



School Leaders' Experiences in Fostering Students' Learning Engagement and Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged schools, requiring adaptive responses from academic leaders, particularly in decision-making and policy implementation during the shift to remote learning and addressing struggling students. This study explores the experiences of academic leaders about implementing the Leveraging Program (LP) and Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) implemented in a Philippine secondary school from the school year 2020-2023. The LP and RPSS are combined intervention programs that aim to foster students' engagement and wellbeing amidst remote learning challenges. Various themes emerged from the results, such as: Theme 1: Establishing Remote Counseling to establish a psychological support system to foster students' wellbeing. Theme 2: Engaging curriculum design for academic success. Theme 3: Collaborative and immediate feedback and assessment and Theme 4: Positive school culture through integration of wellbeing activities to instructions. These themes reflect the holistic support the program provided to students for academic and emotional growth during the pandemic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Lead Editor:

Marie Paz E. Morales, PhD

Guest Editor:

Adonis P. David, PhD

Received:

September 17, 2023

Revised:

March 5, 2024

Accepted:

April 3, 2024

KEYWORDS:

Academic Communities of
Engagement, Leveraging Program,
Students' Learning, Student
Wellbeing

Introduction

Background of the Study

Schools around the globe were affected by uncertainties brought by the COVID-19 pandemic (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). One of the challenges faced by schools was the sudden and expedited shift from regular in-person classes to remote learning to ensure continuity of education and uphold students' motivation for learning amid school closures (Guban-Caisido, 2020). School leaders were challenged on how to support teachers and students in adapting to the sudden shift to distance learning (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021; Wallace, 2005). Indeed, a one-size-fits-all response to implementing distance learning became impossible. Certainly, there is a great demand for resilience and adaptability when it comes to devising and implementing strategies to assist students (Spring et al., 2023). As such, schools innovatively designed their way of implementation based on their school context (Stasel, 2020; Tarrayo et al., 2022).

The Philippine School and Research Site During COVID-19 Pandemic.

As the Philippine government declared the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in March 2020, schools around the country closed for the safety of all (Lopez, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary situation that challenged the school's usual abilities to cope and thrive. While the enhanced community quarantine has been determined as a necessary strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection, it left people feeling exhausted, isolated, vulnerable, and helpless (Agaton & Cueto, 2021).

In basic education, schools catering to younger learners, adapting to the sudden change in learning modalities, and the implementation of distance learning was not easy (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). One primary challenge it faced was keeping student scholars' engagement and to keep on track while undergoing remote learning (Safitri & Nugraha, 2021). In one school system of schools in the Philippines, there were noted cases of students struggling to adjust, maintain learning engagement and to complete school requirements that affects their wellbeing while under remote learning (Briones et al., 2020). Thus, the school through its teachers and other members continue to understand how to help students maintain engagement and positive wellbeing.

Student Wellbeing and Engagement During COVID-19 Pandemic.

At the onset of the pandemic, most of the students struggled with the sudden change in routines brought about by the lockdown protocols and the changes in family dynamics brought about by the work-from-home arrangements of parents and the online classes of the children as evidenced by some survey research (Briones et al., 2020; Malolos et al., 2021). Sudden change in learning modality and confinement at home while learning while doing household chores contributed to the declining level of interest and learning

engagement among students (Tajolosa et al., 2022). Also, since lockdown was implemented, some students in the research site of this study reached out to their teachers and Batch Counselors for help on managing their interest and learning engagement which they claim to be declining and affecting their wellbeing through email and SMS/text messaging. This scenario brought the school leaders and counselors to take the lead in brainstorming about possible ways to provide psychosocial support remotely. As Harris and Jones (2022) suggest, leaders are expected to take the lead in times or circumstances when decision-making and intervention responses are needed. To be driven by actual data, in the research site of this study, the Survey on Students' Well-being Amidst COVID-19 (SWAC) was administered online to know the emerging needs and situations of the students in terms of engagement, motivation and overall wellbeing. The data collected by SWAC was used to determine the need for a remote counseling service to help address students become more engaged to learning and have positive wellbeing. It was however determined, based on students' report, that their wellbeing and level of academic engagement was hard to gain.

