STRATEGIES, STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND ACTIONS TO FLEXIBLE MODE OF DISTANCE LEARNING (FMDL) OF TEACHERS

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Completed 2023

Strategies, Strengths, Challenges, and Actions to Flexible Mode of Distance

Learning (FMDL) of Teachers

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March 2023

Abstract

The restrictions imposed due to the pandemic have led to the application of a Flexible Mode of Distance Learning (FMDL). This study aimed to identify the strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done in distance learning among the integrated school teachers. Phenomenological qualitative research design was employed. The key informants were 40 teachers identified through stratified cluster sampling. Data were analyzed using cool and warm analysis. The result showed that strategies used by teachers in the delivery of the lessons are the online platforms, Adivayan/neighborhood learning with limited face-to-face, and home visitation. The strengths encountered in the FMDL are tutorials, utilization of blended learning, and the use of resources in the community. The challenges in the FMDL were: (1) student academic performance are the low academic performance such as the difficulty of the lessons and there is no source of knowledge; (2) delivering of lessons like insufficient gadgets, localization of the lesson and insufficient training of teachers; (3) giving feedback and evaluation, (4) preparation of materials, (5)Other Challenges in the FMDL aside from school-related concerns such as proximity of student's houses, transportation and inadequate parental support. The actions done by the teachers to address the challenges were: utilization of blended learning, utilization of integrative assessment, sustained adivayan, neighborhood learning, time management, regular parent-teacher communication, upskilling of teachers, and strong partnership with stakeholders. Thus, using appropriate strategies, and preparations with training is significant in addressing the challenges in the implementation of distance learning specifically involving the community or partnership with stakeholders.

Keywords: integrated school teachers, new normal, pandemic

Acknowledgments

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Introduction and Rationale

The spread of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought challenges in almost all institutions not only in the Philippines but also in the entire world and no one knows when it will end. As a response, every country is presently implementing plans and procedures on how to contain the virus as the infections are still continually rising. The restrictions and community quarantine imposed on many areas particularly in the country have left students with little choice but to attend online classes. In order for learners to continue education, the Department of Education (DepEd) and other institutions have implemented flexible distance learning. As a response, every country is presently implementing plans and procedures on how to contain the virus as the infections are still continually rising.

Flexible Distance Learning features the teacher as a facilitator, engaging learner's active participation through the use of various technologies accessed through the internet while they are geographically remote from each other during instruction (Llego, 2020). Before the implementation, DepEd has been bombarded with criticisms, with some throwing back the question on whether DepEd and other educational institutions are really prepared for the current situation. Despite all the criticisms, these institutions were confident that Flexible Distance Learning will work in the Philippines.

According to an education official, about 93 percent of public schools nationwide already have devices that will be used in the online learning modality for the school year 2020-20121 (Hernando-Malipot,2020).Private schools are allowed to start classes prior to the opening of public school classes on October 5, 2020 provided that they will only use distance learning modalities. However, literature shows that e-learning presents many challenges to both students and teachers alike (Andersson, 2008; Islam, Beer & Slack, 2015; Gilbert, 2015; Arinto, 2016; Gillet-Swan, 2017; Dubey & Piroska, 2019; Baticulon et al., 2020). Though much research had been done flexible distance learning even before the pandemic, its use in the primary level had yet to be studied more because of the very limited sources. There is also a dearth of local literature on the aspect of student concentration in online classes.

In the Philippines, one of the sectors that has greatly been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic is Education. In its earlier announcement, the Department of Education (DepEd) echoed the decision of the President to defer the school opening for the School Year 2020-2021 from August 24, 2020 to October 5, 2020, to give ample time for the department to prepare for a different school set-up – the so-called New Normal Educational Set up. On June 19, 2020, DepEd released a copy of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan through DepEd Order No. 012, s. 2020 that explains essential requirements of education in the time of COVID-19 such as the most essential learning competencies, multiple learning delivery modalities for teachers, school leaders and learners, required health standards in schools and workplaces, and special activities like Brigada Eskwela, Oplan Balik Eskwela, and partnerships.

The Schools Division of Benguet came up with a concrete action plans for the School Year 2020-2021 to ensure continuity of learning and provision of basic education services amid the COVID-19 pandemic known as SDO Benguet Learning Continuity Operation Plan (BE-LCOP).The Schools Division of Benguet conducted research, surveys and analysis of the schools division situation of the different schools in Benguet to identify the preference of the different stakeholders on the mode of delivering teaching and learning during this unusual times.

The respondents of the research were the primary stakeholders that includes only the parents, learners, teachers, department heads, and school heads. In the research conducted, it is apparent to the statistical result that Blended learning, account ting for 1,873 (40%) responses favoring the aforementioned teaching and learning delivery mode, was the most preferred .Not far behind was Home Study with 1,452 (30%) responses followed by Home schooling accounting for 571 responses (16%) , then Face to Face with only 471 (12%) responses. Flexible or blended learning as the most plausible teaching and learning delivery mode at this time. That is, stakeholders preferred combination of home schooling and home study. The respondents preferred teaching and learning exists as a product of collaboration between parents and school institution as in blended learning although

teachers facilitate the teaching and the school has the pro vision of modules. Parents at this time, may now become teachers and may even have the opportunity to choose materials for learning and set the schedule of learning assessment.

The Schools Division of Benguet from the field as the participation of stakeholders has formulated its contextualized Learning Continuity Operational Plan (LCOP) for the school year 2020-2021 based on the data feedback. Inspired by the indigenous culture of cooperation and collaboration locally known as *"binnadang"*, the different units and sections of the Schools Division Office together with the schools were continuously engaged in giving feedbacks and inputs since the start of the present health crisis. The gathered inputs eventually guided the Division Planning Team in analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in the schools division's mandate of ensuring the continuous provision of basic education services while primarily safeguarding the health and safety of learners, parents and all DepEd personnel.

Taking cue from the results of a division-wide research survey (2020-2021) on alternative learning delivery modalities and survey on readiness of schools within the division, SDO Benguet outlined the capability, capacity and condition of schools and districts to provide basic education. As expected, strengths and weaknesses were noted even as there are also major opportunities and threats which the planning team considered. Based on these inputs, SDO Benguet has revised and enhanced its Programs, Projects and Activities (PAPs) reflected in its 2017-2022 Division Education Development Plan (DEDP) and 2020 Division Annual Implementation Plan (DAIP) in order to be aligned with the national efforts of ensuring learning continuity while combatting the COVID-19 crisis.

