Investigating the Online Protest #NoStudentsLeftBehind: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Allied Student-Protestors' Views on Online Distance Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: As the COVID-19 pandemic developed, educational institutions were forced to migrate to online distance learning to continue delivering the educational needs and demands of their students. While these efforts are in good faith, issues have been raised regarding equity issues, especially due to the fact that not all students have the resources to allow them to access online classes. Indeed, this pandemic has revealed the gravity of the digital divide within the educational system. In response to the implementation of distance learning amidst the issues presented by the digital divide, students and public figures in the Philippines have engaged in the protest titled #NoStudentLeftBehind which called for the suspension of online classes. Through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study investigated the allied student-protestors' meanings associated with the implementation of online classes, and likewise how these meanings motivated them to join and support the movement #NoStudentLeftBehind. Results revealed three categories, ranging from financial issues, perceived neglect, and allyship.

Key Words: online distance learning, allyship, education, digital divide, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven our society into disarray: economies have sunk, healthcare systems have been overdriven above their limits, and the familiar everyday life we as humans experienced prior to the pandemic is now but a distant memory. Unfortunately, educational systems around the world have likewise been affected by the pandemic, forcing educators in a variety of educational fields - to rapidly migrate to online classes. This has taken a toll on the individuals involved in the professional practice of education; educators are currently in dire need of training and instructional coaching due to being swiftly required to teach online (Allen et al., 2020). On the other hand, a multitude of studies have revealed that students have experienced difficulties in the implementation of online learning. For example, students have raised that they experience hardship in contacting their lecturers and are concerned if their teachers are ready to deliver content

through online modalities (Dushkevych et al., 2020; Hadi et al., 2020). In addition, students are wary of their own readiness to engage in online learning (Dushkevych et al., 2020). Beyond the workings of the online classroom, individual concerns also persist amidst their transitioning to online learning such as reduced sleep quality, financial difficulties, problems with time management, a lack of a personal study space in the home, and mental health issues (Darbishire et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Hadi et al., 2020; Dushkevych et al., 2020). Indeed, students are evidently experiencing a strenuous chapter in their educational journeys. Especially crucial are the concerns about Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), of which online distance learning is heavily reliant on. These include issues with the consistency of their internet connection, and having problems with the required online tools such as their Learning Management Systems (LMS) being used (Moawad, 2020; Dushkevych et al., 2020; Darbishire et al., 2020). These concerns only apply to those individuals who actually have access to these

technologies, as some don't even have access to the hardware and online resources at all (Moawad, 2020). This is known as the "digital divide".

1.1 The Digital Divide

Originally, the understanding of the "digital divide" was concerned with the large disparity between those who had no access to ICTs and those who had (Warschauer, 2003). For example, Warschauer distinguished three types of access beyond physical access to devices: individuals also need conduit (connectivity) access, and literacy (being able to read, process information and computer education). Access for Warschauer, moreover, is not as simple as a dichotomy, but rather exists in a continuum. The aforementioned literacy can also be conceptualized as information literacy, which is the ability to manipulate ITC technology to achieve one's goals (Servon, 2002). She continues that this particular kind of divide in IT Literacy is problematic; while one may have a computer, it wouldn't make any difference if that particular someone lacks or has minimum knowledge to use them. Another proposed type of gap or divide pertains to usage (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003); wherein individuals differ in terms of what they use ICTs for. For example, some are used to using computers for work and learning, but some might only be adept at using them for games.

1.2 Effects of the Digital Divide

The digital divide of course has negative ramifications for those individuals who lack or have limited access, especially in education. It goes without saying that those without any access to ICTs will not be able to access their online classes, however, students who have *limited* access are still put at a disadvantage. For example, Ercikan et al. (2018) argue that students with lower levels of access to ICTs are put at a disadvantage as they will have less experience and literacy to enable them to answer online assessments. Moreover, it has been argued that individuals with low ICT literacy are at a disadvantage since they may lack confidence in using these technologies to support their learning (OECD, 2000). Truly, to become an efficient and effective learner in this day and age requires being adept at using ICTs to find information and apply them to their relevant educational goals (Lau, 2006). While this is not an exhaustive list, it can be seen that the lack of access to or experience in using ICTs can be detrimental to students.

1.3 Digital Divide in the Philippines and the Online Protest #NoStudentLeftBehind

The digital divide in the Philippines is exceptionally evident, even before the pandemic (see Panganiban, 2018, for a review). It's a reality that a large percentage of students in the Philippines do not have access to the proper ICTs to engage in online classes. In fact, the 2019 National ICT Household Survey by the Department of Information and Communications Technology showed that only 23.8% of Filipino households had shared computers, and only 17.7% had internet access. When schools transitioned to online classes, concerns stemming from the digital divide started to be covered by the Philippine media and academics. These ranged from participants' internet access being inconsistent and students not being able to use ICTs for educational purposes (Baticulon et al, 2020) and even mental health, as it was seen that those with less access had higher COVID-19 anxiety (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021).

