Learners' Perceptions and Preferences in Distance Learning in the New Normal Era

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many school shutdowns and pushed millions of learners out of the classroom, resulting in shifts in teaching-learning modalities. The study uses a descriptive quantitative design to explore learners' preferences and perceptions of distance education. Through a convenient sampling technique, senior high school students were surveyed about their preferred study habits and learning practices and their feelings and insights toward distance education. The study found that low access to the internet and gadgets has been a great cause of worry for them. Despite the physical distance, students like to interact and maintain communication with teachers and peers and receive feedback about their work. However, learners are ambivalent about the conduct of regular synchronous classes. The majority also believe that distance learning is more difficult than the pre-pandemic setup. It is suggested that relevant educational stakeholders find ways to help students who struggled during this sudden shift in education.

*Keywords***:**

Distance Education; Online Learning; New Normal Education.

ABSTRAK

Pandemi COVID-19 telah memaksa banyak sekolah ditutup dan mendorong jutaan siswa keluar dari kelas, yang mengakibatkan pergeseran dalam modalitas belajar-mengajar. Memanfaatkan desain kuantitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi preferensi dan persepsi peserta didik tentang pendidikan jarak jauh. Melalui teknik sampling, siswa sekolah menengah atas disurvei tentang kebiasaan belajar dan praktik pembelajaran yang mereka sukai, serta perasaan dan wawasan mereka terhadap pendidikan jarak jauh. Studi ini menemukan bahwa rendahnya akses ke internet dan gadget menjadi penyebab utama kekhawatiran mereka. Terlepas dari jarak fisik, siswa suka

berinteraksi dan menjaga komunikasi dengan guru dan teman sebaya dan menerima umpan balik tentang pekerjaan mereka. Namun, peserta didik bersikap ambivalen terhadap pelaksanaan kelas sinkron reguler. Mayoritas juga percaya bahwa pembelajaran jarak jauh lebih sulit daripada persiapan pra-pandemi. Disarankan agar pemangku kepentingan pendidikan yang relevan menemukan cara untuk membantu siswa yang berjuang selama perubahan mendadak dalam pendidikan ini.

Kata Kunci:

Pendidikan Jarak Jauh; Pembelajaran Online; Pendidikan Normal Baru.

1.   Introduction

The concept of distance education has been around for a long time. In fact, in an article by Harting & Erthal in 2005 about their investigation on the history of distance learning, this educational phenomenon has existed. It has been made available to students since the onset of the 1700s. Since then, it has taken many forms, including the lyceum movement, university extension services, and the open university. This development of distance education into many different types, which also entails augmentation of its scope, has been characterized as "more evolutionary than revolutionary" (Harting & Erthal, 2005).

Throughout the years, distance teaching and Learning have been utilized primarily to address the continuously growing demands of students for a more flexible type of education. Kentnor (2015, p. 30) states that "distance education was based on the premise education was possible without the face-to-face interaction between the student and teacher." With the advent of technology, more platforms and media are made available with that specific purpose to be used and exploited in transforming classrooms and schools towards 21st Century learning. The invention of the internet and the development of the World Wide Web have made education available to a larger audience worldwide—not just to students but also to the general population. Educational materials can now be easily accessed and distributed with just a single click. Recent advancements have quickly propelled distance education to the digital era (Fidalgo et al., 2020).

Before 2020, distance education was viewed mainly as teaching and learning delivery that would enable learners who cannot or do not want to be confined in physical classroom setups due to personal and socio-economic reasons. It is important to note, however, that emergency situations such as armed conflicts, natural hazards, disasters, and chronic health crises have also pushed millions of learners out of classrooms and forced many school shutdowns. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that the number of out-of-school children is rising and that, in crisis-stricken places and countries, school-age children are twice more likely to be out of school compared to their counterparts in places and countries without any of these aforementioned societal disruptions.

On the 31st of December 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in the province of Hubei. It was immediately identified as a new strain of coronavirus—a virus that can cause respiratory illness in humans named after the many crown-like spikes found on its surface—eventually named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease associated with it as COVID-19. The alarming rise in the rate of disease transmission and its increasing levels of severity have caused in-person classes in the Philipines to be suspended indefinitely.

Even without an end to the pandemic, the Department of Education's decision to continue education for the school year 2020-2021 through its Basic Education-Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) amidst the health crisis drew flak. It raised several concerns from students, parents, teachers, and various organizations. Despite all the criticisms, DepEd's pronouncement could still garner support and commendations from various partner stakeholders, such as the Association of DepEd Directors, Inc. (ADD Inc.) and City Savings Bank (Hernando-Malipot, 2020).

The adoption of BE-LCP through DepEd Order No. 012, s. 2020 reiterated the President's order of not having face-to-face classes until safe and until a vaccine has been developed and made available to the Filipino public (CNN Philippines, 2020). The enclosed document in the DepEd Order also discussed and mentioned the facilitation of distance learning modalities in the absence of face-to-face classes which are as follows: (1) Modular Distance Learning, (2) Online Distance Learning, (3) TV/Radio-Based Instruction, and (4) Blended Learning (Department of Education, 2020).

