

In Two Different Worlds: Distance Education Narratives of Filipino Learners Living in The Emirates While Studying in the Philippines

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Abstract

As a result of the most recent global health crisis, academic institutions have made significant transitions towards virtual platforms, enabling students to pursue their studies from remote locations while being physically situated elsewhere. Such separation can create a cross-cultural psychological dilemma. The investigation of this phenomenon centered on 12 Filipino senior high school students residing in the United Arab Emirates who studied virtually in educational institutions in the Philippines. They were selected using a purposive, convenience sampling technique. The findings obtained indicated that participants encountered various difficulties during their distance education experiences, such as time zone discrepancies, cultural and linguistic barriers, technological problems, and interruptions from their surroundings. Notwithstanding, the students derived personal advantages from their immersion in the academic and cultural milieu of the Philippines, such as development of their identity and connections, readiness for advanced education, and personal values. Additionally, participants realized the benefits of broadened social networks and developed a heightened recognition of the importance of ongoing education. The findings of this research can be utilized to create effective approaches and support mechanisms to improve the quality of distance education and cross-cultural pedagogical practices.

Keywords: *Distance education, cross-country, learning experiences, narrative inquiry*

Introduction

The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic was moderated by remote learning possibilities being embraced by educational institutions (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Mishra et al., 2020; Shahriar et al., 2021), which provided flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to reach students beyond physical boundaries (Dhawan, 2020; Simamora, 2020). Educational institutions worldwide took the lead in providing online education from the beginning of the pandemic and have continued to do so.

Meanwhile, reports show that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe (Decerf et al., 2021; Workie et al., 2020). Migrants and workers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), like overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), have had their livelihoods, well-being, and financial stability impacted (Lemana et al., 2023; Tesorero, 2021). The loss of employment or reduction in income affected their ability to sustain their current lifestyles and meet their financial obligations (Cleofas et al., 2021). Filipino families in the UAE have considered enrolling their children in less expensive schools. Studies (e.g., Goel, 2020; Xie et al., 2020) have indicated that the introduction of distance education by schools worldwide has provided an opportunity for households to enroll their children in more affordable educational institutions. For children of Filipino families living in the UAE, virtual studies in schools in the Philippines are such an option.

Distance education poses significant challenges to students, such as technical difficulties, where students may encounter issues with Internet connectivity, device access, software compatibility, or navigating online learning platforms (Dhawan, 2020; Elshami et al., 2021; Moawad, 2020). Other challenges include a lack of in-person interaction that can lead to feelings of isolation, reduced social interaction, and limited opportunities for immediate clarification of doubts (Aldosari et al., 2022; Azmat & Ahmad, 2022; Milan & Lemana, 2023). However, online learning also has provided advantages. For example, there is great flexibility and convenience, enabling students to devise their study schedules and access educational resources from any location (Danchikov et al., 2021). Students

have access to a wide range of learning resources, enhancing their knowledge and skill sets, i.e., digital literacy and technological competencies essential in contemporary society (Rini et al., 2022). Students have come to acknowledge the significance of self-motivation and have assumed responsibility for their education (Dalilan, 2021). They also have acknowledged the significance of proficient time management and prioritization (Syauqi et al., 2020) and have developed an elevated level of self-regulation and the ability to maintain concentration within a digital setting, which means they have enhanced their self-awareness, self-sufficiency, and ability to persevere in their educational pursuits (Palalas et al., 2020; Song & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, distance education is characterized by use of digital platforms for the teaching and learning process, which has reduced traditional face-to-face classes. In many instances, students' geographical location was in the same area as their educational institutions. However, minimal research has been undertaken to delineate learners' narratives concerning distance education experiences when their location differed from that of their teachers, classmates, and school. Distance education in a unique context, when a student is studying in a school in one country (e.g., the Philippines) while physically living in another (e.g., UAE), accentuates peculiar cultural and psychological challenges, gains, and realizations. There is a four-hour time difference between the UAE and the Philippines. In terms of distance, the two countries are separated by approximately 6,000 km (3,728 mi). This distance, coupled with the time zone variance, reflects the significant spatial and temporal separation between the two nations.

