



Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, Learning Insights in Modular Learning of Social Studies Graduate School Students in a State University

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the global educational system. For education to continue, the traditional face-to-face classes shifted to distance learning with the implementation of different learning modalities such as modular (asynchronous), online (synchronous), or blended learning. Among the learning modalities offered, modular learning is very popular among the schools in the Philippines. Hence, this narrative inquiry research explored the lived experiences of graduate students in a state university enrolled in the Master of Education program major in Social Studies. The informants were selected through purposive sampling and underwent an in-depth interview. The written interviews were transcribed and coded. Categories were clustered; then, emerging themes were derived. Results identified three core themes related to challenges such as challenges as a graduate student with sub-themes compliance and deadlines, ensuring quality learning and outputs, and making connection, challenges as full-time teacher with sub-themes preparation of learning modules, connection with learners, and validity of students' academic performance, and challenges as a social individual; two core themes related to coping mechanisms such as positive mind set and time management; and three core themes related to insights/realizations which include need for skill advancement, being resilient, and independent learning. Findings revealed that as education shifted to the "new normal", students prepared themselves for distance learning by making adequate adjustments and preparations. Even if they experience difficulties that may limit their performance and discourage them to continue, they manage to adapt to the demands of the new normal and complete their tasks.

Keywords: Modular Learning, Academic Experiences, Challenges, Coping Mechanism

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most recent global public health emergencies. The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences for almost every sector of the human race. The educational sector has been particularly hard hit. Most countries have temporarily closed educational institutions in order to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce infections (Tria, 2020). To address the challenge of innovating educational delivery mechanisms in higher education, colleges and universities around the world have experimented with various practices such as distance education, online teaching, remote learning, blended learning, and mobile learning (Rotas and Cahapay, 2020). Furthermore, universities needed to change their teaching practices due to Covid-19 pandemic (Kusel, Martin & Markic, 2020). Distance education is characterized by the transaction that occurs when there is a separation of time and space between learner and teacher, a separation that leads to unique patterns of learner and teacher behaviors (Nwanko, 2015).

Distance learning is a rapidly expanding educational system with unique characteristics, owing to the fact that distance learning students study away from both the teacher and the educational institution (Vakoufari, Christina, & Mavroidis 2014). Since the advent of the internet and the advancement of the human race, the demand for skills and higher education has risen to new levels (Vonberg, 2015).

However, along with these educational innovations during this time period, many challenges have faced students, teachers, and even school administrators. These struggles were visible not only among basic education and undergraduate students, but also among graduate students, especially since the majority of these graduate students have "a lot of irons in the fire," particularly those working in academic institutions. As a result, these complexities must be examined in greater depth.

Since modular learning is not a common mode of learning among graduate students, essential skills for this approach should be evident among students to ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of learning. Some studies conclude that, while students learn more via active learning, they may report greater perceptions of their learning and greater enjoyment when passive approaches are used (Deslauriers et al., 2019).

As a result, the purpose of this research is to uncover the difficulties that graduate students face when using this modality. The findings of this study can be used by graduate students who are using modular learning to become more effective and successful in their learning.

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2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. (University of Texas Arlington, 2022). Specifically, this study utilized the narrative inquiry approach which is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data. This approach is distinguished by the collection of stories from individuals or small groups. Individual experiences are described in these accounts, and the researcher is frequently exposed to the identities of those individuals. Interviews are commonly used to collect narratives, but other qualitative data collecting methods, such as observations and documents, may also be employed (Butina, 2015).

As this study was based on Charles Wedemeyer's independent study, it features the learner's autonomy or need for independence to participate in deciding his/her learning objectives, selecting the strategy and means to achieve such objectives, and demonstrating mastery of the chosen objectives is emphasized. Students who participate in distance learning have the option of processing their learning at home, the office, on the job, or wherever they are. Dr. Michael G Moore's subsequent theoretical framework, autonomy, refers to the extent to which learners decide on factors such as "what to learn, how to learn, and how much to learn" (Moore 2013, p 68).

Moore proposed that adult learners set their own learning goals and pursue them on their own. He proposed two types of autonomy: emotional and instrumental. Instrumental independence refers to the ability to perform an activity, such as learning, without seeking assistance; emotional independence refers to the ability to complete an activity without seeking reassurance, affection, or approval. The desire to succeed stems from a desire for self-approval. (p. 162). As a result, graduate students take responsibility for their own progress, with the freedom to start and stop at any time (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, &Zvacek, 2012, p.44).