In response to the identified issues in the research site, the school leaders of curriculum and instruction and guidance and counseling devised a tailored intervention plan to enhance students' learning, engagement, and overall wellbeing during the remote learning period until the gradual return to in-person classes. This initiative is based on the notion, as asserted by Froese-Germain and Riel (2012), that there exists a significant link between students' engagement, well-being and academic success. As an innovative way of the school research site, the school leaders, together with the entire academic council, designed leveraging mechanisms to support students based on their present challenges in terms of engagement, requirements completion, and promotion, which they called the Leveraging Program (LP) accompanied by the Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) to foster students' learning, engagement, and wellbeing during the remote learning at the time of the pandemic.

Leveraging Program (LP) with Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) as Intervention Program

The Leveraging Program (LP) is a school system-mandated intervention. It aims to support students, specifically those facing challenges in the context of remote learning until the gradual return to in-person classes. It was modified at the campus level of the research site and executed concurrently with the school's Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS), the counseling service that transitioned to an online format as a potential alternative according to the research conducted by Richards and Tangney (2008) and Wells (2023).

In the implementation of the Leveraging program (LP) and Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS), the school leaders in the research site collaborated with teachers and guidance counselors and parents through case conferences to discuss different student's situations and to design catch-up plans. The catch-up plans are consisting of intervention plans and identified activities, and references such as readings and video

lectures for individualized learning design based on the specific needs of students with challenges.

The school's intervention program was spearheaded by school leaders under the curriculum and instruction division who oversee teaching and instructional activities within the institution. They collaborated with the RPSS team consisting of six in-house counselors who had received training in Mental Health First Aid for adolescents. As suggested by Deaton et al. (2022), school leaders and counselors can serve as the initial point of contact for identifying students who might be at risk.

The initial step involved the RPSS to establish a connection between students and their Batch counselors through a sign-up link. This approach was put into action to enable students to communicate their needs whenever necessary, aligning with the idea suggested by Hymel et al. (2017) and Hughes et al. (2019) that schools through the provisions of a secure platform for self-expression, can foster feeling of belongingness that potentially enhances students' wellbeing and learning. Equipped with the new learnings, the RPSS was established using the Doxy.me, Google Meet, and Viber, as online platforms. Similarly, when the announcement that schools would shift to online mode was made, the Guidance and Counseling Unit (GCU) migrated all its services online to ensure the students and other stakeholders had easier access to all services.

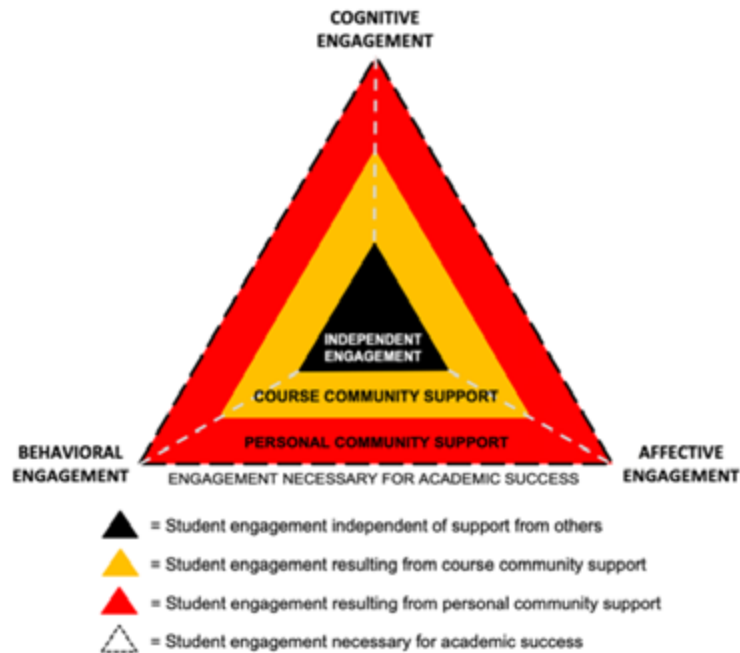
Theoretical Framework that guided the LP and RPSS

As shown in Figure 1, the Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) framework introduced by Borup et al. (2020), students' engagement in attaining academic success is important. Also, the framework shows different supports that may help to foster students' engagement such as course community, personal community, and support from others. In this study, the ACE framework served as a guide in framing the Leveraging Program (LP) accompanied by the Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS), the combined intervention programs that aimed to foster students' engagement and wellbeing.

