

Journal Article

School Reopening Concerns Amid a Pandemic Among Higher Education Students: A Developing Country Perspective for Policy Development

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Abstract:

School reopening is essential for restoring normalcy after a period of disruption. However, executing this endeavor during a pandemic requires a comprehensive strategy to ensure success. Consulting stakeholders is consequently crucial for informed and inclusive policies. Prior works recruited public officials, health authorities, teachers, and parents. Unfortunately, students were often not involved in such consultations. The present study addressed this gap by uncovering the sentiments and concerns on school reopening among higher education students. A total of 223 students enrolled in public and private universities from rural and urban areas participated in the study. Based on their reflective essays, students have mixed sentiments about returning to school during the pandemic and highlight safety, academic, health, and financial concerns as major areas requiring attention. It is now incumbent upon governments, schools, policymakers, and education leaders to carefully analyze and incorporate the findings of this study into their back-to-school guidelines and strategies. With informed decision-making and evidenced-based policy, we can build back a stronger and more resilient education system that equitably serves all students in the post-pandemic world.

Keywords:

School Reopening, Higher Education, Developing Country, Philippines, Qualitative Research, Emergency Remote Learning



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INTRODUCTION

School closure is a common policy response during times of crisis. This tactic has been employed in past crises, such as the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak (Kayman et al., 2015), the 2010 Haiti Earthquake (Green & Miles, 2011), and the 2017 Hurricane Harvey (Jackson & Ahmed, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions were expeditiously and universally closed down to protect public health (González & Bonal, 2021). The transition to emergency remote learning (ERL) became a necessity as a means of educational continuity. ERL is a form of distance education that is temporarily implemented in response to crises. Unlike online learning, ERL is not a well-planned educational delivery mode and it thus may not have the same quality level of learning materials, instructional strategies, and student engagement. Inevitably, the migration of the unprepared education sector to a new learning space has confronted pressing issues relating to socioeconomic differences, online learning pedagogies, psychosocial factors, technological barriers, and more (Barrot et al., 2021; Koh & Daniel, 2022). In response to these challenges, there has been an outbreak of studies on the new normal in education – a departure from traditional educational practices towards a more dynamic, technology-enabled, and student-centered approach to learning. This proliferation of the literature is a collective effort to find strategies less disruptive than school closure that may minimize learning loss and accelerate learning recovery in a post-pandemic education system.

The negative consequences of school closures during the pandemic, including student learning loss, diminished emotional and social development, and impaired physical and mental well-being (Engzell et al., 2021; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020), prompted an increasing demand for school reopening. This study defined school reopening as the process of resuming in-person classes at all types and levels of educational institutions after a period of closure. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) reported in November 2021 that the government's pandemic task force had finally allowed limited in-person classes for all degree programs (Rocamora, 2021). This decision came after an extended period of approximately two years in which education had predominantly taken place through ERL. In stark contrast to many Western countries, the Philippines is among the last countries to reopen schools since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). To facilitate a safe reopening of schools, the CHED imposed several requirements for colleges and universities planning to conduct limited face-to-face classes. These conditions include full vaccinations for participating individuals (e.g., students, teachers, and employees), compliance of schools in retrofitting their facilities, and proper coordination with local governments. After almost a year of limited in-person instruction, the CHED released Memorandum Order (MO) No. 16 instructing higher education institutions (HEIs) to implement either full face-to-face classes or a hybrid learning approach for the second semester of the academic year 2022 to 2023. In this MO, it was advised to conduct a comprehensive analysis of students' needs before reopening schools.

Despite this recommendation, it is unclear whether HEIs consulted their students regarding the resumption of in-person instruction amidst the ongoing pandemic threat. There is also a scarcity of literature that discusses the involvement of students in such consultations. Most studies on school reopening have predominantly focused on the perspectives of teachers (Kim et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2020; Wakui et al., 2021), parents (Levinson et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021), and public health authorities (Singer et al., 2023). Given the comparatively limited representation of students in school reopening literature, there exists a research gap that requires further investigation. Consequently, this study attempts to contribute new actionable findings that can inform school reopening decisions by uncovering the sentiments and concerns among higher education students. Incorporating student voices in the development of back-to-school guidelines, strategies, and recommendations could be invaluable to strengthening the accomplishment of safe school reopening efforts. Addressing this research area may provide valuable insights to policymakers on how to better accommodate the educational needs of students. The findings of this study may also be utilized in making new or improving existing policies, procedures, and guiding interventions (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Lo Moro et al., 2020; Lopes-Júnior et al., 2021) on safe school reopening. Given that numerous schools have already reopened, this research can still serve as a valuable reference in future education crises.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Crises as Catalysts for Education Transformations

A crisis is a critical incident that can take many forms (e.g., human-made events and natural disasters) but all of them invariably result in substantial adverse effects on societies (Howat et al., 2012; Lassa et al., 2023; Postiglione, 2011). In the education sector, they have been observed to catalyze notable modifications in crucial academic aspects such as teaching methodologies (Simões de Almeida, 2023), learning environment (Lamsal, 2022), and access to education (Krishnaswami et al., 2022). Such changes occur due to the pressing necessity for innovative and adaptive approaches that can ensure continuity and quality in education. The traditional modes of learning delivery may become impractical during crises, leading to a shift towards more flexible and remote methods of learning. This temporary transformation may involve the utilization of technology-based tools such as video conferencing, virtual learning platforms, and other digital resources (Garcia et al., 2023; Magulod et al., 2020). These alternative methods serve as an equalizer for all students irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds and other ascriptive characteristics. Recognizing that education is a fundamental human right that should be accessible to all even in the most challenging of times, it is essential to formulate and implement measures that guarantee educational continuity. Therefore, examining the state of education during times of crises is a crucial research topic to ensure that educational policies and practices are optimized for this kind of situation.