In response to this, students, parents, and members of the concerned public voiced their concerns over social media. This culmination of complaints organically led to an online protest entitled #NoStudentLeftBehind, an online protest which called for, among other things, the suspension of online classes. The #NoStudentLeftBehind protest was enjoined by students, parents, concerned teachers, and even activists and politicians. Online protests such as these can be considered what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call "connective action", in which collective action transcends into the digital world. They explain that through the utilization of ICT and social media, protests become personalized as individuals are able to express their own personal views and meanings towards the issue are expressed, as opposed to "traditional" collective action wherein the content of the movement is framed collectively or by an organization. Anduiza et al. (2014) further adds that individuals who join movements via "connective action" are able to "reinterpret grievances and re-create meaning in their social media networks" (p. 753). In the context of connective activism, meanings towards social issues are constructed by individuals through consumption of both traditional and social media, and express these meanings through their own social media accounts, and the process of engaging in discourse in online activism in itself can be associated with a variety of meanings (Anduiza et al., 2014)

1.4 Research Question: Looking for Meaning

Thus, this paper wishes to investigate the meanings the protestors behind #NoStudentLeftBehind associate with the events relevant to their cause? By investigating these meanings, it will not only enable the uncovering of meanings behind student activism, online protests, and the digital divide, but also provide insight into how to address the concerns of the protestors as well. Formally stated, the Research Question of this study is "What meanings does a #NoStudentLeftBehind protesters associate with the events surrounding the transition to online learning by schools in the Philippines in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic?"

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the main analytical method utilized in this study. As opposed to the structural or descriptive school of phenomenology, IPA focuses on the meaning-making process and meanings the individuals associate with the phenomenon (Schacht, 1973; Lopez & Willis, 2004). This meaning-making process and meanings allow individuals to have completely different subjective experiences in an otherwise objectively similar phenomenon (Smith et al., 1999). How then can IPA and the concept of meaning-making be applied to social movements such as #NoStudentLeftBehind? Previous studies have utilized IPA in investigating social movements; for example, Burgess et al. (2007) investigated the views of former rebels regarding the state of affairs in Northern Ireland, in which they explored the meanings the rebels associated with their use of armed conflict. Additionally, Fieck et al. (2020) investigated why female college students participated in a feminist activist movement wherein they explored the personal meanings participants had associated with sexism. In both studies, meanings were seen as a crucial factor as to why participants joined the movement. Indeed, IPA is a suitable method to investigate the meanings behind the various components behind social movements.

2.2 Sampling

Utilizing purposive sampling, the author searched for the hashtag #NoStudentLeftBehind on Facebook and Twitter to find potential participants. The author then contacted individuals who had posted with the hashtag and invited them to participate in the study. The author also utilized snowball sampling since it is likely that a participant would know other individuals who are also involved with the movement. Participants must be currently enrolled as a student in a school, whether private or public, and which transitioned to online learning. Five college students in total were interviewed. The age, sex, and schools of the participants will not be reported to further protect their identity, as their answers could put them under an antagonistic light against their academic institutions. It should be noted again that these participants are allies, as those genuinely affected by the gap wouldn't have had the technology to participate in the study.

2.3 Procedure

Before the interview commenced, the author informed the participants about their rights as a potential participant, as a participant, and issued them a data privacy statement. Since the interview was conducted via Facebook call, brought by physical limitations by the quarantine, the participants affirmed reading and agreeing to the informed consent form and the data privacy statement via Google Forms. The author decided not to request permission from the schools in which the participants were studying as this may present a conflict of interest given the nature of the protest. The interview was executed in English and Filipino, or a mixture of both, depending on which language the participants were more comfortable with. The interview schedule was composed of questions that circulated around the primary research question. This allowed a more lenient discussion with the participants so as to not hinder their participation and potential contribution to the research. The subsequent analysis was undertaken by following the guidelines set forth by Smith et al. (1999).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the IPA of the participants' are discussed below. Data strands are provided for each relevant category to serve as examples for the categories provided.