In this period of COVID-19 pandemic when the traditional in-person of face-to-face mode of learning is not allowed, it is a challenge to explore other innovative learning modalities and strategies to continue schooling of learners in basic and tertiary education who are differently situated in terms of time, pace and place. The teachers and school administrators were given a huge task in preparing materials for a flexible mode of teaching and learning. According to Tria (2020), to sustain and provide quality education despite

lockdown and community quarantine, the new normal should be taken into consideration in planning and implementation of the "new normal educational policy". The Department of Education emphasized that it would not necessarily mean that learners will go to school and devise various modalities to ensure that flexible modes of delivery is implemented in this new learning environment.

In the four districts of Benguet namely: Bakun, Buguias, Kibungan and Mankayan Districts with Integrated Schools resorted to blended learning during school lockdowns. However, this sudden shift has resulted in problems especially for learners without access to technology. When online learning modality is used as a result of the pandemic, the gap between those who have connectivity and those without widened. The continuing academic engagement has been a challenge for teachers and students due to access and internet connectivity.

Considering the limitation on connectivity, the concept of flexible learning emerged as an option for online learning for those who can access internet in the province of Benguet. Flexible learning focuses on giving students choice in the pace, place, and mode of students' learning which can be promoted through appropriate pedagogical practice (Gordon, 2014). The learners are provided with the option on how he/she will continue with his/her studies, where and when he/she can proceed, and in what ways the learners can comply with the requirements and show evidences of learning outcomes. Flexible learning and teaching span a multitude of approaches that can meet the varied needs of diverse learners.

The challenge during the pandemic is how to create a balance between relevant basic competencies for the students to acquire and the teachers' desire to achieve the intended outcomes of the curriculum. The learners' engagement in the teaching-learning process needs to be taken into consideration in the context of flexibility. This is about the design and development of productive learning experiences so that each learner is exposed to most of the learning opportunities. Considering that face-to-face modality is not feasible during the pandemic, teachers may consider flexible distant learning options like correspondence teaching, Self-Learning Module (SLMs)-based learning, SLMs plus

television, SLMs plus transistor radio and the use of two-way radio. For learners with internet connectivity, computer-assisted instruction, synchronous online learning, asynchronous online learning, collaborative e-learning may be considered.

Access to new technologies and additional digital skills training are the challenges which require some additional government and civil society support to fast track. This may include support on the development of curricula that can be delivered online and in responding to market demand. Some students and schools requires platforms, internet access, or equipment to allow for distant learning. This particularly important to make sure no one is left behind.

The researcher aim to discover and identify the strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done by the teachers in the Integrated Schools in the implementation of the flexible mode of distance learning delivery in the four districts of SDO Benguet namely Bakun, Buguias, Mankayan and Kibungan. These teachers' strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done by the teachers in the implementation of the flexible mode of distance learning delivery will be used in planning and/or development of programs to address the needs of learners and teachers in future distance learning platforms in the country.

Literature Review

Flexible Learning

Flexibility in learning, which emphasizes student choice, has been considered one key of enhancing education quality and satisfying highly diverse student needs. It is often, associated with the terms 'open learning', 'distance learning' and e-learning. With the increasing application of information and communication technologies in the field of education, flexible learning has associated with e-learning (Wong et al, 2018).

As instructional leaders, principals embody the role of teacher motivator, supporter, and provider of resources, affecting teaching and learning that is student-centered (Quinn, 2002). In the change process or shift from traditional to modern pedagogy with innovative technologies, engagement overhauls fear (Wolf et al., 2017). Bodden-White (2015) found

that school leaders are instrumental to the advancement of flexible/blended learning in schools, and that they directly influence teacher perception and the implementation of blended learning.

Strengths in Flexible Mode of distance Learning

The strengths in Flexible Mode of Distance Learning were the use of technological tools/equipment to facilitate and enhance the teaching and learning, influence the development of extended or modernized pedagogy (Crompton, Olszewski, & Bielefeldt, 2016; García-Cabrero et al., 2018; Fletcher & Bullock, 2015). Substituting traditional education with technology or digital tools impedes innovation, causing a decline in academic rigor because the curricula and standards remain static (Smith, 2017). As flexible/blended learning changes over time, technological innovations, single- or double-loop solutions, and pedagogical, developmental approaches influence it when teachers' understandings and perceptions affect that change (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015; Gerbic, 2011; Smith, 2017).

Leading through the chaos of innovation in a historically traditional environment requires reflection and review of the process, progress made by others, and possible misgivings that others might have had (Boone, 2015; Horn et al., 2015). Integrating the literature gives a broad view of the theme of flexible/blended learning in educational institutions, but it also encourages the reader to understand the connections. These connections between developed pedagogy, the modernized teacher, the student-centered learner, and the way that traditional transformative leadership can become transformational are influential factors in flexible/blended learning (Boone, 2015; Kumpulainen et al., 2014).

Distance Learning

Distance learning, also called distance education, e-learning, and online learning, is a form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student communication (Simonson, 2020). This is in line with the definition of Means which regards online learning as an educational instruction that occurs using web-based technology, which may be engaged in completely asynchronously or with components of

synchronous learning, and with no located face-to-face class time (Means, et. al., 2009). Distance education technology allows students to take advantage of the convenience and flexibility of taking classes at the times and locations they prefer (Tuckman, 2007).Based on these definitions, we can see that teachers and students are separated in terms of distance or space, but not necessarily by time.

