



Assessment in distance learning: Exploring Filipino early childhood teachers' experiences

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Abstract:

This qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of three Filipino early childhood teachers with assessment in distance learning during COVID-19. The goal of the study was to understand how teachers involve parents when evaluating student progress virtually. The findings of the study were analysed using Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory, where three (Chronosystem, Mesosystem, and Microsystem) out five systems of development served as the focus of analysis. In this study, the Chronosystem served as the socio-historical event that influences assessment practices in the Microsystem and Mesosystem. The results of the study revealed early childhood teachers found assessment in distance learning challenging due to two reasons. First, teachers experienced additional workload when preparing and evaluating assessment tasks of students. Second, parent support was either excessive or lacking before and during student evaluations. Amidst the challenges, teachers have identified that the use of games, assigning project-based tasks, having individual dialogues with the students, and creating portfolios with recorded photos and videos of student work were beneficial strategies in understanding student growth. Findings have shown that teacher and parent collaboration is needed to support student development in distance learning. The outcome of the study may inform teachers and stakeholders on effective strategies when assessing student progress virtually, which may lead to a re-evaluation of policies created to support early years teachers as they assess children's development in distance learning.

Key Words: early childhood; assessment; distance learning; documentation; parent involvement





1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused school closures in 191 countries (UNESCO,2020). In the Philippines, a majority of the schools remain closed due to the rising number of COVID-19 infections (UNICEF,2021). Amidst school closures, pre-primary and primary students continued their education through distance learning (DEPED, 2020). Distance learning or distance education is defined as "learning and instruction that takes place at a distance" (Allen, 2017, p.2). It is synonymously referred to as elearning, flexible learning or online learning (UNESCO,2020). Distance learning allows students and teachers who are geographically separated to interact and learn through technology (Hannum & McCombs, 2008; UNESCO, 2020).

Amidst the available research on early childhood and distance learning, Donohue et al. (2021) argued that knowledge on the use of distance learning in early childhood is limited. The novelty of distance learning has led to a lack of empirical evidence on appropriate teaching, with even less attention paid to assessment, which plays a vital role in teaching and learning (Dayal & Tiko, 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021). To add to the ongoing discussion on distance learning in early childhood, the study identified two aims presented through two research questions that were explored using a qualitative case study:

- 1. What are the experiences of kindergarten teachers with assessment in distance learning?
- 2. How do kindergarten teachers involve parents with assessment in distance learning?

The study sought to encourage further discussion on assessment strategies in distance learning that are appropriate for young learners in the Philippine context.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research paradigm and design

The study is guided by the social constructivist paradigm. The social constructivist view establishes that reality is best represented and interpreted by investigating the multiple views and experiences of individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 2005 as cited in Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). In line with the philosophical view of this study, a qualitative case

study design (Creswell, 2013) was used to understand the diverse experiences of Filipino kindergarten teachers with assessment in distance learning.

2.2 Participants of the study

Three participants were selected through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants according to a set of characteristics that supported the purpose of the research (Lewis-Beck et al.,2011). In this study, participants were chosen based on the criteria that they are practicing kindergarten teachers who utilize distance learning during COVID-19 in a private school in the Philippines. Participants of the study were invited individually through personal message on Facebook and email. Each participant read and signed an informed consent to express their voluntary participation in the study.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews

A forty-minute semi-structured interview was conducted individually with each participant over Zoom. The synchronous interview aimed to mimic a traditional face-to-face interview, in which the interview was conducted in real time, but in an online setting (James & Busher, et al., 2019). The questions from the interviews were based on the review of related literature on early childhood distance learning, assessment, and the Bioecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (Department of Education, 2015; Hayes et al., 2017; Kang & Walsh, 2018; Lam & Wong, 2019; Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018; McAfee et al., 2016).