2.2 Informants

The researchers employed a purposive sampling technique- a non-probability sampling that is selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Purposive sampling is different from convenience sampling and is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling (Crossman, 2020). The researchers purposively selected the possible informants based on the predefined criteria such as those who are in the first year level enrolled in Master of Arts in Education major in Social Studies at the teacher education program of public university for the academic year 2021-2022, into modular-distance learning, and, were 22 to 30 years old.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Informants

Informants	Age	Sex		First Year	Enrolled in MAEd- Social Studies
		Male	Female		
Darla	24		/	/	/
Bekay	24		/	/	/
Jen	24		/	/	/
Lory	24		/	/	/
Jon	29	/		/	/

2.3 Data Sources/Research Instrument

This study utilized a duly-validated researcher-made questionnaire to gather data from the respondents. The questionnaire was composed of two different parts. Part One contained the purpose of the written interview and the Personal Data of the Respondents. Part Two contained the semi-structured questions that were related to the academic experiences in modular learning of the informants.

To answer the research questions, this study used a qualitative interview, specifically through a written interview to elicit the informants' academic experiences in modular learning. Qualitative interviews provide new insight into a social phenomenon because they allow respondents to think about and reason about a variety of topics in a new way (Folkestad as cited by Jugder, 2016). Specifically, the study employed the use of written interviews to deepen the discussion of the informants' responses to the given questions. The informants were given ample time to write down their experiences based on the given questions.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers used a narrative inquiry method to gather the data. Narrative inquiry was chosen in order to provide the flexibility for the informants to tell stories about their experiences. Before the data was collected from the informants, a consent letter was sent to the respondents to seek approval. Information and communication with the informants was done through Facebook messenger and informants' emails. The accomplished questionnaires were retrieved and the data were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

After the data were collected, analysis and interpretation of transcripts followed. In this phase the open coding was done at an initial stage, themes and subthemes were also formed.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data gathered from the written interview. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a technique for 'finding, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in data, and results in an informative study that answers specific research questions. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. In conducting this type of analysis, the six-phase guide introduced by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used as a framework.

The researchers began their data analysis by familiarizing themselves with the entire body of data and taking notes while reading the transcript. Following that, preliminary codes were created in order to organize the research data in a meaningful and systematic manner. Coding was used to dissect data into small chunks of meaning. The next step was to look for themes, which considered the pattern that captured something significant about the data. The final step was to return to the data set and compare the findings to it, to ensure that the themes were accurate and useful representations of the data. Following that, the themes were defined by defining each topic and determining how it contributes to the data's understanding. The researchers went over the data analysis. This included a brief introduction, the methodology used to collect the data, and a description of the data source's themes and evidence.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Informants were informed of the study's purpose and the procedures that would be followed during the course of the study. Informants were also informed of their rights to decline, participate, and withdraw from the research once it had begun, as well as the expected consequences or benefits of doing so. Informants were told how data will be used and what will be done with case materials. Informants for this study shared valuable and sometimes sensitive information with the researchers, with the hope that the researcher will protect their identity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Three important core main themes drawn from data transcripts were used to describe the experiences of graduate school students in modular learning. These themes included (1) Challenges, (2) Coping Mechanisms, and (3) Realizations/Learnings/Insights

Challenges

The challenges mean the issues, problems, and other factors that affect the informants' academic performance. These challenges were categorized into sub-themes that include being a graduate school student, being a full-time teacher, and being a socially active individual. There were three (3) examined categories that are relevant to the challenges experienced by the informants namely (1) As a student (2) As a full-time teacher (3) As a socially active individual.

As a student

This sub-theme was divided into different categories such as student compliance and meeting the deadlines, ensuring quality learning and outputs, and making connections with peers and teachers.

- *Compliance and Deadlines.* One of the challenges that the informants have to deal with is to comply with the requirements of the courses and submit them on or before deadlines. Despite the provision of the course syllabus which provides an overview of the course topics, requirements, and timeline, the informants claimed that they are pressured whenever a task is due for submission. Becca and Lory described their experiences as:

Becca: "At first I was not able to submit two outputs on time and the submission setting in the LMS was already closed. I had to appeal to my professor to submit it via messenger so that my output can still be credited. After that, I make sure to submit my tasks just before the deadline."

Lory: "I struggle with time management and I find it hard to find a balance between my studies, work, and my day-to-day life."

- *Ensuring Quality Learning and Outputs.* Another challenge that the informants encounter is how to ensure that learning on their own is effective and the outputs they submit are of quality.