Modular Distance Learning involves individualized instruction that allows learners to use Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) in print or digital format, whichever is applicable in the context of the learner, and other learning resources like learner's materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides, and other study materials. On the other hand, Online Distance Learning features the teacher as a facilitator, engaging learners' active participation through various technologies accessed through the internet. At the same time, they are geographically remote from each other during instruction. TV/Radio-Based Instruction utilizes SLMs converted to video lessons for Television-Based Instruction and SLMs converted to radio scripts for Radio-Based Instruction. Lastly, Blended Learning refers to a learning delivery that combines face-to-face with any or a mix of online distance learning, modular distance learning, and TV/Radio-Based Instruction.

Before starting classes and implementing the Basic Education-Learning Continuity Plan, the Department of Education conducted an online survey to get a sense of what school personnel, students, and parents think about distance learning. The results of which were included in the released DepEd Order. When asked whether stakeholders are alright with having lessons through distance learning modalities, 46% of the total 789,690 respondents composed of learners (16%), school personnel (53%), and parents/guardians (31%) expressed their preference for face-to-face learning delivery. On the other hand, parents and guardians have been more accepting of conducting distance education, as 59% are in favor and are open to the idea.

The DepEd also surveyed its teachers on their readiness for distance education. Findings revealed that despite most surveyed teachers owning laptops or desktop computers at home, many are still without an internet connection (Department of Education, 2020). Despite the results of this study, the distance mentioned above learning modalities have been adopted, not just by various basic education institutions but also in many HEIs all over the country. The Department of Education, with the help of the various school divisions, created and printed modules for K-12 students. Video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, and similar platforms have been used in online synchronous classes by teachers and students nationwide. Similarly, several schools have utilized online learning management systems, such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Edmodo, etc., to conduct asynchronous activities.

Educators, school administrators, and other pertinent stakeholders need to understand how students want to learn, especially during times of crisis where their Learning could easily be hindered or disrupted. Many studies have long established that understanding the learners' situation would allow teachers and educational leaders to provide a better teaching and learning experience. While there has been much research about distance learning in higher education institutions, limited literature is available for internet access about implementing distance learning modalities at the basic education (K-12) level. Similarly, most schools and students could choose or be at least given the option to select which lesson delivery mode they prefer. However, whether these chosen modalities were effective or favorable to the students remains. Therefore, this paper aims to present the learners' preferences and perceptions of distance education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the study habits and learning practices of public senior high school students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
(2) What are their feelings and insights toward distance learning and teaching during a state of a global health emergency?
(3) How effective are the implemented teaching and learning modalities according to these students?
(4) Based on their own learning experiences for the first two quarters of the academic year in a distance learning setup, what is the students' current preferred mode of teaching and learning delivery?

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study's main objectives are to explore and describe the perceptions and preferences of students regarding distance learning in the context of a global health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilized a descriptive quantitative design. Creswell (2005) describes this as a research method that centers on providing descriptions and explanations of a phenomenon under investigation somewhat definitively (cited in Mertler, 2016).

2.2   Research Population and Sample

The study was conducted at the beginning of the Second Semester of the Academic Year (AY) 2020-2021. The respondents for the study are Grade 11 and Grade 12 students from the senior high school (SHS) department of the University of Makati, commonly referred to as the Higher School ng UMak (HSU). The research employed a convenient sampling technique, primarily choosing the study mentioned above participants because of two reasons: (1) these set of students have all been studying in a distance learning modality, and (2) the researcher's ease of access to the intended respondents.

2.3   Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

A survey questionnaire was formulated to collect data pertinent to the study's objectives. The questionnaire was developed by adopting parts of survey instruments that have been used in previous studies and reports which are related to the current research paper specifically that of Koper (2015), Gillingham & Molinari (2012), Mt. SAC Distance Learning Committee (2012), Patch (2020), Lederman (2020), and Osei (2010). The study mentioned above instruments were chosen as they have utilized survey questionnaire items aligned with the current study's objectives and could provide information necessary for the completion of this research.

The survey questionnaire was divided into three sections: (1) Demographic Profile which includes the grade level, enrollment status, and the respondents' strand/track, (2) Learners' Preferences in Distance Learning containing items in a 5-point Likert scale format (with 1 being Strongly disagreed to 5 being Strongly agreed) as well as items which rank several elements of distance learning based on the concern they had for each and which contributes the most to the success of a distance learning experiences, and (3) Learners' Perceptions of Distance Learning which also contains items of the same format as the second part which estimates their general attitudes toward distance education. For the last part of the study instrument, respondents are also expected to select their preferred learning modality for the rest of the year based on their experiences for the first semester or first two quarters of the academic year. *(See Appendix for a copy of the survey questionnaire used)*

A survey form containing the items mentioned above was created with Google Forms. The platform is chosen over other online survey websites because of its convenience and ease of use for the researcher. The author of this paper also expects that the student respondents are already familiar with navigating the said platform, as it has been utilized many times before.

The link to the survey form was generated and sent to selected class advisers, who were forwarded to their respective classes. This data collection technique was done to ensure diversity in the demographic profile of the students. This also enabled the researcher to collect as many respondents as possible in a very limited time. Due to time constraints, the form link was active and only made available to prospective respondents for three consecutive days. In the data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to process the collected data sets.

