



## Predominant Challenges of COVID-19 to Students' Personal Learning Endeavors: Illustrative Case Study in a Philippine University

Cathy Mae D. Toquero<sup>✉</sup>, Diane Mae P. Ulanday, Jovar G. Pantao, Maria Theresa P. Pelones  
Mindanao State University-General Santos City, Philippines

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### Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic created psychological chaos, social distress, and emotional disturbances to the students worldwide which affected their pursuit to focus on their learning goals. This article examines the psychosocial, educational, and other related challenges of the current crisis which threaten the space for learning heuristics and personal well-being of university students.

**Methods:** The study applied an illustrative case study design to describe the real-life situations of the students in from a state university in the Philippines during the early stages of a phenomenal health event in history.

**Results:** Result indicates that COVID-19 posits detrimental effects to the students' educational cycles and psycho-social well-being as they felt drowned, trapped, and annihilated at the arrival of COVID-19.

**Conclusions:** The educational momentum of these particular students declined due to unprecedented educational transitions, decreased motivation for their studies, complexities experienced in the emergency online learning environments, and multiplex health and digital issues.

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<sup>✉</sup> Correspondence Address:  
Email : [cathymaetoquero@gmail.com](mailto:cathymaetoquero@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The existence of the deadly virus influenced the psyche of the students. They faced isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future in the unprecedented time in their student life. The study of Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, and Sasangohar (2020) revealed that students experienced increased stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts during the Covid-19 outbreak due to multiple stressors such as increased concerns in their academic performance. Another studies even stated that COVID-19 had the negative effects on students' outcomes when the results showed that 13% of students at Arizona State University have delayed graduation due to COVID-19 (Aucejo, French, Araya, & Zafar, 2020).

Since March 2020, in-person classes were suspended in all educational level in the Philippines. In the case of tertiary education, The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines enjoined Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to employ flexible learning and other alternative delivery modes instead of on-campus learning in order to continue learning (Commission on Higher Education, 2020). Mindanao State University-General Santos City (MSU-GSC) has adopted the flexible learning mode, in which classes were conducted remotely either modular or online synchronous and asynchronous, to ensure continuity of learning despite the threats of the pandemic. Classes continued and students were given a pass or fail mark instead of the typical numerical grades. Although this can be considered a reasonable decision, however, studies have shown that students are more motivated if their performance are thoroughly evaluated (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014). Also, long events of lockdown has added more stress and anxiety that decreased their level of concentration and focus in their studies. College students of MSU-GSC experienced disconnection in their studies due to poor internet connection, financial incapacities, and lack of technological skills.

Meanwhile, during the flexible learning, most of the teachers delivered emergency online classes. This modality highlights the significant role of digital technology in the continuity of education. Despite the promise of technology

and its obvious advantage in flexible learning, it still negatively affects students' academic endeavors. Students were faced with challenges related to technological infrastructure such as lack of internet facilities and weak internet connectivity (Chinna et al., 2021). The issue in the affordability, accessibility, and availability of technology has resulted to a wider "digital divide" (Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela, 2020).

The shift from in-person classes to a new learning environment brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic such as the online and modular learning has caused academic tension among students most especially to those who cannot easily adopt to new learning paradigm (Di-Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, & Mazza, 2020). This aggravates the educational inequalities. While this pandemic has caused disruption in learning of students, significant insights can be seen and understood based from the findings that were generated from the experiences of the students. The implementation of flexible learning has ensured the continuity of education despite the sting of the virus. This study explored in a broader perspective how students' educational goals are affected during the Covid-19 crisis and how the findings may be used by policymakers and school administrators in deciding how to mitigate the detrimental effects of Covid-19 on education. Moreover, the results may also assist teachers and parents on how they can properly provide support and guidance to students during this public health emergency crisis.

## Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach through an illustrative case study design. Illustrative case study allows the researchers to show and describe the real situation among the student educators. This design gives familiarizations on how the current emergency situation has affected the students' mental health and educational learning endeavors in the context of a state university in the Philippines.

Participants from this study came from one of the prominent state universities in the Philippines. The state university has produced top gun graduates in successive years, is known for producing top 10 ranks in state examinations especially in Teacher Education

and Engineering courses, and is recognized for its quality graduates who are prioritized in job hiring in the country. At the start of the crisis, the state university immediately advised the students to partake in the online learning environment, however, several problems were encountered among the students such as lack of internet connectivity, financial hindrances, and remote locations. The students are also under home quarantine and lockdown protocols ensued by the government in the local context. Due to insufficient resources for remote learning and lack of technological provisions for the online learning curriculum, the classes were terminated and the students were mass promoted based on attendance alone for three months prior to the start of the pandemic. The students thereby shifted to social networks such as Facebook, Youtube, Instragam, Tiktok, etc. to find solace in the virtual communities to temporarily rid their worries due to the disruption of classes and rising cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines. The students also shifted in social network to alleviate their psychosocial anxiety caused by the pandemic.

