training for teachers to teach and manage online classes effectively. They should also consider new policies to protect teachers from overworking online.

Lastly, digital natives' readiness for e-learning needs to be reconsidered. The example of using videos for presentations highlighted that the transfer of technical competence does not always happen when students use technology primarily for entertainment. Training students to use technology for learning is therefore paramount (Ng et al., 2021; Lau & Lee, 2021).

LIMITATIONS

Understandably, due to the small sample size, the data yielded by this study is not generalizable. Rather, this study is a narrative inquiry looking at specific teachers who experienced ERT and how, against all odds, they coped with the challenges. The authors followed narrative inquiry conventions and focused on two teachers from each location (Creswell, 2015). Therefore, this study has offered in-depth insight into the lived experiences of several teachers in two distinctly different locations during ERT and compared those experiences. Researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies in order to gain a wider view on the issue, perhaps in different countries and involving teachers of different subjects.

This study has not considered the role or feelings of parents during ERT in great depth. This seems to be a research gap that needs addressing. Parental involvement in a child's education is crucial but unfortunately overlooked. It would no doubt contribute much more to our existing knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry has shed light on several shortcomings of ERT. While teachers in both Hong Kong and Los Baños appreciated what technology afforded, such as e-learning skills development and convenience during school suspension, it has led to different outcomes when it comes to teachers' experience. Hong Kong appears to have different kinds of technological challenges than those of the Philippines. There are far greater support networks for teachers and IT infrastructure is readily available for Hong Kong citizens. However, teachers in Los Baños struggled with basic internet bandwidth and a lack of support. This could potentially discourage teachers from online teaching to some extent.

Participants' feedback also highlighted the need for systemic ERT planning for future emergency events that might require similar strategies. Governments should invest in training students and getting them ready to follow digital learning, offer more financial support for schools, and pay attention to students' and teachers' mental wellbeing, which is vital to maintaining motivation. When these practical issues are adequately addressed, we can then expect meaningful online instruction with robust theoretical backing that can be deployed to educate 21st-century learners.

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