The State of Education in Times of Adversity

Education plays a vital role in assisting students to confront the challenges they encounter during times of adversity. Extensive research has shown that schools can and must create a predictable and supportive environment that provides students with the necessary stability and structure to cope with the unfortunate consequences (Egan et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). In such difficult times, schools can offer a sense of normalcy amidst uncertainty and serve as a safe space for students to continue their education (Lamsal, 2022; Treceñe, 2022). There are also trained professionals (e.g., school counselors) within these institutions who can provide valuable support and guidance to students who may be struggling to cope (Alexander et al., 2022; Pincus et al., 2020). Despite its substantial benefits to entire nations, education is frequently the first service that is suspended and the final one to be reinstated during a crisis (e.g., Tilak, 2021). According to the literature, school closures can have long-lasting effects, including significant learning loss, increased dropout rates, reduced learning outcomes, and decreased economic opportunities (Antipova, 2021; Betthäuser et al., 2023; Garcia & Yousef, 2023; Smith, 2021). It is consequently unsurprising why the state of education during such times is a matter of critical importance for researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, one of the most critical priorities of the education sector is to reopen schools.

Involving Stakeholders in School Reopening Decisions

Reopening schools for site-based instruction amidst a crisis is a complex decision that requires careful deliberation of many factors, including sociodemographic, economic, and health-related concerns. Consulting with stakeholders and involving them in the decision-making process is therefore critical not only for building trust and transparency but also for ensuring that all perspectives are considered. This necessity is highlighted in the literature produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considered one of the most unprecedented crises in the history of education. In a multiple case study involving traditional public and charter schools, Singer et al. (2023) found that school system leaders generally consulted public health authorities to ensure compliance with recommended guidelines and protocols. Other major actors involved in school reopening were public officials (e.g., governors and mayors), school board members, system leaders (e.g., superintendents), school leaders (e.g., principals) teachers and teachers' unions, and parents. Similar key stakeholders were also reported in other studies (Amri et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2021; Marianno et al., 2022; Zimmerman et al., 2022). Regrettably, students were often not consulted or included in the decision-making process. This lack of involvement can have significant consequences as students are the ones who are most directly affected by school closures and reopenings. Therefore, there is a necessity for student representation in the decision-making process to formulate more comprehensive educational policies. Their viewpoints may provide valuable insights into the needs and challenges of the student population.

METHODS

Research Design

This study is a qualitative inquiry looking into the concerns of higher education students on school reopening amidst the ongoing pandemic threat. According to Teti et al. (2020), a qualitative inquiry is the most suited approach for capturing social responses to this pandemic. This assertion is supported by many studies that adopted qualitative methods to inform evidence-based public health response efforts (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). For the methodological orientation, this qualitative study applied a content analysis approach to examine reflective essays. Content analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research for systematically examining and interpreting the content of various forms of communication (e.g., written texts or documents). According to Schreier (2012), content analysis is deemed systematic due to its comprehensive consideration of all relevant material, adherence to a predetermined sequence of steps during the analysis process, and the researcher's responsibility to ensure coding consistency. In this study, this method allowed for a systematic examination of the reflection papers submitted by students in response to the assigned questions. The checklist provided by Elo et al. (2014) was used to improve the trustworthiness of this content analysis study.

Setting and Participants

Similar to other nations, the Philippines encountered a range of challenges in its ERL implementation (Garcia & Revano, 2022). Although school reopening was imminent, this developing country displayed caution in resuming in-person classes (Maboloc, 2022). The extensive duration of school closure and the continual threat posed by the pandemic positions it as a suitable candidate for examining concerns associated with school reopening. Consequently, both public and private universities from rural and urban areas ($n = 4$) in the Philippines were purposively selected to participate in the study. The deliberate inclusion of universities from diverse geographical settings allows for a comprehensive representation of the higher education student population. The Urban-Rural Classification provided by the Philippine Statistics Authority served as the basis for categorizing the participating universities according to their geographical location. The selection of specific universities was based on a purposive and convenient sampling approach, taking into consideration the willingness of the universities to participate in the study and the availability of an online learning platform. The online learning platform was a requirement because the reflective essay was distributed as an online assignment. As per the agreement with the participating universities, the online assignment was made available randomly in a limited number of classes. In terms of student inclusion criteria, a minimum of one semester's worth of experience in ERL was required. A total of 223 assignment submissions were collected from a public urban university ($n = 57$, 25.56%), public rural university ($n = 47$, 21.08%), private urban university ($n = 63$, 28.25%), and private rural university ($n = 56$, 25.11%).

