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Education policies and COVID-19 in the Philippines: observations and inputs

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic brings great impact in the education landscape, Philippine Education (DepEd) has issued policy directives to address the health emergency in relation to teaching and learning. This study is focused on five (5) policy directives issued by the DepEd concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. As a descriptive research, this study scrutinized each policy directive vis-à-vis the nature and content in terms of aspects, contexts, and stakeholder involvement. Careful analysis of the data revealed that most of the directives mainly focus on health (those from the DOH and other related agencies) and administration. It is imperative to emphasize how specific aspects and contexts of teaching and learning are lack attention. It appears that the focus points of the policy directives are mainly set on activities outside the classroom.

Keywords: Impact, COVID-19, education, philippines, policy, stakeholder

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1. Introduction

The way a health crisis creates a 360-degree turn in people's lives is unimaginable. The COVID-19 pandemic has surprised the world and its impacts can be seen and felt in various ways: social, political, and economic. Sharif et al. [1] identified COVID-19 as a "source of systemic risk" highlighting the need for extensive investigation on the health crisis and its effects on the financial sector. No geographic territory is spared from the catastrophe of the virus as the society quickly embraces a new way of living and survival as wearing a face mask, observing physical and social distancing have become a norm. In the USA, for example, social distancing is employed as a principal strategy to prevent the virus spread [2]. Strict health protocols are in place to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and as expected, various consequences also go along with these measures [3]. Various government entities have enforced lockdown and quarantine restrictions as a measure to contain the virus transmission; thus economic movements and enterprises are affected [4]. According to Baker et al. [5], COVID-19 has created a critical impact on the stock market as compared to previous crises. Human's economic and social activities are altered because of the health emergency, but life did not stop as the new normal sets in.

There is a never-ending attempt to succeed in responsive and proactive processes to keep human transactions surviving and evolving. While face-to-face meetings are limited, interactions are now held online to continue with the process of negotiation and conversation. Work-from-home schemes are implemented so that expected outputs are delivered anytime, anywhere, even at the comfort of one's home. Policies like these bring beneficial gains such as effective health protocol schemes and preventing loss of employment [6]. According to Spinelli & Pellino [7], the following are identified as the advantages of virtual meetings: the better environmental profile, lower costs, and on demand streaming. Anxiety, distress, apprehension, and other concerns fill the minds of people. In a study by Abd-Alzaraq et al. [8], the economy and infection mitigation are the primary concerns based on a tweet analysis conducted. As technological breakthroughs seem to shape people's post-pandemic experience, it is vital to note how contemporary times could give rise to the future. It is undeniable that current practices continue to influence and affect the future.

Although the "economic shock" of the pandemic has been regarded as "highly unusual" [9], business entities have closed down and those that have barely survived continue to struggle as community lockdowns and other quarantine mechanisms are still in place. The health sector has suffered a great loss as some areas continue to record an increasing number of patients infected with the virus. A study by Tan et al. [10] concludes that even non-medical professionals are also vulnerable to the biggest threat of psychological stress at the onset of the pandemic. Even

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government services are hampered as public funds are directed to pandemic response and mitigation. The rise of the unemployment rate has burdened not only the economy but also the public sector as amelioration and support programs are central for the survival of the citizens. Central to COVID-19 response is "policy learning" so sound policies could be developed and implemented [11].

In the education context, the challenges brought about by the pandemic are also immeasurable. As the economy faces devastation and misses opportunities due to COVID-19, the process of teaching and learning has been adjusted to respond to the needs of the stakeholders. According to Franchi [12], the pandemic has brought the education landscape two inevitable effects: impending disturbance in education and clouded students' future. The delivery of safe and equitable learning modalities amid a pandemic has posed serious concerns to education stakeholders. It is also imperative to note how experts in the education sector have implemented carefully crafted mechanisms to ensure that no one is left behind and learning never stops. Initial concerns rest on the modality since actual face-to-face instruction is prohibited. Distance learning or also known as remote learning is engulfed with criticisms about whether appropriate learning materials are available, or if students and teachers are prepared for this scenario. As suggested by Dunn [13], it is vital to analyze currently employed strategies and view these through the lens of political contexts. At the height of the pandemic, temporary school shut down are found to be "effective at saving lives" since concerns of local transmissions among schoolchildren are addressed [14].