There are three distinct groups that served as community support to help the students be more engaged and develop positive wellbeing while undergoing remote learning until gradual return to in-person classes. First is the course community support that includes teachers who implemented the curriculum through actual classroom teaching. Second is the personal community support that includes parents that guided students at home and guidance counselors as the primary key role players of the RPSS that conduct counseling sessions and various workshops to help the students develop positive wellbeing. And the support from others that includes the different experts outsourced by teachers and guidance counselors during symposiums and workshops that provided discussions and practical activities to foster students' engagement and wellbeing. These three collaborative communities work in synergy to enhance students' engagement and wellbeing.

Figure 1

The Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) Framework Adapted from (Borup et al., 2020)

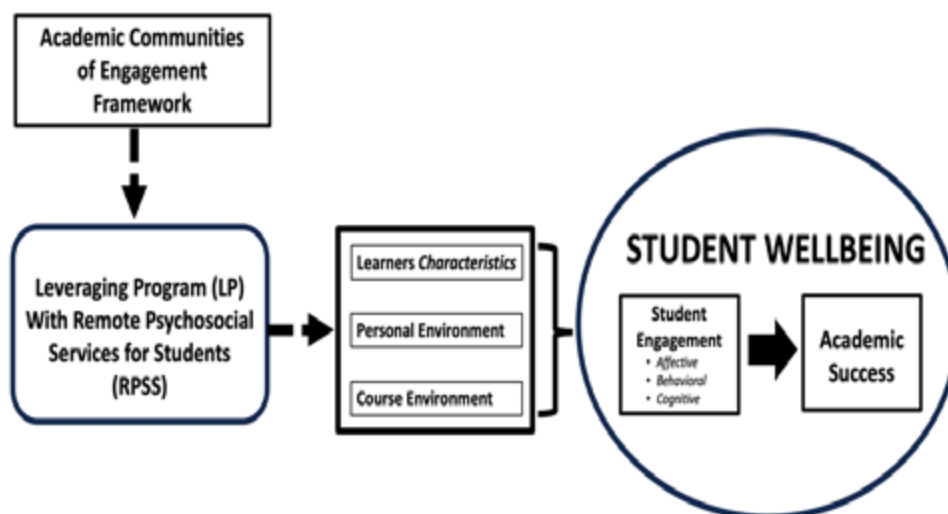


The LP and RPSS as framed by the ACE framework

As presented in Figure 2, the ACE served as the lens for designing the Leveraging program (LP) and the Remote psychosocial services (RPSS) for students. These two combined

Figure 2

The Leveraging Program Intervention Model framed by ACE framework



intervention programs aimed to proactively support students by fostering students' engagement and wellbeing.

Through the LP and RPSS, the learners' characteristics, personal environment and course environment were considered in designing intervention activities to foster students' engagement and wellbeing. Emphasizing individualized learning, teacher support, students' autonomy, and continuous guidance, are the most important aspects considered in the intervention program. Understanding different situations that students are facing helped teachers and guidance counselors design catch-up plans to help the students learn on their pace and maintain engagement towards learning.

During the pandemic, the LP and RPSS, guided by the ACE framework, adapted to disruptions by prioritizing accessibility for all students and to be inclusive for all. Collaboration among educators and counselors provided academic support, fostering connection for students facing uncertainties.

The LP and RPSS focused on how to address challenges of students during the remote learning. The individualized learning introduced in the implementation of LP and RPSS helped students reduced stress associated with the difficulties and other remote learning challenges. The continuous guidance from teachers, guidance counselors and other members of the support communities helped address the needs of students. The LP and RPSS guided by ACE was framed to create educational environment prioritizing overall student engagement and wellbeing through inclusive, collaborative, and personalized support amid challenges caused by the pandemic.

This research study aimed to explore school leaders' experiences in implementing the Leveraging Program (LP) with Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary objective is to identify successful practices, challenges faced, and overall impact of these interventions on students' engagement and wellbeing. The results of the study aimed also to recommend which practices applied in the intervention programs be recommended to be retained and to be improved for future should there be a need to shift again to full remote learning.