2.4 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed using the computer software Otter.ai. Transcribing is an ethical act of turning spoken research events like interviews, into written text (Nordstrom, 2019). In the study, a focused transcription was used to provide detailed information about what transpired in the interview (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Each interview was individually analyzed using the six-step process of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Saldaña's (2013) initial and pattern coding technique. A line-by-line analysis (Given, 2008) on each transcript was done to gather initial understanding on the experiences of early childhood teachers with assessment in distance learning. Then, a code or label was created to represent the ideas of the participants. The researcher then proceeded to the second step, which was pattern coding. Pattern





coding was utilized by putting together codes based on their similarities (Saldaña, 2013). During the coding process, memoing or taking down field notes (Given, 2008) was employed to assist the researcher to generate and relate concepts on assessment in distance learning. Once themes were identified and finalized for each participant, a cross-case analysis, (Creswell, 2013) was done to examine how similar or different the experiences of the kindergarten teachers were with assessment in distance learning. After the cross case analysis, the defined themes were analyzed using the three selected Bioecological systems of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Hayes et al., 2017), which were

(Bronfenbrenner,1977; Hayes et al., 2017), which were the Chronosystem (COVID-19), Mesosystem (interaction of parents with the teachers of their children), and Microsystem (interaction of teachers with children).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion section are organized according to the research questions presented in the study. The first aim of the study was to understand the experiences of Filipino early childhood teachers with assessment in distance learning.

Results from the study has shown that there are four common themes and three sub-themes (Figure 1) that emerged from the data analysis, which discusses the experiences of Filipino early childhood teachers with assessment in distance learning.

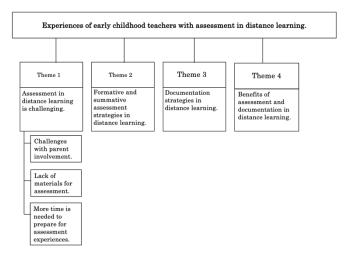


Fig 1. Experiences of early childhood teachers with assessment in distance learning.

Assessment in distance learning is challenging

The common and overall experience of the participants with assessment in distance learning was described as challenging and frustrating as seen in Figure 1. Participant one said, "It was challenging at first, overall, that's the one word that would really come into mind." While, participant two mentioned, "So overall, there would be days when assessments could get frustrating because it doesn't ultimately translate the full capability and potential of the child.' Part of the challenge in assessment was the experiences of teachers with parent involvement. The first subtheme is identified as challenges with parent involvement. It is described as the excessive and lack of parent support with student assessment. Participant three experienced that some parents would overly support their children by changing the answers from submitted worksheets or activities. The teacher was able to determine the discrepancy between student performance from the submitted work. As a result, quarterly assessments shifted from paper and pen assessments to oral assessments. These instances led the teacher to question how accurate the assessment results of the students were. In fact, participant one felt the same way as participant three, she expressed, "It's just hard to assess the kids and it's hard to prepare a topic that's the best fit for them if they've already been influenced on what they're supposed to do.'

The challenges experienced by the participants with the involvement of parents in assessment is similar with the findings of Timmons et al.(2021) who explained that teachers encountered submitted work with questionable answers, it appeared as if it were done by an adult. From a Bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner,1977; Hayes et al., 2017), COVID-19 (Chronosystem) has influenced teacher and parent relationships (Mesosystem) to continuously be open for communication and collaboration. This is evident in the way that participant two explained that she had to remind parents multiple times to allow students to independently share their ideas.

As for the lack of support with assessment, it was identified as the lack of preparation by the parents to provide materials needed for evaluation and the inability of parents to help students use technology due to work demands. This instance may be attributed to new responsibilities placed upon parents as they adapt to the demands of work and family during COVID-19 (Goldschmidt, 2020 as cited in Steed & Leech, 2021).





The second subtheme identified was the lack of available materials for assessment in distance learning. Participant one and two explained that not all students have the same materials to use at home for virtual assessments. The findings show that the lack of materials during student evaluations led to teachers reevaluating their implementation due to students who were unable to participate in the scheduled evaluation. It can be said that the findings supports the recommendation of McKenna et al. (2021) to establish effective procedures when administering virtual assessments. The current evidence available on distance learning in early childhood focuses on providing materials to teachers when implementing lessons al.,2020;McKenna et al.,2021), however the discussion on providing appropriate learning experiences of early years students in distance learning should include equipping both teachers and students with materials to use for assessment.