Jen: "I have difficulty concentrating and lack of focus in answering the different activities. There are too many distractions that contribute to time wastage and loss of concentration because while studying, there are many chances of deviating from other activities like social media."

Lory: "I also feel that modular learning is a bit hard for me because I was not able sometimes to understand the topic given in our grad school."

- *Making Connections.* To establish connections with their classmates and professor is also a challenge considered by the informants. In distant learning, problems with group work and socialization are common (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). Although communication is accessible through the use of online platforms, it is different if you get to discuss some concerns with your classmates and teachers face-to-face. The informants

are familiar with one another but despite this, discussions are not often done unless a classmate starts a thread of conversation in the group chat.

Jon: *"Since the first semester, I only message one or two of my classmates if I want to verify something regarding our class. I am not confident to ask questions in our group chat."*

As a full-time teacher

Part of the challenges experienced by the informants is that they are also working as full-time school teachers. Other than complying with the requirements of the courses they take, they also deal with the demands of their work most especially during the implementation of distance learning. It is a challenge to balance their academic requirements with their workload. This was divided into three (3) different categories namely (1) Preparation of Modules (2) Connection with the Students (3) Validity of Students' Academic Performance.

- *Preparation of Modules.* The informants prepared the modules that will be given out to the learners. They download and print out the ready-made modules provided by the DepEd Central Office. Darla described her experience as:

Darla: *"First, the printing of modules of my students since the references are not enough for my students so I must provide other instructional materials like personally printed modules."*

- *Connection with the Students.* Another issue they dealt with is how to maintain constant communication with their learners due to unstable or poor internet connection, or learners who are not responsive to them. In order to efficiently implement online or offline tasks, learner engagement must be established (Beteille as cited by Sagales, et al., 2020). To prove this, two informants uttered:

Lory: *"I was not able to have a good or stable connectivity where I could connect to my students and at the same time during my classes."*

Becca: *"Constant communication to students, wherein some students are ignoring the messages in group chat. That's why it's hard for me sometimes to reach out to my students, especially in giving instructions to them."*

- *Validity of Students' Academic Performance.* Because distant learning reduces teacher-student interaction, schools are concerned about the validity and reliability of students' replies in modules/LAS, summative assessments, and performance activities. Because of the distance and the lack of frequent follow-up with the students, the informants said it was difficult to monitor their activities. One participant even uttered:

Becca: *"During the distribution and retrieval of modules, some students are not returning and submitting the answer sheets so sometimes I tend to assume their raw scores and it's hard to predict when they can fully pass the answered modules."*

As a socially active individual

Aside from being a graduate student and being a full-time teacher, students have other work to do that hinders them from focusing on their studies, such as being socially active. Also, the students face a challenge in focusing on their studies due to anxiety based on unpredictable experiences. The two informants narrated this way:

Darla: *"I started my graduate studies during the second year of the implementation of distance learning. Since I am also a full-time teacher who also delivers modular learning to my students, my time now is solely devoted to accomplishing the tasks of both the courses I'm taking and my field of work. I can still manage to have my "me time" and socialize with my friends but it's not as often as it was before."*

Jon: *"I noticed that I am always giving excuses whenever I am being asked to travel on a weekend, or simply go "mall". I feel like a weekend is not enough for me to finish checking my students' modules and at the same time work on my assignments in the graduate school. Rare long weekends are what I always look forward to."*

Coping Mechanisms

These are the ways and means in which students are able to overcome the challenges that they encounter in modular learning. According to the informants of this study, they were able to cope with the challenges of modular learning through the following subcategories divided into two (2) namely (1) Having Positive Values/ Mindset (2) Time Management.

- *Having a Positive Values/Mindset.* The informant said that having and maintaining a positive mindset was the most essential coping method they used. They disclosed:

Jon: *"By accepting what's really happening, lengthen patience and by helping one another."*

Darla: *"I think I'm still in the process of adapting to our situation."*

Becca: *"I am always reminding myself not to destroy my inner peace so I must adapt to the situation and don't mind the difficulties just focus on the positivity in every challenge that I am facing."*

Jen: "I think of why I'm attending the graduate school program and I identify my learning goals to stay focused on doing the different activities assigned to us. To stay motivated, I log onto my learning platform every day so I don't miss any assignments or announcements."

- **Time Management.** Time management is a significant skill for balancing the demands of home and work. For the past two years, the majority of schoolwork has doubled. Managing their time and planning their responsibilities, according to the informants, made their work easier. Three of them succinctly put this way:

Lory: "My takeaways from these encounters is that time management is very important in order for me to finish the work and that I will be overloaded for all the work that I was not able to do."