In line with this, this research study aimed to explore school leaders' experiences in the implementation of the Leveraging Program (LP) with Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) through the lens of Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

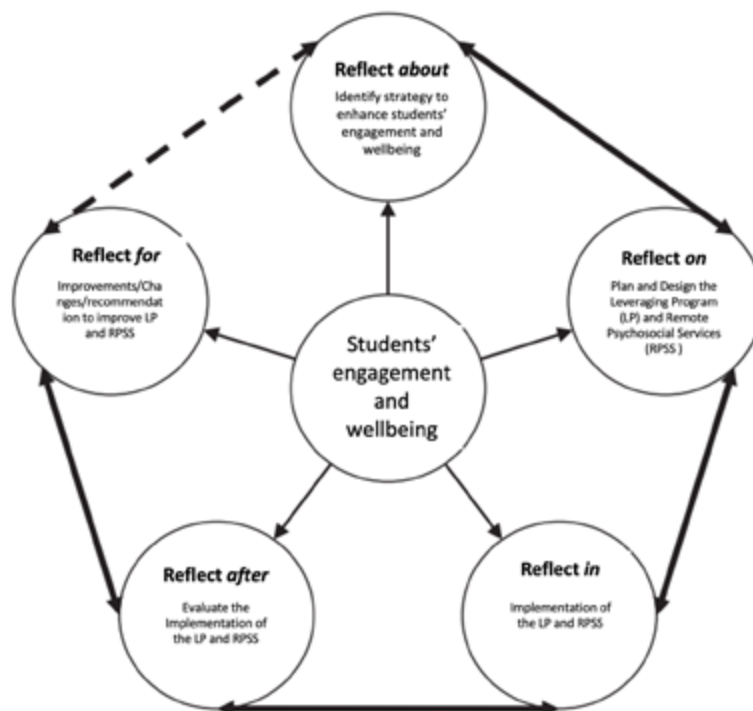
Methodology and Methods

Guided by interpretivists’ view, this qualitative research investigated the effectiveness of the implementation of Leveraging Program (LP) and Remote psychosocial services (RPSS) to support and enhance students’ engagement and wellbeing amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it employed the self-reflective approach, an integral facet of action research (Cresswell & Gutterman, 2021). As highlighted by Zuber-Skerritt (1996, p. 14), “action research provides the necessary link between self-evaluation and professional development.” In this study, three academic leaders acted as the researchers and concurrently as the participants. They engaged in a critical reflection to thoroughly examine their own practices, actions, and experiences in the implementation of the LP and RPSS intervention. This is a technique that helped them identify areas for refinement and improvement in the intervention practices (Satariyan & Reynolds, 2016; Schmuck et al., 2006). This study adhered to the structured five-phases of reflective action research process proposed by Satariyan and Reynolds (2016) and shown in Figure 3.

As referred to Figure 3, the first step is to *reflect about strategies or interventions on how to enhance students’ engagement and wellbeing*. In this stage, the leveraging program (LP) and Remote Psychosocial Services (RPSS) was identified. Secondly, to *reflect on implementing the Leveraging program (LP) and Remote Psychosocial Services (RPSS)*, to enhance students’ engagement and wellbeing. This stage included developing and executing

Figure 3

Reflective Model for Action Research



individualized Catch-up plans tailored to meet students' specific needs. Thirdly, *reflection in* the actual implementation of LP and RPSS in action. This phase involved monitoring the actual execution of the planned interventions and making necessary adjustments for effectiveness. The fourth step involved reflecting *after*, which involved reflecting on the outcomes and impact of LP and RPSS. The researcher participants assess how the LP and RPSS intervention program have contributed to enhancing students' engagement and wellbeing. Finally, the fifth stage centered on *reflection for* identifying areas of improvement, suggesting changes, and making recommendations for future implementation of LP and RPSS. Throughout this reflective process, continuous refinement, and enhancement of the LP and RPSS intervention programs are pursued to better support students' engagement and wellbeing.

