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Introduction: COVID-19 and Education

The new normal caused enormous and extraordinary changes to education institutions in the Philippines, the majority of which have followed the residential, face-to-face method of instruction. Exceptions are the few open universities that have either of these two learning platforms: completely remote or blended learning. Indeed, this affirms the observation by the United Nations or the UN (2020) that the pandemic caused the "largest disruption of education systems in history." The UN reports a total of 1.6 billion learner displacement in more than 190 countries, as well as school and learning space closures impinging on 94% of the global student population, 99% of whom come from the lower- to middle-income countries.

In August 2020, the World Economic Forum (WEF) reported

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that within a mere four-month period, learner displacement figures increased by four million from a figure of 1.2 billion in April 2020. School closures and the subsequent shift to mostly technology-based learning had only intensified the already critical prepandemic learning divide, further marginalizing "those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons" (UN 2020, 2). This UN Policy Brief refers in turn to a 2018 report by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization or UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) that pegged "out-of-school children and youth" at 258 million, including fifty-nine million primary school age, 62 million "secondary school age, and 138 million upper secondary age" youths.

The same divide presumably applies across other categories like continents and economies. A 2020 European Universities Association (EUA) survey on digitally enhanced learning and teaching showed that 95% of member institutions completely shifted to distance learning, while another 4% partially did so (Gaebel 2020, 9). The new teaching-learning modality is back-dropped by an education scenario that has been accustomed to digital learning for some time.

A 2013 EUA survey of institutional e-learning modes indicated that 91% of higher education institutions (HEIs) had blended learning courses; 82% offered online courses; 55% ran blended learning degree programs; 40% provided joint online learning with other higher education institutions; and 39% developed online degree programs.

In contrast, such a scenario does not apply in developing Asia, according to a 2021 Asian Development Bank (ADB) Special Topic report. It discusses the following information on the pandemic's impact on Asian education (1–3):

(1) As of April 2021, schools in Asia experienced drawn-out partial or full school closures. The region reported the longest recorded shutdowns: at over a year and a half in eight out of forty-six economies. The longest full school closure happened in Myanmar and Bangladesh at over 300 days, while schools in the Philippines ceased face-to-face classes for more than 200 days.

(2) Online and television platforms were the primary means of instruction in Asia, supplemented or substituted by paper-based learning packages based on a survey of education ministry officials conducted by the UNESCO, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank (WB) from April to October 2020. Online learning was facilitated by state governments and websites like YouTube for learning content delivery and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. Social media reinforced communication between and among educators and students.

(3) Online learning was contingent on a household's computer ownership and internet connectivity. However, this capacity or access to such technology was unevenly spread in developing Asia. The distribution figures related to available computer and internet facilities in households across economic classifications revealed that:

    (a) Seventy-six percent had computers and 86% had internet access in high-income economies.

    (b) Fifty-two percent had computers and 68% had internet access in upper middle-income economies.

    (c) Eighteen percent had computers and 41% had internet access in lower middle-income economies.

Given that many Asian countries have lower middle-income economies, digitally enhanced learning is not expected to reach a high level of sophistication soon. Instead, more commonly owned equipment like mobile gadgets, phones, and television sets are most probably the default devices for online learning in households across the region.

Referencing the various impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, a UN policy brief (UNSDG 2020, 3–4) recommended policy responses for governments and stakeholders to address the overwhelming effects of the pandemic on education systems around the world, namely:

(1) "Suppress transmission of the virus and plan thoroughly for school re-openings"

(2) "Protect education financing and coordinate for impact"

(3) "Build resilient education systems for equitable and sustainable development" and

(4) "Re-imagine education and accelerate change in teaching and learning"

Determining to what extent and in what manner these endorsed policy responses are being played out in the Philippines is first presented in this paper, followed by notes on quite diverse local and institutional contexts. It will then examine three ZAMBASULTA (Zamboanga Peninsula, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi) education institutions to provide realistic insights into certain segments of the Philippine education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Philippine Education amidst COVID-19: Government Directives on the New Normal

At the pandemic's onset, the Department of Education (DepEd) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) each issued directives to address the new normal and to mitigate the varied challenges to the academic landscape, which have been affected by the community quarantine and its many restrictions. Their foremost concerns were the indefinite suspension of classes and the struggle to prevent the teaching-learning process from losing its momentum while considering the pandemic threat.