Darla: "I am also trying to manage my time and limit the use of social media and playing online games so that I can be more focused with the things I need to do."

Jen: "I also set regular days and times to attend virtual class and complete assignments. I used to build out a calendar of upcoming tasks and be sure to give myself a realistic amount of time to complete them."

Learning Insights

Based on the data transcripts, the informants held positive aspirations in life despite having difficulties. This was divided into three (3) subcategories: (1) Need for Skill Advancement (2) Resiliency (3) Independent Learning.

- **Need for Skill Advancement.** Following the global move from face-to-face classrooms to distance learning, various online learning platforms emerged, specializing in the delivery of online classes and webinars. Examples of these are Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Edmodo, etc.

The informants saw this as a challenge since they felt that it is necessary for them to learn new skills, at the same time manage their time on performing other important tasks that they need to accomplish. If not addressed, this will hinder an effective and balanced educational system (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). For Skill Advancement, they revealed:

Darla: "I reminded myself that if the oldies are trying with their limited knowledge of technology so should I."

Jon: "I've learned to use google meet, google classroom, and zoom and explore sites and apps that helped me in my teaching."

Becca: "At first I was a bit hesitant to navigate these online platforms since I was comfortable with what we were used to. It was only complicated for a while but once I knew the process, it actually made my distance learning easier."

- **Resiliency.** The informants identified this as one of the learnings and realizations that they have acquired. The development may be a way to assist graduate school students to deal with the challenges and vulnerability and they audibly put it this way:

Darla: "We are still in the process of adapting to the change that this pandemic caused us." "I think I'm still in the process of adapting to our situation", she added

Becca: "As a graduate school student, I am a striving individual who is trying to catch my deadlines and balance my work and studies."

Jon: "Our versatility is tested and we've come to an end with this distance learning." "I think we need to become ready for whatever encounters we may face in an unexpected time", he added.

- **Independent Learning.** The most important insight that the informants were able to gain from modular learning is that they develop independent learning. With less interaction from their course facilitators, they were able to explore their subject. Becca, Jen, and Darla further elaborate:

Becca: "I have proper gadgets and a stable internet connection to mobilize in understanding and analyzing the different concepts."

Jen: "Modular learning helped me with time management because I had to take the initiative to keep up with school work. I can easily communicate with my classmates to ask for clarifications and instructions regarding the activities that we need to accomplish within a week."

Darla: "In modular distance learning I can learn at my own pace and I can study as much or as little as I want every day, as long as I complete my study material within the stipulated time. It also gives me more freedom and time to understand each topic without any classroom or peer pressure."