Research Participants and Settings

Three participants at a secondary public school, acting as both researchers and key program implementers, were selected purposefully for their major roles in planning and executing the LP And RPSS intervention program in this study. Two participants served as Curriculum and Instruction Division chief and Instruction officer, directly involved with academic matters. The third participant was the head of the Guidance and Counseling unit also acting as the batch counselor. The three participants played essential roles in understanding students' needs, collaborated with parents and assisted teachers in designing personalized Catch-Up plans to enhance learning, student engagement and wellbeing.

Data Source and Analysis

Data were gathered through the researcher participants' journals, dialogical transcripts, and their responses in open-ended semi-structured interview questionnaires. This was to capture their personalized practices and involvement in the implementation of the leveraging program. The semi-structured interview contains a prompt that will further explore academic leaders' insights on how their roles, practices, and the overall implementation of the program be improved. The data collection was only limited to the academic leaders as researcher participants and did not include interviews with other school communities due to limited access and time constraints. To at least lessen the threat to the reliability and trustworthiness of the research, the researcher participants observed proper audit trail and member-checking all throughout the research process where they provided each other professional feedback.

All the researchers' narratives were analyzed through thematic analysis, a non-linear approach that is used to analyze qualitative data (Creswell & Gutterman, 2021; Saldaña et al., 2014). It initially involved reading and rereading participants' journal inputs, dialogical transcripts, and all responses to the open-ended questionnaires. After ensuring enough responses, a hybrid coding was used. A deductive approach through the lens of the Academic Communities of Engagement framework was employed and an inductive approach was also utilized to lessen the researchers' bias. The six steps in

thematic analysis introduced by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) namely: (1) Familiarization with the data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes and (6) Writing reports, as discussed by (Dawadi, 2020) were followed in the data analysis of this study.

Ethical Considerations

In this self-reflective action research, there were ethical factors that required careful consideration. One was the participants' close collaborative working relationship as researcher participants. In alignment with this, the researcher participants made sure to uphold their dedication to being advocates of ethical research and continue to adhere to the principles of covenantal ethics. As highlighted by Creswell and Gutterman (2021, p. 650), "this dedication involves active and transparent engagement, valuing individuals' expertise, promoting democratic and non-hierarchical approaches, and fostering constructive and enduring social change within the action research community".

Confidentiality of Research Data

The researcher participants took diligent steps to protect the confidentiality of the research data. They secured approval from the school administration and data privacy officer. It was guaranteed that none of the names of students and non-participants in the research were disclosed. Furthermore, no school documents, student records, or employee records were featured or discussed in this study. Moreover, all data collected for this study were strictly used objectively and employed for its intended purpose only. Most importantly, all researcher participants had the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts of their responses. The researcher participants were committed to ensuring the research was accessible while safeguarding the privacy of collected data.

Results and Discussions

This section provides information about the experiences of school leaders, as research participants on fostering students' engagement and wellbeing through the implementation of the LP and RPSS. Their experiences were reflected by the successful practices that they implemented under the LP and RPSS during the remote learning until the gradual return to in-person classes.

As discussed in the background of the study, the different support communities to support and foster students' engagement and wellbeing are the course community, personal community, and the other supports. The course community support refers to all personnel in the school with the role in terms of dealing with the students in terms of courses or any academic-related matters and administered the overall LP activities. Thus, like those highlighted, by Borup et al. (2020) this includes teachers, peers, administrators, and

guidance counselors. Personal community support on the other hand according to Borup et al. (2020) involves the student’s parents, siblings, and peers. Guidance counselors in this study fall under both personal and course support because they are the ones, through the RPSS, to help students maintain positive wellbeing. At the same time, they were the ones who communicated the situation of the students to the course community for better planning of the individualized catch-up plan for students at risk. Below are the successful practices experienced by the school leaders.