Government measures to face the new normal were imposed after a relatively protracted period since the start of the pandemic.

Decision-makers consulted stakeholders, surveyed health environments, and tested and measured response mechanisms and outcomes. A case in point is the flexible internship program that took official effect in the second quarter of 2021. However, the said program was identified by the CHED as a prospective pathway for college students in mid-2020 (San Juan 2020).

Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan

On June 19, 2020, the DepEd adopted the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to act on the prolonged disengagement of students from the "teaching-learning process," and to specify steps forward given the quarantine restrictions and the existing physical and mental health risks due to COVID-19.[2] The BE-LCP espoused these principles:

(1) Health, safety, and well-being of basic education stakeholders

(2) Learning continuity anchored on K-12 curriculum adjustments, learning materials alignment, "multiple learning delivery modalities...training for teachers and school leaders, and proper orientation of parents or guardians of learners" (3)

(3) Safe return to the workplace of school personnel and learners as guided by projections and risk assessment data from national agencies at the forefront of pandemic-related actions and responses[3]

(4) Sensitivity and responsiveness to equity considerations and concerns; and

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2 See Department Order No. 012, s. 2020, "Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 in light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency."

3 Department of Health (DOH) and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases in the Philippines (IATF).

(5) Linking and bridging towards quality and future-oriented education.

Most Essential Learning Competencies

The DepEd Order behind the BE-LCP similarly directed public schools to cull the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCS) from the K-12 curriculum. This aimed to equally streamline and secure continued learning despite the transition from face-to-face instruction to more flexible, home-based platforms. The notion of "academic ease" and the mandate towards flexible learning were reiterated in a subsequent memorandum from the Office of the Undersecretary for Curriculum and Instruction (OUCI).

The OUCI further promoted contextualization, the constructivist learning approach, and the devolution of teaching-learning responsibilities from teacher and school to student and parent. Curriculum streamlining was conceived to respond to the huge adjustments necessitated by the new education modalities. Inadvertently, this move addressed the long-standing observation that the Philippine education curriculum was overcrowded and content-heavy.

Meanwhile, the shift of teaching-learning responsibilities from school to home inevitably rendered the assimilation of homeschooling elements to the education system. This situation then begs these questions: How are parents, guardians, and other adult household members prepared to shoulder these responsibilities? In what ways can they be capacitated to optimize their child's or children's learning? A wide-ranging pulse survey or study on these concerns would be highly relevant.

Flexible Learning

Like the public schools, HEIs adopted flexible learning as the new modality by virtue of CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) 04,

Series of 2020 that was issued on September 2, 2020. This CMO was based on Republic Act (RA) no. 7722–Higher Education Act of 1994, Republic Act (RA) no. 11469–Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, and Commission En Banc Resolution no. 412–2020.

Though it recognizes the use of education technology and distance-education approaches, the CHED declared that flexible learning would not run solely on these platforms, given the varying degrees of institutional and student adaptability. Access to education was imperative, but a matter-of-fact evaluation of the higher education environment was similarly needed so that CHED can correctly calibrate policies, standards, and guidelines.

In the second quarter of 2020, following the first enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), the CHED conducted consultations and surveys among HEIs and its technical panel members. The topics were focused on post-ECQ recommendations involving curricular modifications and alternative modes or flexible learning strategies per discipline, which were pertinent to students across levels of technological capacity and internet connectivity. Strategies, practices, and learning management systems (LMS) for transitioning into flexible learning were also discussed.

The outcomes of these inquiries could have informed specific provisions in CMO 04, s. 2020. Besides citing the rationale, scope and coverage, definition, and general guidelines, the memorandum order provided various implementation modalities and expressed support for the creation and development of consortia anent to flexible learning.

The same memorandum order obligates HEIs to submit Learning Community Plans (LCPs) to CHED. This directive allows universities, colleges, and other tertiary schools to perform institutional assessments and plan for flexible learning adaptation. The LCPs would provide CHED baseline information

for sustainability and monitoring purposes, as well as insights into HEIs' overall situations and capacities in the new milieu.