Grounded in the tenets of cross-cultural psychology (Berry, 2002; Keith, 2019), it is postulated in this study that more profound challenges may arise due to time zone differences, cultural adjustments, and potential language barriers as students interact with the curriculum and navigate the intricacies of their virtual learning environment. Cross-cultural psychology is a field that deals with how cultural factors influence human behavior, cognition, and social interactions (Berry, 2002; Gunawardena et al., 2003; Keith, 2019; Liu & Gallois, 2014). Given that culture profoundly shapes individuals' beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors, the theory explores the impact of cultural diversity on various psychological processes, emphasizing that people from different cultural backgrounds may have distinct ways of perceiving the world, solving problems, and interacting with others.

In this qualitative study, a narrative inquiry was employed to contribute new insights into the above-delineated form of distance education. Examining the narratives of students engaged in this type of virtual education represents a crucial step toward developing tailored support systems specifically designed to address the distinctive needs of such cohorts. By delving into the intricacies of their experiences, teachers can gain invaluable insights into the challenges and opportunities these students encounter, thereby enhancing their ability to provide targeted assistance. This has the potential to significantly elevate the overall educational experience and academic achievement of students navigating virtual education from a foreign location. Moreover, the outcomes of such an exploration can contribute to expansion of options and improvement of accessibility for students confronting similar circumstances. A greater appreciation of specific challenges posed by virtual education in an international context allows educational institutions to implement measures that facilitate a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for such students, transcending geographical barriers. In addition, lessons gleaned from student experiences who are engaged in virtual education overseas can serve as a valuable resource for refining online learning practices. This knowledge can inform the development of effective strategies, instructional methods, and support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of students navigating distance education.

Methods

A narrative inquiry format was used in this study. This approach focuses on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals through the collection and analysis of personal stories or narratives (Benson, 2014; Murray, 2009; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). Researchers seek to comprehend the meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences, emphasizing the subjective

nature of these accounts and the importance of the context in shaping the narrative (Wang & Geale, 2015).

The study was conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, where the main author was residing and working during the time of the study. A purposive, convenience sampling technique was used to select participants (i.e., Grade 12 senior high school students) with the guidance of a set of inclusion criteria—participants must be residing in the UAE, enrolled/studying as a Grade 12 student in a school based in the Philippines, and willing to be interviewed for the study. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants (those aged between 18 and 19 yr), and explicit consent was obtained from minor participants (those who were 17 yr old), as well as their parents or guardians.

A mutually agreed timetable was obtained for the semi-structured interviews on Microsoft Teams; the format was validated by a panel of five research experts. Participants were told that confidentiality of their identity and information would be secured. Thus, each participant was given a pseudonym (i.e., SHS1—senior high school 1 to SHS12). Also, they could opt to withdraw their participation at any time.

The lead author conducted one-on-one interviews with participants (40–60 min each interview). Participants were prompted to tell stories about their perceived and encountered obstacles, benefits, and insights with regard to their situation of engaging in remote education in the Philippines. Transcripts with necessary translations were then produced and disseminated to the participating individuals for member checking. The researchers also took detailed field notes during and after interviews or narrative sessions.

Riessman's (2008) thematic analysis approach for narrative inquiry studies, as cited in Creswell (2013), was employed to treat the data in this study. The process began with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data. They then broke down the narratives into smaller segments or units of meaning. They assigned descriptive codes to the segments based on their content, capturing the narrative's essence and organizing the data for analysis. Through a process of iterative analysis, they then identified patterns or themes. Themes were refined and interpreted in relation to the research questions. A meticulous audit trail was kept together with a reflective log, guaranteeing that the conclusions drawn were grounded solely on the collected data and analyzed in accordance with robust theories and previous research. Ultimately, the veracity of data analysis was validated by three external research intercoders.

Results

Profile of the Participants

A total of 12 senior high school students participated in this study. All of them lived in Abu Dhabi, UAE with their parents since they were born. Three of them were 17 years old, eight were 18, and one was 19; seven were boys, and five were girls. Each of them was enrolled and studying in a private school in the Philippines located in the country's national capital region.

Thematic analysis of these narratives revealed significant themes. They shed light on the intricate landscape of struggles, gains, and realizations experienced by the learners. The overarching themes were further dissected into subthemes, offering a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature inherent in the distinct dynamics of their unique distance education experience. Notably, the findings delineated the cross-cultural and psychological dimensions involved, and gave a richer insight into the challenges and adaptations of students' in their educational journeys.