Personal Support Community Activities through the RPSS

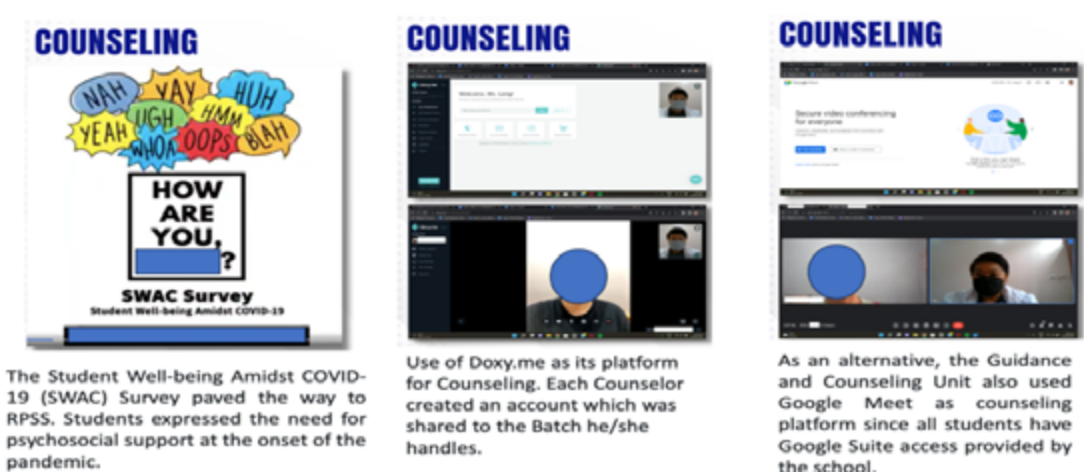
The RPSS is the first line of identifying students who need support in school. Below are the actions taken during the remote learning until the gradual return to in-person classes.

Theme 1: Establishing Remote Counseling to establish psychosocial support system to foster students’ wellbeing.

The focus of the RPSS was to establish a holistic psychosocial support system, aiming to cultivate a more inclusive atmosphere to enhance the emotional well-being of students. This involved guidance counselors offering webinars and individual counseling sessions to students who sought their assistance as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Counseling Session by the RPSS Team



The remote counseling conducted by the guidance counselors provided safe space for students to ask help and express their challenges as Ms. Anna, the researcher participant in this study narrated that “the GCU consistently received an excellent rating in the year 2021. She also shared that “According to the students, they really enjoyed the intake interview the guidance

counselor had with them. It makes them feel that the school really cares about the entire well-being of their students.”

Course Support Community Activities through Leveraging Program

The course support community in this study primarily involved teachers who teach various subjects and overseen by the instruction division leaders.

Theme 2: Engaging curriculum design for academic success.

In response to the declining students’ learning engagement during the remote learning, the school adjusted it to the way that activities to make learning more engaging were prioritized. Recognizing that engaging curriculum is important to fostering academic success, hands-on and interactive activities which can be done online were incorporated in the curriculum.

Activities were integrated with technology such as virtual labs, multimedia presentations, and printed materials to enhance student engagement while on remote learning until the gradual return to in-person classes. Acknowledging the challenges faced by students in remote locations with intermittent or no internet access, the school took proactive approach by delivering printed modules. This initiative ensured that all students, regardless of their geographical constraints, could actively participate in the learning process. As shown in Figure 5, the school’s commitment to facilitating a conducive learning environment by providing laboratory kits alongside with printed modules, enabling students to collaborate with their classmates and teachers during synchronous class discussions.

Figure 5

Learning Guides and Laboratory Kits Sent to the Students to use for Remote Learning