Procedures

Initially, the scheduled data collection was set immediately following the announcement regarding the potential opening of limited face-to-face classes made by the CHED on October 11, 2021. However, the data collection had to be postponed due to major examinations taking place at two universities during that week. In an effort to mine timely and current student opinions, the data collection process was rescheduled to coincide with subsequent statements regarding school reopening. Fortunately, on November 5, 2021, the CHED issued a further announcement permitting limited in-person classes up to 50% capacity for all degree programs (Rocamora, 2021). Before proceeding with the data collection process, the research protocol and procedures were reviewed and approved by the universities and relevant ethics committees. Following their approval, the assignment was posted on their corresponding online learning platforms. The reflection paper consisted of two guide questions: "*How do you feel about going back to school?*" and "*What are your concerns that must be addressed before returning to school?*". Students were explicitly informed that the assignment was voluntary and would not impact their grades. A day after the submission deadline, an informed consent package was sent to all students who had submitted their reflection papers. They were requested to sign and return the consent form if they agreed to have their reflection papers utilized for research purposes. All students ($n = 223$) agreed and submitted a consent form signed by themselves and/or their parents.

Data Analyses

Reflection papers ranging from five to eight paragraphs (average = 1588 words) were examined using sentiment and content analyses. The sentiment analysis component focused on addressing the question of students' emotional disposition towards returning to school, while the thematic analysis component aimed to identify the concerns that need to be addressed before resuming in-person classes. Sentiment analysis is typically computer-assisted (e.g., Garcia, 2020) but was performed manually in the present study since the sample size made it feasible. This decision is supported by van Atteveldt et al. (2021) who asserted that human coding has still the best performance and that automatic techniques do not always perform sufficiently. The annotation schemes proposed by Mohammad (2016) were followed to classify sentiments as positive, negative, or neutral. The researcher and two external advisors served as human annotators. Meanwhile, the same team performed content analysis using an inductive approach (Graneheim et al., 2017). As a data familiarization process, reflective essays were reviewed several times. The research team individually derived codes and categories, which were then compared according to their similarities. A consensus-building process was adopted to address differing viewpoints. Whenever possible, the extracted subcategories were merged to form a main category. Together with the reporting of results in the next section, these steps followed the methodology outlined by (Kyngäs, 2020). Finally, representative quotations were included to indicate the trustworthiness of the results and reflect the participants' voices (Elo et al., 2014).

RESULTS

Sentiment Analysis

When asked “*How do you feel about going back to school?*”, a relatively equal number of responses were classified as positive (82, 36.77%) and negative (86, 38.57%), with the remaining being neutral (55, 24.66%) as shown on Table 1. The sentiment classification of student feedback was primarily based on their stance on the issue of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, most negative sentiments originated from students affiliated with the public (44, 19.73%) and urban (50, 22.42%) universities when the data were analyzed by group.

Table 1. Sentiment Analysis of Reflective Essays

University	Positive		Negative		Neutral		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
By source								
Public Urban	20	8.97	24	10.76	13	5.83	57	25.56
Public Rural	16	7.17	20	8.97	11	4.93	47	21.08
Private Urban	25	11.21	26	11.66	12	5.38	63	28.25
Private Rural	21	9.42	16	7.17	19	8.52	56	25.11
Total	82	36.77	86	38.57	55	24.66	223	100.00
By group, type								
Public	36	16.14	44	19.73	24	10.76	104	46.64
Private	46	18.83	42	18.83	31	13.90	119	53.36
By group, area								
Urban	45	20.18	50	22.42	25	11.21	120	53.81
Rural	37	16.59	36	16.14	30	13.45	103	46.19

Positive Sentiments

A core pattern across responses was the array of challenges encountered by students when their classes transitioned to ERL. From the standpoint of students, these challenges created barriers that impeded their access to educational opportunities. It is widely expressed among students that ERL is not effectively meeting their educational needs, making a return to in-person instruction a welcomed relief. For them, it is a risk they are willing to take.

“Frankly, I’m still not fond of venturing outdoors amidst the ongoing pandemic but having a limited face to face classes is still preferable than attending another Zoom class.” – S18

“I am feeling a sense of anticipation as I prepare to return to school. Reflecting on my pandemic experience, I have come to appreciate the effectiveness of in-person classes compared to online classes. A reliable internet connection has been my problem. I hope that the news confirming our return to physical classrooms is indeed definitive.” – S21

Negative Sentiments

Despite the common notion among students that in-person classes are still more effective than ERL, there were nevertheless some responses emphasizing the prioritization of health over schooling. This sentiment echoes the phrase “*Maslow before Bloom*”, referring to the hierarchy of needs taking precedence over educational learning objectives. Additionally, some students argued that ERL possesses advantages that may offset the challenges, and they expressed the view that returning to school in a limited capacity at present is not worth the associated risks.

“Going back to school is inevitable. However, I am not particularly inclined to the idea of returning to face-to-face classes at this point. The advantages and conveniences offered by online schooling outweigh the benefits of physically attending school. By staying at home, I have greater control over how I allocate my time and organize my daily tasks.” – S155

“I came from an unwealthy family, which is why I feel scared of going outside and potentially exposing myself to the virus. If certain students wish to return, let them make that choice. Personally, I prefer to prioritize my safety and that of my loved ones.” – S142

Neutral Sentiments

When it comes to striking a balance between prioritizing health and the significance of attending school, students encounter a challenging dilemma. At this juncture, it is understandable that certain students maintain a neutral stance and have not yet reached a definitive conclusion on whether returning to school aligns with their best interests. These students find themselves in a state of deliberation, carefully considering the various factors involved before making a decision. They are aware of the complexity of the situation and are taking their time to assess the potential implications before committing to a particular viewpoint. Some students noted:

“Finding a balance between my newfound love for staying at home and the need to continue learning is a decision that requires careful consideration. However, choosing between the two options will ultimately depend on prioritizing my personal growth and long-term goals.” – S45

“Presently I’m uncertain whether face-to-face classes is needed. I would like to assess first the situation whenever some students returned. I would also like to consider various factors like the transportation, potential exposure risks, and the condition of school facilities.” – S94

Content Analysis

When asked “*What are your concerns that must be addressed before returning to school?*”, four core themes were identified from the analysis: safety, academic, health, and financial. Each of these themes was further divided into four sub-themes. Of the 223 responses, only a small portion (65, 29.15%) fell under a single theme or sub-theme, while the majority (158, 70.85%) were associated with two or more themes or sub-themes. To offer deeper insights, the results were categorized and quantified according to classification (see Table 2). Overall, safety emerged as the most prevalent theme in student feedback, followed by academic, health, and financial concerns.