In relation to this scenario, six students who are currently taking up Bachelor of Elementary Education in the College of Education participated in the study. They were chosen based on their willingness to join the study. These participants underwent psychosocial counseling to a registered psychometrician. Part of the criteria of inclusion include having a Facebook account and being active in the social media. They were given a letter that asked for their consent to participate and informed them of their rights based on the context of the study. During this writing, the state university did not have any formal online learning environments after the termination of classes and mass promotion of the students, so numerous students opted to join in virtual networks to find solace during the pandemic.

A written interview questionnaire was created with in-depth questions to explore the motivations, feelings, and experiences of the students during the pandemic. The researchers

also studied the Facebook accounts to delve on the posts and shared messages of the students since the start of the lockdown.

Through online communication, an interview protocol was given to the students. The students preferred written interviews so that they can better express their thoughts and feelings. The researchers asked the students for clarifications through chat messages after they finished answering the written interview questionnaire. The students sent their accomplished written interview materials through the Facebook messenger.

Thematic analysis was applied to create codes and themes based on the accomplished written interview materials from the students. Rich quotes were provided as support of the analyses of the researchers, along with member checks and audit trail of the gathered data to uphold trustworthiness of the qualitative results. A follow up online interview was also carried out as a way to verify and triangulate the answers of the students in the written interview. The students agreed on the interpretation of the transcripts.

## Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 outbreak has inflicted enormous and intense ramification in many people across the globe. One of the most crucial, but apparently overlooked issue is the related psychosocial and educational challenges of COVID-19 outbreak on the students (Figure 1). Community-based mitigation programs implemented during a severe pandemic like COVID-19 such as community quarantine and closing of schools disrupt students' academic focus and can potentially promote anxiety and focusstre, among others, due to factors like fear of the unknown and loss of control. A study from China noted that the amount of anxiety among college students in China was positively associated with hampered daily life schedules and delays in academic activities as affected by lockdowns (Cao et al., 2020). The intensity of effects of public health emergencies to college students varies in many folds.



**Figure 2.** Challenges to Students' Personal Learning Goals due to COVID-19

### **Emotional: Longing for an escape while chasing dreams.**

The pre-service teachers under study experienced a significant amount of negative emotions during the start of the lockdown. They experienced despair, loneliness, discouragement and frustration because they cannot do the things they need to do. The negative emotions stem from unable to meet their educational, emotional, and psychological needs. They also experienced technical, virtual, and social challenges that have profoundly affected their educational efforts.

Maria: "Because of the pandemic, we are quarantined in our own houses. During the quarantine period, I encountered educational and psychological challenges. I keep on thinking when this pandemic will end because we are so behind our lessons."

Michelle: "I felt like I was in the precipice of annihilation when this pandemic came in. To be honest, I have encountered lots of challenges. Some are quite hard to combat and some are just minors."

Edward: "Yet most of the time, we get bored because we lose the courage to do things. I feel like I am trapped and I hate it. The silence drown us especially when we are used to a loud happy environment in school. Good thing that they cancelled

some online classes because it would be a burden to us who are living in out of nowhere."

### **Educational: Aiming for the target without assurance of the future.**

During this COVID-19 pandemic, pre-service teachers under study were concerned about the possible impact of changes in the progress of their studies and future job opportunities. The cessation of Face-to-Face learning platforms makes students feel sad, lonely, problematic and worried. Most of them made commendable remarks without any assurance of the future at the end of this pandemic. This paranoia reduces their momentum in studying, while others feel that they are scholastically left behind and cannot cope up with the excessive school requirements in their classes. The rich quotations below shows the deleterious effects on those students.

Maria: "Before we started our 2nd Semester, I promised to myself that I must have good grades in this semester. However, when the pandemic starts to invade our country, slowly but slowly my momentum in studying decreases. Almost a month we are only staying in our houses instead at school. We have to keep up with our lessons and have double time to learn it. Also, the suspension of alternative learning platforms made me sad because we can't have activities or having lessons during the enhance community quarantine."

Cherry: "I became also worried to my studies and subjects since we didn't already have our midterm and final exams and the extension of this lockdown made me feel that we are behind in our lessons. And I can't enjoy even there were no class since we are not allowed to go out and for me it makes more lonely, problematic and paranoid that I want to make a cure on it."