Challenges Encountered by Students and Teachers

Despite the conveniences of flexible distance learning, challenges also are encountered by students and teachers. Distance education provides students much more freedom in how and when they interact; however, Sun & Rueda (2012) argued that their ability to regulate learning becomes critical. Amadora (2020) also pointed out that with the lack of interaction during online classes, students tend to get distracted easily on smartphones, pets, deliveries and many others rather than the ongoing online class. Because face-to-face interaction is absent, it is theorized that students will experience the lack of interest in the online class. On the other hand, Tuckman (2007) found out that students may lack opportunities to collaborate and receive feedback and social support while Rost (2019) found that online environments can generate a feeling of anonymity to students which makes it easier for students to withdraw or participate minimally or completely disappear from the course. These theories showed that students in online learning suffered from anxieties that lead to lack of participation. In contrast to Tuckman, Greenberg (1998) asserted that students in online learning often feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team. When this is not taken into consideration, the participation is generally low and dialogue is absent (Palloff & Pratt, 2000). The theories pointed out that online learning puts pressure on students to work more in groups and requires more participation and engagement. The generation of some younger students are considered to be digital natives. The Internet became a part of their lives since they became aware of their surroundings. And while most are learning new things online and navigating the internet, Rost (2019) believed that issues of digital literacy will prevent some students from successfully taking full advantage of online learning resources. Jacob (2016)

added that it was difficult for preschool, kindergarten and even early primary grade students to work with educational software because it required the use of a mouse or keyboard. Students' digital literacy is an important factor in online distance learning because without it, the challenge in learning will be much greater. Internet connectivity is a popular complaint being highlighted among teachers and students as the Philippines is still one of the countries in Asia with slow internet. Wireless connectivity is another challenge as the nation has seen on television or read news reports of teachers and students going up on mountain sides or on hilltops to catch wireless signals to use the internet (Averia, 2020). Also, Adonis (2020) cited that teachers suspected that the decrease in class size was related to poor internet connection as millions of students and parents struggled to familiarize themselves with the new learning platforms prompted by the new coronavirus pandemic. The Philippines' slow internet connection, posed a great challenge among students, especially those who are from remote places. Throughout the literature, there is a consistent evidence that online distance learning brought challenges to students.

In the case of SDO Benguet, where internet access is a real challenge, e-learning may be a favorable option for the students. Hence, this situation gives a unique implementation in the flexible mode of distance learning delivery. The challenges mentioned will be used as a basis for the researchers in finding out the different strategies, strengths, challenges faced and activities done by the senior high school teachers in the implementation of the Flexible of Mode of Distance Learning (FMDL) to guide educational leaders and teachers in case this mode of delivery will still be adopted even after this pandemic.

Research Questions

The study aimed to determine and describe the phenomenon in the flexible modes of distance learning used in the four district of Schools Division of Benguet namely Bakun, Buguias, Kibungan and by the integrated school teachers in the implementation of such learning delivery modes. Specifically, the researcher would like to answer the following questions:

1. What are the strategies, preparedness and trainings in administering the flexible mode of distance learning?

2. What are the strengths of the flexible mode of distance learning as experienced by the integrated school teachers?

3. What challenges encountered by the integrated school teachers in the   implementation of the flexible mode of distance learning?

4. What are the actions done by the integrated school teachers to address the challenges encountered?

Scope and Limitations

This study aimed to identify the strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done by the teachers in the Integrated Schools in the implementation of the flexible mode of distance learning delivery in the four districts of SDO Benguet namely Bakun, Buguias, Mankayan and Kibungan. The study utilized phenomenological qualitative research design using stratified cluster sampling to determine the number of participants. Data were gathered through series of interviews and was analyzed using cool and warm analysis. The participants of the study was limited to the four districts of Bakun, Buguias, Kibungan and Mankayan.

<center>**Research Methods**</center>

Research Design

The researcher used the phenomenological qualitative research design using online and face-to face interviews was used for data collection, as defined by (Sutton 2015) an in-depth interviews using open- ended questions used to describe the live experiences of the participants. The researcher aimed to identify and describe the strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done in administering the flexible mode of distance learning among the integrated school teachers in the four selected districts of SDO Benguet namely: Bakun, Buguias, Kibungan and Mankayan. The research value of qualitative studies was based on the respondent's responses in the context of the research questions. The researcher employed the use of phenomenological qualitative approach in gathering data. Phenomenological qualitative approach in research focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group.

Population and/or Sampling

The researcher used the stratified cluster sampling by assigning percentage due to the number of population in an area. The participants were the forty (40) integrated school teachers. Integrated Schools (IS) refers to "a public schools that offers kindergarten, elementary, junior high school and senior high school education" and has a unified instructional program.

Higher population in an area have the chances of bigger percentage. The population and the sample of this study were the following: Bakun has only one (1) or 10%; Buguias has twenty nine (29) or 50%; Kibungan has nine (9) 0r 30%; and Mankayan has only one (1) 0r 10% with a total of forty (40). The researcher selected these four districts of Benguet as the respondents of this study since they have common Mother Tongue *"Kankanaey"* in the locality and nearby municipalities for the researcher to easily gather data during this pandemic.

Data Collection

Virtual interviews, text messages, phone calls and video call interviews was conducted since some of the schools in the selected four (4) districts can access internet. All interviews was carried out prior to setting of appointments with the concerned respondents. The interviews has no specified time limit as the researcher based it on the respondent's convenient time. All interviews was carried out with the helped of combining formal and conversational interviews. Interview guide questions which are standardized open- ended questions was utilized. Further, there were three (3) questions on the strategies, strengths, three (3) questions on challenges being encountered, and one (1) question on activities done in the implementation of Flexible Mode of Distance Learning to validate data. Validation of instruments were done by the Division Research Technical Working Group Committee before the questions was used by the researcher in the conduct of the research. Journals/ notes was maintained by the researcher to monitor how those data were collected in this study to ensure researcher bias was minimized and accounted for.

Data Analysis

The researcher used cool and warm analysis in analyzing data (de Guzman & Tan, 2007). Verbatim responses from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. In the cool analysis, the transcribed data were read and reread repeatedly to extract significant statements that provide descriptions from the reported views and experiences of the participants. The significant statements were further analyzed by identifying statements that may be clustered together to identify categories that reflect the participants' common and typical experiences. In the warm analysis, these initial categories were subjected to thematic analysis by examining similarities and relationships among them in order to extract themes that provide a collective description of the participants' views and experiences on the strategies, strengths, challenges and actions done by the teachers were gathered through a survey, particularly by using a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions interview. Colaizzi's method was used in the interpretation of data. This is a method of

analysis of data enable new knowledge to be revealed and provided insights into experiences. Developing clusters of themes and themes from formulated meanings.