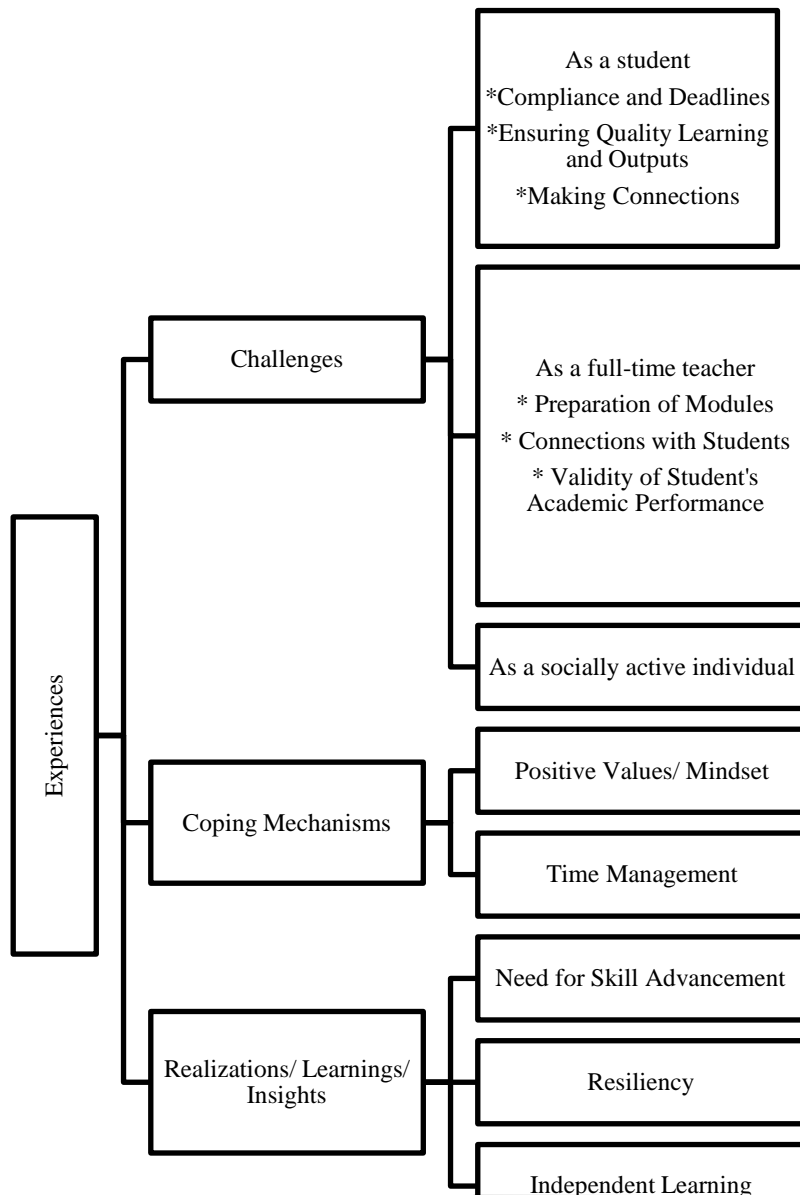


Figure 1. Demonstration of meaningful categories of the study

3.2 Discussion

Continuing education has encouraged many graduate students to pursue their studies beyond their undergraduate degrees, and adding other commitments to these students' lives means another responsibility to bear. Distance learning in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis poses hurdles to students but also drives them to survive despite the number of challenging tasks they need to experience every day. The crisis and its aftermath have exposed flaws in educational systems while also providing an opportunity to reform school education into a more resilient and robust paradigm.

This paper shares about the experiences of the Social Studies graduate students enrolled in modular learning during the second semester of school year 2021-2022. The informants were asked to narrate their experiences. Their responses were subjected to thematic analysis and the major themes that were identified include; the challenges they faced as a student, as a teacher, and as a socially active individual; their coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges; the realizations and insights they gained from their experiences of modular learning.

The challenges encountered by the informants were categorized to the ones they deal with, as graduate students, as full-time teachers, and as socially active individuals. As students, the challenges encountered by the informants include compliance with deadlines, ensuring quality learning and outputs, and making connections with their professors and classmates.

They consider compliance and submission of outputs on time as a challenge. They experience cramming and sometimes submit their outputs late. This is evident for those who are taking three (3) courses in a semester, at the same time as a full-time teacher. Compliance is very challenging especially during midterms and finals wherein submission dates overlap with one another.

Another challenge in the distance learning that informants have considered is ensuring quality learning and outputs. This correlates to the statement of Altun, Gülay, and Özdemir (2021) stating that distance learning does not ensure successful learning, learning persistence, or success. It is expected that graduate school students should be responsible for their own learning and be resourceful to facilitate their learning needs. Distance learning students claim that they have greater work, tasks, and study loads (Nenakhova, 2021). There are certain topics that they found difficult to understand on their own. Tasks are graded and given constructive feedback. This resulted in their queries about whether they did well or not in a specific output.

According to Adnan and Anwar (2020), in distant learning, problems with group work and socialization are common. As evidence, informants claimed that they are a bit hesitant to clarify or ask questions. They only wait for updates in the group chat and use it as an opportunity to clarify something. Other informants would just send a private message to some classmates if they want to ask questions. Additionally, Nenakhova (2021) stated that the lack of face-to-face interaction and conversation is considered a hindrance. Moreover, studies have also revealed that students are unable to learn independently and rely significantly on teachers (Batmang et al., 2021; Pedroso and Herbuela, 2022).

As full-time school teachers, the informants' challenges include the preparation of modules, maintaining connections with their students and how to ensure the validity of their academic performance. Distance learning limited their interaction with their learners. Because of the lack of frequent follow-up with the students, the informants said it was difficult to monitor their activities. In order to efficiently implement online or offline tasks, learner engagement must be established (Beteille as cited by Sagales, et al., 2020).

The first semester of implementing modular learning was an adjustment period for the teachers and students. During the second semester, the challenges were managed based on the experiences of the previous semester and through their different coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms included having a positive mindset and time management. The challenges caused them stress and oftentimes prevented them from accomplishing their tasks, but they were able to overcome them by being adaptable and flexible to change. It is possible to boost academic performance by creating a happy environment and well-being within oneself (Loveless, 2020). At the end of the day, they choose to be optimistic and look for the positive aspects of the situation.