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	Total		Public Urban		Public Rural		Private Urban		Private Rural	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Safety		198	88.79	54	94.74	44	93.62	51	80.95	49	87.50
	Vaccination	109	48.88	34	59.65	27	57.45	24	38.10	24	42.86
	Health Protocols	67	30.04	24	42.11	19	40.43	9	14.29	15	26.79
	Commuting	54	24.22	19	33.33	17	36.17	8	12.70	10	17.86
	Food Safety	24	10.76	8	14.04	8	17.02	3	4.76	5	8.93
Academic		167	74.89	43	75.44	39	82.98	39	61.90	46	82.14
	Student Readiness	98	43.95	21	36.84	16	34.04	33	52.38	28	50.00
	Blended Learning	96	43.05	24	42.11	31	65.96	17	26.98	24	42.86
	Class Schedule	54	24.22	12	21.05	6	12.77	20	31.75	16	28.57
	Classroom Setup	32	14.35	11	19.30	9	19.15	5	7.94	7	12.50
Health		124	55.61	38	66.67	35	74.47	24	38.10	27	48.21
	Risk of Infection	109	48.88	38	66.67	20	42.55	36	57.14	15	26.79
	Mental Health	107	47.98	29	50.88	25	53.19	32	50.79	21	37.50
	Physical Condition	62	27.80	18	31.58	15	31.91	21	33.33	8	14.29
	Students with Disability	24	10.76	5	8.77	12	25.53	2	3.17	5	8.93
Financial		93	41.70	32	56.14	26	55.32	12	19.05	23	41.07
	Transportation	83	37.22	32	56.14	28	59.57	8	12.70	15	26.79
	Boarding House	66	29.60	24	42.11	4	8.51	35	55.56	3	5.36
	Part-Time Job	47	21.08	21	36.84	10	21.28	7	11.11	9	16.07
	Tuition Fee	44	19.73	9	15.79	7	14.89	18	28.57	10	17.86

Safety Concerns

As expected, safety concerns (198, 88.79%) constituted the largest proportion of student feedback. With more than 2.8 million confirmed cases and more than 47,000 deaths in the country, it is unsurprising that students feel unsafe about attending in-person classes. Among the 198 safety-related concerns, more than half of the responses were about vaccinations:

“Everyone should be vaccinated before returning to school. This includes students, teachers, staff, literally everyone inside the campus. Without this, everyone is not safe including us who are fully vaccinated already.” – S47 (Subtheme: Vaccination)

“Students who are not vaccinated should not be allowed to join the face-to-face classes. I respect that it is their choice but safety first.” – S129 (Subtheme: Vaccination)

Aside from stressing the importance of being vaccinated, students were also concerned about health protocols (e.g., wearing face masks and social distancing). They highlighted the importance of being consistent with these protocols both inside and outside school facilities:

“There should be strict health protocols inside the campus. I don’t care if I wear face masks throughout the whole class sessions.” – S85 (Subtheme: Health Protocols)

“I personally do not see the benefits of imposing 50% capacity for physical distancing inside the school when people are not clearly distancing from one another outside. How can we be safe if this is the reality?” – S123 (Subtheme: Health Protocols)

Another important concern that was raised by students was the danger of commuting via public transportation. Most students in the Philippines have no other option but to rely on cramped public transportation (e.g., trains, buses, and jeepneys) to commute to and from schools.

“There is so much uncertainty because you do not know the people you will encounter in the jeep or in a bus, whether they are sick or not.” – S12 (Subtheme: Commuting)

“I always hear from people that during rush hours, social distancing is not being observed inside public transportations. While I understand that drivers want to earn more to survive, it makes me worry about my safety when I return to school. I am from a poor family, and we do not own a private car.” – S62 (Subtheme: Commuting)

It is also interesting to learn that students are also concerned about food safety, and the potential risk of contracting COVID-19 through food chain interactions:

“I can only afford to eat in a carinderia during face-to-face classes but now I am worried if it is safe to eat outside with other people.” – S131 (Subtheme: Food Safety)

“Our school canteen is usually packed with a lot of students during breaktime, so I wonder how safe the foods will be with many people come and go.” – S6 (Subtheme: Food Safety)

Academic Concerns

Throughout the ERL implementation in the country, a significant stressor for numerous students revolves around academic-related concerns. Unfortunately, the same type of concern (167, 74.89%) arises as students entertain the idea of school reopening in the middle of the pandemic. Nearly half of these concerns were disclosed by students who shared their need to adapt first to the new normal. Some of the students stated the following:

“I don’t think I am ready yet to go back to school. I have been this way for almost two years now and I kind of enjoy sleeping long hours and the flexibility with my time. I do not know how I will perform when I return to school.” – S202 (Subtheme: Student Readiness)