The said CMO likewise encouraged the establishment of consortia among HEIs "for strengthening partnerships, co-production and sharing of resources, building capacities and facilitating mobility" (CHED 2020, 8). It likewise advocated for cooperative engagements "with national and local government agencies, civil society organizations, telecommunication companies, professional and international organizations, and other institutions to strengthen and/or complement existing resources, infrastructure, or connectivity to ensure undisrupted learning of the students" (CHED 2020, 5). The fundamental intent was to facilitate continued learning for students despite constrained access, whether physical (i.e., to home institutions, internship, or practicum sites) or virtual.

The quarantine also posed a dilemma for HEIs with programs requiring competencies exclusively derived from face-to-face, practicum, or internship set-ups. Aside from being deprived of practical, hands-on, and industry-specific skills, students may be underqualified to graduate and/or take the national licensure exams for their respective professions.

The CHED's directives for flexible clinic and internship programs were issued in April 2021, a year after the quarantine engendered the new normal.[4] However, these memorandum orders pertained only to undergraduate degree programs in the allied medical professions, such as speech pathology, pharmacy, respiratory therapy, and dentistry. Similar guidelines for laboratory research work in the pure and applied sciences, and for fieldwork and practicum in education and the social science fields remain unavailable. This situation could be contingent on whether these guidelines are still deemed necessary

[4] See CHED Memorandum Orders 2, 3, 4, and 5, series of 2021.

in anticipation of post-pandemic normalcy in public and private sector operations in the near future, especially as the government continues vaccination efforts.

The "next normal" foresees renewed development based on increased movements among the industrial and work sectors, according to Presidential Adviser on Entrepreneurship Joey Concepcion (CNN Philippines 2021). This scenario will subsequently impact HEIs. Government measures to address the effects of the pandemic on the education sector serve as points of reference for understanding how these realities and initiatives interface with, and reciprocally impact on, realities on the ground.

The ZAMBASULTA Context

In examining the COVID-19 pandemic scenarios, this paper considers the unequal circumstances, aptitudes, and wherewithal of students and academic institutions across the country. It probes into the challenges faced by three educational institutions (i.e., a state polytechnic college, a private institute of technology, and a traditional madrasah/boarding school) in the ZAMBASULTA territory.

The Zamboanga Peninsula had Zamboanga City as its sole highly urbanized area based on the 2015 Census of Population and Housing by the Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA). This is particularly evident in reference to PSA poverty incidence data on the following:

- The poverty incidence rate among farmers, fisherfolk, and individuals residing in rural areas was higher than "other basic sectors" in 2015 and 2018.
- Compared to other sectors, the highest magnitude of poor Filipinos occurred among women, children, and people living in rural areas in 2018 (PSA 2020a).

Unlike Zamboanga, the other ZAMBASULTA provinces (i.e., Basilan—except Isabela City—Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi) are under the jurisdiction of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which had a poverty incidence rate of 61.8% in 2018, with 58.9% of the youth belonging to poor families (PSA 2020b). In addition, a 2016 study commissioned by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) noted that the BARMM had the lowest functional literacy rate in Mindanao at 71.5%. This figure is based on the PSA's 2008 rural and provincial data. It was 8.0 percentage points lower than the second lowest literacy rate recorded for Zamboanga Peninsula in the same cluster. The data further indicated that Mindanao was pegged below the national literacy rate in the same year. A 2010 provincial survey shows the poor education of the majority population aged five to sixty-four, with 66% reaching only the elementary level.

Other than the common context of poverty incidence and low functional literacy rates of their respective locations, the education institutions mentioned in this paper have their distinct administrative structure, regulation, accreditation, infrastructure, government subsidy, and development programs. Such uniqueness is most especially pertinent to the *madrasah* (school) which has long operated independently of government regulation and support like other religious schools in the country. A brief background on the madrasah and its position within the Philippine education system would help describe their situation during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Madrasah in the Philippines

Before the establishment of the public education system by the Americans, religious instruction was the primary mode of schooling in Muslim communities in the Philippines. It was undertaken through varying methods (i.e., personal mentoring by a religious teacher, home or mosque instruction, and the more formal setting of the madrasah, with "madāris" as the plural form in Arabic). Religious

instruction is usually established in the vicinity of the community mosque (*masjid*), demonstrating the centrality of seeking knowledge in Islam. Typically, the madrasah gives fundamental instruction on Islam and the Arabic language on weekends. Other models are the regular, weekday schools, and the *markaz* (literally, "center" in Arabic) that functions like a boarding school.