Ethical Issues

The researcher asked permission from the Public School District Supervisor that such basic research was conducted. After receiving permission to interview Integrated School Teachers from the School Heads, the researcher called all Integrated School Teachers and asked them to participate in the study with the given requirements/qualifications. Messenger/GC, email, text messages and phone calls interview was utilized as one of gathering of responses from the teachers. The teachers of the school for the sampling were informed about the study for their information. The participants had the right to participate in the research, and the freedom to decline at any time. After the responses were all gathered and finalized, then it was returned to the participants to verify their responses if it is correctly written according to how they stated during the interview. The data were treated confidentially.

Results and Discussion

Strategies, Preparedness And Trainings in FDML

Strategies used in FMDL of Integrated Schools

The findings showed that common strategies used by teachers in FMDL of integrated schools are the limited face to face and online platforms. Limited face to face like home visitation, Adivayan/ neighborhood learning in the designated areas like the barangay hall, tribal hall, church and "*baliwang mo, eskwelaan*" as identified by the parent coordinators were sustained and giving of printed integrative activities and assessment that ease them in checking of learners output and not to pampered students with a lot of activities.

"*Home visits are the good remedies to reach out our learners in their homes to monitor and follow up their performance*".

"*Instead that we teachers gave bulk activities, we prepared integrative activities and assessment that ease our burdens in checking a lot of learners output and not to pampered students with a lot of activities*".

Furthermore, online platform are the easiest way to communicate with the learners' and parents through phone calls, text, chats for those who have access of signals. Also, video lessons activities was .save to flash drives and was distributed to identified learners with gadgets. According to Kerka (2020), in designing for online or distance learning, there is a need to understand the role of technology to attain the success of the engagement.

Moreover, with the current new normal education with the shifting of learning delivery, the challenge would be on how to provide an inclusive IT infrastructure to provide quality education for all learners (Internet access and education: Key considerations for policy makers, 2017).

Table 1.1

Common Strategies used in the Flexible Mode of Distance Learning

Strategies used by teachers in the FMDL	Teacher's experience
A. Face to face	
a. Home visitation	*"It's the good remedy to reach the learners' in their homes"*
b. Adivayan/ Neighborhood Learning	*Adivayan Areas were designated in different sitios "Baliwang mo. Eskwelaan"*
c. Giving of integrative assessment	*"Easier in checking of students output/less work"* *"Learners are not pampered with so much activities"*
B. Online Platforms	
a. Text, calls, chats/video calls	*"It's the easiest way to communicate with the learners and parents through phone calls/text, chats for those who have signals.*
b. Video activities	*"Some video lessons was saved to flash drives and was distributed to students with gadgets"*

Most Effectives Strategies used in FMDL. The result of the study showed that the most effective strategies used by teachers in the delivery of the lessons are the online platforms, Adivayan/neighborhood learning with a limited face to face and home visitation. This because some learners have their own android/cellular phones that they easily access because of strong net. Video clips and audio activities were sent through Group chats/FB messenger. On the other hand, some learners who have no phones and have poor signals especially those in the far flung areas are those who are being reached by the teachers. Limited face to face to some learners in the Adivayan learning areas that helps students to clarify and ask questions on the topic they really need help.

Home visitation is a service provided by the teachers to reach out learners in their homes to provide support for parent to better understand their child's/children's daily home activities. During this time of pandemic, home visitation serves as the interaction between the teacher and parent on how to improve the academic performance of a child or learner.

The teacher is the one assisting the parent to establish a bond with his or her the child in time of teaching and learning (Hernando Almario, 2022). A home learning environment has a positive "direct association" with a child's academic performance (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015).

Table 1.2

Most Effectives Strategies used in FMDL

Effective Strategies used	Teacher's Experience
1. Online platforms	" Some learners who use their phones in submitting their outputs through FB messenger" "Some video clips and prepared online activities were sent through their Group Chat/F Messenger for the learners to access".
2. Adivayan/neighborhood /	"It is the easiest way to reach out the learners in the designated area"
3. Limited face to face	"The learner are reach out in their Baliwang mo, Eskwelaan mo"
4. Home Visitation	"Visiting of learners personally with the presence of their parents can establish a bond with his or her child or a learner".

Preparation of FMDL Materials and Trainings attended by teachers

The findings showed that teachers are preparing their modules, localized lessons, downloading from the LR portals including the printing of modules. Additional activity sheets are also prepared by teachers for remedial and enrichment purposes.

Some teachers also attended trainings on the development of LRs, video- making trainings, the use of the radio-based instructions and two-way radios. Prepared LRs that was uploaded to the LR portals.

According to Quinn (2002), as instructional leaders, embody the role of teacher motivator, supporter, and provider of resources, affecting teaching and learning that is student-centered.

Table 1.3

Preparation of FMDL Materials and Trainings attended by teachers

Preparation of materials for FMDL	Trainings Attended
1. Preparation of LRs and other materials	1. Reskilling of Teachers
• Preparation of localized lesson suited to diverse learners	- LR developer
• Downloading of modules	- Video shooting
	- Radio-Based Trainings
• Printing of modules	
• Prepared and modules additional activities	
Activity sheets/activities	

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Strengths in the FMDL

Approaches Used in FMDL

Tutorials and Exploration. *"*Tutorials and exploration gives more opportunities to explore and reach new methods of learning. Parents are likely multitasking, for example, tutoring, holding down their nonteaching jobs, and caring for other family members. With multiple demands on their time and little formal training as a teacher, many parents will have difficulty reading long, complex directions on how to help their children learn. Some parents can be quite effective teachers when given easy-to-implement, engaging activities. Here are some personal narrations of teachers during the interview:

> *"Their parents role as teachers or tutors at home, reminding their children to learn regularly, controlling the child's time and way of learning and creating learning atmosphere that is comfortable for their children in doing the task given by the teacher".*

> *" Parents as a facilitator, since they provide the facilities and infrastructure for their children in carrying out distance learning".*

> *" Parents as a motivator, because they provide enthusiasm and support to*

their children in carrying out learning so that children will have the eager to learn and obtain good achievement".

According to Heather C. Hill & Susana Loeb (2020), materials sent home for parents work best if their directions are both simple to read and easy to follow.

Utilization of Blended Learning. Blended learning is an approach combines the utilization of other modalities aside from modular learning. Through the use of blended learning, some teachers shared their experience that they enjoyed teaching students with modular learning combined with online platforms. Here are the personal narrations of teachers during the interview:

"For me as a teacher, I am utilizing blended learning. I have time giving of instructions and activities online. With these, I also have time for "kumustahan" to say hello to my students".