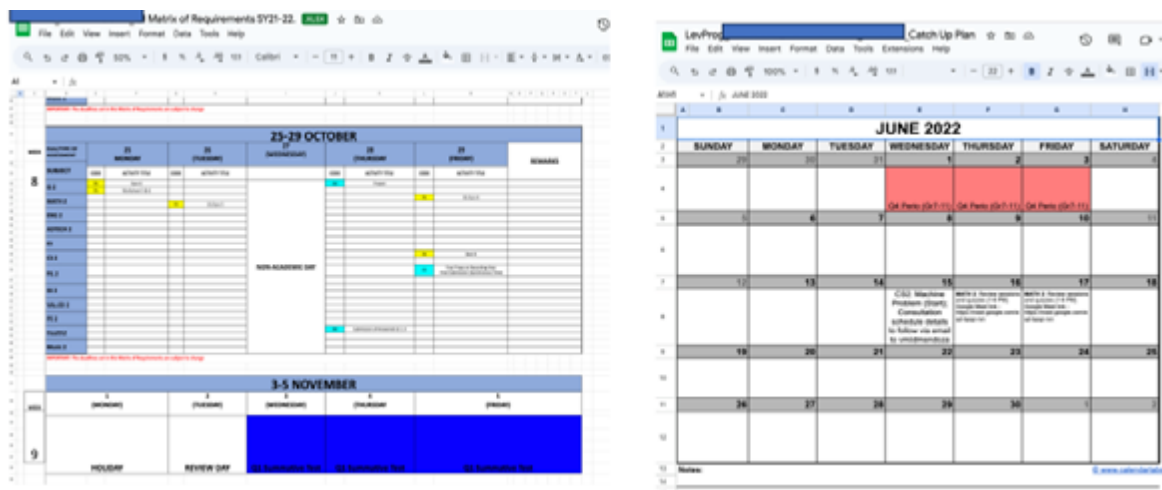
and respected, fostering sense of belonging in the remote learning environment. Also, through technology, the school implemented feedback mechanisms, allowing asynchronous and synchronous online check-ins. This approach facilitated timely and constructive feedback on students’ outputs and performances, creating iterative process that empowered students to revise and enhance their works.

Theme 3: Collaborative and immediate feedback and assessment.

The course community support composed of teachers and guidance counselors spearheaded by the curriculum and instruction division leaders conducted regular meetings to discuss students’ cases and to design individualized catch-Up plans and present them to students and their parents or guardians. As presented in Figure 6, this technique is supported by what Daradoumis et al. (2011) asserted that computer-supported collaborative learning can help smaller groups of school members to foster and enrich educational experiences as well as facilitate productive work and social interaction for learning.

Figure 6

Leveraging Orientation, Planning and Designing Individualized Catch-up Plan for Individual Student using online platforms



One of the major practices made in the leveraging program is the collaboration among teachers and school leaders together with the guidance counselor. As expressed in the narrative of the two researchers:

“In the leveraging program, the best practice I learned being a new school leader is how to work with other co-educators. It is challenging but worth learning to reflect and work to come up with a shared vision on helping students without compromising the integrity of instruction and assessments. Best thing to consider

here is the strongly built relationship with colleagues, leaders, and counselors. I am very thankful to my superior for being my mentor in dealing with the various case conferences I handled.”- Kylie.

“The practice of collaborative planning among teachers, curriculum and instruction division leaders and guidance counselors promoted a more holistic approach to support students with challenges. It helped the students by addressing their academic, emotional, and social needs while providing teachers and leaders with valuable insights for effective intervention”. -Cris

In line with the researchers’ reflections, mentoring and effective collaboration to plan and design instruction and assessment for the students with challenges is important. This is cognizant to what other researchers asserted that mentoring has the potential to enhance interactions with fellow educators or colleagues leading to increased motivation and empowerment to enhance their own performance and wellbeing (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Torossian, 2021)

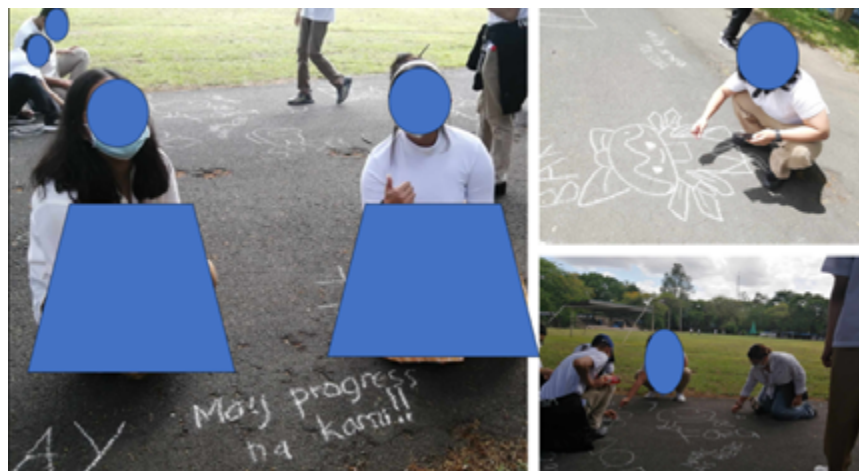
Theme 4: Positive school culture through integration of wellbeing activities to instructions.