The markaz is a madrasah with specialized program outcomes. Its curriculum is focused on the classical Islamic sciences aiming towards selective disciplinal specialization and mastery, typically in Arabic language and communication or memorization and recitation of the Qur'ān. The methodologies employed require intensive disciplinal immersion and mentoring.

The Philippine government's policies on the madrasah within the last five decades underscore the nuances of its conceptions and subsequent directives intended for this particular education system. A brief historical review includes the presidential issuances, legislative recommendations, and DepEd orders.

Letter of Instruction (LOI) 1221

Issued by President Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1982, the LOI 1221 was the first government legislation on madrasah. With reference to Islamic education, it aspired to do the following:

- Formulate and adopt an extensive madaris (Arabic plural form of madrasah) development program designed for a 'progressive integration into the national education system (NES)
- Develop Islamic Studies programs, including instructions about the *Shariah/Sharia'* (divine law)) in state universities and colleges (SUCs), and

- Establish and strengthen Arabic language education programs in Mindanao (Boransing, Magdalena, and Lacar 1987).

This LOI paved the way for the institutionalization of Islamic Studies institutes across the country. This is based on the model program that the University of the Philippines (UP) Institute of Islamic Studies (IIS) pioneered in 1973.[5] The IIS has aimed to serve as the venue for knowledge exchange on Islam within and outside the UP community, and to provide university students opportunities to participate in nation-building and public service. University Professor Cesar Adib Majul, the first dean of the IIS, conceptualized the Islamic Studies Program (ISP).

The same mandate allowed private schools to establish elementary or secondary schools with a curriculum integrating Islamic subjects into the national curriculum as additional courses. These were usually Arabic Language and Islamic Studies to encompass the Islamic sciences. Private schools had the liberty to frame the Islamic element of their schools while obtaining government authority through the phases of permission to operate, recognition, and accreditation.

During the National Congress on Education (NCE) in 1992, participants discussed how to improve the academic instruction for Muslims and other indigenous cultural communities. The Congressional Committee on Education (1993) specified these proposed steps (quoted verbatim from the NCE proceedings):

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[5] By virtue of Presidential Decree (PD) No. 342, the IIS was created as an integral part of the Philippine Center for Advanced Studies (PCAS) on November 22, 1973. However, it was re-established as a UP constituent unit after Pres. Marcos issued Executive Order (EO) No. 543 on July 9, 1979. This EO led to the abolition of the PCAS.

Annex 2–Conclusions and Recommendations for Basic Education, Education for Cultural Communities (238)

(1) "*The madaris.* The regular Madaris (those that offer elementary education curriculum required by DECS (Department of Educastion, Culture and Sports) should be recognized and classified as sectarian private schools while special madaris (the truly religious schools) should be left alone."

(2) For tribal groups, the full provision of learning resources (human, material, facilities) should be extended to schools/ educational programs that address their learning needs.

(3) "Provide government support to pupils/students of mission schools of various religious denominations (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, etc.) accredited by DECS, which provide education for cultural communities in areas inaccessible to government schools."

Annex 4–Summary of Recommendations on Sectoral Targets, Section II. Sectoral Targets-Planning for Sectoral Groups, A.2 The Madaris (292)

(1) "Integrate only the regular Madaris within the public schools system. The special Madaris are better left alone.

(2) Inject some subjects in the curriculum of the Madaris to introduce national standards in these schools. However, such a step towards mainstreaming should be balanced by preservation of the Muslim cultural heritage. It would be better to upgrade the Madaris curricula and program standards rather than to integrate them within the public school system.

(3) Provide special teachers and instructional materials for the Madaris. Moreover, the curricula [sic] has to be especially designed to suit the needs of the pupils because the Muslim culture has not adequately prepared them for formal schooling.

(4) The establishment of middle-of-the-road educational system: a relevant Madrasah which incorporates acceptable fundamental elements of the public school for purposes of achieving national unity and maintaining peace and/or a flexible public school system which teaches concepts consistent with the Muslim culture.

(5) Redesigning the Madrasah curriculum for purposes of standardization.

(6) The use of the vernacular as a medium of instruction.