"As a teacher, I should not be confounded my students with modular learning but rather explore or use of other modalities to ensure effective delivery of the lessons".

"As a teacher, blended learning is really a need today's time of new normal so that we can give the best learning experiences to our learners"

"It is also really good to see students and hear their voices even though it's online".

Amadora (2020) pointed out that with the lack of interaction during online classes, students tend to get distracted easily on smartphones, pets, deliveries and many others rather than the ongoing online class. Because face-to-face interaction is absent, it is theorized that students will experience the lack of interest in the online class. On the other hand, Tuchman (2007) found out that students may lack opportunities to collaborate and receive feedback and social support while Rost (2019) found that online environments can generate a feeling of anonymity to students which makes it easier for students to withdraw or participate minimally or completely disappear from the course. These theories showed that students in online learning suffered from anxieties that lead to lack of participation. In

contrast to Tuckman, Greenberg (1998) asserted that students in online learning often feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team.

Use of Resources in the Community. Learning resources during this new normal education are the parents, LSA, LGUs, PNP and other partners in the community that voluntarily support the learning process; community area that serve as the Adivayan/neighborhood learning; various gadgets at home for blended learning; and financial support from the school partners that support the availability of various materials needed in the flexible mode of distance learning.

Table 2.1

Approaches Used in FMDL

Strengths in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Tutorials and explorations	" *Learners were able to experience tutorials from their parents or relatives at home and Self-learning or explorations"*
2. Utilization of blended learning	" *I enjoyed teaching the students with modular and combined with online instruction or platform"* *"It is the easiest way of sharing and "kumustahan" saying hello…with my students through any online platform"*
3. Use of resources in the community	" *We identified areas within the community as Adivayan/Neighborhood learning areas and volunteers as sources of knowledge to helped learners especially in the reading.* *"LGUs, PNP and other partners donated materials in the preparation, delivery and retrieval of modules".*

Opportunity of Learners to Clarify Topics

Questions and Answering of Queries. Learners were able to clarify topics through the use of online platforms by simple asking question to their teacher to clarify topics which they cannot understand. The teacher then answers the questions of the learners on time and child-friendly.

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Parent-Teacher Communication. Teachers believed that regular communication to parents using various modes and media could help lessen problems in the learning process. Many teachers also shared that their regular communication with parents and learners would helped them in their lessons since they easily provide techniques and assistance to the learners whenever they encountered difficulties. Here are some of the personal sharing gave by the teachers during the conduct of the interview:

"*Communication to parents and learners are very important to ensure that the learner is doing well in answering of modules that will be submitted on time. Regular communication is really important in this new normal*"

"*As a teacher, constant communication to my learners and parents helped me a lot because it is where I'll know the conditions where the learners have parents to assist them or they are busy working for a living. It is our duty to assist them to overcome their difficulties*".

Table 2.2

Opportunity of Students to Clarify Topics

Opportunity of students to clarify topics	Teacher's experience
1. Question	"*Learners ask questions though online platforms (text/calls, FB messenger etc.)*"
2. Answering of queries	"*Teachers are child-friendly to answer learners' queries*
3. Parent-Teacher Communication	" *Parents are open to teachers on their child* and learners *performance*"

Teacher-Learner Interactions

Home Visitation. During this pandemic home visitation is useful in order for a teacher to give instructions and clarifications to them on those lessons that they need most of the help from teachers. Here are some of the teachers' personal sharing during the interview:

"*For me as a teacher, this is the opportunity to follow up the module, activities, and performance tasks that are not yet submitted*".

" *Through this home visits, I came to know the family backgrounds of my students thus, flexibility is being employed in handling of my students*"

Home visit is indeed a way to interview the learners regarding their ways in adhering to the required lessons in their grade levels in the midst of their conditions at home because there are learners who have their designated household chores before they focus on their studies. With proper healthy protocols, the teacher's home visitation are truly purposeful and they are really giving sufficient to the learners.

According to Hernando Almario (2022), Home visitation is a manifestation of a teacher's heroic deed and he or she never thinks of the extended responsibility as long as he or she is serving the young generation who will soon lead our society.

Limited Face to Face. Limited face to face learning is a combination of distance learning modality and an in-school face to face setup. It will utilize self-learning materials (SLMs) and classroom learning for a maximum of four hours depending on the grade level. Here are some personal sharing of teachers during the interview.

"*In-person communications can make our brains happier*"

"*I can manage the topics very well because I can give the instructions and clarify topics verbally and learners can easily understand*"..

"*This is alive interactions between us teachers and learners which they also interact with their classmates*"

Rajiv Shah (2022) revealed the face to face learning ensures a better understanding and recollection of lesson content and gives class members a chance to bond with one another.

Online Platforms. Online platforms such as the use of Facebook, Google meet, text and phone calls allows teachers and students to have their own learning pace. Practically, the use of these online platforms is not only limited to being a social media platform, but it can also be an effective teaching and learning support platform, especially during this time of

pandemic. Thus, using these online learning platform learners can easily retrieve academic sources and share them with their classmates for intellectual discussion.

Tuckman (2007) revealed that distance education technology allows students to take advantage of the convenience and flexibility of taking classes at the times and locations they prefer.

Table 2.3

Teacher-Learner Interactions

Teacher- Learner interaction	Teacher's experience
1. Home visitation	*" Home visit is the best way to know the learners' situation"*
2. Limited face to face	*" Limited face to face will help learners to to ask and clarify topics"*
3. Online platforms	*" Learners who can access internet can easily communicate to teachers and and can perform online lessons/activities".*

Challenges in the FMDL

On Student Academic Performance

The challenges in the FMDL on student academic performance are the low academic performance, difficulty of the lessons and there is no source of knowledge. Here are the personal narrations of teachers during the interview:

"*Learners have poor reading skills and comprehension skills*"

"*Learner struggle with self-study*"

"*Some learners are children of OFWs or from broken families usually stayed with their grandparents who cannot read and write*".