3. Results and Discussion

A total of 206 students submitted their responses, to which 38.8% were Grade 11 students and 61.2% were Grade 12 students. Most of the respondents are of regular status, constituting 98.1% of the total respondents, and only four are of irregular status, two of which are tagged as returning students.

Respondents are mostly from the Academic Track. Sixty students are enrolled in the Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM) strand and 49 from the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS). Five are from the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) strand. They comprise 55.3% of the total number of responses.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	N = 206	Percentage
Year Level		
Grade 11	80	28.80
Grade 12	126	61.20
Enrollment Status		
Regular	202	98.10
Irregular (with back subjects)	2	
Returning *(Balik-Aral)*	2	
Track		
Academic	114	55.30
Technical-Vocational Livelihood (TVL)	61	29.70
Sports	11	5.30
Arts and Design	20	9.70

It also recorded 11 responses, or 5.3% of the total responses from students of the Sports track, 20 (9.7%) are enrolled in the Arts and Design program, and 61 (29.7%) are from students under the Technical-Vocational track hailing from various strands, more specifically from Computer Systems Servicing, Computer Programming, Tourism, and Hotel and Restaurant Services strands. However, it is important to note that other strands under the TVL track are offered at HSU besides the ones mentioned above. The following information is necessary as students from different tracks and strands also follow different curricula. Therefore, these students are exposed to varying forms and degrees of teaching and learning experiences. A closer inspection of the Philippines' SHS program and curricula, which includes the required subjects or classes for each, will reveal similar observations. Alipio (2020) even states that "the significant difference that exists in the students in a different SHS strand suggests that the [college] academic adjustment and performance of the students vary based on the SHS strand taken." A study by Heck et al. (2004) emphasized that differences in student attainment concerning differentiated coursework patterns are also relevant to understanding student learning.

For the second part of the survey questionnaire, student respondents were asked how they wanted to study in the context of distance learning. The items used describe study habits, learning activities, and social connections, which are common elements of teaching and learning.

Despite the physical distance between students and their peers, many still prefer to form social connections with their classmates, as is evident in their responses for items 1, 2, and 11. Thirty-three percent of the learners strongly agree, and 43% agree to like having contact and interacting with classmates and peers. This is consistent with the results from a study conducted by Bojović et al. (2020, p. 15), where they pointed out that "students appreciate somewhat more possibilities for interaction even in online courses." Students also are generally fond of being acquainted with the teacher, with agreement from 67% of the surveyed population. This is supported by the findings of Gillingham & Molinari (2012), who indicated that students view student-teacher interactions as a form of collaborative Learning. Student respondents also greatly favor getting feedback from the teacher about their work (Item No. 10), with agreement from 80% of the research group.

Table 2. Frequency Graph of Responses of Preferences in Teaching and Learning in Distance Education
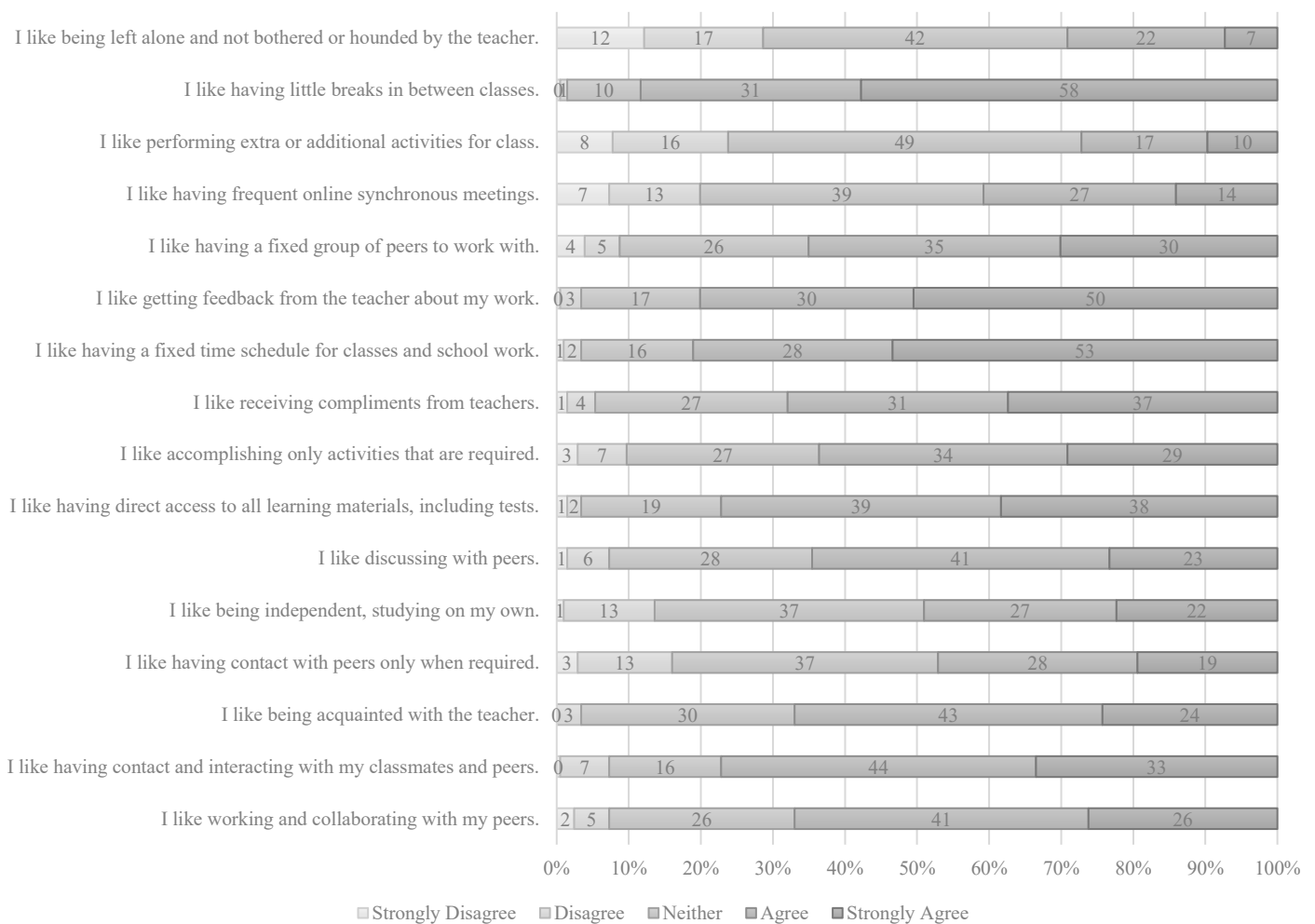
Students are also indifferent in terms of being left alone. It is reported from the survey that 42% of them neither agree nor disagree with the preference of not being bothered or hounded by the teacher. Tichavsky et al. (2015, p. 6) highlighted that classroom engagement in a digital classroom entails an awareness that students and the teacher are "interacting with or are in the presence of real people." These data suggest that creating opportunities for students in class to build rapport and connections between and among each other is necessary. Teachers must also consider spending more time interacting with the learners even when physically distanced from them, one of which is having a consistent or fixed schedule feedback system or process. Educators must also consider giving praises and commendations, as 68% of the surveyed respondents also like receiving compliments from their teachers.

