Context

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire school year 2020-2021 in the Philippines was delivered remotely, in addition to several months of the end of school year 2019-2020. Under the mother tongue-based multilingual education curriculum (MTB-MLE), children begin school in their home language (if available) and then learn Filipino and English as second and third languages. How is such a challenging curriculum of foundational skills delivered when students are separated from their teachers due to pandemic restrictions? This study aimed to gather insights to help the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd) address gaps in service delivery and anticipate where students might be when schools reopen.

Home learning partners (HLP) in the study came from a wide range of contexts, but most work in the informal sector and few have higher education (see Brief #1, Strategies for Assisting Home Learning Partners), so they may also be unaccustomed to supporting their children across these three language domains.

Shifting from classroom to remote learning

Prior to pivoting to home-based distance or ‘remote’ learning, most Grade 1 and Grade 3 teachers rated their own ability to teach literacy in the mother tongue as “good” or “very good” (89% and 82%, respectively), and similarly for Filipino with 88% of teachers in both grade levels assigning that rating. Confidence in English was lower for both grade levels, with only 68% and 76% of Grade 1 and Grade 3 teachers, respectively, feeling “good” or “very good” about their ability, with the remaining reporting average preparedness. However, teachers were less confident transferring these skills to the remote learning environment.

At least 10 percentage points fewer teachers reported feeling “extremely confident” or “somewhat confident” in teaching literacy in the mother tongue (79%/72%, G1/G3), Filipino (73%/72%, G1/G3), and English (68%/50%, G1/G3). More Grade 3 teachers seem to struggle than Grade 1, but this may also be that the curriculum is more demanding (i.e., English is not yet taught in Grade 1, and Filipino is only oral at that stage).

At the end of the school year 62% of teachers—or 23 out of 37—felt that teaching literacy through distance learning is effective for “all” or “most” children; about 22% or 8 teachers felt that it was effective for only “half” of the students and, finally, 16% or 6 teachers felt it is only effective for a few (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Teacher survey responses: Language and literacy during distance learning is effective for:
This self-reported rating seems highly positive considering the number of challenges that teachers raised during the interviews (see analysis and quotes, next page). In fact, the positive attitude increased from mid- to end-of year and was not considerably different between Grade 1 and Grade 3 teachers.

**Modalities for Delivering Literacy Instruction**

Teachers delivered instruction in a variety of ways. Instructional delivery included the sole use of printed self-learning modules (SLM), home visits, use of digital technologies, and online teaching. The following breaks down the combination of modalities used across the 20 schools participating in the study.

![Figure 2: Instructional modalities for teaching literacy, from teacher interview data](image)

- **SLMs Alone**
- **Modules and Home Visits**
- **Online with or without SLMs**
- **Educational TV**
- **Individual Instruction Through Phone Calls**
- **Mobile Messenger (WhatsApp, Group Chat)**
- **Video / Audio Instructional Presentations**

Figure 2 shows teacher reports during interviews and shows that there is not one model that all schools adopted, rather they made use of the modalities available to them—often more than one. During interviews, teachers discussed a variety of ways they adapted their teaching practices to teach reading. From survey responses, half of the schools in this study (50%) used SLMs as the sole means of remote learning and teaching and found these materials to be very useful.

**Teacher-student contact time**

There was very little face-to-face teaching. Teachers who could, visited children in their homes, however because of COVID-19 restrictions, very few of the teachers could do this. According to the survey responses, less than half of the teachers said they conducted any home visits with children. Twenty-seven percent of teachers started the academic year making home visits, and this number rose to 41% by the end of the academic year. Of those who could make home visits, thirty-one percent stated that they met with learners once a week for 10-20 minutes. This is enough time perhaps to check in with learners, but not enough to support learners who are struggling and give HLPs help they might need. Less than half of the teachers (37%) spoke directly to children at least once a week to check on their learning, whether in person or from a distance. This number was highest, at 44% in the middle of the year, but dropped to 32% by the end of the academic year. Some teachers pointed out during their interviews that it was challenging to reach out to every child in the class. The number of teachers who taught online increased over the school year from 9% at the beginning of the year to 30% in the 4th quarter.
**Literacy teaching practices**

For the most part, teachers taught children directly through distance modalities mentioned above and/or by providing specific guidance to HLPs on reading instruction. Analysis of interview transcripts show that most comments made by teachers focused on describing adaptations they made to direct instruction.

First, to support children in learning letter sounds and syllables, or the *Marungko* method, some teachers would take a video of themselves and send it to HLPs and students. Second, the DepEd materials were adapted—modified for level of difficulty and translated when needed—and sometimes supplemented with teacher-made or downloaded reading materials. Teachers gave instruction on how HLPs could help their child read and understand through “shorter stories” than what might be provided in the regular curriculum materials. Teachers who gave online classes, made use of these materials to listen to children read. Teachers also provided specific instructions for parents, including coaching on reading fluency and giving children a chance to answer questions or talk about what they have read. (See also *Brief #1 Strategies for Supporting Home Learning Partners*).