According to Apriyanti (2020) found in their research that kindergarten and primary school faced problems during the COVID -19 pandemic such as being unable to guide their children to learn and children's lack of concentration, unwillingness to learn, desire to go to school, inability to learn online and limited comprehension of the materials. Fauzi eta. (2020)

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found in their research that teachers face problems during the pandemic such as lack of opportunities, network and internet use, planning, implementation and evaluation of learning and collaboration with parents.

It is suggested that in order to maintain very satisfactory performance of learners, there should be a close monitoring and intervention plan betrween administrators, teachers parents, stakeholders, and learners (Paquican and Torreon, 2022).

Table 3.1

Challenges in the FMDL on Student Academic Performance

Challenges in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Low academic performance	*"Learners have poor reading skills and comprehension skills"*
2. Difficulty of the lessons	"*Learner struggle with self-study"*
3. No source of knowledge	*"Some learners are children of OFWs or broken families usually stayed with their grandparents who cannot read and write"*

On Delivering Lessons

Based on the findings, it reveals that the challenges in the delivery of lessons in the flexible mode of learning such as insufficient gadgets, localization of the lesson and insufficient training of teachers. Teacher noticed that not all learners have gadgets at home like TV, radio, cellphone and others so they prefer pure printed modules. On the other hand, some learners were identified that have gadgets with internet connections which are having the blended learning.

Huhtala (2018), cited that teachers prepared localized lessons/topics suited to learners for them to understand easily. The primary goal of teaching is to provide appropriate and effective instruction to students. Thus, a teacher is responsible to devise and provide necessary instructional materials (IM) in teaching. Learning is more productive when there is available, sufficient, and strategically designed instructional

materials suited for the different types of students. Also, teachers must consider the students' needs and their approaches to learning.

According to Dahar (2011), developing instructional materials play an integral role in the teaching – learning process and it has a strong relationship with academic performance of the students. Using localized materials in instructional material (IM) will enhance the creativity of the IM developer and will lessen the cost of the IM. On the other hand, using contextualized and indiginized IM will easily understand the students of the concept being taught especially if the students are not familiar with some words. This problem always encountered by some teachers in teaching especially in the country that English is not their primary language.

Moreover, according to teachers, the trainings they received were insufficient to prepare for them to become effective teachers utilizing flexible mode of distance learning. Some teachers believed that because the modality is new, teachers were in the period of adjustments and thus, several trainings, professional and capacity building activities should be conducted to provide adequate and best possible experiences to teachers. Here are some personal experiences shared by the teachers during the interview:

"We teachers attended virtual trainings and capacity building activities conducted by the DepEd. However, it is difficult for us to gain new skills online".

"Teachers should be capacitated prior to the utilization of flexible mode of distance learning. Orientations were given to us but still it's insufficient to really provide better learning experiences to the learners".

Capacitating of teachers is one of the best ways to make flexible mode of distance learning effective. When teachers do not have enough knowledge and skills in teaching, they cannot provide better learning experiences to the learners. According to Borup et.al (2019) stated that knowledge, skills and attitudes are the important in becoming a better school. This further explained that when teachers are knowledgeable enough and were strongly trained and developed, they would be able to help the learners in this new normal education.

Rasmitadila et al. (2020) found that teachers face problems in distance education implemented in the Covid-19 pandemic such as technical barriers, student's conditioning, student's participation in education and online education experience.

Table 3.2

Challenges in the FMDL on Delivering Lessons

Challenges in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Insufficient gadgets	*"Not all learners have their gadgets at home so they prefer pure printed modules while those who have gadgets were in the blended learning"*
2. Localization of lesson/topic	*" As a teacher, we localize the topic/lesson for the students' to understand easily"*
3. Insufficient training to teachers	*"There were insufficient training among teachers on the flexible mode of learning, as a teacher I find it difficult"*

On Giving Feedback and Evaluation

The result of the study shows some of the challenges that teachers encounter as they engage in the process of checking and evaluating learners' answers in their modules or outputs. The teachers find it difficult to check outputs especially for those who submitted with no answers as it indicates that they have nothing to record with regards to students' performance. It is also hard to identify whose output is being checked since some of them forgot to write their names, especially when recording purposes. Hence, it is challenging for teachers to evaluate a student without evidence of learning.

The teachers have limited time in checking due to other paper works assigned or other task in school. Thus, teachers' time in checking of learners' outputs is being affected. Some teachers' claimed, *"We even bring learners' output at home so that we have time to check".* This is the reason why teachers spent their family time in checking learners' outputs.

It is during the checking and evaluation of outputs that a teacher discovers the current learners' performance.

This is the reason why students have low scores from the activities in the modules. It is hard for the teachers to validate the actual performance of students' since there are some have tutors while the others do not learn by themselves. The modules are expected to be their self-learning guide but teachers admit that the students need their guidance and teaching in learning a particular concept. Low scores of learners challenge the teachers to find alternative ways on how to reinforce every student's performance.

Checking also requires careful attention and examination by the teacher when it comes to the answers written by the students. According to the respondents of the study, teachers find hard time in recognizing students' answers due to ineligible penmanship while others are parents' penmanship. This may result in teachers being unable to check the outputs of students' since the students' penmanship is not eligible.

Assessment of student learning outcomes is very important. A concern on how to assess learning outcomes and how to answer assessment tasks emerged as a major concern as reflected in the narratives of the teacher and student respondents. There is a need to address the teachers' concern on how to conduct off-classroom performance evaluation and the bulk of submissions that they have to evaluate which are submitted online or offline. The assessment measures are essential as an assurance that learners have attained various knowledge and   skills (Coates, 2015).

Table 3.3

Challenges in the FMDL on Giving Feedback and Evaluation

Challenges in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Checking and evaluating students' answers in the modules	" *There are students' who submitted with incomplete modules/output or even no answers and no names* ".
2. Limited time in checking due to other tasks	" *Due to other paper works, the time for checking in school is limited*".
3. Low scores of learners'	" *Some learners" got low scores below the passing rate*".
4. Ineligible and different penmanship	" *Some parents or guardians were the one answering students' modules just to meet the time in passing of modules*".

On the Preparation of Materials

Based on the findings, it can be seen that teachers' challenges in the preparing the modules are related to time, materials and supplies needed to prepare and print modules.