In connection to their study habits, 37% of the students neither agreed nor disagreed with preferences in terms of studying on their own or independently. They particularly favor having direct access to learning materials, with almost 77% agreeing. Arthur-Nyarko & Kariuki (2019, p. 7) pointed out that "access to resources for eLearning is key to effective eLearning implementation and uptake." The responses clearly support what Bagarinao (2015) suggests: online classrooms or courses should be designed so that the students' needed information in accomplishing certain tasks and activities should be readily accessible to them. Students also prefer having a fixed schedule for their classes and school work, with more than 50% strongly agreeing. Students also enjoy having little breaks in between classes. Most of them (58%) strongly agree with the idea. A similar study that examines the learning styles and study habits of students conducted by Pulist (2017) further validates that students devote specific time slots for completing different learning activities, maintain the schedule, complete one subject at a time, and take small breaks in between studies.

Regarding learning activities in distance learning, 63% of the respondents also generally prefer accomplishing only required learning activities, and 49% neither agree nor disagree with completing additional or extra activities nor requirements for the class. They do, however, like having direct access to all learning materials, such as quizzes, examinations, and lesson handouts, with 77% agreeing to Item No. 7.

Various reports and research have identified the challenges and limitations brought about by issues on access to technology and internet connectivity in distance learning and have been comprehensively compiled and reviewed by Wong in 2007. In the Philippines, where only about 24% of households have cell phones, 23.8% have computers. Only 18% of the population have access to the internet (Department of Information and Communications Technology, 2019), with a reported average connection speed of only 5.5 Mbps (Akamai, 2017); frequent synchronous sessions will be viewed indifferently. In the data collected, student respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (39%) in expressing their fondness for frequent online synchronous sessions. In this study, online synchronous sessions are characterized by video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, etc., to facilitate classroom instruction or lesson delivery. This hesitation may be attributed to the limitations in data connection, and gadget availability described beforehand and experienced by these learners. Not only

that, in a study conducted by Culajara et al. (2022), it was even pointed out that problems with internet connectivity primarily lead to students' failure to submit outputs and complete assigned tasks.

It is highly recommended that teachers utilize strategies that will enable the students to learn without the need to constantly be online and digitally present. Abou-Khalil et al. (2021) also found that student content-engagement strategies such as screen sharing, summaries, and class recordings are perceived as most effective, especially in low-resource settings. It is also important to note, as reiterated by Adnan & Anwar (2020), that this sudden shift in education (from traditional classrooms and face-to-face Learning to Online Learning) gave birth to a completely different educational experience for most of our learners.

Respondents are asked to rank specified elements of distance teaching and Learning based on their concern level at the beginning of the semester. It is evident from the survey results that learners are most concerned about their grades as we shift to the distance learning modality, with 40% of them ranking it as first over the other elements. Despite the shift in learning modality, learners' concern for grades remains unchanged. This finding could be supported and explained with conclusions from a similar study by Khan (2014), which revealed that employability pressure, academic self-concept, parental interest, psychological pressure, academic recognition, and financial concerns are the primary reasons that drive students to be watchful of the numerical equivalents of their academic performance.