The Philippine education system has witnessed how the COVID-19 pandemic tests the bureaucracy's resiliency and innovative mindset of the Department of Education (DepEd). The dawn of the COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines in March 2020 took education stakeholders by surprise as the basic education sector was busy preparing for final examinations and end-of-school-year ceremonies. It was one step away from officially ending of the academic year but as school closures were implemented, face-to-face classroom interactions were stopped leading to a shortened school calendar. As the pandemic experience is taking longer than usual, the move to start the new school year is faced with both disapproval remarks and affirmative sentiments.

While remote learning is being pushed by DepEd, President Rodrigo Duterte has stated that he is only in favor of a face-to-face classroom set up only when the vaccine is developed. In the long run, these experiences will lead to new mandates, directives, and policies, prompting the government to be more capable of addressing these concerns in the future [15]. The onset of the pandemic has made DepEd realize its crucial role in ensuring the safety of a hundred thousand Filipino teachers, academic staff, and a few million students. As early as January 2020, official orders have been released to serve as a guide in implementing protocols related to COVID-19. These orders and memoranda were issued by policymakers in the DepEd central, regional, division, and district offices down to the school level. These official issuances are black-and-white mechanisms to ensure that procedures, practices, and protocols are cascaded and implemented. It is essential to recognize that equity is at the core of COVID-19 policy response, facilitating the participation of the sector from below [16].

The following inquiries serve as a springboard of this study as DepEd memoranda are analyzed. As these official documents reflect the structure of a larger policy in addressing the health concerns in the context of education, policy inputs are offered based on the findings of the study.

1. How may the policy directives related to COVID-19 response issued by the DepEd be described and analyzed?

2. What inputs to teaching and learning during a pandemic may be proposed based on the findings of the study?

The study places its significance in advocating responsive and proactive policy measures during a pandemic. It challenges how think-tanks projects in teaching and learning in contemporary times, as education stakeholders, prioritize ways and means to deliver quality and equitable education to Filipino schoolchildren without compromising established health protocols. Through the lens of official orders and memoranda, it is expected that policies are scrutinized, and ways forward will be identified through evidence-based approaches and a practice-driven mind-set. The crucial role of policymaking in the field of education is especially critical as advocates call for uninterrupted and accessible learning modalities especially in basic education.

As official order and memorandum are cascaded and implemented, it creates avenues to successfully navigate the teaching and learning terrain, which leads to students' academic achievement goal, whether in the middle of a health crisis or not.

In this study, official memorandum (policy directives) issued by the DepEd related to COVID-19 were analyzed, with the overall aim of providing inputs to policies related to teaching and learning during the pandemic in the context of Philippine education. Specifically, it scrutinizes (1) what aspects/contexts the policy directives try to address: economic, social, health/medical, pedagogical, etc., and (2) how each stakeholder is involved and projected in the issuance.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study specifically involves DepEd policy directives related to COVID-19. Department issuances

have been identified in relation to the pandemic as DepEd website particularly provides a page titled "COVID-19 – Memoranda" which serves as the database for these orders or memoranda. COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines has been a consistent variable in this study as it provides the context and content of analysis. Seddighi [17] revealed the need to craft a policy considering the pandemic to establish proactive ways to combat the crisis. True enough, a bureaucracy's efficiency can be tested with existing policies at hand and those pipelined for strategic programs and projects. It is also worthy to note how policies have created a negative impact on groups, as Dintrans et al. [18] found out in Chile, where government policies aim to keep the elderly from the virus, but lead to unfavorable magnitude in terms of mental, physical, and financial concerns.

For this study, each policy directive was scrutinized according to nature and content. The proponent believes that it is an aspect worthy of exploration to identify how DepEd has established policies even before lockdown and quarantine measures have been imposed in the Philippines. It will provide a clear picture of the direction and policy development mechanisms in a chronological manner. A study by Liu & Saltman [19] investigated the policy lessons based on initial reactions to the pandemic and revealed "structural health limitations" during the spread of the virus. Looking at the pre-COVID-19 era provides an in-depth view of the current situation. Each DepEd issuances at hand were examined according to aspects and contexts presented. A study by Murray & Murray [20] showed that more than scientific factors, political and economic concerns are also considered by government leaders' decisions related to COVID-19 response. This is to classify whether each issuance deals with economic, social, health/medical, or pedagogical concerns. Through this, it can be noted how DepEd puts weight on numerous areas of concerns and priorities.