The insufficient time in preparing and printing of modules of the students causes the late production of modules. Furthermore, the insufficient and scarcity of printing materials affect the production of modules on time. According to the respondents of the study, it is difficult to print all the modules for the whole quarter because of insufficient time and assistance in printing all the modules. Instead, teachers prepare the modules only per unit or chapter to be able to produce modules on time.

Fauzi et al. (2020) demonstrated that teachers experience a variety of problems during the Covid-19 pandemic such as time consuming in the printing of modules, scarcity of supplies, lack of opportunities in online learning applications, network and internet use, teacher's planning, implementation and evaluation and collaboration with parents.

Table 3.4

Challenges in the FMDL on the Preparation of Materials

Challenges in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Time consuming	*"It takes time to prepare and print modules".*
2. Scarcity of supplies	*" It is difficult to produce modules on time due to lack of printing materials like printer ink, bond papers etc…."*
3. Insufficient time and assistance in printing	*" It is hard to print all modules for the whole duration of the quarter".*

Other Challenges in the FMDL Aside From School-Related Concerns

Proximity of Students' Houses. Reaching of learners in a remote area is a huge challenge. Besides, walking long distance is physically and mentally tiring (Zuckerman, 2021).

"*We still have lots of areas where there is no internet access. In some remote areas, there is no even electricity, limited teacher scaffold, poor peer communication….etc".*

Transportation. Some dedicated teachers in remote areas travel long distances and give face-to-face lessons to small groups of students in their homes. Teachers encountered variety of uncomfortable means of transportation, some part of the area need to walk for more than an hour to reach their homes.

"Teaching in far-flung area is not easy especially when you do not know who you are with, the people, kind of learners you will have, location of the houses and the means of transportation.. This is because I am called to touch millions of young minds, though it took kilometers away from my home to reach the learners and even my expenses exceeds".

Inadequate Parental Support. Several parents' assemblies, consultations and meetings were conducted to inform and disseminate the crucial roles of parents in current modality of education. However, teachers argued that there was an inadequate parental support extended by parents to their children's education. Teachers noticed that most of their parents were workers, and therefore spent lesser time in assisting their children's at home. Some parents a have limited knowledge and are illiterate who cannot assist their children in their modules.

When parents and children collaborate in learning activities, bonding between parents and children increases as they are able to spend much more time together. Such instances allow parents to become a source of comfort in easing pain and worry and engage in conversations with their children to help them in alleviating their anxiety. It has been recommended that parents should be taught interventions on how to provide emotional support to children at times of uncertainty (Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, & Jiang, 2020).

Table 3.5

Other Challenges in the FMDL Aside from School-Related Concerns

Challenges in FMDL	Teacher's experience
1. Proximity of student's houses	- *Learners in the far flung areas has no access to internet or signal and even current.*
2. Transportation	- *No public transportation to reach the school and even houses of the learners*
3. Inadequate parental support	- *Some learners are children of staying with their grandparents who are illiterate with no source of knowledge.*
	- *Most of the parents are farmers which they have no time to assist their child/children due to farming activities.*

Actions Done by Teachers to Address those Challenges in the FMDL

Utilization of Blended Learning

According to Hashemi and Sina (2020) Blended learning is an approach in the teaching-learning process, it is found to substantially improve student's performance. On the other hand, blended learning allows learners for greater flexibility, social interactions and engagement among students and deeper learning experiences. Blended learning creates interest and motivation among students by involving their more senses. Teachers are seen as facilitators of the learning which creates a significant impact to the learners as they independently learn the lessons facilitated by the teachers (Jones, 2019).

Utilization of Integrative Assessment

Teachers prepared integrative assessment of common competencies of different subject to ease burden of learners.

According to Fung (2017)**,** integrative assessment are used to improve students' experience curriculum as an integrated, holistic opportunity for students to engage with the overarching aims and intention of the program. This integrative assessment methods may include: major projects, assignments, capstone portfolio, projects and exams.

Sustained Adivayan/Neighborhood Learning

Adivayan/Neighborhood learning is a limited face to face classes in a meeting place of neighbor learners. The main objectives of the adivayan/ neighborhood learning are to improve the quality of education, enrich and complement educational programs.

Regular parent-teacher Communication

Regular communication to parents and learners using various modes and media could help lessen their learning difficulties. Many teachers that their constant communication to parents and learners helped them in their lessons since they can easily provide assistance to the learners whether they encountered difficulties. Here are some personal sharing given by teachers during the conduct of the interview:

> *"As a teacher, regular communication to the parents and the learners are*
>
> *really important to ensure that learners will answer and submit their outputs on time".*

For me, I can say that consistent communication to parents and learners is a way for me to know their conditions whether they are assisted by their parents or there is no source of knowledge. With this, I can help and assist them overcome their difficulties with their given activities".

Consistent communication to parents and learners is an important aspect of ensuring success in the implementation of flexible mode of distance learning. Teachers to regularly communicate to the parents and learners to give them update and monitor the progress of their learning.

Upskilling of Teachers

Training enables teacher to be more acquainted with the process of teaching with modular instruction and prepare them to be more ready in terms of knowledge and skills in giving interventions to learners when they encountered difficulties. Here are some personal sharing given by teachers:

"For me, I attended the DepEd orientation and trainings conducted online regarding on the implementation of flexible mode of distance learning but still I found inadequate since the difficulties is on the assessing and evaluating of some modules due some errors".

"I attended orientation but I need more trainings to be more capacitated to overcome challenges since I am a newly permanent teacher in my station ".

Teachers training provided to teachers on regular basis as an investment to teachers to develop their skills. Fisher (2013), argues that it is important to teach new skills to teachers because, otherwise, they cannot be able to a generation that is learning more outside the classroom.

According to Ramatlapana (2009), revealed that teacher must be exposed to training to know the new pedagogic ways, innovations and emerging trends in teaching and how they can implement it in the teaching-learning process.

Strong Partnership with Stakeholders

Some of the Community Learning Facilitator or the Learning Support Aid (LSA) voluntarily deliver the printed modules prepared for the learners in their homes especially to those who have limited access or have absolutely no access to Internet and digital services.

According to Sevilla (2020), with the minimal time and resources, all our school heads and teachers are doing their very best to make learning continue despite all adversities. That's how deep the commitment and love of our teachers are for their learners. This time, we commit to involve the stakeholders for the sake of our learners." Indeed the call for a strengthened and robust school-community partnership is not later but now.