Table 3. Frequency Graph of Responses to Level of Learners' Concern for Distance Teaching and Learning Elements
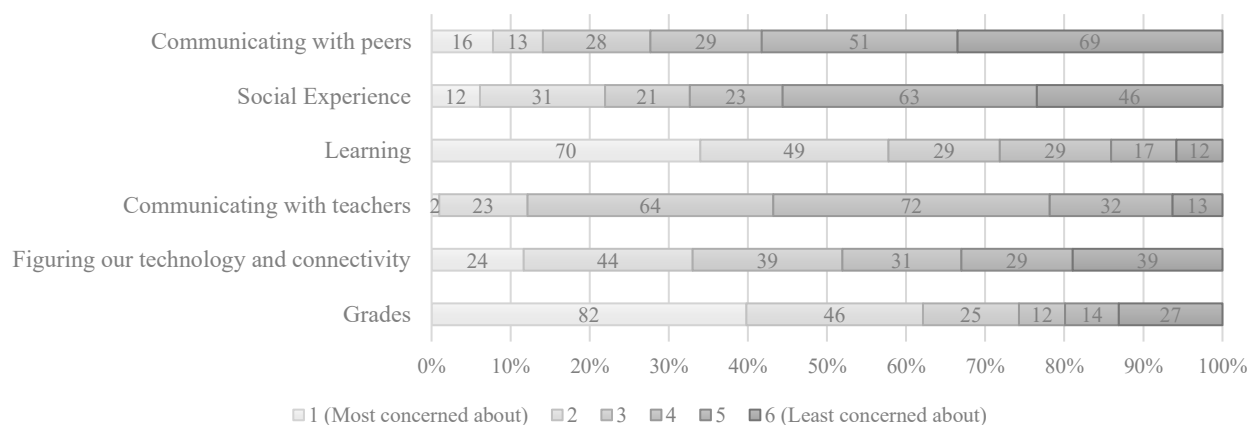
This concern about grades is closely followed by their worry about their Learning and their anticipation of difficulties that may arise from figuring out technology and connectivity (ranked 2nd/3rd). In a study conducted by Borisova et al. (2016), it was found that students even asked more questions about the learning process rather than specific items or discussion topics of the course subject. It is also important to note that students were more concerned about how they can communicate with their teachers (ranked 4th) than their peers and the effects it might have on their social experience, as most of them ranked the two elements in last (ranked 5th/6th). This finding is

similar to Tichavsky et al. (2015, p. 3), citing that when students were surveyed, they were "more specific in their reasons for interacting with the teacher rather than peers." In the same study, the researchers also emphasized that interaction with the teacher is one of the top reasons why students prefer face-to-face interaction.

Table 4. Frequency Table of Responses of Learners' Perceptions of Contributing Factors to a Successful Distance Learning Experience
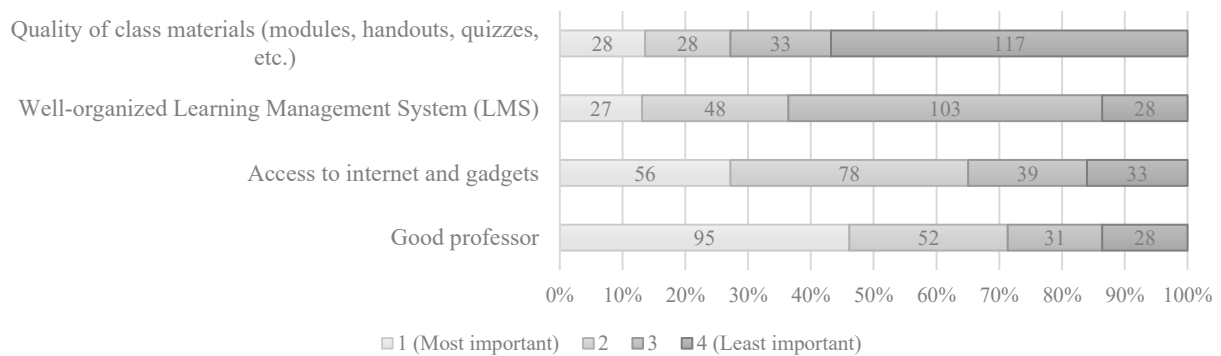
Respondents are also asked to rank identified factors based on how much they believe these contribute to the success of their own distance learning experience. Based on the results of the survey, these factors were ranked as such: (1) Good professor, (2) Access to the internet and gadgets, (3) Well-organized Learning Management System (LMS), and (4) Quality of class materials such as modules, handouts, quizzes, etc.

With these results, it is reasonable to conclude that teachers, despite the physical gap between them and their students, still play a major role in learning success. Even though students are expected to "increase their self-regulated learning" (Churiyah et al., 2020, p. 502), teachers must still establish their authority and fulfill their responsibility as classroom managers, even in an online, digital space. In a study conducted by Adnan & Anwar (2020), it was established that learners must also have a fully-functioning computer and the skills required to use technology to ensure the success and effectiveness of an online learning program. Similarly, for teachers to conduct online classes effectively, they must possess not just technology-related skills but also skills in content development, learning activities, teaching strategies, and assessment (Arinto, 2016). The importance of the teacher's role even in education is once again reiterated by Prestiadi (2020, p. 51), stating, "e-learning can facilitate the learning process and have a good impact on students if it can be managed well by the teacher."