Managing their time also helped them deal with the demands of modular learning. Creating routines through habits and practices in a set schedule allows you to make better use of your time (De Villa & Manalo, 2020). Thus, it is essential that they organize their work so that they can still devote time to other duties, particularly their family commitments.

Despite the challenges encountered by the informants brought about by modular (distance) learning, they were able to cope with these and continue with their routines as a student, full-time teachers, and socially active individuals. Their experiences enabled them to deal with the demands of education in the new normal. These learnings include the need for skill advancement, being resilient, and most importantly how to be an independent learner.

Students must enhance their skills in order to navigate these platforms and make the most of them in the learning process as a result of this advancement. Because of the wide school closures caused by the global epidemic, the need to study new technology and advancements is unavoidable (Gonzales, Gonzales, Miranda & Sagales, 2020). Further, ICT is an important factor in online distance learning. ICT is no longer an option, but a necessity in today's digital society (Cosmas & Mbvette, 2009). The increasing popularity of information and communication technology (ICT) encourages the wide use of technologies in training, with the goal of enhancing the teaching and learning quality (Xuan et al., 2021; Pedroso, 2021).

As cited from Camitan and Bajin (2021), resilience has become a prominent notion in both study and clinical practice during the last decade (Kumpfer, 2002; Walsh-Dilley and Wolford, 2015). It is widely acknowledged that resilience refers to the beneficial adaptation that occurs after a stressful or negative experience (Porterfield et al., 2010). Most definitions recognize two fundamental aspects of resilience (Herrman et al., 2011). The first is that it is affected by a variety of circumstances. Second, resilience is context- and time-dependent, and it may not be present in all aspects of life. Resilience appears to be open to the impact of certain conditions (Hayman et al., 2017).

One of the advantages of employing modules for instruction is that students develop better self-study or learning skills. Students actively participate in understanding the concepts provided in the module. They gain a sense of responsibility as they complete the tasks in the module (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020). It enables students to manage their time independently, without having to worry about attending lectures on campus, and they can study in the comfort of their own homes (Sadeghi, 2019; Pedroso et al., 2022), thereby establishing self-discipline (Rao, N.V. & Rao, D., 2020; Pedroso et al., 2022) among learners. As Wedemeyer's Theory emphasized that autonomy and self-responsibility must be employed in distance learning.

This current study has many limitations that should be identified and addressed in future studies. First, this study is limited to graduate students who are consciously involved in modular learning. The study's informants are all in their first year of postgraduate studies. Their first-year experiences differ from those of students who are halfway through their postgraduate degrees. All of the informants are also Social Studies students. Because of its different fields of focus, the findings of this study may differ from those of other studies involving informants from various majors. Furthermore, this study focuses solely on graduate school students' academic experiences with modular learning. Further studies could include graduate students who are involved in e-learning instruction. Finally, the researchers utilized written interview questions, thus there might be a possibility of distortion through self-report bias (Pedroso & Pacit, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the study's stated limitations, it provided sufficient data on the experiences of graduate students in modular learning that educates future researchers on this topic.

This study has the potential to embark on significant pieces of learning and awareness on the various academic experiences of graduate school students, promoting resiliency and independence through distance learning. Moreover, this study can be used by learners who are involved in distance-modular learning. The academic experiences revealed in this study will serve as a guide for how other students will apply the coping mechanisms to their challenges.

4. Conclusion

Modular learning as a learning delivery mode among Social Studies graduate school students have varied effects on their academic experiences. These experiences include positive and negative ones that contributed to their total learning experience. Their challenges being a student, being a full-time teacher, as well as the other responsibilities that confronted them adds spice to their academic life. However, along with these challenges, there were coping strategies that they employed in order to overcome it and helped them to become motivated in pursuing their graduate studies. The coping mechanisms that surmounted include having a positive values and mindset and managing their time accordingly. Additionally, after encountering various challenges, and coping with it, the graduate school students acquired substantial learnings and realizations. These learnings or realizations include the need to skill advancement, becoming resilient, and being a responsible independent learner. These significant things that they have shared are worth knowing and can be used as a guide by some graduate school students for their own benefit.

Therefore, many graduate school students who are into modular learning mode, at the same time being a full-time professional worker, consider openness, flexibility, patience, possessing positive attributes, and being wise time managers in order to bounce with all the challenges that they may experience along the process of personal growth and professional development

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