Theme 1: Connecting virtually, struggling in reality. The global outbreak of COVID-19 significantly impacted the education sector, necessitating a transition to remote learning modalities. Online learning afforded students the chance to pursue their academic endeavors amidst the pandemic, but it also engendered a distinct array of obstacles and predicaments, particularly for students in the UAE who were engaged in virtual instruction in Philippine educational institutions. Under this theme, the challenges and difficulties these students faced in their pursuit of online education are delineated, and

attempts were made to examine the implications of these challenges on their academic and personal well-being.

Time zone differences. Time zone differences can be a significant challenge for Filipino students in the UAE attending virtual classes in Philippine schools. Due to the geographic distance between the two countries, there was a time difference of several hours, which resulted in disrupted sleep schedules for students attending synchronous classes in real-time. As for the participants, the disrupted sleep schedules affected their overall health and well-being.

Attending synchronous classes in the Philippines while in the UAE means that I have to stay up all night, which has been challenging. I try to maintain a consistent sleep schedule, but it's hard when my classes start as early as 4 am. This lack of sleep has affected my ability to concentrate during the day and has caused me to miss a few classes. – SHS1

Moreover, some students opted to attend asynchronous classes to avoid waking up early, which resulted in missed opportunities for real-time interactions with teachers and peers.

I have missed several classes because of the time difference. My teachers have been understanding, but I know that it has affected my grades. I try to catch up by watching recorded lectures, but it's not the same as participating in real-time discussions. It's frustrating because I want to do well in school, but the time difference is making it difficult for me. – SHS8

The participants then expressed a desire for more flexible options for scheduling synchronous classes that would work for all students. They stated that it was frustrating to miss out on real-time discussions and interactions with their teachers and peers because of the time difference.

Cultural and linguistic barriers. Another subtheme that emerged from the challenges that Filipino students in the UAE faced involved adaptation to cultural and linguistic differences between the UAE and the Philippines when attending virtual classes. As for the cultural side, Filipino students in the UAE experienced culture shock in different ways such as feeling overwhelmed or confused by differences in communication styles, social norms, and customs between the UAE and the Philippines. They also experienced a sense of homesickness or nostalgia for their own culture and familiar environment.

I felt a sense of culture shock that was overwhelming at times. I had to navigate the stark differences in communication styles between the two countries, which made it challenging to connect with my classmates and teachers in the Philippines. While I was used to a more reserved and formal communication style in the UAE, my counterparts in the Philippines were more expressive and casual in their language. – SHS2

On this note, cultural differences have also been explained in terms of the teaching methods adopted in the two countries. One participant shared that he would often find himself comparing the teaching methods and educational philosophies of the UAE and the Philippines.

While the UAE placed a strong emphasis on discipline and structure in the classroom, the Philippines was more focused on collaboration and creativity. This made it difficult for me to adjust to the teaching methods in the Philippines, and I often felt that the expectations were too different to adapt to easily. – SHS5

In the case of Filipino students in the UAE, they encountered language barriers as they were accustomed to speaking English as their primary language, while their counterparts in the Philippines primarily spoke Tagalog. These language differences sometimes resulted in difficulties in understanding and communicating with each other during online classes and discussions.

The language barrier was especially difficult during group projects where communication and collaboration were crucial. There were times when my groupmates would discuss in Filipino, and I would feel left out and unsure of what to contribute. This sometimes led to misunderstandings and delays in completing the task. – SHS10

As a result, these language barriers created a sense of exclusion and frustration among Filipino students in the UAE, further exacerbating their challenges in adapting to virtual learning in the Philippines.

Sometimes I feel like an outsider because I don't speak Filipino fluently. It's like everyone else has this shared language and culture that I'm not fully a part of, and it can be isolating. – SHS4

Theme 2: Overcoming distance, unlocking gains. While the previous theme shed light on challenges and obstacles faced by these learners, this theme focused on the transformative experiences or gains that arose from students' virtual learning journey. Within this theme, participants shared their progress, personal growth, and opportunities as they navigated the virtual educational landscape, which offered a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of their online learning experiences.

Immersion in the Philippine academic and cultural landscape. For participants, the opportunity to immerse themselves in the Philippine academic landscape brought with it a multitude of gains. By navigating the intricacies of the Philippine educational system, they gained a comprehensive understanding of the nation's cultural nuances, academic traditions, and educational values.

