A YEAR IN REVIEW
HOW A PANDEMIC SINGLE-HANDEDLY ALTERED THE WHOLE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

by:
Mrs. Norma S. Guinto
Principal I, Panilao, Elementary School, Pilar, Bataan

The beginning of a new decade has always been a vision to look forward to; a chance to start anew and leave the woes of the past behind. It was not until March 16, back when President Rodrigo Duterte announced the Luzon-wide quarantine that reality has gotten the best of what we viewed as a blank slate. Our once bright hopes toward the future were suddenly replaced by silent prayers for 2020 to end.

It did not take much for a strain of a virus to take the world by storm and be a cause for global concern. In a snap, news about coronavirus death tolls and the growing number of cases have plagued the media. Along with these comes the disruption of our way of life and its ease that we have become accustomed with. Restriction in all sectors of our nation has been placed, drastically limiting trade and travel and forcing citizens to live in isolation for months on end. Businesses that were once thriving became just another failed venture in a record of many which spiked the unemployment rate to 17.7% back in April.

The same sentiment of disruption can be concluded in the context of Philippine education. At the reinforcement of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), every school in the country was mandated to close and suspend all services that require physical interaction. In consequence, more than 27 million students were stuck in limbo while academic institutions grapple with ways to mitigate the setback that quarantine has triggered. The decision was finally made after months of class suspension-
resume learning through what might be the greatest takeaway of the education sector from the year 2020: the Philippines’ attempt on nationwide distance learning.

Depending on the availability of learners, mentors, and resources, distance learning can take on many forms. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in hopes of providing quality and inclusive education for all, promoted a strategy of flexible learning where those who are prepared to offer courses fully online can start immediately, while those that cannot offer fully online might provide offline modes of learning delivery like printed course packets, radio broadcast especially for those institutions with radio stations, and portable learning management systems (De Vera III, 2020). Most higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines have opted for modes that can be accessible to the greatest number of students, mainly e-learning, modular learning, or a combination of both called blended/hybrid learning. Since the resume of classes last August, the new mode of learning has become a part of the students’ present reality, replacing dusty chalkboards with screens filled by the faces of their classmates and instructors or of printed modules that are meant to be studied independently.

A country that houses 73 million internet users, which equates to roughly 68% of the total population, is expected to have a smooth transition from traditional to online learning given that more than half of its citizens are digitally literate. However, the emergence of the new normal has still proved to be taxing in a third world country in a lot of ways. Virtual classes, though a lot flexible in time and proximity, pose hindrances to learners in terms of the resources they require. Placing the majority of learners under this mode of education for months, with the exception of those who opted for modular learning, has quickly become an economic burden for Filipino households due to the cost of stable internet connection and a gadget to be used with it. What is meant to narrow the gap between the faculty and the students became a considerable factor in widening the digital divide. As petitioners for a nationwide academic break has voiced
out, access to internet connection and learning devices continued to be a privilege up to this day, placing those with poor internet access at a disadvantage when it comes to online classes (Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela, 2020).

After nearly a year of withstanding the pandemic in any way we can, it is a marvel how Filipinos can still see the joy in the little things and celebrate life within the restrictions of distancing. In the same way, the transformation of the Philippine educational system, no matter how flawed in its first phase of execution, is still something that the entire academic community can look forward to. The status quo is not a total regression from where it was before the pandemic. The prospect of distance learning still has a long way to go, but its most significant benefit are the new methods and opportunities it has opened for a more versatile learning experience. With excellent leadership and sufficient resources that reach even the most far-flung areas of our country, Filipinos might be looking at the schools of the future; the ones that know no distance nor bounds, where no students get left behind.

References: