

Determining the Learning Needs of Homeschoolers: A Case of a Catholic Homeschool in the Philippines

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Educational system in the Philippines continuously evolves. Before, Filipinos generally preferred regular schools; however, nowadays, more and more parents and students are venturing into homeschooling programs where parents serve as teachers at home. This descriptive qualitative study aims to find out the types of homeschool learners that a Catholic homeschool in the Philippines caters to, the teaching strategies/learning activities that the learners perceive to be working well for them, and the way by which they want their mentors to respond to their learning needs. Open-ended questions validated by a language and research expert were sent via email and messenger to 30 Grade 11 and 20 Grade 12 students. However, only 23 students sent their responses. The data gathered from the responses were coded based on the themes identified via open coding and frequency count was applied. The study reveals the following findings: (1) A majority of the senior high school students surveyed in this study are visual learners while some are auditory and kinesthetic learners. Visual learners learn well by reading textbooks and other materials; auditory learners, by listening to discussion and kinesthetic learners, by doing. (2) In terms of challenges that they encountered in their studies, they stated lack or limited knowledge on topics of their subjects, noise in the classroom, social media use, and limited teacher feedback are some of the things that they consider to be hindering their learning. (3) On teaching strategies, use of PowerPoint presentation with great slides appealed most to visual learners, lectures and thorough discussion to auditory learners, and videos to multimodal learners. (4) Finally, most of the students perceived that their learning needs can be met by uploading materials such as PowerPoint presentations of lessons and engaging instructional videos to Google classroom, and by sending prompt responses to students' queries about the lessons and school requirements via email. Hence, for any homeschooling program to be effective, educational support and constant communication with students and parents is imperative.

Keywords: homeschooling, teaching strategies, learning activities

Introduction

Homeschooling or home education, according to the Alberta Education Organization (2010), "is when a parent has decided to retain responsibility for educating the child" (p. 3). Homeschooling was conceptualized by its founder, John Holt, in the 1970s as a non-formal education known as "unschooling" to liberate the children from rote learning in traditional schools. Holt argued that children until age nine should be schooled at home by their parents to provide them with a solid educational, psychological, and moral foundation (Holt, 1981).

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Homeschooling in the United States continuously evolves to what it is today. Its primary goal is to provide the learners with quality education and to prepare them for leadership roles in society. According to Dr. Brian Ray (2022), “homeschool population is continuing to grow at an estimated 2% to 8% per annum over the past several years, but it grew drastically from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021” (para. 1).

In the Philippines, homeschooling is recognized by the government. However, a homeschooling provider needs a regular school as its affiliate to monitor its operations. For the past few years, the homeschooling population has grown exponentially. If before parents were skeptic with the idea of homeschooling, today, more and more parents are venturing into homeschooling their children. In 2019, about 12,000 families were estimated to be homeschoolers (Homeschool Defense Legal Association, 2019).

A Catholic homeschooling in the Philippines is the first homeschooling provider in the country that offers senior high school programs in 2017, a year after the implementation of the K-12 educational system in the Philippines. Since, senior high school subjects are mostly technical and discipline-related, parents may find it hard teaching these subjects to their children. This paved the way for the Catholic homeschool to offer two programs for senior high school students: (1) blended learning, and (2) home study program (online learning). Blended learning is a combination of online and face-to-face instruction. Face-to-face sessions happen in classrooms where teachers meet their students once a week every Tuesday and on two Mondays of the month to discuss lessons in core and major subjects. Online learning, on the other hand, requires homeschoolers to watch online videos to supplement their lessons in some subjects, take online quizzes, and upload their projects in Google classroom. On the other hand, home study program provides students independent study where they are left on their own in learning lessons in prescribed textbooks with the guidance of their parents. They take online quizzes and exams and upload projects via Google Classrooms. Teachers check their outputs and provide feedback.

During the Catholic Homeschool’s third year of operation of the Senior High School, the researchers noticed that a number of students had difficulty complying with school requirements. To address this concern, the researchers felt the need to improve its academic programs through gathering data from the homeschoolers to address their learning needs. The main objectives of this research include the following: (1) determine the learning styles of the senior high school students; (2) identify challenges they experienced that affected their learning; (3) point out the teaching strategies and practices that they believed would work for them; and (4) elicit their recommended ways on how to address their learning needs.

Review of Related Literature

While several studies on homeschooling focus on the reasons why parents homeschool their children, the comparison of academic performance of traditionally schooled and homeschooled students, and the assessment of social skills of homeschooled students, a dearth of research is focused on the homeschoolers’ learning needs. This study aims to fill this research gap. This study is focused on homeschoolers’ learning needs considering their learning styles, their challenges in learning in a homeschooling setup, their perceived teaching strategies that worked well for them, and their recommendations to address their learning needs.