Lastly, stakeholder involvement is also argued on how each issuance engages school leaders, teachers, community partners, students, parents, and others. Unaltered communication channels prepare all stakeholders for the likelihood of emergencies [21]; thus, their involvement is crucial. By looking at the nature and content of the issuances, it can be gleaned how DepEd tries to include different agents that make up the Philippine education ecosystem, especially during the health crisis.

Once the nature and content of each issuance have been analyzed according to the time of release, along with the aspects and contexts, and stakeholder involvement, policy inputs to teaching and learning during a pandemic are developed. According to Richards & Scowcroft [22], the contribution of patients, families, and frontline health and social care professionals in terms of policy efforts can address concerns on the

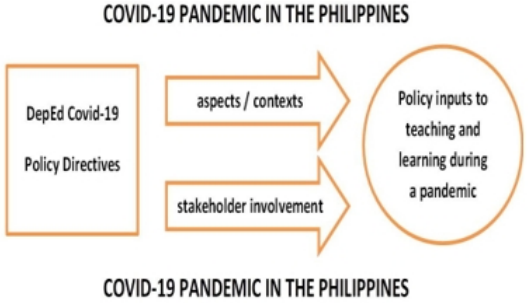


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study.

negative effects of service interruption, lockdown, and access to various provisions. This is especially crucial since a bureaucratic government agency like DepEd employs memorandum and order to facilitate policy dissemination and implementation. In the long run, developed policy inputs are expected to be responsive, appropriate, and equitable since these are drawn from the examination of contemporary practices.

3. Methodology

Descriptive research was used in the study since it aimed to appreciate past or contemporary occurrences. To be particular in this study, the focus is on the official issuances of the Philippines' DepEd concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Being qualitative, this study used critical case sampling. With these parameters, the proponent of the study set samples to be the official issuances of the DepEd during the COVID-19 pandemic. From available official documents from the DepEd website, five (5) manuscripts were identified to be related to COVID-19 and pandemic response, tagged as policy directives. These files were labeled as department orders and memoranda from January to March 2020. Usual issuances not related to the health crisis were excluded from the data set.

Qualitative content analysis was utilized as the data analysis method. This method involved subjective interpretation of the content or text data employing methodical identification, thereby classifying themes or codes. Since data sources for this study are official DepEd issuances which are available online, these are considered public domain knowledge, accessible and downloadable anytime. This study posed no ethical threats to human subjects and objectivity, fairness, and honesty were observed by the researcher in the analysis of the data.

4. Results and Discussion

Five (5) DepEd policy directives make up the data set. These issuances were both released and signed by the Department Secretary. The table below summarizes the issuances used in this study:

Table 1. Summary of DepEd policy directives during COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.

No.	SUBJECT	CODE	DATE OF ISSUE
1	First Set of Policy Directives of the DepEd Task Force COVID-19	DM No. 15, s. 2020	February 4, 2020
2	Second Set of Policy Directives of the DepEd Task Force COVID-19	DM No. 21, s. 2020	February 12, 2020
3	Third Set of Policy Directives of the DepEd Task Force COVID-19	DM No. 23, s. 2020	February 19, 2020
4	Fourth Set of Policy Directives of the DepEd Task Force COVID-19	DM No. 31, s. 2020	March 5, 2020
5	Fifth Set of Policy Directives of DepEd Task Force COVID-19	DM No. 34, s. 2020	March 9, 2020

4.1 Pre-pandemic outbreak response: Task force creation and policy directives

COVID-19-related data set of the DepEd which covers the period of January – August 2020, showing 11 issuances released from January to March 16, 2020, the day when quarantine schemes were officially implemented. The remaining fourteen (14) issuances were made available thereafter, released from March 26, 2020, until June 19, 2020. All in all, this twenty-five (25) DepEd memoranda and orders encompass COVID-19 related documents under the DepEd as of press time.