Being part of the Philippine academic system virtually has been awesome! I've gotten to dive into our own unique way of learning, connect with our culture, and understand how education shapes who we are. It's like discovering a whole new side of myself that I never knew existed! – SHS1

Studying virtually in Philippine schools has been a game-changer for me! I've gained a whole new perspective on education, made friends with fellow Filipino students, and explored different ways of learning that have challenged and inspired me. It's like a journey of self-discovery that's opened up exciting possibilities! – SHS4

Likewise, for participants, this exposure allowed them to embrace their roots, develop a deeper sense of identity, and forge meaningful connections with their Filipino peers.

Through interactions with my Filipino peers during online classes, I have developed a deeper sense of belonging and a stronger bond with my fellow students who share the same heritage. – SHS6

Participants also mentioned that this experience provided an opportunity to prepare for their college studies. Since they intended to pursue higher education in the Philippines, this experience allowed them to familiarize themselves with the Philippine academic landscape and cultural aspects, making possible a smoother transition and setting a stronger foundation for their future academic endeavors.

Interacting with Filipino classmates and teachers during virtual classes has allowed me to build connections and networks even before setting foot in the country for my college studies. It's comforting to know that I'll have familiar faces and supportive peers when I start my degree in the Philippines soon. – SHS8

I am grateful for the chance to immerse myself in the Philippine education system before officially starting college. This experience has not only deepened my understanding of the country's rich cultural heritage but also instilled in me a sense of excitement and readiness to fully embrace the college life that awaits me there. – SHS12

Flexibility and adaptability. Virtual learning taught participants to be adaptable and flexible in managing their schedules, navigating different time zones, and accessing online resources. These skills have extended beyond their academic pursuits, benefitting their future careers and personal lives.

Virtual learning has taught me to be a master of flexibility and adaptability. I've become a pro at adjusting my schedule, dealing with different time zones, and finding awesome online resources to help me rock my studies! These skills are going to set me up for success in college and whatever comes my way in the future. – SHS7

Independence and self-motivation. According to the participants, studying virtually provided them an opportunity to cultivate self-discipline, self-motivation, and time management skills. They

learned to take ownership of their learning process, set goals, and work independently to accomplish tasks, which contributed to their personal growth and development.

So, like, during virtual learning, I figured out that I could totally do things on my own, you know? I didn't need someone always telling me what to do. I got this self-motivation thing going on, where I set my goals, managed my time, and did my work without anyone pushing me. It's like discovering this independent superhero inside me! – SHS3

Studying virtually has given me the opportunity to cultivate important skills like self-discipline and time management. I had to learn how to prioritize tasks, manage my time efficiently, and stay on track with my studies. It's made me more self-reliant and prepared for the independence that awaits me in college. – SHS6

Expanded networks and connections. Engaging in virtual learning enabled the participants to connect with peers, educators, and professionals beyond their immediate physical surroundings. They were able to establish networks and build relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds, potentially opening doors to future collaborations, mentorships, and career opportunities.

Participating in virtual study groups and collaborative projects has provided me with the opportunity to collaborate with a diverse group of students. I've been inspired by the different perspectives and strengths each person brings, and together we have been able to tackle challenges and learn from one another. – SHS9

Thanks to virtual learning, I've become part of online communities and clubs where I've met people who share my interests and passions. We discuss topics, exchange ideas, and support each other. It's like having a global network of like-minded individuals. – SHS11

Theme 3: Beyond the screen realizations and reflections. After exploring the challenges, gains, and transformative experiences of participants' virtual learning journeys, they were prompted to reflect on the realizations and lessons learned from their overall experiences to uncover deeper insights from their encounters with distance education. By delving into their reflections, a comprehensive understanding of the profound impact virtual learning had on their perspectives, values, and aspirations may be gained.

Filipino learner: Thriving here and there. This theme captured the essence of participants' ability to flourish and succeed in both their immediate physical environment in the UAE and their remote educational setting in the Philippines. It highlighted participants' experiences of navigating the challenges and opportunities that arose from studying virtually in a different country and acknowledged the unique context in which they found themselves, where they were physically present in the UAE while simultaneously connected to their schools in the Philippines through online platforms.