Needs Assessment and Assessing Learners’ Needs

A “need” is a gap between the learner’s current level and his expected level. In order to fill this learning gap, needs assessment is necessary to plot future action. Needs assessment, as defined by the Office of Migrant

Education (2001) is “a systematic set of procedures that are used to determine needs, examine their nature and causes, and set priorities for future action” (p. 2).

The Office of Migrant Education (2001) proposed a three-phase model of Needs Assessment. Phase 1 of the model is Explore What Is. This phase determines the current state of the learners following these steps: organizing a committee responsible for identifying the learning needs, identifying major goals, determining need indicators, identifying data sources, and deciding on preliminary priorities. Phase 2, gathering and analyzing data, consists of the following steps: determining target groups, gathering data to describe needs, prioritizing needs, identifying and analyzing causes of the persistence of learning needs, and summarizing findings. Finally, Phase 3 is decision-making which consists of these steps: setting priority needs, identifying possible solutions, selecting solutions, proposing an action plan, and preparing a report.

Needs assessment is pivotal to effective teaching (McKimm & Swanwick, 2009). Assessing learners’ needs is essential in order for educators to tailor their instructional approaches and strategies to students’ learning styles in order to maximize their learning.

Learning Styles

Learning style refers to the way an individual learns and processes information. There are many different learning styles, however, this study focuses on the common learning styles by Barbe, Swassing, and Milone (1979). Visual learners learn well through visual images such as graphic organizers, texts, PowerPoint presentations, videos, and the like. Auditory learners learn effectively through listening to information. Some activities for auditory learners include listening to lectures, reports, conversations, group discussions, and the like. Kinesthetic learners learn by doing practical applications of concepts learned.

Several studies have proven a strong positive correlation between students’ learning styles and academic performance across age groups (Nja, Ukpepi, Edoho, & Richard, 2019; Barokah, Suseno, Say, & Ali, 2019; Fatemeh & Camellia, 2018; Vaisnav, 2013). Hence, it is recommended that teachers should match the teaching styles to students’ learning styles to maximize their learning (Awla, 2014; Nja et al., 2019).

Whatever learning style a student uses in processing information, he/she encounters challenges that may hinder learning.

Challenges That Hinder Learning

Homeschooled students, just like the traditionally schooled ones, also encounter challenges in learning. Some of these challenges can be distractions caused by social media, lack or limited knowledge in school topics, and processing of instructional materials like textbooks, supplemental readings, online videos, and other resources that use technical language.

Studying independently is not that easy for teens. At this stage, adolescents are not yet mature enough when it comes to setting priorities. They are more often than not tempted to prioritize leisure over studies. This explains why teenagers get distracted so easily by social media. Social media has been influential on teens’ lives. Among these social media platforms, Facebook is top in the list. This is where they get to interact with their friends and families, browse through news feeds, write posts, upload photos, watch Netflix, and play online games. With all these attractive features of Facebook, teens get distracted and lose focus on their studies (Tuurosang & Amadu, 2014).

Engaging in social media poses a great challenge on students since it has adverse effects on their studies. Mingle and Adams (2015) and Feng et al. (2019) concluded that excessive use of Facebook affects SHS students' academic performance negatively. Jacobsen and Forste (2011) echoed a similar finding although their study did not only focus on Facebook but included other types of social media such as online social networks, emails, video online games, cell phone/IM, and the like. They posited that there is a negative relationship between the use of various types of electronic media and first-semester grades of university students. The negative effect of social media use was attributed mostly to students' heavy usage of social media. On the contrary, if Facebook is used for information sharing, communication, and collaboration relevant to school projects, Facebook can be a tool for learning (Mazman & Usluel, 2010).

Aside from social media, another challenge faced by young learners is their lack or limited knowledge of topics in their subjects. Anderson (1977) in his Schema Theory posited that students are able to process information easily if they have background knowledge of the topic. Hence, a student trying to learn a new concept will get overwhelmed without any background knowledge to bank on.

Finally, learners get frustrated when presented with information written in technical language. If the information is new and written in the language that is difficult to comprehend, learners tend to avoid processing such information since bottom up or decoding of word meaning (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) and top down processing (activating prior knowledge) (Goodman, 1967) cannot help them decipher its meaning.

To address students' challenges in learning, educators should design engaging learning activities that will orchestrate their understanding of complex concepts.

Effective Teaching Strategies

Weimer (2013) presented some key principles to facilitate learning. These include allowing students to do more tasks, less telling on the part of teachers to enable students to discover things on their own, doing instructional design more carefully, modeling explicitly to students how experts learn, encouraging students to learn from and with each other, creating climates for learning, and using evaluation to promote learning.

Nja and her colleagues (2019), on the other hand, recommended using varied teaching strategies and methods to address different learning styles. As students vary in their learning preferences, so do teachers should strive to provide various learning experiences that address the different learning styles of students.