Some other techniques done during the COVID-19 Pandemic was to integrate activities related to wellbeing particularly in their homeroom classes as the students gradually returned to in-person classes as shown in Figure 7. As one of the researchers expressed:

“The chalk art activity allowed our students to express their emotions which they said therapeutic for them. For me as I observed, it opened an avenue for them to communicate their feelings that they may not be able to express verbally”- Kylie.

Figure 7

Chalk Art Activity Integrated in Homeroom Class



Moreover, as the other researcher observed the chalk art activity, he also expressed his thoughts in his narrative that:

“The activity served as an avenue for the students to express their emotions, a way to reduce their stress and anxieties. For the students creating the art can be relaxing and helped them manage their pandemic-related stress. The art activity was like a welcome break from their academic work and allowing them to focus again and engage. It also encouraged the students do outdoor activity and reconnect with nature after being confined at home.” - Cris

Based on the researchers insights, it can be affirmed that the students indeed need to be exposed to creating opportunities for stress reduction, fostering social connections through activities involving natural settings to amplify their sense of wellbeing as claimed by (Down et al., 2023) in their study.

Conclusions

The generated themes discussed in the previous section can help leaders and other educators plan how to continue education should there be another crisis that the academic community might be facing. In conclusion, the study revealed some impactful practices implemented by school leaders with the other members of the school community to enhance students' engagement and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the personal support community, the Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS) played a significant role. The establishment of remote counseling, proactive reach out to students and conduct of webinars to deliver information about wellbeing provided a comprehensive psychosocial support system for students. These practices helped the students develop strong sense of care and wellbeing. On the other hand, in the course support community that facilitated the Leveraging program (LP), the engaging curriculum designed as the practice of developing engaging curriculum helped students maintain their interest in learning during the remote learning until the gradual return to in-person classes. The collaborative planning among teachers, counselors and parents revealed to be effective in designing individualized catch-up plans for students. This is noted as a holistic approach that addressed academic, emotional, and social needs which are important aspects of students' wellbeing. Furthermore, the integration of wellbeing activities to homeroom classes during the gradual return to in-person classes such as the chalk art activity, provided students with therapeutic outlets for expression and stress reduction and thus fostered positive wellbeing for them. Also, this study recognized the importance of comprehensive and collaborative approach in fostering students' engagement and wellbeing during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations to further enhance students' engagement and overall wellbeing. First is to sustain and possibly expand the Remote Psychosocial Services for Students (RPSS), giving emphasis to both now remote and in-person counseling sessions, proactive reaching out to students, and to sustain the conducts of seminars about wellbeing. This ensures the continuity of a comprehensive psychosocial support system, positively influencing students' sense of care and wellbeing. Secondly is maintain the innovative curriculum design suitable for both remote and in-person learning. This is essential for schools to be ready in case there will some unforeseen challenges again such as pandemic, natural disasters, or other crises that can disrupt the traditional modes of learning. By consistently prioritizing engaging curriculum design through the incorporation of technology and printed materials, schools can enhance their preparedness for unexpected class disruptions. Thirdly, it is highly recommended to foster continued collaboration among educators and counselors. Encouraging on going collaborative planning ensures the design and implementation of individualized catch-up plans that embrace a holistic approach to those students who might be needing support. Furthermore, it is recommended to extend integration of wellbeing activities in the classroom to provide students the experiences that will help them reduce stress and pressure, contributing to the cultivation of a positive and supportive school culture. And finally, this study highlights the importance of establishing a mechanism for regularly seeking and incorporating student feedback. This continuous feedback ensures that interventions and activities align with evolving needs and preferences of students, fostering a more responsive and student-centered educational approach.

By adopting these recommendations, schools can create an adaptive school environment that not only addresses immediate challenges but also proactively nurtures the overall wellbeing and engagement of students.



Research Funding

The researchers received no financial support from any funding institution for the conduct of this study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgment

The researchers extend their gratitude to the Management Committee, Data Privacy Office, Ethics Committee of the research setting for their approval, generous time, and support in the conduct of this study.



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