(7) The revision of textbooks and other learning materials to eliminate passages offensive to the Islamic faith and to include the appreciation of Muslim art, culture and history, as well as their translation to the vernacular.

(8) Look into the accredited Madaris and assist them so that they will be able to comply with the minimum standards set by the DECS."

The deliberations about the madrasah involved these threads:

- Recognition of the regular madrasah as a sectarian private school (excluding weekend schools and other modes which are considered special schools)
- Incorporation of national education standards into the madrasah curriculum with the intent to upgrade and reframe it without prejudice to Muslim culture
- Support for Madrasah development with teachers and resources, and the use of the vernacular as language of instruction, and
- Assistance for accredited madaris.

Reforms within the public school system were likewise tackled to work towards the inclusion of Muslim culture and context into the state education's resources and scope of teaching.

DepEd Order No. 51 s. 2004–Standard Curriculum for Elementary Public Schools and Private Madaris

Issued on August 15, 2004, this department order directed the development of "a curriculum for private and public schools in Muslim-dominated areas" to:

- "Establish a smooth transfer from public to private madrasah or vice versa;
- Unify the long history of dichotomy among Muslims; and
- Promote Filipino national identity and at the same time preserve the Muslims' cultural heritage" (Abu Bakar 2011, 85).

The order reflected the global consensus on the madrasah following the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001 (i.e., it was a source and training ground for radicalized Muslims). Consequently, the government intervened in the madrasah system and its curriculum to ensure that elements of radicalization would be eliminated. The intervention took the form of prescribed curricula for public schools and private madaris that promoted nationalist sentiments and was Islam-friendly, according to then DepEd Undersecretary Manaros Boransing. The official program was known as madrasah mainstreaming.

DepEd Order No. 46 s.2005–Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of DepEd Order No. 51 s.2004 Prescribing the Enriched Curriculum for Public Schools and Standard Curriculum for Private Madaris

This order was issued on August 16, 2005. It complemented DepEd Order No. 51 s.2004 by providing operational guidelines for implementing the madāris program for the School Year (SY) 2005–2006. Among its implementation features was the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) Program in public

schools as a compulsory component in what was known then as the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). It was also presented as an option in public schools in non-Muslim majority areas that had a sizeable Muslim population.

A separate curriculum for private madāris was likewise crafted, and offered for their adoption, with the promise of government accreditation and financial support. A relatively small number of madāris adopted the DepEd's standard madrasah curriculum and gained the said incentives. However, majority of madāris opted not to take the government offer. They were concerned that their respective curricula would be marginalized on top of the primary sentiment that the state should not intrude into religious matters, which madrasah instruction embodied.

In contrast, some madāris directly sought accreditation from overseas Islamic universities by adopting their curricula with the intent of securing a learning continuum for their graduates. Examples of these tertiary institutions are Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Madina Islamic University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and other similar HEIs across the Middle East and North Africa. Graduates from these universities who would like to continue their studies or work in the country were advised to seek equivalency recognition for their foreign curricula from the CHED. A certificate of equivalency enabled these Muslims to re-integrate into the Philippine education system and labor force, respectively.

Later, the jurisdiction on private madāris was given to two government entities: the ARMM (later known as the BARMM) and the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) for madāris outside the BARMM. The BARMM administration provided for full support of madāris, while those external to its jurisdiction were mostly self-supporting. Public schools, on the other hand, were generally within the oversight and administration of the DepEd unless they were in BARMM territory as well.

DepEd Order No. 57 s. 2010–Implementation of the Basic Education Madrasah Programs for Muslim Out-of-School Youth (OSY) and Adults

This directive was issued "as a response to the call for global commitment on Education for All." It is "guided by the Roadmap for Upgrading Muslim Basic Education" and its "three major components:" (1) the ALIVE program in public schools; (2) the Standard Madrasah Curriculum in Private Madaris; and (3) the ALIVE program for Muslim Out-of-School Youth (OSY) and Adults.