Before the pandemic outbreak in the country, it is noticeable how DepEd has tried to engage its stakeholders about the agency's function in line with the COVID-19 response. The very first issuance is a memorandum from the Office of the Undersecretary while the rest are memoranda from the Office of the Secretary.

A task force was then created to combat what was labeled as "Novel Coronavirus Acute Respiratory Disease" through DepEd Memorandum No. 11. In recognition of the disease as a critical health concern, expressing that the issue is a "matter of serious and urgent concern," a body was tasked to "formulate policies and develop of strategies and action plans". The task force was comprised of two clusters: the policy group and the operations group. Early on, the policy group has tapped only those from the central office, with the DepEd Secretary as the chairperson, and several undersecretaries and regional directors as members. Moreover, the operations group was led by the Assistant Secretary for Administration as the chairperson, with Quick Response and Recovery Team members with School Health Division as members.

Scrutiny of the task force composition can lead to an idea of the centralized nature of the bureaucracy, since the operations group which was mandated to monitor even the school level situation, is supervised by the policy group. Tapping representatives from the school or district level to contribute to policy efforts can be an opportunity to have a wider perspective of the situation concerning the health crisis.

It is also critical to note policy-level mandates which are top-to-bottom transactions, as coordination is limited only to national agencies like the Department of Health and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases in the Philippines. Schools are involved in the policy level for functions like promulgation of standard protocols, monitoring systems, and other one-way direction schemes. Five (5) sets of policy directives were then issued as developed by the task force, DM No. 15, 21, 23, 31, 34, s. 2020. All these five (5) directives comprehensively communicated information about coronavirus, health safety protocols, and school-level efforts to combat the spread of the disease.

4.2 First set of policy directives: Missed chances and opportunities

The first set of policy directives was issued to relay information and provide guidance to the DepEd community nationwide. The memorandum includes nine (9) enclosures that cover the background situation, measures, and prevention (safety precautions and protocols), activation of the risk management team, guidance in reducing seasonal influenza in schools, self-protection, medical referral form, and template of health situation report.

The background situation enclosure presents a typical overview of the condition relative to the health situation. It mainly communicates details on the virus spread in the country. It is the same information that can also be found in daily newspapers or online media. Only two (2) sections pertain to the functions of DepEd: The Secretary "called on schools to implement DOH guidelines" and the creation of DepEd Task Force. True enough, the first enclosure appears to be very technical and complicated, owing to most details not related to DepEd functions.

It could have been a proactive step if an overview of how schools could respond to the health concerns was presented, and the manner the DepEd aggressively could address the pressing needs of schools during these situations was extrapolated. These scenarios undoubtedly present the background of the situation in the education context. The background situation could have been a glimpse of how the Philippine education sector has been or is projected to be affected by the impending health crisis.

Enclosure No. 2 is contextualized in schools and offices, about prevention and control of the virus spread. Provisions included in the document are travel restrictions and health monitoring of DepEd personnel and learners, discouraging conduct of activities that require the gathering of people, and information campaign. Enclosure No. 3 mandates the formation and activation of risk reduction and management teams in

various levels, with the regional level assuming the coordination and monitoring tasks. However, school-level teams are mandated to twelve (12) particular descriptive roles, from coordination to actual legwork which includes even the "regular disinfection of doorknobs and handles". Part of the job is to "ensure an adequate supply of water and soap in schools." For Enclosure No. 4, the Preventive Alert System in School (PASS) is operationalized by explicitly stating that the "teacher conducts early morning health inspection to detect the presence of fever".

The fifth enclosure relays information from the Department of Health, as safety precautions and protocols are not even contextualized in the school setting. Enclosure No. 6 is for school administrators, directing them to "encourage, educate, and establish" different stakeholders in various contexts. Part of it is the capacity to "separate sick learners and staff" and assigning a "sick room". Designating a "sick room" is indeed a proactive measure, but not when schools are struggling to meet the classroom needs of the students who must go on shifts because of inadequate learning classrooms. Enclosure No. 7 contains health protocol to mitigate the spread of Corona Virus, almost like Enclosure No. 5, but this time, it comes with a Filipino translation and colorful graphics. Enclosures No. 8 and 9 are forms and templates related to health procedures. Amid an impending pandemic, the bureaucracy never fails to come up with templates and reports to be submitted.