The third subtheme identified was teachers needed more time to prepare for assessment experiences. Participant one and three expressed that more preparation and transition is needed to successfully prepare the assessment materials and environment for the students. The findings convey that an increase in assessment preparation may be attributed to the shift to distance learning, where teachers need to plan how student evaluations are implemented and assessed. Gaytan and McEwen (2007) explained that an increase in assessment tools used in distance learning may not necessarily equate to effective learning. It can be suggested that planning for assessments should be done intently with the development of the young child in mind in order to provide appropriate assessment experiences (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; NAEYC, 2020).

Formative and summative assessment in distance learning

The experiences of the participants with assessment in distance learning were not limited to challenges. Findings from the three interviews revealed that all participants used a combination of old and new strategies to conduct formative and summative assessment. In the case of participant one, formative assessments from in-person learning were adapted to the online setting. Students were assessed through small group discussion, games, and dialogues with the teacher. It was emphasized by participant one that she particularly found formative assessment in distance learning difficult because some parents

would immediately provide feedback on a child's answer in class. To resolve the challenge, the teachers in participant one's grade level communicated to parents to allow their children to experience productive struggle.

For summative assessment strategies conducted in distance learning, the data revealed two common methods that teachers use to assess student learning. First, all participants made use of performance-based assessments, where students are expected to show their understanding of a lesson through individual projects. As for the second common summative assessment strategy, teachers conducted individual assessments through synchronous dialogues. All three participants emphasized that synchronous individual assessment is the most common strategy used in summative evaluations in distance learning because it informs teachers on the current understanding or misunderstandings students may have towards lessons taught in class. The findings confirm that the summative and formative strategies employed by the teachers are effective in evaluating student progress in distance learning because all three participants mentioned that they would continue the strategies they are currently using. It is highlighted that assessments done individually in distance learning as compared to group assessments greatly assisted the teachers to understand student progress.

In a Bioecological view (Bronfenbrenner,1977; Hayes et al., 2017), COVID-19 (Chronosystem) has influenced the teachers and parents (Mesosystem) to work together by communicating with one another on how to best support the children during assessment. This then, influenced how teachers plan and implement assessment tools that were suitable for their students (Microsystem).

Documentation strategies in distance learning

The use of anecdotal records and the compilation of video recordings and photos were the two common documentation strategies of all three participants. These two strategies supported the teachers as they planned for learning experiences and evaluated student progress. Another highlighted strategy was the use of digital portfolios. Collectively, participants responses showed that the documentation strategies used in distance learning were beneficial to teachers as they evaluated and reported on the progress of their students. The results are in line with Lam and Wong (2019) who reported that documentation serves as a guide for curricular planning and assists teachers and parents in understanding student learning (Kang & Walsh, 2018). In a Bioecological view, it can be





inferred that COVID-19 (Chronosystem) may have influenced the relationship of parents and teachers (Mesosystem) positively because the documentation strategies used in distance learning resulted to an open dialogue on student progress between teachers and parents. As for the Microsystem, the results suggest the influence of the Chronosystem may have led to a positive experience for parents and students because it provided the opportunity for them to discuss the contents of the digital portfolios together.

Benefits of assessment and documentation in distance learning

Results have shown that using games, informal dialogues, one-on-one evaluations, and projects as strategies in assessment during distance learning were beneficial to all participants.

The evidence suggests that the recommended strategies for assessment from DEPED (2015), DEPED (2016) and DEPED (2020), which were oral presentations, games, student observations, and open-ended questioning was applicable to the context of the teachers. However, a distinct and unique finding from participant two revealed that students feel more comfortable with assessment in distance learning as compared to classroom-based assessment because it is not mandatory for the children to write their answers during quarterly evaluations. As an alternative, they are provided the option to share their answers through verbal communication. This finding is new and has not been discussed in the review of literature of this study. The data suggests that alternative strategies with assessment in distance learning are not yet identified in research and should be further explored. NAEYC (2020) explains that appropriate assessment in early childhood should reflect the developmental, cultural, and linguistic contexts of children. Another significant finding emerged from the experience of participant three with benefits of assessment in distance learning. It was discussed that there was flexibility in administering assessments. Participant three shared:

So for example, the student cannot take the assessment during the scheduled time we can reschedule and do it within the day and unlike before we have to do it on a different day and make another assessment for the child, another set of assessment.