Juliana: "The CoVid-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal educational cycles and timelines of formal educational endeavors, and thus have a threat of

extending my period of stay in distress.”

Michelle: “I promised myself that I would strive even more because I’d like to get a commendable remarks, but this pandemic really affected my educational goals because I wasn’t yet given the assurance if I passed or failed all my subjects which I always pray for the former, not the latter.”

#### **Technical: Choosing between emerging technologies or disappearing internet connections.**

The pre-service teachers under study during the lockdown were challenge by the emergence of digital technologies to be used in the classrooms. Most of the students kept out of the classroom during the pandemic due to lack of learning gadget and or no access to a household computer.

While some students live in locations that are not served by mobile networks, and they had to go to the nearby community where internet cafes and pisonet are available. Added to this, the high cost of the cellphone bills and mobile data charges are exacerbating the problem. The deepening of the digital divide, in particular those students who have disadvantageous backgrounds, will shut them out of school activities. This economic and digital interoperability gap reduces the participation rate of the students.

Cherry: “Due to this Corona Virus 2019 most of the requirements were passed online. As a student without an access on internet connection and accurate technology to comply and do my tasks, I need to go to small establishments of Internet café just to finish my requirements”

Farhan: “Since these pandemic issue occur, many tasks are given online. As a student with no internet connection at home, I need to go to the nearby computer shop to comply the said requirements.”

Maria: “Even though there are some alternatives for learning, we can’t deny

the fact that it is not available all the time.”

#### **Social: Isolating physically and socially due to virus protocols and preventive measures.**

The social relationship between pre-service teachers under study was affected by the COVID-19 crisis. During this pandemic, students were physically and socially isolated due to virus protocol and preventive health measures such as physical distancing, home quarantines and isolation. Changes in social network patterns was observed and could directly affect the mental health of individuals associated with one’s physical health, and health of others.

Edward: “As a person who always like to hangout, the quarantine has a big impact in social well-being. Good thing that we have phones even though the signal is weak most of the time.”

Juliana: “One of the top measures deployed by the Philippine government among its people is the “Stay at Home Quarantine” which means that everyone is locked up at home until a vaccine is discovered to combat this CoViD-19 or SARS-CoV-2.”

Cherry: “COVID 19 pandemic affects my life especially in my studies. I experience difficulty in doing my online requirements due to lack of Internet connection as well as gadgets to use... but since the government ordered all small establishments to close due to lockdown, I can say that it was so hard for me to achieve my personal education goals were I aim to improve more.”

Farhan: “At the same time the government discourages activities that needs to be outside in each other’s home so for me it’s very hard to achieve my personal education goals.”

Michelle: “This pandemic dissipates me from my friends because our Government reminded us to put social and physical distancing in motion in



order to mitigate the so-called “quick spread” of this virus. Emotionally, as an extroverted introvert, I think that nothing changed a bit because I’m simply used to be alone.”

### **Virtual: Experiencing the information and academic overload in the virtual world.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the pre-service teacher under study experienced information and academic overload in the virtual world. Excessive information on a problem that is somehow unreliable or false “fake news” has contributed to difficult situations. Infodemic, lack of access to technology and connectivity are causing stress, anxiety, panic, feelings of guilt to students which also affect their concentration and focus.

Juliana: “Aside from disrupting the normal academic schedules of formal education I have from the university that I am attending, the only real challenge for me in terms of educating myself is verifying news resources, documentary stories, and finding locally published articles, journals of medicine, and investigative endeavors of life science discoveries regarding viruses and how they infect organisms in various forms and species.”

Farhan: “This pandemic really affect my life especially in my studies where the schools are ordered to temporarily shut down and most of my class are giving online tasks and for me, it’s hard to deal with it since we don’t have a strong internet connection and an appropriate study area in our home. At first it was easy to access internet connection we went a store and reload our sim but as days goes by some changes imposed in our community like the so-called enhanced community quarantine.”

### **Psychological: Dealing with worries, sufferings, and the endless home quarantines.**

The pre-service teacher under study experience worries, sufferings and endless home quarantine during the lockdown. Limited knowledge of the pandemic, overwhelming

news and constraints on physical movement and social activities, and sudden radical changes in lifestyle are affecting psychological balance of the students.

Maria: “During the first and second week of the quarantine, me and my parents started to encounter psychological challenges which is panic buying. We start to keep foods that is good for weeks. We even plan to plant vegetables in case there will be a shortage of food if this pandemic can’t control.”

Farhan: “It also has a psychological impact for me because knowing that anytime the virus could be or could spread even in our community.”