The first policy directives cover various aspects of health (medical) and administrative concerns. It misses out on the chance to mention actual teaching and learning practices about the prevention of virus spread. While stakeholder participation is limited, parents, through the school administrators, are only allowed to take part as passive stakeholders who need to be educated. Tapping parents, community leaders, local government units, and other external stakeholders to play an active role in the initial steps and preparation regarding information and awareness campaigns can also be a solution waiting to be uncovered. The first set of policy directives has been a limited exploration between the DepEd and DOH. Also, as template reports and forms make up the last enclosures, the policy directive has failed to discuss how these could be significant to the bureaucracy, or how these are evaluated and utilized.

4.3 Second set of policy directives: A number game on class suspension

The second set of policy directives is about guidelines on class suspensions based on the number of schools, or municipalities, or provinces that have positive cases of infections. Three enclosures are also part of the directives, all from the DOH. This time, consolidation of weekly health reports is ordered despite the lack of discussion on its significance or contribution to virus mitigation efforts or how these are utilized to come up with future decisions and policies.

Enclosure No. 1 is a memorandum from the DOH, reiterating guidelines on disease response in schools and higher education institutions. School administrators are tasked to "take necessary steps to prevent, contain, and mitigate possible transmission of the diseases in communities." The content is like the previously issued memorandum, and this time, community engagement and coordinated response are given emphasis, involving higher-level education officials, local government units, and public health officials. Local community emergency response teams are also tapped in handling individuals with suspected exposure to the virus.

One contextualization of the memorandum is on the four response levels identified by which class suspension will be based. The first two levels recommend no suspension of classes but with explicit appropriate responses to be carried out. Levels 2 – 4 mandate the reporting of cases to the local health office and DOH Regional Center for Health Development. The last two levels listed class suspension depending on the virus transmission situation in the community. Enclosure No. 2 is an advisory on the use of masks which could be attributed to the success in combatting panic buying and hoarding, ensuring sufficient supply to medical front-liners and those required to wear it. Enclosure No. 3 advises the public to "avoid attending, participating in, and organizing events that draw a large number of attendees". This is also a proactive move to generally inform the public to be cautious about their activities, thus mass gatherings are recommended to be canceled.

The second set of policy directives includes administrative, health (medical), and social concerns. It encompasses a larger scope of involvement among internal and external stakeholders, along with various government agencies, particularly the DOH.

4.4 Third set of policy directives: Temporarily back to normal before the new normal

Included in the third set of policy directives are measures that seemingly go back to the normal life settings with featured restrictions, despite the development in the looming health crisis as the virus disease is now officially named COVID-19. This time, if in case DepEd personnel or learners went on travel (despite the previous discouragement) to destinations with confirmed cases of COVID-19, they were required to undergo mandatory 14-day self-quarantine. Maier and Brockman [23] have developed a model that supports containment policies that cover the quarantine of individuals, yielding beneficial results. With the absence being accounted to leave credits (for personnel) and the provision of alternative delivery modes (for learners and not marked absent), the order is indeed a systematic and carefully structured and responsive plan.

"In a crisis, governments often make difficult decisions under uncertainty and time constraints," [24]. The third set of policy directives also gives the go signal to conduct activities at the national and regional levels, including off-campus activities, with adherence to safety and health protocols. Prohibiting the gathering of many people would advance campaigns and protocols such as social distancing, which according to Adolph et al. [25] is "critical to flatten the curve against emergent infectious diseases".

In terms of budget and expenditures, it has been finally noted that the school's maintenance and other operating expenses (MOOE) will be the source of funds to purchase whatever is needed to comply with the previously mandated measures. Private schools are again urged to implement the mandates advocated by the DepEd with COVID-19 response. Besides, an enclosure in the third set of policy directives presents a joint statement from the DOH, Department of Tourism (DOT) and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), stating an assurance that it is safe to organize and attend public gatherings, meetings, and festivals, provided that precautionary health and safety measures are in place.

The third set of policy directives deals with administrative, fiscal (budget), and social aspects. The directives have been a springboard for a larger scope as a joint statement issued by the DOH, DILG, and DOT is included.