The third component considered the high drop-out rates in Muslim communities that exceeded those of other areas in the Philippines. The statistics anticipated vulnerabilities of Muslim youth, particularly with livelihood capacities that rendered them "at risk" of getting recruited by extremist groups. These institutions within the NES were mandated to address such vulnerabilities through the stated road map components in a ten-year project cycle:

- The Bureau of Alternative Learning Systems (BALS) was tasked to provide basic literacy programs to Muslims through the ALIVE Program and facilitate "continuing education to drop-outs through the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) and Accreditation & Equivalency" (A&E) program.
- The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) collaborated with the DepEd in implementing the ALIVE Program that involves:

    (1) Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) skills programs that are suitable to the interests and capacities of Muslim OSYs and adults, with priority given to migrant Muslims in urban and rural areas, and

    (2) An entrepreneurship program that would develop the skills of, and provide livelihood for, Muslim OSYs and adults.

DepEd Order No. 30 s. 2012–Policy Guidelines on the Hiring and Deployment of Madrasah Teachers

Issued on April 16, 2012, this order addressed the capacity-building concerns of educators in Muslim areas to ensure quality program implementation. Quality assurance mechanisms were plotted at a continuum to provide medium-term development and assessment of madarash teachers.

(1) Qualifying Examination in Arabic Language and Islamic Studies (QEALIS)—This test seeks to ascertain an educator's competence in both disciplines.

(2) Language Enhancement and Pedagogy Training (LEaP)—This is a twenty-three-day "live-in pre-service training workshop" for QEALIS passers. The training workshop doubly functioned as a second-level evaluation of prospective teachers. The post-workshop qualification rendered teachers eligible for contractual hiring with monthly allowance in public schools by Schools Division and City Superintendents (SDS).

(3) Accelerated Teacher Education Program (ATEP)—Designed as an equivalent to a Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) degree, this two-year program for ALIVE teachers was approved by the CHED and the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC). Qualified ALIVE Program teachers in public schools received a full subsidy from the DepEd and were allowed to take the licensure test after satisfactory completion.

(4) Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET)—This test marks the terminal assessment in the program continuum. It gave LET (Licensure Exam for Teachers) passers among the ALIVE Program teachers the opportunity to become eligible for a Teacher 1 level position in public schools.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) allocated funds for Teacher 1 items under this program. Unfilled items during the SY 2012–2013 were then given to qualified Muslim teachers or aspiring applicants according to certain priority categorizations.

DepEd Order No. 30 focused on capacity-building and the standardization of madāris teachers. It was based on the observation that those who participated in the mainstreaming program were subject matter experts in the classical Islamic sciences, but they were not trained in instructional design and methodologies.

DepEd Order No. 41 s. 2017–Policy Guidelines on Madrasah Education in the K to 12 Basic Education Program

On August 11, 2017, this directive laid out new policy guidelines in consonance with the K-12 educational reform. The guidelines aimed to:

(1) "Provide Muslim learners with appropriate and relevant educational opportunities while recognizing their cultural context and unique purposes for participating in the program"

(2) "Integrate content and competencies which are relevant and of interest to Muslim learners"

(3) "Harmonize existing DepEd issuances on Muslim education with new provisions for more effective and efficientprogram development, implementation, and evaluation," as well as "rescind" directives that are "inconsistent" with this new department order; and

(4) Establish itself as a "basis for developing the Manual of Operations for the Governance and Administration of the Madrasah Education Program (MEP)."

At this point, the DepEd's roadmap for Muslim learners had been implemented for years. Its prior programs, actions, and resultant initiatives already underwent subsequent reviews and fine-tuning.

The historical review of government policies on the madrasah education system (MES) primarily demonstrates the acknowledgment of an educational tradition that is entrenched in Philippine Muslim communities, parallel to the knowledge traditions

of indigenous communities in the country. Such recognition emerged from the shifting conceptions and resultant policy calibrations on the madrasah (i.e., from the distinction of a long-held education system uniting all Muslim Filipinos with prospects for integration or accommodation into Philippine education to a system that underscored educational dichotomy and prospective radicalization in Muslim communities and which needed to be mainstreamed). The assumption in the latter conception and above-featured policies represents the crux of the public-private madrasah divide and the continuing operation of these madāris at the far periphery of government.

ZAMBASULTA Education Institutions in the New Normal

This paper presents moderated discussions with school representatives including those from the madrasah sector. These interviews touched on the following key points:

- Challenges posed by the pandemic and the new normal; and
- Institutional contingencies and response mechanisms to the new normal.