The experience of participant three was reported as a new strategy employed due to distance learning. In a Bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977;

Haves et al., 2017), COVID-19 (Chronosystem) has influenced the implementation of assessment in the Microsystem, where the teacher and student interact to accomplish a shared goal, which is to complete an assessment. In the teacher's point of view, it was suggested that the flexibility of implementing an assessment tool were helpful for teachers because they did not need to create new assessment tools, The result suggests that the policies on assessment implementation can be reexamined in order to reflect the contextual experiences of the participants (NAEYC, 2020). Lastly, a common benefit that emerged from participant two and participant three's experience was documentation in distance learning was easier as compared to classroom-based documentation. The ease of compiling student work, the accessibility to digital work samples, and anecdotal records of students are viewed as benefits when assessing students in distance learning. The results reveal that it supports current knowledge on the importance of documentation in assessment of student learning (Leekenan & Ponte, 2018; Kang & Walsh.2018).

Involvement of parents with assessment in distance learning

The second aim of this study was to explore the involvement of parents with assessment in distance learning. Three common themes emerged from the data analysis, which discussed the experiences of early childhood teachers in the Philippines as they involved parents with assessment in distance learning.

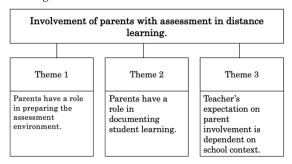


Fig 2. Involvement of parents with assessment in distance learning.

The first theme that emerged was parents have a role in preparing the assessment environment. All participants explained that they involve parents with assessment in distance learning by requesting the parents to prepare the computers or other technological devices of the children. The data shows that parent involvement with assessment in distance learning is represented as parents supporting the





assessment environment of their children. The results may imply that parent involvement in distance learning is different from parent involvement with assessment in classroom-based instruction (Orillosa & Magno, 2013). Using the lens of the Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Hayes et al., 2017), COVID-19 (Chronosystem) has influenced the relationship of parents and teachers with assessment practices. Now, parents and teachers (Mesosystem) collaborate with one another not only during lesson implementation, but also for assessment implementation. Data has revealed that influence of the Mesosystem is seen in the Microsystem, where teachers are only able to support student development during assessment if parents are able to prepare the environment and tools for virtual evaluations.

The second theme that emerged on parent involvement in distance learning was parents have a role in documenting student performance. All participants highlighted that parents submit photos or videos of student work through the learning management system of the school. Research in early childhood prior to COVID-19 has shown that documentation is the part of the responsibilities of an early childhood teacher (Krechevsky et al., 2013 as cited in Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018; Kang & Walsh, 2018), however in distance learning it is seen that both parents and teachers need to collaborate with one another to document student learning. Using the Bioecological theory as lens of analysis, (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Hayes et al., 2017) one may view how COVID-19 (Chronosystem) has changed the way student documentation is implemented in early childhood. This is evident in the way teachers and parents (Mesosystem) work together to collect student work in distance learning.

The third and final theme that emerged from the data was that a teacher's expectation on parent involvement with assessment in distance learning is dependent on the school context

Participant one and participant two emphasized that they do not expect parents or caregivers to be involved during virtual assessment of student learning. It was explained that parent involvement is restricted to preparing the materials needed for assessment and ensuring an appropriate learning environment. However, a contrasting expectation was explained by participant three, where in her school context, parents are expected to be present and involved during assessment of student learning.

In a Bioecological stand point (Bronfenbrenner,1977; Hayes et al., 2017), the difference between the views on parent expectation and involvement with assessment in distance learning in the each school can be understood and explained as each Mesosystem and Microsystem having its own unique sociocultural beliefs and practices. Ultimately, It can be drawn from the data that parent involvement is important when assessing early childhood students during distance learning.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the challenges in distance learning, early childhood teachers were able to establish effective assessment strategies as they monitored student progress virtually. Based on the experiences of the participants, effective assessment in distance learning includes the use of digital games and project-based tasks, digital portfolios, and teacherparent collaboration.

Continuing the research on early childhood assessment in distance learning will be beneficial to early years students, practitioners, and stakeholders because in the future, schools face the possibility of transitioning back (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021) or continuing the implementation of distance learning due to medical or natural emergencies.

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