“Well, with all honesty, I don’t mind going back to school even during a pandemic, but I need to adjust my mindset again. I need to transition from having a lot of freedom to being a real student again.” – S130 (Subtheme: Student Readiness)

With the pandemic still around, schools cannot yet afford to completely reopen as it might accelerate community transmission of the virus. Consequently, the Philippine government’s pandemic task force has only allowed face-to-face classes at 50% capacity. Although it is a safety measure, students still expressed their concerns regarding this blended learning approach:

“If only 50% students are allowed because of limited face-to-face, it only means that the other 50% will be studying virtually. How will they select who will be at school? What if I do not want to go to school at all?” – S19 (Subtheme: Blended Learning)

“For me, limited face-to-face with 50% capacity means that they are only solving 50% of my problems during online learning. I will not still learn half of the time and I fear it may affect my performance during the other half.” – S45 (Subtheme: Blended Learning)

Perhaps one concern that only students could voice out is their class schedule. Before the pandemic, long-vacant hours between classes means that students have extra time to study and prepare for their next class. Conversely, some students travel back and forth between their homes and school just to attend a single class. In the new normal, students asserted that an optimized class schedule is needed to minimize the risks of going out:

“One of the things I dislike about college and during face-to-face before is that I used to wait 3-6 hours before my next class. If I will have the same schedule, I think it will increase my risk of getting the virus.” – S93 (Subtheme: Class Schedule)

“Another important factor that schools should consider is that since we are first attempting “limited” face-to-face classes, proper distribution and management of schedules should be prioritized. Students should not be expected to commute all the way to school just to attend one subject at a given day.” – S135 (Subtheme: Class Schedule)

Following the announcement of the school reopening for all degree programs, various news segments about the proposed classroom setup were also reported. Of particular interest to many students were the discussions surrounding the implementation of plastic barriers and the limitations imposed on the availability of classrooms. These aspects garnered attention and sparked further deliberations among the student community. Students expressed curiosity about the potential impact of these measures on their learning environment and educational experience.

“As I always see on the news, most schools have set up plastic barriers installed on chairs/tables inside classrooms. Is it proven to be effective? I’m afraid that it will just be another distraction like the face shield.” – S81 (Subtheme: Classroom Setup)

“The proposed classroom seat arrangement broadcasted yesterday in the news seems to be created without sufficient consideration. Our country does not have enough classroom for this setup. Why push for face-to-face?” – S3 (Subtheme: Classroom Setup)

Health Concerns

Numerous empirical studies have extensively examined the significant adverse health consequences resulting from the prolonged duration of the pandemic among students. As schools prepare to resume operations, students express valid health concerns (124, 55.61%) that they wish to have addressed. While some of these are recurring issues during ERL (e.g., mental health), there are also some new ones like the risks of contracting the virus:

“Some concerns that the school must address is to really think about the student who commute because they are the most vulnerable to the virus and being around them at school in an enclosed environment is very risky for us.” – S2 (Subtheme: Risk of Infection)

“I am concerned mostly just hygiene related issues, like the restrooms and drinking fountains, and human contact, direct or indirect.” – S221 (Subtheme: Risk of Infection)

Apart from the virus itself, the traumatic nature of the current global pandemic has affected the mental health of many people. Specifically, students are expected to return to schools with significantly heightened needs compared to before, owing to the prolonged mental stress endured while navigating the challenges of surviving a pandemic in a third-world country. Regrettably, the unique circumstances and limited resources in such regions have added a layer of complexity to their mental well-being. Some students noted the following:

“My concerns are travel, some financial issues, probably a bit of time management and most importantly, physical and mental health.” – S12 (Subtheme: Mental Health)

“I continue to experience stress in online learning, and I anticipate additional stress when I transition back to face-to-face classes. I hope that schools are prepared to provide support for students who struggle with mental health issues.” – S212 (Subtheme: Mental Health)

Students likewise emphasized the importance of prioritizing both mental and physical well-being. Their feedback revealed that extended periods at home led to a decrease in outdoor physical activity, resulting in muscle loss and increased body fat (Garcia et al., 2021). This unfortunate circumstance highlights the need to address not only mental health concerns but also to promote a healthy lifestyle that includes regular exercise and physical activity.

“I got fat during lockdown. Besides my uniform that will not fit me anymore, I feel like I cannot walk long distance back and forth which I do before in the university when going to different buildings to attend classes.” – S158 (Subtheme: Physical Condition)

“Physically and mentally, I am still in no condition to resume my suffering from the hardship of commuting in a bus and in LRT.” – S186 (Subtheme: Physical Condition)

An often overlooked yet widespread issue before the pandemic was the lack of a safe and inclusive school environment for students with disabilities. With the return to school, these students may encounter a fresh set of challenges that necessitate additional support through the implementation of tailored interventions. Concerns have been voiced by students themselves, urging the government to provide the necessary assistance in addressing these issues.

“My brother is physically disabled. How will they accommodate his needs while maintaining the safety of everyone?” – S46 (Subtheme: Students with Disability)

“I believe that the government should also consider other students like those with no money to support their school or those with physical disability. I think they need more adjustment and support from schools.” – S35 (Subtheme: Students with Disability)

Financial Concerns

The COVID-19 pandemic has created not only health but also a financial crisis. In particular, the Philippines has witnessed its economy suffer the most severe recession since 1946. As indicated in the responses, this economic downturn has had a direct effect on students. A pattern revealed that financial concerns (93, 41.70%) could potentially hinder their ability to participate in school reopening. Even more concerning is the possibility that some students may be compelled to discontinue their studies altogether due to these financial constraints.