4.5 Fourth set of policy directives: The dawn of leave credits amid COVID-19

The fourth set of police directives is issued with 2 other enclosures from the DOH and the Civil Service Commission (CSC). It relays how the risk of the health situation is at the "very high" in the global arena. A travel ban to specific destinations is enforced, as DepEd personnel with previously authorized travel are now strongly advised not to proceed. More importantly, as previously policy stated that leave credits may be utilized for self-quarantine and/or treatment, a memorandum was issued by the CSC ordering that used leave credits may be restored.

Health (medical) protocols are stated in the policy, which includes guidance on home quarantine, use of disposable surgical masks, proper hand hygiene, food handling, disposal of used gloves, tissues, and masks, cleaning, and disinfection. Those who have undergone the mandatory quarantine are required to secure a medical certificate before going back to work. Those infected are required to submit a medical certificate issued by the Referral Center for Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases, stating that the learner or personnel has been treated and allowed to return to school. Lastly, the policy also warns personnel against unauthorized travel, reiterating the need to secure an official travel authority from the agency.

Enclosure No. 1 is relayed from the CSC for the use of leave credits absences due to self-quarantine or COVID-19 treatment. Under three categories, officials and employees, and frontline service providers who tested positive for COVID-19 and incurred absences due to quarantine and treatment will not be charged against their leave credits. Furthermore, it has been stated that "After the cited 14-day period has elapsed the official employee diagnosed with the COVID-19, their absences shall be charged from their earned sick leave credits." It is indeed an assurance that government officials and employees contribute to efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19; and that they are provided with the mechanisms to seek medical help, as it covers all employees regardless of the status of their appointment. True enough, the development of the health crisis will be central to how the governments order timely policies [26].

The second enclosure is from the DOH issuing guidelines for the management of persons suspected of COVID-19 who are under home quarantine. The general guidelines specify those required to undergo home quarantine, room isolation and contacts, use of disposable and surgical masks, proper hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, food handling, disposal, cleaning and disinfection, and reporting. The contents are similar to previously issued protocols and enhanced with some applicable guidelines and health practices.

The fourth set of policy directives includes administrative and health (medical) aspects. With the CSC memorandum, guidance on the use of leave credits among DepEd personnel is enforced. The inclusion of the CSC and DOH mandates is evidence that various government agencies are working hand in hand to relay, implement, and enforce unified policies related to COVID-19 responses.

4.6 Fifth set of policy directives: Towards informed, coordinated, and proportionate COVID-19 response

The fifth and last set of policy directives highlights "heightened precautions" as an alert system has been raised by the DOH as it anticipates the influx of community transmission of the virus, thus the possible suspension of classes is expected. Guidance for school activities for March 2020 is also released: suspension of all national and regional, division and district activities (that require travel), and off-campus activities. School-based activities are allowed, if those who exhibit respiratory infections will be prohibited to attend, following previously identified health protocols. To purchase "critical logistics and supplies" needed in school operations such as thermal scanners, hand sanitizers, soap, disinfectants, and masks, authority is granted to utilize the MOOE funds for this purpose. To address issues on misinformation and fake news, DepEd personnel and learners are directed to share only verified and reliable issuances from the World

Health Organization (WHO), DepEd, and the DOH. A study by La et al. [27] revealed that in Vietnam's context, reliable sources of information came from timely communication from the government and media, and reports from the science community. Situation reports are also expected to be submitted by concerned teams and groups identified.

Enclosure No. 1 is a press release from the DOH dated March 7, 2020. The report confirms the first local transmission in the country, as the 6th case of COVID-19 positive patient is identified. Included in the statement is a section on information sharing that aims to "yield the utmost benefit and avoid unnecessary stress and stigma to individuals and institutions." As the health situation continues to escalate, improved diagnostic capacity and contact tracing updates are also shared with the public. Fisher and Wilder-Smith [28], noted that investment should be done in terms of COVID-19 testing, as contact tracing is conducted.

The second enclosure is also from the DOH regarding the Code Alert System. While it does not necessarily reflect functions of the DepEd in terms of teaching and learning, different alert levels are presented in the scheme: data gathering and advisory, interceptions in airports and seaports, contact tracing, quarantine, case management, and epidemic surge. Codes are in white, blue, and red; as triggers are classified according to the gravity of local transmission concerning Executive Order 168: Creating the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging and Infectious Diseases. Suspension of school or work is identified as a response as triggered by sustained community transmission beyond capacity.

