

CATCH-UP FRIDAYS: BRIDGING LEARNING GAPS

by:

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As we are recovering from the effects of the pandemic on our economy and education, educators noticed a drastic decline in our students' comprehension, attentiveness, and competency. This may have been due to the prolonged closure of our schools, adding up to the environmental stress because of the virus and, of course, the demand for being able to fulfill academic requirements.

According to the World Bank Group President David Malpass, not only that the pandemic result in a significant loss of human capital, but also a loss in foundational learning, health, and skills that are critical to the development of the next generations. The Philippines is one of the countries with the most extended school closures globally, so we should expect deep learning losses. Because for every 30 days of closure, students tend to miss an average of 34 days of learning. Imagine 510 days of not being able to attend classes.

Moreover, based on the rollout of the learning program during the release of the Program for International Student Assessment or PISA 2022, Filipino students lagged behind other countries ranking 77th out of 81 countries globally from learners ages 15 years old. Their average reading score was 374 points which is lower than the average of 476 conducted globally.

As such, the Department of Education launched on January 12, 2024, the program “Catch up Fridays” as the department’s solution to addressing learning gaps among grade school and high school students. The program focuses on strengthening the

foundational, social, and other relevant skills to achieve the goals of the basic education curriculum as per the department's notion.

Upon the release of this program, I can't stop thinking about how reading cultivated our lives during our time as students. Where internet is not yet present, and all we can do to finish our homework in reading is to go to libraries and search for the title of the book where we can find the answers to the supplemental questions in our assignments. It is nostalgic to go back to times when AI wasn't present, and we are obliged to come up with an essay based on our understanding or analysis of the story. Now, it is kind of disturbing to see students' output made by ChatGPT and notice the declining competencies of our children who are not born to be voracious readers, nor engaged in stories during the early years of their learning.

Redirecting our path to reading is the right step to establishing rightful learning, as long as the foundation or framework of this program is comprehensive, and the tools are based on what our learners need according to their level of comprehension and fluency.

The goal of this program is to cultivate reading habits, and it is expected by the Department of Education that there will be an enhancement of reading, critical thinking, analysis, and writing skills, specifically for those learners who have low proficiency based on national assessments.

According to the DepEd Memorandum no. 001 series of 2024, the first half of the program is dedicated to the National Reading program, while the second half is for engaging Values, Health, and Peace Education. The memorandum also indicated that there would be age-appropriate texts provided for the implementation of the program. In addition, this program is an opportunity to empower students to have a wider understanding of justice and peace, as reading promotes awareness of societal issues and culture. Since the main objective is to reinforce and engage students in learning, this

program ought to not be graded. Instead, the progress is monitored by compiling reading experiences through journals, essays, and other creative expressions.

Regardless of the texts to be provided, the teachers who will be responsible for the implementation must be knowledgeable of their students' level of phonics, comprehension, and fluency, nonetheless, this program will be absurd. Also, they should have a full grasp of the text they are about to deliver. Thus the program should also, in accordance, include assessment tools to effectively determine students' level for proper usage of the program objective. Also, the tools are not only beneficial in assessing students but could be a way to conceptualize instruction materials that will be used based on varying competencies.

Another question in my mind is how can we ensure that the program is effective by writing essays if at first, our students aren't able to justify or comprehend text, nor even write their thoughts? With this, I believe we should not burden our learners with merely writing but incorporate playing or enjoyment to further engage students in the program. These can be done through word hunt or crossword to enhance students' vocabulary, or by allowing the students to retell the story based on their own words and try to synthesize their thoughts to fortify the concepts.

Aside from meeting the objectives of this program, educators and school administrators are encouraged to support each other in organizing a collaborative framework to address varying difficulties that may arise upon implementation of this program.

Despite the positive impacts that this program may bring to our student's level of competency and our country's standing on global assessment, this may also be a challenge to our learners. Keep in mind that learning is not easy. As students learn and adapt to changes in their routine, there may be instances that they may experience frustration and low self-esteem, if in case they are not able to meet the demands of this

program. This type of academic stress may lead to less well-being or anxiety development, hence delaying the progress of reading and learning. Although this may not happen to everyone, considering this will not hurt to allow us to have a contingency plan in the future since mental health is also considered in allowing learning to advance.

The bottom line of this program is that there are still some issues specific to every school, to every year level, and to every competency that needs to be addressed. This program should not be hastened unless taken into consideration the pros and cons at various levels, and the support and resources that are needed by the teachers to implement such a program. The educators are letting their hopes up for the accomplishment of this program's objective. Thus, we are yearning for its positive effect in the long run and its adaptability to the future changes in our educational status, to help us develop a more resilient and globally competitive nation.

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