Despite the physical distance, I feel a strong sense of belonging to my school in the Philippines. I've actively participated in online discussions, engaged with my classmates and teachers, and even formed study groups to support each other. It's amazing how technology has allowed me to thrive academically, despite being physically located in the UAE. – SHS5

What can I say about Filipino learners? Filipino learners are incredibly versatile, succeeding anywhere they are. Whether studying in the Philippines or abroad like in the UAE, we adapt, persevere, and achieve. Our resilience, resourcefulness, and strong work ethic drive us to overcome challenges and reach our goals. As a Filipino learner, I firmly believe in my ability to thrive and succeed, regardless of location. – SHS7

Embracing the reason, finding the direction. This subtheme emphasized participants' journey of understanding the purpose or motivation behind their unique educational arrangements and discovering the paths that they needed to follow to achieve their goals. By embracing the reason behind their virtual education in the UAE and finding direction that aligned with their aspirations, they could develop a sense of purpose and focus.

At first, I was like, 'Why am I studying online from the UAE?' But then, I started seeing the bigger picture. I realized that this virtual setup gives me the chance to connect with top-notch schools back in the Philippines while still being here. It's like having the best of both worlds! – SHS1

Even though it was tough, I started seeing how this whole thing could actually be good for me. I trusted my parents' call and believed in the process. It hit me that this experience could totally open up my world and make me a global citizen. Like, I've realized that I want to make a real difference in the world through international relations. Being a Filipino student doing virtual school in the UAE has toughened me up and made me super determined to chase after that dream, no matter what. – SHS2

Self: One's best ally, worst foe. This subtheme captured the dual nature of the individuals' relationship with themselves. On the one hand, self could be their best ally when they exhibited determination, self-motivation, and a positive mindset, enabling them to succeed in the virtual learning environment. On the other hand, self could become their worst foe if they struggled with self-discipline, time management, and negative self-perceptions, hindering their academic progress and well-being.

I've come to realize that I can be my greatest ally in online learning. When I am motivated, determined, and resilient, I find the strength to overcome challenges and succeed academically. Yet, there have been moments when I have become my worst enemy during online learning. I've struggled with self-discipline and managing my time effectively. Procrastination and distractions have occasionally gotten the best of me, leading to setbacks and feelings of frustration. – SHS2

Given the internal struggle discussed, here is a piece of advice shared by a participant:

It's essential to find a balance between self-motivation and self-care. While being driven is important, I've learned that taking breaks, practicing self-care activities, and seeking support from peers and teachers are equally vital for my well-being. By nurturing both my academic and personal needs, I can optimize my online learning experience. – SHS8

Discussion

In this study the narratives were explored of Filipino students in the UAE who were engaged in distance learning with schools in the Philippines. Several major themes were identified in the study that highlighted their struggles, gains, and realizations.

On Struggles Experienced

The findings in the study resonate with ideas coming from cross-cultural psychology by highlighting the intricate ways in which cultural differences influenced students' experiences in distance education (Gunawardena et al., 2003; Liu & Gallois, 2014). They emphasize the need for educational institutions to consider these cultural factors and implement strategies that accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds to create more inclusive and effective learning environments. For example, in regards to the challenge concerning time zone differences between the two countries, if students resorted to attending asynchronous classes to avoid waking up early, this resulted in missed opportunities for real-time interactions with teachers and peers. Previous researchers have found that a lack of real-time interaction between students and teachers or peers can impact students' learning outcomes and social engagement (Karcher et al., 2022; Parkes & Barrs, 2021). Moreover, research on international distance education has highlighted the challenges faced by students in different countries due to time zone disparities (Demuyakor, 2020; Elshami et al., 2021; Gewin, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017). Studies have shown that time zone differences can disrupt students' schedules, leading to sleep deprivation, fatigue, and decreased well-being. It is worth noting that while asynchronous learning offers flexibility, it reduces immediate interaction opportunities (Dhawan, 2020; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Perveen, 2016). The findings of the present study are aligned with the existing literature highlighting how some Filipino students opted for asynchronous classes to accommodate the time zone differences, resulting in missed opportunities for real-time interactions. Hence, the challenges that participants faced in attending synchronous classes and the subsequent

reliance on asynchronous learning highlights the need for educational institutions offering distance education to consider alternative strategies and support mechanisms to ensure inclusive and engaging learning environments despite time zone disparities.