The fifth set of policy directives includes social, administrative, and health (medical) aspects. The inclusion of the DOH press release shows how the policies are shaped by the current situation, relative to the development of efforts to mitigate COVID-19. Various internal and external stakeholders are tapped in the policy directives, harmonizing strategies towards informed, coordinated, and proportionate COVID-19 response.

4.7 Policy inputs to teaching and learning during a pandemic

Sound and responsible policies provide avenues for sustainable delivery of services and uninterrupted operations of government agencies and entities. Not only that these mandates contribute to efficiently implement mechanisms during a health crisis, but these also provide a futuristic view of what can be expected and how impending challenges may be addressed. A responsive policy does not only provide solutions to temporal issues, but it also incorporates the participation of stakeholders involved. Furthermore, numerous contexts and aspects are emphasized in a situation such as a health crisis like COVID-19 is not merely confined as a medical or health concern.

The pedagogical context must be given a strong emphasis on crafting policies as it is central to the core functions of the DepEd. The aspects of teaching and learning must be given enough space in the realm of mandates and orders: specifically on how learning could be facilitated and how teaching could be sustained amidst the looming crisis.

In a bureaucracy as complex as the DepEd, political aspects must be explored instead of just maintaining the top-to-bottom, bottom-to-top approach. Local community leadership must be tapped in recognition of the ecology where the school belongs. Contextualizing actions and mandates through the lens of political jurisdiction would eventually gather support from entities that contribute to the successful operations of the school system. Also, it would be beneficial to consider social and cultural norms to effectively gauge the success of policy implementation. A sound policy founded on strong socio-cultural bases will most likely gather support from the stakeholder as these reflect the totality of their being concerning how a particular issue is presented. In a pandemic as the COVID-19 crisis, Filipinos are most likely to be active and aggressive individuals to uphold and advocate measures and protocols if these are rooted in their capacity to understand, believe, and act. Socio-cultural perspectives must also be considered in advancing measures related to COVID-19 response.

Future policy efforts must capture the genuine interest and participation of internal and external stakeholders. Maximizing what interest groups could contribute would lead to a more structured and coordinated strategy. More than parents and DepEd officials, local community leaders are at the forefront waiting to be tapped. As a predominantly Catholic nation, religious leaders may also be of service to the school community. The quest to combatting COVID-19 is not only confined to the gates of schools, thus it concerns everyone in the community. Keeping our schools safe is not only the sole responsibility of DepEd teachers and parents. Individuals manning the local enterprise also have their share of contribution in making the environment safe, whether it is in or out of the school premises. Missing these significant groups out of the picture is like isolating the bureaucracy on its own as it faces the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

Careful analysis of the data revealed that most of the directives mainly focus on health (those from the DOH and other related agencies) and administration. It is imperative to emphasize how specific aspects and contexts of teaching and learning are lack attention. It appeared that the focus points of the policy directives are mainly set on activities outside the classroom. Internal stakeholders are mostly tapped in the issuances, as teachers and school-level individuals are specifically

tasked to work on COVID-19 reports using prescribed formats and templates. Also, as COVID-19 policy directives mandate the provision of alcohol, hand sanitizers, and others, it is vital to explicate how funds may be sourced to procure said items.

This study places its limitation mainly on the period at the time of the conduct of research. It only involves those issuances from January – March 2020, which borders the inquiry to pre-pandemic experience in the Philippines. It could be suggested that future research involves during and the post-pandemic time frame to holistically navigate the issue being studied. While no one can barely predict when this health crisis ends, it is still worthy to note and study DepEd issuances related to COVID-19 response. Another limitation is the DepEd memorandum and order used as the springboard of the study. The focus of this inquiry is only on the issuances coming from the central office of the bureaucracy. Future research could include other mechanisms such as evaluation of implemented programs and policies, dialogue with stakeholders as part of policy-making attempts, or contribution from the curriculum and instruction division and school governance and operations division. DepEd memorandum and order included in the study have also manifested a top-to-bottom communication channel. It is also worthy to explore attempts that strategized the bottom-to-top approach, particularly capturing efforts from teachers and other stakeholders.

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