3.1 Financial issues amplify technical issues.

This category deals with concerns of economic nature. These concerns augment students' difficulty in connecting or accessing online classes. With regard to #NoStudentLeftBehind, the participants believe that these financial issues present a great threat to the equality of education. Thus, the participants believe that classes should be suspended due to the fact that not all

students are able to receive quality education. Sample strands include:

"*In all honesty, ICT itself is a privilege and we look at the Philippines as a society that isn't really open to equality…*" - ON

"*But we still have students from public schools: those who can't afford those gadgets - who don't have much ICT skills, or they might not even have any… And maybe those in the middle and upper classes were able to gain the necessary skills before, but what about the marginalized, those in the fringes of society who didn't have any access even before?*" - NY

Category 1 illuminates the perceived effect of the financial situation of those who are not financially well-off unto the ability of the students to participate in online classes. Technology was supposed to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich in the context of education, but from a critical perspective, the opposite has been observed: implementing these technologies has only exacerbated the gap and promoted elitism in the educational system (Sims et al., 2008), especially during this pandemic.

3.2 Schools and the government ignored students.

This category deals with the participants' interpretations of the actions, or inactions, the school and the government made. As the institutions ultimately decided online classes will be pursued, it is to be expected that the participants would have an opinion regarding their judgment. Sample strands include:

"*There was this townhall meeting wherein we talked about the academic freeze… I don't want to name drop, but [one of the faculty member's] response was like, "You're just students, you're not the ones in charge.""* - ON

"*And you would hear in the townhall meeting [in consultation with the administrators], they would say, "You're just a noisy minority". It feels like they're invalidating the things your students are going through -- they're the ones you're supposed to be listening to; they're one of the biggest stakeholders of the university.*" - SA

The themes under this category reflect the participants' interpretations of how the educational institutions and the government reacted to the initial criticisms. It appears that they interpret themselves to be ignored, or their concerns minimized. Implications of this interpretation could be grave, as ignoring the complaints of protestors are also interpreted as a form of betrayal and insult (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). While in reality it may not be exactly the case that the government or schools "ignored" the protest, that is the subjective reality of the participants. The continuous ignorance of their pleas could have contributed to the growth of the protest. It is noticeable that the participants usually referred to those who were in need in the previous categories as someone besides themselves. This can be seen as "allyship", which is discussed in the next category.

3.3 Being an Ally of those in need.

This category deals with those interpretations of the movement itself, particularly its goal: helping others. The participants themselves claim that they do not experience hardware and connectivity issues, indeed, it is a contributing factor to why they were able to participate in the study.

"*Because #NoStudentLeftBehind is not for people like me, but it's for people that cannot, the people who can't push forward with online classes.*". - ON

"*When you complain, it doesn't mean that you're the only one who's experiencing the problem. Even if I had access to technology, I joined #NoStudentLeftBehind because I see my batchmates, and other students struggling.*" - SA

Allies are "individuals who strive to end oppression through supporting and advocating on behalf of "oppressed" (Sabat et al., 2013, p. 480). While the concept of allyship originated from discussions regarding heterosexual individuals supporting LGBT+ rights, it has expanded to include other social cleavegas wherein an individual uses their privileged position to eliminate the struggles of an underprivileged population, such as a Caucasian individual joining the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Sabat et al., 2013).

This category reveals a vital, yet usually "hidden" fact of the protest: participants are not "in it for themselves". They are fighting for those who do not have a voice, and those who are not privileged enough to try to even have a voice. Previous writings of scholars on social movements in the emergence of the digital age expressed worries that only the agendas which directly served the interests of those with access to the internet, i.e. the middle class and the rich, could be meaningfully expressed via online protests (Tilly & Wood, as cited in Elliott & Earl, 2018). However, the results of this study

suggest otherwise: the participants, even being in the position of economic privilege, joined the protest advocating for an outgroup - the poor.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, it can be said that allies' #NoStudentLeftBehind was powered by the participants' need to bring their less-privileged co-students' concerns to the forefront when they were first ignored. The findings of this study add to the ongoing debate as to whether or not technology promotes or hinders educational equality. The perceived necessity of suitable hardware and a stable internet connection due to the government and schools to not suspend online classes reveals a dark truth about the non-neutrality of technology. While technology can indeed enhance the educational process, technology in itself regrettably puts underprivileged students more into a disadvantaged position (Sims et al., 2008). Indeed, unequal access to relevant ICTs can only compound the effects of the existing socioeconomic cleavage (Bolt & Crawford, as cited in Warschauer, et al., 2004). As for policy recommendations, the author suggests to those who have the authority to continue online classes to provide alternative methods of distance delivery of education. This may include printed course materials, the usage of SMS instead of the internet, or their lessons and modules delivered via a digital packet in a flash drive, among others. Students who receive financial/access assistance should also be trained in using them as educational tools, as some may only be accustomed to only using them for entertainment purposes, as a symptom of usage divide (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003).

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