“Every peso counts. This has been our motto for the past two years. Whenever there is an increase of expenses like electricity, food, water, transportation, and everything, we feel it. We have to save and limit out expenses.” – S3 (Subtheme: Transportation)

“Although I love the fact that electronic jeepneys are air-conditioned and well-ventilated, we cannot afford the additional fare. For a student like me, even a few pesos are important which I can spend to buy food.” – S26 (Subtheme: Transportation)

Many students who attend universities located far from their homes often opt to reside in boarding houses. This decision not only helps them save on transportation expenses but also allows them to save valuable time, especially in countries with congested traffic conditions. However, due to the closure of schools, a significant number of these students have chosen to return to their homes to reduce their financial burden related to rental fees. When schools eventually reopen, students anticipate a surge in demand for boarding houses. This growth could mean a more expensive rental fee and difficulty in finding a suitable place to live.

“I hope the government announced early when is the start of face-to-face class so I can start finding a dorm in Manila. We really need to save money for it because we are expecting it will be expensive than before.” – S112 (Subtheme: Boarding House)

“For sure finding a dorm will be difficult and expensive especially if all students will return at the same time. For someone like me who live outside Manila, travelling back and forth every day is risky for my health.” – S115 (Subtheme: Boarding House)

Many students find themselves working part-time jobs while simultaneously pursuing full-time online education to support their schooling and family's livelihood. The flexible schedule provided by ERL creates an opportunity for them to manage both work and school responsibilities more easily, but this delicate balance could be potentially abolished if schools reopen for in-person classes. Returning to a rigid, pre-pandemic schedule may force these students to make difficult decisions, potentially requiring them to give up their part-time jobs.

“If students will be asked to return to school, I have to consider my part-time job. This is a problem for me because my parents need my help.” – S11 (Subtheme: Part-Time Job)

“I think I may have to decrease my units if I have to go back to school so I don't have to give up my part-time job as a graphic designer.” – S89 (Subtheme: Part-Time Job)

Due to the economic fallout caused by the pandemic, many families have experienced job losses and a decline in income. These adverse effects have driven students to seek part-time employment, compelled by the urgent need to support themselves and their families. More alarmingly, students are growing increasingly worried about the uncertain prospects of enrolling in the upcoming semester, which has become a pressing concern overshadowing the reopening of schools. Evidently, the financial instability and educational uncertainty amplify their anxieties.

“My concern is I don't even know if I will be able to enroll in the upcoming semester. We don't have enough money yet for my tuition fee.” – S56 (Subtheme: Tuition Fee)

“Everything is more expensive now and our business does not earn like before. My parents are always telling us about financial problems. I may have to find a way to come up with my tuition fee on my own next year.” – S38 (Subtheme: Tuition Fee)

DISCUSSION

As society adapts to the reality of coexisting with COVID-19, many schools have begun the process of resuming in-person classes (either partially or in full). Recent global experiences have demonstrated that some schools have had to revert to closure, while others have postponed their reopening due to surges in new COVID-19 cases (Guthrie et al., 2020). Despite failures and hardships, many schools have remained relentless in their efforts and commitments to striking a delicate balance between addressing the educational needs of their students and prioritizing public health concerns amid the pandemic. This balancing act has necessitated the development and implementation of various policies, plans, and recommendations through collaborative efforts involving governments, schools, and health experts. According to the evidence kit for policymakers provided by the Center for Global Development, the active engagement of communities in the planning process for school reopening is deemed crucial to ensure its success (Carvalho et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that existing studies on school reopening have predominantly focused on gathering perspectives from teachers, parents, and health experts, thereby leaving students relatively underrepresented in the discourse. Consequently, the findings of this study offer fresh insights and guidance that may be useful for the creation of new policies, the enhancement of existing procedures, and the implementation of targeted interventions. From a macro perspective, this study may serve as a valuable reference not only in the current context but also in future instances of educational crises.

How do students feel about going back to school?

At the time of the study, mixed sentiments toward school reopening were evident. The dilemma of *safety vs. education* was foremost in the minds of students. The contrasting sentiments indicate that there was no uniform consensus among students on this matter. It was evident that positive sentiments were largely associated with the benefits of face-to-face education, while negative sentiments revolved around safety concerns. This inclination towards in-person learning over remote alternatives aligns with studies conducted in other countries (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Costado Dios & Piñero Charlo, 2021; Gherheş et al., 2021). One plausible explanation for students' desire to return to physical classrooms is the unique set of challenges posed by ERL during the pandemic (Fung et al., 2022; Ruipérez-Valiente, 2022). This notion finds support in a systematic review conducted by Hammerstein et al. (2021), which exposed the adverse impact of school closures. In the case of the Philippines, these challenges varied in terms of their nature, extent, and impact on students. According to Barrot et al. (2021), it encompasses socioeconomic, logistical, technological, pedagogical, and psychosocial aspects. Overall, the existence of these mixed sentiments underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of the topic. This finding highlights the necessity for careful consideration and a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing decision-making regarding school reopening among students.