Cultural and linguistic barriers also emerged as prominent challenges. In particular, the participants experienced culture shock, feeling overwhelmed or confused by the differences in communication styles, social norms, and customs between the UAE and the Philippines. Culture shock has been widely studied in the field of international education, and several studies (e.g., Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Chen et al., 2018; Hussain & Shen, 2019) have highlighted its influence on the adjustment and academic performance of students studying abroad. Specific studies, such as those by Ma et al. (2020) and Shan et al. (2020), indicate that cultural differences and challenges of adapting to a new cultural environment can lead to stress and apprehension among students, impacting their overall adjustment.

The findings of the current study underscore the importance of providing appropriate support and resources to help students navigate the cultural transition effectively. By acknowledging and addressing the challenges associated with culture shock, educational stakeholders can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students, promoting their overall well-being and success (Ahrari et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study participants also encountered language differences, with English being their primary language while Tagalog is predominantly spoken in the Philippines. These language barriers led to difficulties in understanding and communicating with classmates and teachers during online classes and discussions, creating a sense of exclusion and frustration. Previous researchers (Erturk & Luu, 2022; God & Zhang, 2019; Heng, 2017) have found that language differences hindered effective communication and interaction among international students, leading to feelings of exclusion and frustration. Such studies are aligned with these results, which indicated that Filipino students in the UAE, whose primary language was English, faced difficulties engaging with classmates and teachers who predominantly used Tagalog during online classes. The language barriers exacerbated their adaptation to virtual learning in the Philippines, where limited proficiency in Tagalog hampered their understanding and communication with peers and instructors. The findings highlight the need for language support and strategies to facilitate effective communication and inclusive learning environments for students who face language barriers in virtual classrooms. Addressing these language challenges can enhance students' engagement, participation, and overall adaptation to virtual learning.

On Gains Acquired

The findings indicate that virtual learning provided participants with various benefits and opportunities. One main gain was immersion in the Philippine academic and cultural landscape, which helped them understand the country's educational system, cultural nuances, and academic traditions. This exposure also allowed them to embrace their roots, develop a stronger sense of identity, and establish meaningful connections with Filipino peers in the Philippines where they planned to study in person in the future. These findings suggest that immersion in the Philippine academic and cultural landscape has multifaceted benefits. As Marijuan and Sanz (2018) imply, immersion promotes personal growth, resilience, and the development of a broader perspective, leading to increased cultural sensitivity and meaningful connections. It also allows individuals to directly experience and engage with a country's culture, traditions, and way of life (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). In the same way, immersion challenges individuals to step out of their comfort zones and adapt to a new environment (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017). As individuals navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by learning in a new country, they develop resilience, empathy, and a broader perspective, leading to a greater appreciation for the host country (Chen et al., 2018; Hussain & Shen, 2019; Ma et al., 2020).

Virtual learning also taught participants valuable skills such as flexibility, adaptability, and time management. They learned to manage their schedules, navigate different time zones, and access online resources effectively. This finding suggests that virtual learning experiences not only provide

participants with academic knowledge but also equip them with practical skills that can benefit them in their future careers, personal lives, and ongoing learning endeavors. Several studies (e.g., Palalas et al., 2020; Song & Kim, 2021; Syauqi et al., 2020) have indicated that virtual learning experiences not only promote academic knowledge, but also foster the development of crucial skills such as adaptability, flexibility, and time management. Furthermore, Rini et al. (2022) noted that online learners cultivate adaptability by navigating technology, adapting to diverse learning environments, and engaging in self-directed learning. While studying virtually, participants develop independence, self-discipline, self-motivation, and resilience, take ownership of their learning process and work independently to achieve their goals. These skills contribute to personal growth and development, equipping individuals with the necessary tools for success in an evolving educational landscape (Keener et al., 2021).

Lastly, these findings showed that engaging in virtual learning expanded participants' networks and connections beyond their immediate physical surroundings, and this, is another gain acquired from their distance education experience as students living in the UAE while studying virtually in the Philippines. Research has indicated that virtual learning not only facilitates knowledge acquisition, but also fosters networking and connection-building opportunities (Gee, 2018; Ito et al., 2018). This implies that by connecting with peers, educators, and professionals from diverse backgrounds, learners can expand their professional networks, forge collaborations, find mentors, and explore potential career pathways.