Teachers also tailored their support to parents, according to the parent’s skills to help fill these gaps. The focus on reading practice was mentioned by many, with one teacher mentioning a “Drop everything and read” program on Fridays, when children were not required to do modules, just read.

Figure 3, below, provides more detailed survey responses regarding instructional materials used for supporting literacy development in each of the three languages of the curriculum. It indicates that resources for mother tongue literacy instruction are scarce, and there are fewer types of resources available.
Between 11 and 21% of teachers in Grades 1 and 3, at each time point—March and June—said they were not teaching mother tongue at all. See also Brief #2 Teaching and Learning Materials. Only 7 teachers were surveyed in November, so this analysis uses only occasion 2 and 3.

**Literacy assessment practices**

The most frequent comment made by teachers about monitoring their students’ learning activities and progress was the use of direct assessment through the telephone, Facebook Messenger, or Group Chats with children reading to their teacher or through exchanges of video- or audio-recordings of children reading. These mechanisms limit children whose parents don’t have a phone, but teachers encouraged parents to call on neighbors to share their phones for this purpose.

Teachers also provide feedback directly on activity sheets and writing assignments submitted by the students. Some teachers provided an “Assessment Checklist” to parents to check in on student progress on daily tasks and completion of modules. Teachers are cognizant of the importance of more regular assessments or quizzes to keep children on task and to gauge progress more regularly, in addition to the use of summative tests at the end of each quarter, but they also find it difficult. Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the percent of comments made by Grade 1 and Grade 3 teachers during interviews about different assessment approaches. There were a total of 171 comments (98 from 39 Grade 1 teachers and 73 from 29 Grade 3 teachers), as shown in Figure 4, below. Most comments (35% of Grade 1 comments and 38% of Grade 3 comments) concerned the use of audio and video recordings.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Teacher Comments Referencing Assessment Strategies**

![Assessment Strategies](image)

The self-administered teacher survey also asked about assessment practices. According to the survey, most teachers (80%) require students to turn in completed language and literacy assignments weekly. There was little difference in practice between Grade 1 and Grade 3 teachers, except that four G1 teachers answered “daily”, but no Grade 3 teachers said ‘daily’. Most teachers evaluate this student work and provide feedback weekly as well (about 60%), again with the exception of a few teachers who provide G1 students feedback daily or several times in a week.
Teachers communicate feedback to their students in a combination of ways, as shown in Figure 5 below. The pattern is similar for both grades, although Grade 3 teachers were more inclined to give written or oral feedback. Written feedback increased at the end of the year by 21 to 25 percentage points for G1 and G3, respectively, compared to mid-year (not shown in graph, which provides the average between occasions 2 and 3).

**Challenges and achievements**

Teachers’ greatest concerns about teaching literacy in the remote learning context centered around children’s learning and assessment. Assessment of student performance is one of the greatest challenges that teachers face in remote learning. Many teachers expressed their frustration in not knowing how their students are progressing. For example, some teachers are not able to make home visits and aren’t providing online instruction—two of the most effective ways to gauge progress. With only the students’ learning activity sheets to evaluate, they still can’t listen to their students read nor ask them comprehension questions. Another challenge faced by many teachers is that some parents complete their child’s work. Teachers were concerned about whether children were learning to read, learning to read fluently and if they were progressing in their reading and language proficiency. There is genuine care and concern that children are not progressing as they should be, and teachers were uncertain about their student’s abilities in reading as this is difficult to assess without in-person contact.

Yet teachers are also being very creative about teaching and assessing reading. Teachers mentioned a wide variety of the positive comments about their instruction in the remote learning context, the most frequently mentioned was what the parents were experiencing and learning. Teachers mentioned the opportunity of parents “seeing for themselves how children learn”. They mentioned the opportunity for bonding with their children through their support for their child’s learning. Other positive aspects mentioned included use of games for enhancing interest and engagement; increased communication with parents; finding materials on the internet; hearing strong feedback from parents on the value of the SLMs; learner independence and time management skills and allocating more focused reading time.

During the end-of-year interviews, parents were asked if they had observed any improvements in their child’s reading ability. The reported observations for Grade 1 and Grade 3 learners are presented in Figure 6. Of the 62 HLPs who commented on learners’ reading, most observed recognizable improvements. Though a few HLPs related these to English or Filipino, most did not specify the language.
Recommendations

- Increase opportunities for teachers to have direct contact with students, if not in person, then by regular phone contacts or if possible online learning. Teacher-child connections are crucial both for teacher's sense of the child's progress and for the child to be connected and maintain their relationships with teachers.

- Audio- and video-communications and exchange of recordings is one avenue in which any teacher can keep abreast of their students reading progress. All possible ways to give phone and/or internet access to families should be made.

- Share audio- and video-presentations across schools to support more widespread use of these instructional good practices.

- Teach HLPs how to support children without placing undue burden on them.

Image 1. A Grade 1 child's mid-year literacy work

As part of the study design, we created a written literacy check-in. The HLP was asked to read the instructions to the child in the local language. Researchers provided instructions. Some families did not return the assessment at both time points, and there was less than three months between check-ins. Images 1 and 2 provide examples of student work at these two time points.

Image 2: The same child’s work at end-of-year interview