A prevalent phenomenon known as "school hesitancy" emerged due to concerns about safety, particularly among those who held negative views regarding the reopening of schools. Notably, it was observed that most negative sentiments originated from public universities (44, 19.73%) and urban universities (50, 22.42%) when the data were examined by different groups. For public universities where most students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it is plausible that students harbored heightened anxieties about the financial implications of potential hospitalizations for themselves or their family members in the event of COVID-19 infection. This observation is further supported by the thematic analysis, which revealed that financial and health concerns were more prevalent among students attending public universities (financial: $n = 58$, 62.37% and health: $n = 73$, 58.27%) compared to those at private universities (financial: $n = 35$, 37.63% and health: $n = 51$, 41.13%). These findings extended the work conducted by Barrot et al. (2021), highlighting that while socioeconomically disadvantaged students face urgent challenges during ERL (e.g., access to quality Internet service, limited learning space at home, and online learning resources), these factors alone do not necessarily drive them to prefer returning to physical schools. On the other hand, the negative sentiments expressed by students attending urban universities may be influenced by their geographic location. A study examining the urban-rural disparity in COVID-19 perceptions within countries in the Western Pacific region indicated that individuals residing in rural areas tend to perceive themselves as being less susceptible to the virus (Park et al., 2021). Additionally, the majority of COVID-19 cases and fatalities in the Philippines have been concentrated in urban areas (Department of Health, 2021). Consequently, convincing students from public and urban universities to resume in-person schooling necessitates the implementation of more compelling and persuasive strategies.

What are the common concerns among students?

The findings of this study revealed four primary concerns expressed by students regarding the reopening of schools, namely safety, academic, health, and financial concerns. Consistent with previous research, prevailing sentiments among students during the COVID-19 pandemic were their preeminent worry for their safety (Dayagbil et al., 2021). Building upon this prior work, the present study delves deeper into the specific safety-related concerns that students harbor within the context of school reopening. Thematic analysis of the data identified several key safety-related concerns, including vaccination, health protocols, commuting, and food safety. It is noteworthy that the first two safety-related concerns (i.e., vaccination and health protocols) concerns have been addressed by the CHED in their school reopening conditions. Accordingly, participating students should be vaccinated, and schools must retrofit their facilities. However, only 45.91% (1.83 million) of the tertiary student population have been vaccinated as of December 2021 (Montemayor, 2021). Consequently, students may remain apprehensive about going out and potentially encountering unvaccinated individuals. The thematic analysis further demonstrated that the risk of infection is the top health-related concern among students. Both vaccination (safety) and the risk of infection (health) concerns are further exemplified in their worries related

to commuting by public transportation. Even before the pandemic, the commuting public in the Philippines has been suffering from the woes of mass transport, such as daily road congestion and the insufficiency of efficient mass transit systems. With limited public transportation options and traffic congestion, it is plausible that students may associate longer travel times with an increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Nevertheless, avoiding public transport is not an option for many Filipino student commuters due to financial constraints. The same constraint was the reason why roadside *carinderia* (eatery) is a common dining option among Filipino students due to the comparatively higher prices of food in school canteens. Accordingly, it is understandable why food safety is a concern for students, as there have been postulations regarding the potential foodborne transmission of COVID-19 at the time of the study (Han et al., 2021).

Extensive research has examined the academic-related concerns expressed by students in the context of ERL (Ulum, 2021). While these studies are useful in formulating online learning policies, their findings may not directly apply to the reopening of schools. This disparity is evident in the distinct and specific academic-related concerns identified in this study, such as student readiness, blended learning approaches, class schedules, and classroom setups. It is crucial to recognize that students' readiness to return to school is a significant factor that should not be overlooked when devising policies for the resumption of in-person classes. In the Philippines, the decision to reopen schools is heavily influenced by the prevailing number of COVID-19 cases. Despite the efforts to mitigate the challenges posed by ERL, students may still be less inclined to cooperate, particularly since attending limited in-person classes remains voluntary and restricted to 50% capacity at the time of the study. This lack of readiness, whether stemming from physical or mental health concerns, is a clear manifestation of the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to their employed counterparts, students experienced greater psychological impact as well as more stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Tee et al., 2020). Therefore, even when students decide to return, it is possible that they may have greater needs (e.g., social-emotional and behavioral) than before due to the prolonged psychosocial and economic stresses (Hoffman & Miller, 2020). This possibility emphasizes the critical need for a comprehensive support system to aid students who are returning to school after more than two years of social isolation, hardship, loss, trauma, and feelings of loneliness.

This study also emphasizes the critical importance of fostering inclusivity within the education system as we navigate the post-pandemic, hybrid world (Krishnaswami et al., 2022). While it is crucial to prioritize students with mental health issues, it is equally vital to consider the needs of other vulnerable student groups when making decisions regarding school reopening. Extensive evidence suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities, disproportionately impacting socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Cullinan et al., 2021) and students with disability (Mohammed Ali, 2021), with a much more severe impact on those who have intersectional challenges. Hossain (2021) highlights that the implementation of alternative schooling methods has resulted in unequal experiences, indicating clear disparities in the

adoption of remote learning in developing countries. Building upon prior research, this study further highlights the specific needs of these vulnerable student groups in the context of school reopening. For instance, while the digital divide has been a common issue for socioeconomically disadvantaged students during the pandemic, it is important to recognize that they face new and distinct challenges in the context of school reopening. Financial worries about transportation costs, boarding arrangements, part-time employment, and tuition fees become more prominent. It is plausible that some students have encountered these concerns for the first time due to the economic impact of the pandemic, as indicated by a previous study (Yu et al., 2020). For students with disability, their concerns shift from the inability to access essential services (e.g., Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023) to advocating for equal opportunities to return to school. This modification encompasses not only their freedom to choose between continued remote learning and in-person classes but also the availability of supportive services ranging from accessible transportation (e.g., wheelchair ramps for new electronic jeeps) to inclusive educational programs (e.g., access to tailored learning recovery initiatives).