A study concerning problems of using innovative teaching methods in distance learning also noted that distance learning modality would not work if a school or an institution "does not have a well-constructed electronic learning environment" (Borisova et al., 2002, p. 2016). This includes facilities for computer-supported collaborative Learning, electronic learning resources, and a learning

management system. A Learning Management System (LMS), in particular, is described as a "wide range of systems that organize and provide access to online learning services for students, teachers, and school administrators" (Paulsen, 2002, p. 5). Moodle has been used and officially recognized as the institution's official LMS platform at the University of Makati, where the survey was conducted. Chen et al. (2020) also emphasized that institutional educational support is critical to the success of e-learning. Nevertheless, Garcia (2017) reiterates that students will only notice the ease of using the LMS when the internet connection is fast, enabling them to adopt and use the system better and more likely.

Table 5. Responses to Comparing Distance Learning vs. Regular Face-to-Face Classes

	N = 206	Percentage
Easier than regular face-to-face classes	16	10%
Same as regular face-to-face classes	21	8%
More difficult than regular face-to-face classes	169	82%

In terms of learning materials, Garcia (2017) also draws attention to the use of multimedia in lesson delivery, as many research papers have already proven that this may enhance students' academic achievement. However, Ferraro et al. (2020) still note that despite all these varied and available new technologies, simple text documents and written instructions are still considered essential tools for teaching and Learning.

Student respondents are also asked to compare their distance learning experience thus far to their experiences during regular face-to-face classes. Almost all (169 out of the 206 students or 82%) have expressed that digital learning classes have been more difficult than traditional in-person classes. This is consistent with a study by Chen et al. (2020), which reports that students believe their Learning has worsened since shifting to distance e-learning. Adnan & Anwar (2020) report the same findings and emphasize that traditional classroom learning is more effective than online or distance education. Rizun & Strzelecki (2020) also further point out that despite the positive opinions about distance education, students would like to return to traditional education.

Consistent with their learning preferences, most students (70%) agree that prompt feedback from the teacher is necessary. As was indicated before, students view this as a form of classroom interaction that establishes student-teacher relationships despite the physical restrictions of distance learning. They also have positive perceptions concerning the utilization of an LMS platform. Seventy-four percent of the responses reflect agreement with the statement that having one is helpful and advantageous. The development of an LMS through uploading course content and using other technologies "can increase opportunities for students to receive diverse opinions and feedback from classmates and the instructor" (Tseng & Walsh, 2016, p. 11). Furthermore, LMS also allows students to make more efficient use of their time by engaging in these course content and assignments even when they are not in a physical classroom.

Table 6. Frequency Table of Responses on Learners' Perceptions of Distance Learning

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither | Agree | Strongly Agree |
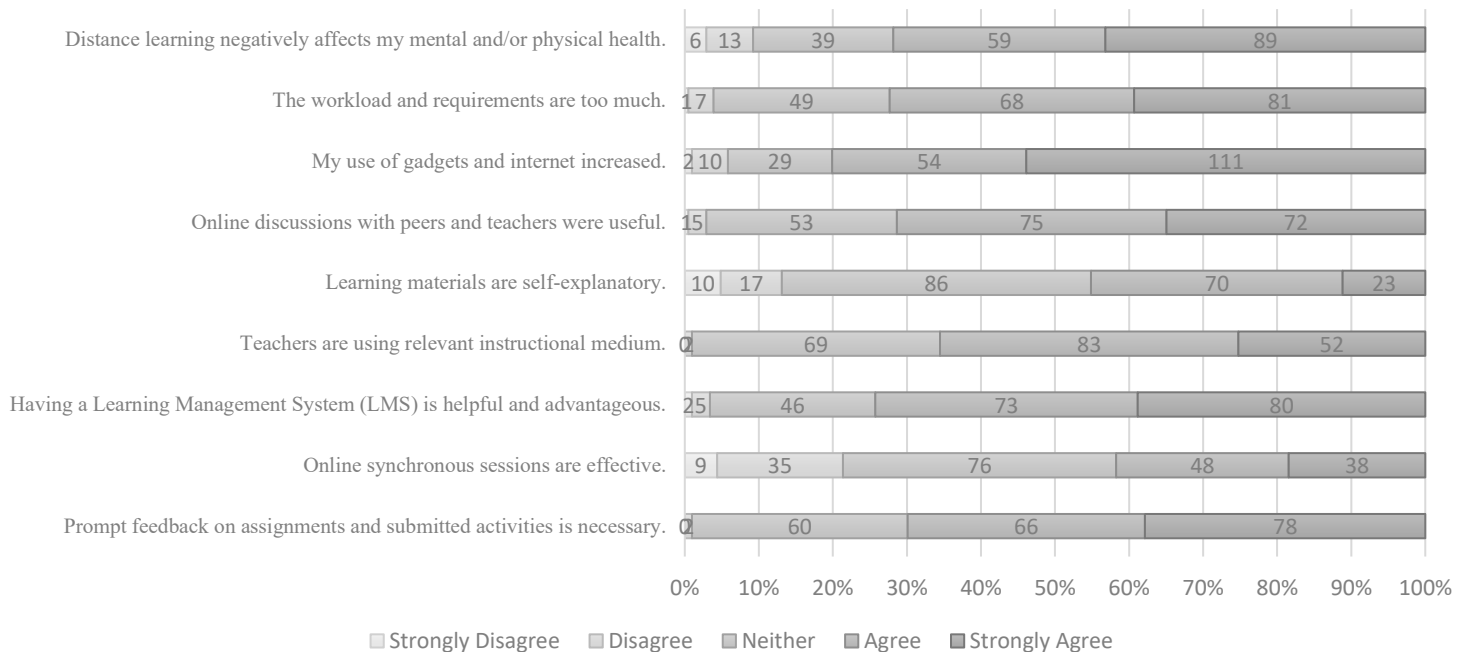
Students also generally believe that the teachers are currently using relevant instructional materials, with only two expressing disagreement with the statement. However, it is also important to consider that for the next item about learning materials, 42% of them neither agree nor disagree that these learning materials are self-explanatory. This should be taken into serious consideration and poses a challenge for educators to develop learning materials that could easily be understood by the students and learning contents that would not need further explanation and clarification from the teacher. Such would encourage self-directed and self-paced Learning—the core of distance education.