Zamboanga City State Polytechnic College (ZCSPC)

As one of 112 State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines, the ZCSPC significantly receives a subsidy from the government (Magsino 2020).[6] It used to be a trade school that was established during the American colonial period in 1905 and pioneered by Thomasites.

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[6] It is reportedly one of two SUCs in ZAMBASULTA that got zero capital outlay from the DBM for 2021, a policy contested by the Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges (PASUCs).

At the pandemic's onset, the ZCSPC engaged in a three-pronged response:

- The adoption of a flexible learning system
- The implementation of a care system for constituents (i.e., provision of food packs, healthy snacks, live-in employment in a canning factory for selected students, and medical and mental wellness consultations by the Medical Clinic and Guidance and Counseling offices, respectively),[7] and
- The production of protective materials approved by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) in relation to the corona virus (i.e., face masks, face shields, and foot disinfectant trays that the college distributed to city frontliners).[8]

Through its Project DELTA (Delivery for Learning, Teaching, and Assessment), the ZCSPC conducted online classes and offered self-paced, module-based learning for Academic Year (AY) 2020–2021. The initiative combined the elements of:

1. Alternative learning delivery (flexi-teaching and learning system through blended and modular learning)

2. Multiple communication options (social media, postal courier, drop-off points, and call/text messaging arrangements), and

3. Capacity-building on the new LMS. A component of LMS was the project AskCARLA (Circulation and Library Reference Assistance) that uses online and offline platforms.

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7 The ZCSPC's Food Services Management Laboratory produced the healthy snacks.

8 Protective materials production by the ZCSPC was spearheaded by the Fabrication Laboratory and Garments and Technology departments of its College of Engineering and Technology (for face masks and face shields) and the Mechanical Technology Laboratory (for foot disinfectant trays).

The LMS had its challenges. Some of these issues were the poor internet connectivity of the institution and students, variability of students' access to internet-ready gadgets, and the transition from actual face-to-face class to online operations while ensuring student participation and faculty cooperation. Other concerns emerged from the trial-and-error process in the adoption of new mechanisms, student and teacher quality monitoring, and the suspension of practicum, internship, or apprenticeship programs that delayed program completion.

Mahardika Institute of Technology (MIT) in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi

Located in Tawi-Tawi's governance, education, and commercial hub in Bongao, the MIT was founded by a Muslim in 1997. It is a private institution accredited by the CHED and TESDA. It offers high school education, technical-vocational courses, and baccalaureate degree programs.

The MIT incorporates Islamic principles in fulfilling its human development mission. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it adopted the ILMOH (Knowledge in Sinug and Sinama languages) for the New Normal campaign to advance coping, recovery, and normalcy measures. This initiative targets inclusive, lifelong, modernized, oneness-oriented (based on *tawhīd,* the unity of Allāh), and health-conscious learning. Administratively, the MIT embraced a tri-focal priority agenda with the following components (quoted verbatim from source document):

(1) Managing and sustaining campus services and community engagement
    (a) Reviewing campus services management
    (b) Training of employees and staff on expanded guidelines
    (c) Sustaining community engagement & support

(d) Installing school management and learning system

(e) Keeping sound financial management

(2) Institutionalization of health/wellness systems and protocols

(a) Creating Health/Wellness and infection control committee

(b) Installing decontaminating stations and screening infrastructures

(c) Developing guidelines/protocols on minimum health standards

(3) Technology-based education and flexible-learning ready infrastructures

(a) Redesigning curriculum & instruction

(b) Retooling/upskilling of faculty competence for a blended learning system.

(c) Preparing/remodeling academic and management infrastructures/facilities

(d) Embracing a technology-based educational system

(e) Expanding support structures for printing services

Among the challenges that MIT encountered in their pandemic response was the school's poor to nonexistent internet connectivity. This was due to the limited infrastructure in Bongao despite being the capital of the province. The implementation of a modular system of learning, as well as student and teacher quality monitoring, also figured as a major concern. Delayed student promotions likewise happened because of the suspension of practicum, internship, or apprenticeship programs—a situation similar to that in the ZCSPC.

Markaz

The institutional responses to the ECQ of a markaz depended on its location and circumstances. The suspension of school

operations posed dilemmas on promotion, retention, and graduation. Two *marākiz* (plural of markaz in Arabic) resolved such issues by conducting teacher deliberations on students' previous performance.