Implications, Recommendations, and Limitations

This study emphasizes the crucial role of policymakers in actively engaging students as change agents and partners, ensuring that their voices significantly influence the development of school reopening policies. Like their teachers and parents, students should be part of the dialogue as they offer unique perspectives based on their distinctive experiences and challenges. Collaborative decision-making and inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders can result in well-informed choices and more robust solutions. Given the significant implications of school reopening decisions amid a pandemic, it is crucial to carefully consider even the smallest details to ensure that they serve as an effective solution to mitigate the negative consequences of prolonged school closures. The success of these reopening efforts relies heavily on the active participation and support of all stakeholders. While some students may eagerly anticipate returning to their educational environment, many still harbor hesitations and safety concerns. Therefore, comprehensive policies should be implemented to encourage students to reflect on the differential impact and outcomes of school reopening. Schools, teachers, and parents have a shared responsibility to help students during the transition back to their familiar routines. As students navigate the process of establishing a new normal, it is essential for everyone in their surroundings to play a role in fostering their well-being and successful adaptation.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to ensure a successful and inclusive school reopening process. First, the safety of everyone within the school premises must be prioritized by strictly enforcing health protocols and measures (e.g., non-contact temperature screening and strategic placement of hand sanitizers). Maintaining a safe learning environment fosters a sense of security and confidence in the school community. Second, other types of support (e.g., psychosocial, and emotional) must also be provided to address the

prolonged social and health impact of the pandemic on students. Counseling services, mental health resources, and peer support programs can be implemented to address the emotional well-being of students. Third, recovery efforts that can help families overcome new financial constraints and the opportunity costs of schooling must be provided. Some potential forms of financial support that could be explored include the provision of cash assistance, offering student loans, implementing programs for free school meals, and incorporating tuition waivers. Fourth, school reopening plans must consider the needs of vulnerable groups (e.g., socioeconomically disadvantaged students and students with disability) to ensure their full participation and academic success. By addressing their specific needs, schools can mitigate the potential widening of educational disparities and strive towards creating a more equitable educational landscape for all students. Teachers should also employ inclusive learning strategies that can help students cope with their learning loss. Fifth, efforts should be made to keep parents engaged even as schools reopen because their involvement and support are crucial for the continued success and well-being of students. Keeping parents engaged fosters ongoing collaboration, enhances communication, and allows for a comprehensive approach to supporting students' academic and socio-emotional development. Overall, policymakers should develop new or enhance existing school reopening plans by taking all these recommendations into consideration.

This study has some limitations that may influence the interpretation of the findings. Firstly, the data were gathered through an online assignment due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. While this method allowed for the efficient collection of data, it may have some drawbacks compared to other qualitative data collection methods. For instance, interviews could potentially provide more nuanced and in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of students, allowing for a richer understanding of the topic at hand. Nevertheless, an online interview was not feasible due to the large sample size. Future research could benefit from incorporating other qualitative data collection methods to complement the findings obtained through online assignments. Secondly, this study acknowledges the cultural and country-specific differences, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Considering that school reopening is a global phenomenon, the implications offered in this study may have varying degrees of applicability and relevance. Factors such as educational systems, policies, resources, and societal norms can significantly impact the experiences and perspectives of students and stakeholders involved in school reopening. Therefore, it is crucial for future research to account for these contextual factors and expand studies to include developed countries as well as other developing nations. This broader scope of investigation will provide a broader perspective and facilitate the development of contextually relevant strategies and interventions for effective school reopening. Lastly, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which serves as an additional limitation. The unique circumstances and challenges presented by the pandemic may have influenced the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of students and stakeholders involved in school reopening. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the results and findings

of this study may not be directly transferable to other crises or non-pandemic situations. Different crises may have distinct characteristics, implications, and considerations that could result in different outcomes and responses in the context of school reopening. Future studies should explore the specific dynamics and nuances of other crises to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on education and the implications for reopening schools.

CONCLUSION

School reopening represents an inevitable step toward reinstating a semblance of normalcy within the education sector. However, executing this endeavor amidst the ongoing pandemic necessitates the implementation of even more extensive educational policies to enhance its likelihood of success. Consulting with stakeholders is consequently crucial to ensure that the adopted educational policies are well-informed, inclusive, and responsive to their needs. Unfortunately, most studies on school reopening have primarily centered on the perspectives of teachers, parents, and public health authorities. The present study addressed this gap by uncovering the sentiments and concerns on school reopening among higher education students. Based on their reflective essays, students have mixed sentiments about returning to school during the pandemic and highlight safety, academic, health, and financial concerns as major areas requiring attention. It is now incumbent upon governments, schools, policymakers, and education leaders to carefully analyze and incorporate this valuable information into their decision-making processes. Much like how the education sector was obliged to revamp its primary instructional model when ERL began, it must now prepare for another round of overhaul and transition as students start to return to their second home. As we navigate the complexities of school reopening, it is critical to approach this endeavor with empathy, flexibility, and a commitment to continuous improvement. With informed decision-making, we can build back a stronger and more resilient education system that equitably serves all students in the post-pandemic world.

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If you are looking for research collaborators, please do not hesitate to contact me at mbgarcia@feutech.edu.ph.

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