The respondents have also expressed neutrality when asked whether they agree or disagree that online synchronous sessions are effective. About 37% of them, or 76 of the responses recorded, have been ambivalent in their assessment of such distance learning techniques. Chen et al. (2020) support this finding with their study pointing out that there is a strong preference for asynchronous prerecorded lectures with synchronous follow-up sessions compared to live lectures. It was also highlighted in the same study that combining synchronous and asynchronous components may improve student learning in the days to come as we continue to utilize distance learning modalities. Tseng & Walsh's (2016) study also suggests that students in a blended course reported higher motivation and learning outcomes and even garnered higher grades compared to their traditional course counterparts.

Nevertheless, students still find online discussions with their classmates and teacher useful based on the survey results, with about 71% agreeing to the notion. Chen et al. (2020) also report that

interactive virtual classes that entail question-and-answer sessions and/or small group discussions improve engagement and decrease student burnout. However, in a study conducted here in the Philippines by Moralista & Oducado (2020), surveyed teachers agree that in online distance education, there is less student-teacher interaction in an online learning environment. Whenever an opportunity arises where student discussions are facilitated, these interactions seem impersonal and lack feeling. This is another challenge that teachers may want to consider in creating and organizing group works, peer-to-peer discourse, and other forms of collaborative efforts in lesson delivery and class management.

The survey results about the increased use of gadgets and the internet among learners have already been validated by numerous accounts and general observations of all educational stakeholders, as these are necessary tools in the conduct of the teaching and learning processes. Based on the survey, 54% of the respondents strongly agree that the amount of time spent in front of computers, mobile phones, tablets, etc., and using the internet has grown. Though Rizun & Strzelecki (2020) state that students are "generally comfortable with using computers and the internet," the results of the study conducted by Arthur-Nyarko & Kariuki (2019) also suggest that access to the internet does not significantly determine their preference for digital learning delivery mode. Access to technology may also distract students from the task at hand while engaging in online Learning. Ferraro et al. (2020) even found that 95.2% of the students they surveyed for their study admitted having used other devices and surfing the web while following distance learning classes.

Lastly, most students agree that the workload and requirements given to them through distance learning modalities are too much, with 72% agreeing with the statement. Even without the pandemic, students have already been experiencing academic stress coupled with other personal, family-related, financial, or work stressors (Pitt et al., 2017). Educators may want to evaluate the amount and nature of the requirements they give out during distance learning. It is suggested that teachers design and prepare written assignments and performance tasks that can be completed within a short amount of time but will still measure the Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs). Most students (72%) agree that distance learning adversely affects their mental and physical health. Similar results have been indicated in Ferraro et al. (2020) study of learners in Southern Italy, wherein most respondents reported feeling more tired after lessons. The study also suggested that asynchronous Learning might be beneficial in easing the burden and anxiety some students feel, particularly about homework. As with such observations, teachers must be empathetic towards students and sympathetic to their conditions. As this is not the main focus of the study, the author recommends conducting further studies that will examine the positive or negative effects of distance learning on learners of varying ages or school levels.

For the last part of the survey, students are then asked to evaluate their experiences from the first two quarters of the school year and choose a preference from given distance learning modalities implemented in HSU and in most parts of the country. The choices include modular Learning, modular e-learning, blended modular Learning, pure online Learning, and blended e-learning. In this study modular Learning refers to studying with printed modules that are retrieved and returned to

school. The term modular e-learning refers to studying with digitized copies of modules that are retrieved and returned online. On the other hand, blended modular Learning is defined as studying with printed and digitized copies. Pure online Learning is considered as studying and learning from regular sessions and pre-recorded videos/lectures with no accompanying modules. Lastly, blended e-learning is a term used to refer to studying with a combination or mix of modular Learning and Online Learning.