Table 4

Actions Done by Teachers to Address the Challenges in the FMDL

Actions done	Teachers responses
1. Utilization of blended learning	"*Some video lessons and activities were save in flash drives that were distributed to our learners*"
2. Utilization of Integrative assessment	- "*We prepared common activities to same competencies in the different subjects to ease burdens of learners*".
3. Sustained Adivayan/neighborhood learning	'*We teachers usually meet our learners in the designated areas as Adivayan learning areas for short discussions regarding the lesson/topic which they do not understand well.*
4. Time management	"*Managing our time effectively so that we can do other tasks such as checking of modules and recording of scores of scores*".
5. Regular parent-teacher communication	"*Our regular communication to parents ensure that the learners will submit their modules on time.*
6. Upskilling of teachers	"*The DepEd conducted trainings and we*

7. Strong partnership with stakeholders	"*We teachers ask assistance to LGU,* *PNP, and religious sectors with signed MOA to help in the delivery and Retrieval of modules and also as sources of knowledge within the area/community".*

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Derived from the findings of the study, it is concluded that:

1. The result of the study shows that the effective strategies used by teachers in the delivery of the lessons are the online platforms, Adivayan/neighborhood learning with a limited face to face and home visitation. This because some learners have their own android/cellular phones that they easily access because of strong net. Video clips and audio activities were sent through Group chats/FB messenger. On the other hand, some learners who have no phones and have poor signals especially those in the far flung areas are those who are being reached by the teachers. Limited face to face to some learners in the Adivayan learning areas that helps students to clarify and ask questions on the topic they really need help. Home visitation is a service provided by the teachers to reach out learners in their homes to provide support for parent to better understand their child's/children's daily home activities.

2. The strengths encountered in the flexible mode of distance learning are the following: tutorials, utilization of blended learning and the use of resources in the community. These strengths and challenges on how they strategize in planning and in preparing of the modules or lessons. Innovating teaching strategies adapting to changes brought about by this new normal trend in education, being flexible, adaptive,

providing alternative plans, being patient and optimistic, equipping oneself which are with the necessary skills suited and are some of the ways how teachers cope up with the challenges that they encounter in the flexible mode of distance learning.

3. The challenges in the FMDL on (1) student academic performance are the low academic performance such as difficulty of the lessons and there is no source of knowledge; (2) delivering of lessons like insufficient gadgets, localization of the lesson and insufficient training of teachers; (3) giving feedback and evaluation, (4) preparation of materials, (5)Other Challenges in the FMDL aside from school-related concerns such as proximity of student's houses, transportation and inadequate parental support.

4. The actions done by the teachers in overcoming of the challenges such as the utilization of blended learning, utilization of integrative assessment, sustained adivayan, neighborhood learning, time management, regular parent-teacher communication, upskilling of teachers and strong partnership with stakeholders. The appropriate interventions to struggling learners according to teachers are consistent consultation through text call, call and through other social media platforms, organization of Community Learning Facilitators, neighborhood learning, home visitations for direct tutorials and immediate feedback made by teachers.

Recommendations

Based from the conclusions, the recommendations are:

1. School heads may continue to extend their instructional support to teachers by conducting regular supervision to improve teaching strategies and determine the strengths and weaknesses of teachers in the delivery of flexible mode of distance learning.

2. Technical assistance, mentoring, coaching, capacity building and professional development activities may be provided to teachers to overcome those challenges in the delivery of flexible mode of distance learning.

3. Teachers may engage to various professional development activities to improve their teaching skills and may continue to nourish their relationship with the parents to ensure the effective flexible mode of distance learning to learners. Teachers are encourage to attend professional studies to enhance their learning in various educational and pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning and with the current trend in education.

4. Teachers should sustain their assistance through phone calls, text, posting updates on social media, community facilitating and by giving words of encouragement.

5. There should be a strong partnership to PTA and other stakeholders such as their donations and assistance were some of the ways to augment financial needs of the school. To help also in the delivery, retrieval of modules and as source of knowledge to learners who are having difficulties in the lessons.

Dissemination and Advocacy Plans

The result of this research shall be disseminated to the teachers of Buguias District during virtual or face to face SLAC session and to be disseminated during District and Division Meetings/Webinars. A copy of the final research paper will be furnished to the different district offices to serve as reference of similar action research by other school. Another copy will be submitted to the LRMDS office for reference. The result of this research will be forwarded to the division office as basis of endorsing professional development of teachers in Benguet. Other plans will be for participation to congress or symposia and likewise during district INSET's including school INSET's to encourage other teachers to make their action research. A plan for publication of the research study.

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Financial Report

A. Supplies and Materials						
Activity	**Item**	**Unit**	**Quantity**	**Estimated Cost**	**Total**	**ACTUAL COST**
Preparation of research papers , Instructional Materials and other documents	A4 Bond paper	ream	10	250	2,500.00	2,500.00
	A4 Folder Tagboard with fastener	Piece	20	20	400.00	400.00
	Printer Ink, Black	Bottle	10	320	3200.00	3200.00
	Printer Ink, Cyan	Bottle	2	320	640.00	640.00
	Printer Ink, Magenta	Bottle	2	320	640.00	640.00
	Printer Ink, Yellow	Bottle	2	320	640.00	640.00
	USB External Flash Drive	Box	2	1000	1000.00	1000.00
B. Domestic Expenses						660.00
Submission of First Tranche Deliverable with wet signatures	Private Vehicle/Garage /Van	trip	1	660.00	660.00	
C. Food and other incurred expenses during the conduct of the research						
D. Reproduction, Printing, and Binding Cost						
E. Communication Expenses for the Implementation/Conduct of the Study						
Validation of Instruments	Load of Validators/ Experts	Card	5	300.00	1500.00	1500.00
Implementation of Study- Data Gathering/Collection, Preparation and submission of research papers and other documents (Division Wide- 4 Districts: Bakun, Buguias, Kibungan and Mankayan)	Regular Load of Proponent	Card	10	500	5000	5000
	Internet Load of Proponent	Card	10	500	5000	5000
	Load of Target Participants (Interviews/Online Meetings)	Card	40	500	12000	12000
E. Other Expenses						
TOTAL					33,180.00	**33,180.00**

ROSALIE S. ANHIBEY
Proponent