



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

Adrian Ting, University of Salford, UK*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1354-9364>

Karen A. Manaig, Laguna State Polytechnic University, Philippines

Alberto D. Yazon, Laguna State Polytechnic University, Philippines

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5453-1216>

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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*Corresponding Author

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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

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