Towards the end of the semester, many students (36.9%) prefer a combination of distance learning modalities. Whereas 32% would rather study and learn from regular online teaching sessions or learning materials made accessible and available on the web. The author suggests that other researchers pursue studies on why some students would still prefer to physically retrieve and return modules in schools despite the many restrictions in place.

Table 7. Responses to Learners' Preference in Learning Modality

	N = 206	Percentage
Modular Learning	10	4.9%
Modular E-Learning	17	8.3%
Blended Modular Learning	35	17%
Purely Online Learning	66	32%
Blended E-Learning	76	36.9%
Other	2	1%

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a change in the global education landscape through the implementation of various flexible learning modalities. This research study's findings revealed students' different perceptions and preferences about distance learning in what many refer to as the New Normal Era. Results of the survey notably revealed that students' feelings and insights towards teacher-student interaction, feedback, and access to learning materials in this global health crisis are consistent with their identified preferences for learning in a distance education setup. The study also found that low access to the internet and gadgets has been a great cause of worry for students. However, despite this additional stressor coupled with the physical distance between them, students still value interaction and constant communication with their teachers and peers. The study participants also expressed their ambivalence towards the conduct of regular synchronous classes. They believed that distance learning was more difficult than the teaching-learning setup we had before the pandemic. These findings could be used to develop or improve distance learning policies in the studied institution, other schools, and even the entire country. It is now essential, more than ever, for educators and school leaders to understand how students want to learn, particularly during situations and instances where their Learning could be easily hindered or disrupted.

Distance learning has also definitely affected not just the current state of education in our country, but also our students' mental and physical well-being. As they are our primary stakeholders,

educational administrators, teachers, and private partners must find ways to address and extend help to students who have felt anxiety and burden over this sudden shift in education. Additionally, educational administrators and teachers must also undertake steps that are necessary to address the growing concerns of the students and are aligned with the pertinent findings presented in this paper. The author suggests necessary adjustments and modifications in lesson delivery, the performance of assessments, the feedback system, and other teaching and learning experiences that would cater to the needs and capabilities of learners more appropriately. It must be noted, however, that this study is only conducted in one educational institution and is based solely on the experiences of its students. It is recommended that other researchers conduct a similar study, particularly about the delivery of online distance learning in basic education (K-12), as only a few similar studies have been done on this educational level.

5.   References

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APPENDIX

A Survey of Learners' Perceptions and Preferences in Distance Learning

Name (Optional):
Grade Level:
Track and Strand:
Section:

As a student, how do you want to study?

SD – Strongly Disagree   D – Disagree   N – Neither   A – Agree   SA – Strongly Agree

	SD	D	N	A	SA
I like working and collaborating with my peers.					
I like having contact with my classmates and peers.					
I like being acquainted with the teacher.					
I like having contact with peers only when required.					
I like being independent, studying on my own.					
I like discussing with peers.					
I like having direct access to all learning materials, including tests.					
I like accomplishing only activities that are required.					
I like receiving compliments from teachers.					
I like having a fixed time schedule for classes and school work.					
I like getting feedback from the teacher about my work.					
I like having a fixed group of peers to work with.					
I like having frequent online synchronous meetings.					
I like performing extra or additional activities for class.					
I like having little breaks in between classes.					
I like being left alone and not bothered or hounded by the teacher.					

At the start of the semester, which of the following were you most concerned about in relation to distance learning? Rank the items from 1 (most concerned about) to 6 (least concerned about).

_____ Grades
_____ Figuring out technology and connectivity
_____ Communicating with teachers
_____ Learning
_____ Social Experience
_____ Communicating with peers

Which of the following do you think contributes the most to a successful distance learning experience? Rank the items from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important).

_____ Good professor
_____ Access to internet and gadgets
_____ Well-organized Learning Management System
_____ Quality of class materials (modules, handouts, quizzes, etc.)

As a student, how will you describe distance learning classes?
    a. Same as regular face-to-face classes
    b. Easier than regular face-to-face classes
    c. More difficult than regular face-to-face classes

As a student, how do you perceive distance teaching and Learning?
SD – Strongly Disagree   D – Disagree N – Neither   A – Agree   SA – Strongly Agree

	SD	D	N	A	SA
Prompt feedback on assignments and submitted activities is necessary.					
Online synchronous sessions are effective.					
Having Technology-Based Learning Hub (TBL Hub) is helpful and advantageous.					
Teachers are using relevant instructional medium.					
Learning materials are self-explanatory.					
Online discussions with peers and teachers were useful.					
My use of gadgets and internet increased.					
The workload and requirements are too much.					
Distance learning negatively affects my mental and/or physical health.					

After the first few weeks of classes, which of the following learning modalities do you prefer?
    a. Modular Learning (Digitized Copies)
    b. Modular Learning (Printed Copies)
    c. Blended Modular Learning (Digitized and Printed Copies)
    d. Online Learning
    e. Blended Learning (Printed Modules and Online Learning)
    f. Blended Learning (Digitized Modules and Online Learning)