Michelle: “However, what made me suffer a little bit is the scarcity of foods to be ingested because our Local Gov’t Unit declared this Home Quarantine where everyone is prohibited to go out when the travel isn’t that so essential. This made us suffer a bit because my uncle, a tricycle driver, cannot drive as far as city proper. With that being said, our food consumption which is mainly gotten from my uncle’s driving was affected and that made us starve a bit.”

Cherry: “And due to this deadly virus the government implements preventive measures like social distancing which makes our daily lives more difficult. We fall in a long line at supermarkets to purchase our daily needs and contribute more burden because of the hot temperature as well as you can only buy limited items. And as a working student I didn’t able to earn money since in the restaurant I’m working in, lots of orders and caterings were cancelled.”

### **Positive Thoughts from the Students: Tuning in to Positivity and the Brighter Side of Life.**

In spite of the negative impact of COVID-19, the pre-service teachers under study during the lockdown have a silver lining to it. Students tend to tune in to positivity and capitalize on the brighter side of life.

Juliana: “As to my educational goals in personal learning, the pandemic actually gave me a more relaxed time to read books without the pressure of an examination or of a deadline, which makes it more fun because I got to do it in my own pace of understanding and comprehension. Only by now, have I learned how powerful, useful, and humungous is the knowledge already stored in large cloud storages of the likes of Google and whatnots. However, I just have this kind of experience that I am more comfortable in reading and understanding published or printed materials as opposed to reading pdfs on my phone or at the screen of my laptop.”

Edward: “It really affects our school life because we are used to waking up in the morning to attend a class. But it also gives us time to do things that we haven’t done during school.”

Farhan: “This pandemic affects my academic performance like I easily have this discouragement to myself that I can’t accomplished my work because I don’t have strong internet connection. Luckily, some of our Professors postponed the passing of the requirements and it was a relief for me”.

The lockdown helped the students seize the opportunity to extend their schedules in accomplishing the learning task at their own pace, time and preference. Students were also given time to reassess their priorities for both school activities and household responsibilities. On a more positive note, students valued the power of technology and felt that they were giving more opportunities to connect and stay in touch with family and friends. The rich quotes from the narratives of the informants depicts the positive effect of COVID-19 to students.

Hence, may the students tune in to the brighter side of life despite the continuing threat of the virus, as Juliana positively remarked: “The home that I am in right now has an enjoyable environment and I have

buddies that play Mobile Legends: Bang Bang with me, we have a Netflix account...we can watch unlimited movies and both local and international series...my host family here in General Santos City is fathered by a Christian Pastor and a faithful deaconess, so we have Bible studies and prayer time every night that constantly keeps our psychological and emotional aspects in check.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought emotional, educational, virtual, social and psychological challenges which hinder the attainment of prospective teachers’ goals. These challenges mutually-reinforce to yield negative emotional responses such as frustration, worries and discouragement among the students. The fact that the situation is highly unpredictable, students are left with tendencies to crave for security and control over their lives because they could hardly meet their emotional, educational and psychological needs.

The middle of the semester suspension of classes due to the declaration of Enhanced Community quarantine has interrupted the students’ momentum in reaching their goals. The students felt they were behind in their lessons and were left with responsibility to learn independently at home. The heightened uncertainty during that time has made them think of the idea of extending the period of their tertiary education.

Moreover, education in the wake of pandemic also offered the students with various virtual learning experiences. However, they got bothered with information and academic overload.

Studies showed that online learning actually makes students stressed with the many tasks to do (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). The struggle that these students encountered in their virtual learning engagement can be explained by the fact that at this stage, they are still adjusting to the demands of emergency online learning. The experiences offered to them are not yet part of their repertoire and these necessitate reconfiguration so that this will become part of their learning range.

Another important point generated from the students under study is that the lockdown unfavorably distant them from their social networks. Although introvert students described

this situation as normal to them, the extrovert students suffered from this isolation because they were used to hanging out with friends. The introvert students consider the quarantine as “golden age” for them (Lee, Dean, & Jung, 2008) as they lower the levels of requirements for social connection. The data provided in this study supports the initial evidences that extrovert individuals, particularly those who are highly active and sociable are more likely to experience higher levels of distress (Liu, Lithopoulos, Zhang, Garcia-Barrera, & Rhodes, 2021). Literature also indicated that increased social isolation among tertiary students consequently resulted to reduced contact with friends. For instance, the quantitative research endeavored by Son, Hedge, Smith, Wang and Sasangohar (2020) revealed that over half of the students signified that their interaction with their friends decreased significantly (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar, 2020). Hence, this period was seen as an epoch for digital social network connection as students used their devices to connect, communicate, and reduce the distance.