On the prospect of flexible learning, one markaz situated in a highly-urbanized city with strong internet connectivity subsequently held online classes. It also pre-recorded lectures and made them available online through a social media platform at fixed regular schedules. However, these arrangements benefitted only a few students who similarly enjoyed trouble-free access to gadgets and to the internet at home.

The marākiz situated in low to moderate urban areas initially opted for modular learning. This method was eventually deemed not feasible because the courses required disciplinal immersion, mentoring, and mastery. Its viability similarly rested on the capacity of a markaz to design, produce, and make resource materials available. This condition requires technical skills, expertise, and financial resources. Weekend madāris chose to remain closed.

On the other hand, some marākiz continued operations for their few students who got stranded in their schools due to the lockdown. With no option to travel home, they were allowed to stay in their respective boarding schools during the ECQ.

The madāris in ZAMBASULTA and other areas of the country are commonly private, non-profit, and community-based institutions running on personnel volunteerism and occasional private endowments from individuals and organizations. Without government recognition and funding or self-generated resources, these schools would always have limited resources and poor operational flexibility to launch sustainable mechanisms that are responsive to pandemic-imposed restrictions.

Synthesis

The inquiry into three ZAMBASULTA education institutions shows that pandemic scenarios are equally general and institution-specific. It is general because of the shared contexts of these schools based in the southern Philippines. They are situated in peripheral, off-center locales far from the apex of national development and with comparable poverty incidence and literacy rankings.

The scenarios are likewise institution-specific in terms of each school's character, baseline infrastructures and strengths, internal and external stakeholder support, and most importantly, adaptive capacities towards the new normal. These cover the following:

(1) New educational technologies and corresponding instructional designs

(2) New ways to administer or manage teaching-learning infrastructure

(3) New protocols, ethics, and etiquette corresponding to the new infrastructure

(4) New systems of teacher, student, and instruction monitoring and promotion, and

(5) Sustainability deliberations and development.

The three academic institutions encountered dilemmas that affected their momentum and service quality, most particularly in terms of teaching, learning, and constituent care. They also continue to confront the challenges and risks of the COVID-19 pandemic with equanimity and on-point responsiveness. Additionally, they needed to make decisions amidst an unpredictable scenario without the benefit of prior reference paths.

Both the ZCSPC and the MIT demonstrated the kind of adaptability that led them to establish a formal structure for administrative and academic affairs to handle the effects of the

pandemic on their respective institutions. As a state college, the ZCSPC continues to follow the educational structure and operations prescribed by the CHED. It also derives its budget and other forms of emergency support from the government. By contrast, the MIT is financially independent and has a particular administration and academic structure. Despite these features, it managed to obtain a quality level that allows it to operate with government accreditation and regulation.

Policy Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic saw educational institutions in the Philippines confronting a host of challenges that many are still struggling to overcome. In hindsight, the new normal was an inadvertent game-changer as it countered crucial issues in education, such as

- Content-heavy curriculum with the MELC campaign
- Integration of residential, face-to-face education structure with flexible, blended learning options
- The shift from school and teacher-centric learning approaches to a home-based education with teacher-parent collaborations, and
- The shift from traditionally textbook-based instruction to a multimedia-based instruction platform.

Undoubtedly, the experience has given stakeholders an incalculable comprehension of realities involving the Philippine education system. CHED Chairperson Prospero de Vera recently declared flexible learning as the new standard (ABS-CBN News 2021). Developing new infrastructure and capacitating adaptiveness must be pursued until schools are able to achieve the "fitness" required by the new benchmark.

Academic institutions should look towards creating new skills, mental maps, and mindsets to adjust to the new normal, given the variability in terms of technological capacities. Philippine schools should consider exploring the possibility of using previously normative teaching and communication tools like high-frequency radio transmitters (commonly known as ICOM) to support teacher-student engagements. Two-way radios used to be a popular tool across the ZAMBASULTA for Islamic lectures and general communication.

The Philippine government needs to become seriously perceptive of the unequal circumstances of education institutions to ensure that its policies and mechanisms of support are universally relevant. Deliberations on the issues mentioned in this paper are highly important and should be extensively carried out for a deep and thorough understanding of how the country's education superstructure may forge its way forward from the seemingly crippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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