On Realizations Constructed

The findings of the present study captured the participants' reflections and lessons learned from their virtual learning journeys. For instance, they realized that they had the ability to flourish and succeed in both their physical environment in the UAE and their remote educational setting in the Philippines, which suggests their adaptability and resilience in overcoming the challenges associated with studying virtually in one country while living physically in another. In other words, virtual learning can be a transformative and enriching experience for students, enabling them to thrive and succeed in different physical and educational environments. Previous studies (Keener et al., 2021; Naidu, 2021) have highlighted the potential of online learning to cultivate adaptability and resilience in students. By providing them with opportunities to navigate through digital environments, take ownership of their learning, and overcome challenges, online learning can contribute to the development of these important skills. It is thus suggested that educators and institutions should continue to explore and develop virtual learning opportunities and resources that allow students to engage with different cultures and educational contexts (Ali, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Participants in the present investigation also understood the purpose and motivation behind their unique educational arrangement. These students embraced their educational situation and made the most of their opportunities. They were motivated, goal-oriented, and found purpose in their studies, even though they were physically located in a different country from their virtual learning environment. The results obtained imply that when individuals understand the purpose and motivation behind a challenging endeavor, such as the unique educational arrangement described in this study, it can indeed lead to increased productivity and a higher likelihood of achieving success by providing them with clarity, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and a stronger commitment to their goals. The self-determination theory indicates that individuals, who have a clear understanding of their autonomous motives (motivation driven by personal interest, values, and choice), tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement, effort, and overall performance. Literature depicting the self-determination theory framework supports the idea of a positive relationship between understanding one's motives and productivity/success (Deci et al., 2017; Manganeli et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The last finding of this study relates to participants' complex relationships with themselves. On the one hand, self can be a powerful ally, supporting them through determination, self-motivation, and a positive mindset, which leads to success in the virtual learning environment. On the other hand, self can also become a formidable adversary, causing difficulties with self-discipline, time

management, and negative self-perceptions, ultimately impeding academic progress and well-being. This duality highlights the significant impact of individuals' internal mindsets and behaviors on their educational outcomes and overall mental state during virtual learning, which social cognitive theory also can explain. According to this theory, individuals' behavior, cognitive processes, and environmental factors interact and influence each other (Bandura in Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Zalazar-Jaime & Medrano, 2021). In the context of virtual learning, the theory suggests that individuals' internal mindsets and behaviors, such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-perception, play a crucial role in determining their educational outcomes and mental state.

Conclusions

This study focused on the struggles, gains, and realizations of Filipino senior high students who physically resided in the UAE while studying virtually in schools in the Philippines. The findings obtained revealed that this particular type of distance education poses unique challenges to students, including time zone differences and cultural and linguistic barriers leading to disrupted sleep schedules and difficulties in communication and understanding. Challenges experienced by these students can extend to personal, sociocultural, linguistic, and academic issues, making them more challenged compared to other students who took distance education in the same country where they were residing. Despite the difficulties encountered, students gained opportunities to develop personally, as distance education allowed them to become immersed in the Philippine academic and cultural landscape, foster a deeper sense of identity and connections, prepare for future higher education, develop flexibility and adaptability, cultivate independence and self-motivation, and expand networks and connections with other individuals. With these challenges and benefits, they realized their ability to thrive in dual settings, appreciated the value of continuous education, and reflected on the dual nature of their relationship with themselves. These insights revealed their growth and self-awareness development during their virtual learning journeys. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of distance education in terms of the challenges, benefits, and realizations of students residing in one country while studying virtually in another. Though not generalizable, these findings may provide a deeper understanding of the experiences encountered in distance education, and can inform the development of strategies and support systems to enhance virtual learning experiences in similar contexts.

Beyond the rich and insightful findings, it is worth discussing the limitations of the study. There was a sample bias in that the focus was only on Filipino students in the UAE studying virtually in Philippine schools. Hence, the generalizability of the findings is limited. The absence of quantitative data reduces the generalizability of the findings; reliance on thematic analysis alone may affect reliability. The narrow perspective adopted in the study excluded the viewpoints of teachers, administrators, and parents. Future research should address these limitations for a more comprehensive understanding of distance education, which may include diverse student samples from various nationalities and cultural backgrounds who are engaged in distance learning.

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