To cope with interruptions brought about by the pandemic to the students’ educational goals, a few maximized this situation as an opportunity to learn at their own pace. They became more relaxed in learning as they were given relief from the pressures of examinations and deadlines. They also learned to access significant information online and manage large files in cloud storages. Clearly, the students during this mode of instruction acknowledge the significant role of self-discipline and self-motivation in keeping themselves attuned to latest trends and updates on news information. This response particularly at the earlier period of the pandemic is a clear manifestation that the students might have this feeling of increased study obligations (Aristovnik, Kerzi, Ravelj, Tomaževič, & Umek, 2020).

The emotions displayed by the students can be generalized as an age-associated response to challenging situation. The students under this case study are 20-21 years old who are most likely considering themselves as young adults. At this age, tertiary students get worried about the secondary consequences of the pandemic which are named in this study

as educational, social, and emotional. This is consistent with the work of Shanahan, Steinhoff, Bechtiger, Murray, Nivette, Hepp, Ribeaud & Eisner (2020) which explains that young adults’ sources of distressed are the secondary consequences brought about by the pandemic (Shanahan et al., 2020). For young adults, these consequences are troubling as they are on the stage of tackling several efforts and adjustments to cope with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Brooks et al (2020) showed stressors such as fear of infection, frustration, boredom, lack of information and supplies, financial loss and stigma that would lead to boredom, disappointment, low motivation and irritability (Brooks et al., 2020). Increase of these stressors could impair the academic performance and social functioning of students. A significant negative effect of boredom on edutourists’ attitudes as well as an insignificant positive effect on their behaviours was determined; furthermore, the students’ attitudes did not affect their behaviours. A positive connection between boredom and psychological distress was significant (Afellat, Abdalla, & Alipour, 2021).

The students’ depiction of their stay during home quarantine whether emotional, educational, technical, social, virtual, or psychological challenges portray their overwhelming experiences due to COVID-19. Study of Wathélet (2020) stated that the results of a national survey conducted among French students in 2016 found that 15% reported a depressive episode in the last 4 weeks (Wathélet et al., 2020). These existing experiences can shape how they will formulate their personal learning goals in the coming years. Inevitably, both positive and negative emotional and psychological experiences may strongly determine the unfolding of their characters in the future. A healthy family function may alleviate generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and anxiety of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yang, Wu, Wang, & Peng, 2021).

Experts from Peking University Sixth Hospital made six suggestions for the public to cope with mental stress (Bao, Sun, Meng, Shi, & Lu, 2020). These included assessing the accuracy of information disclosed, enhancing



social support systems (eg, families and friends), eliminating stigma associated with the epidemic, maintaining a normal life under safe conditions, and using the psychosocial service system, particularly telephone-based and internet-based counselling for health-care staff, patients, family members, and the public (Bao et al., 2020).

Since most students of the university have smartphones, the university needs to provide free virtual mental health counseling, teleconferencing, and virtual health chat-box so that the students can easily access health assistance even amid the pandemic such as Sun (2020) explain at his study that using social media with official account to inform all students daily of the current prevention and control situation, school prevention and control arrangements, notices, requirements and discipline standards (Sun & Su, 2020). Aside from the psychological interventions, this study also articulates to monitor the socio-emotional well-being of the students as crucial for them to stay focused in their studies. The administration should also give them emotional support through webinars which discuss strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with the traumatic experiences that they are undergoing. The provision of a flexible learning platform or modular-based education ensure that no students are left behind in their educational endeavors during this pandemic, so the university needs to adapt the pedagogies and platforms for instruction according to the principles of individual differences and needs of the students. Chang (2020) said that an older age was associated with a higher level of awareness of COVID-19 and greater changes in future health behaviors were associated with less anxiety and depression among the students (Chang, Yuan, & Wang, 2020).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented psychosocial and other related educational challenges that affected the personal learning endeavors of the students as they lost pleasure and focus in attaining their educational goals. The depressing reality among the students is crucial for the university to address as students face various issues that can affect the nations' social and educational recuperation from the

crises. The negative experiences among the students can create more social disparities as they lost interests in learning. Hence, the university and policymakers need to create provisions for educational and mental health support that are accessible and responsive to the students' needs to strengthen their resolve to persevere with their personal learning endeavors despite the crisis.

The other opinion was the pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of students (Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan, & Davi, 2020). The results emphasize the importance of both professional help for students with mental health problems and effective prevention programs on university campuses that promote coping skills, and mental health during the current pandemic (Karing, 2021).

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