Moreover, Senthamarai (2018) posited to use interactive strategies for learning. Interactive strategies involve students' active participation in learning. Resilient Educator (2018) proposed some interactive teaching strategies which include brainstorming, think, pair and share, buzz session, incident process, and Question and Answer sessions. Brainstorming is an activity where students can be divided in small groups to brainstorm on a topic. Think, pair and share is done in pairs wherein each student is made to think first and write down his/her answers on a specific question or topic. Afterwards, he/she is encouraged to pair with a classmate and discuss each other's answers to the question posed. Then, the teacher may call some volunteers to share with the whole class their answers. Buzz sessions are done with small groups of students discussing a single topic. Incident process is like a case study format wherein students are trained to solve real-life problems. Finally, question and answer sessions allow students to write on 3×5 index cards their three questions and their answers about the topic. During the lecture, the teacher will mix up these index cards, read the questions and answers of students.

Moreover, Sanchez (2010) suggested some interactive (student-centered) strategies to make students succeed in their academic endeavors. These strategies include providing students activities to put their ideas into

words to organize and clarify their thinking, connecting lessons and instructional materials to students' interests and real-life experiences, and providing students with a variety of learning activities either alone or with peers to challenge their thinking.

While teaching strategies are important in making students engaged in classroom discussions and activities, equally important is the teachers' ability to integrate technology into their classrooms. And this integration may prove to be challenging to some teachers (Chen, 2008; Herold, 2015). Designing online instructional videos and PowerPoint presentations and engaging online activities may be difficult for some teachers. This is an important skill set that educators need to acquire because studies (Harris et al., 2016; Nja et al., 2019) show that integrating technology into classroom instruction has been proven effective to maximize students' learning. Furthermore, Uukkivi and Labanova (2018) and Australian Christian College (2020) stressed that the use of digital apps and online learning materials were significant in fostering students' engagement.

In a related study, Kosterelioglu (2016) found out that based on students' views, using video clips has positive effects in arousing interest in the class (11.9%), concentrating during class (8.9%), improving memory in learning (27%) and providing intelligibility of the topic (7.9%). This implies that educational videos that are relevant to lessons have a facilitative effect on students' learning.

On the whole, educators should be aware of the learning needs of their students, their preferred learning styles, their challenges that hinder learning, and their perceived teaching strategies that are effective for them. From their perspectives, educators may align their teaching approaches to students' preferred ways of learning and add those strategies that have been proven by research as effective in maximizing students' learning.

Theoretical Framework

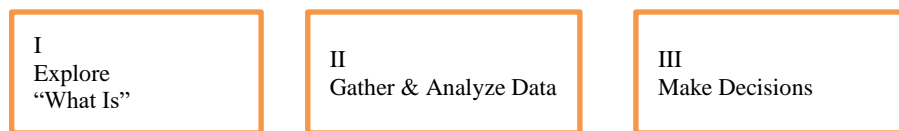


Figure 1. The Office of Migrant Education's (2001) Three-Phase Model of Needs Assessment.

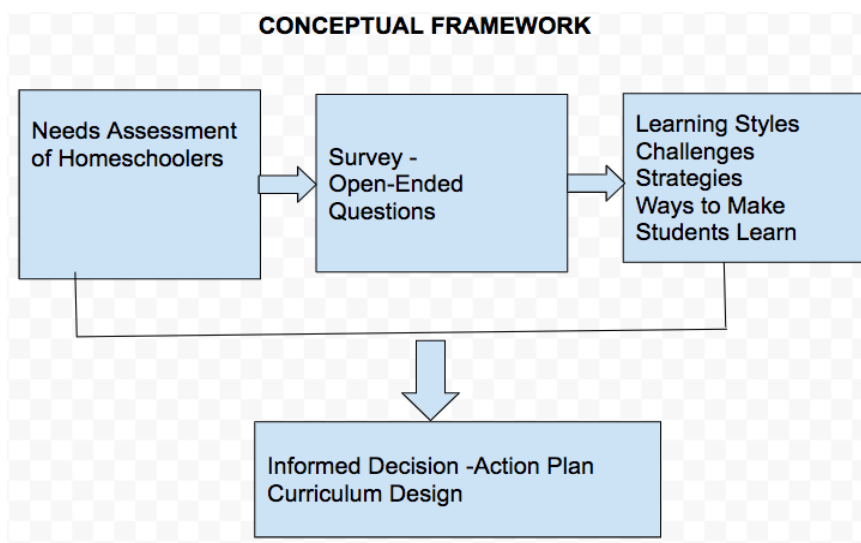


Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the study. The Office of Migrant Education's (2001) Three-Phase Model of Needs Assessment was adapted in the study as its basis in implementing needs assessment of homeschoolers in a Catholic Homeschool. Phase I of the model is Explore What Is. Senior High School Homeschoolers were identified as target group to explore where they were in terms of their learning styles, challenges that they encountered in learning academic lessons through home study or blended learning, instructional strategies/practices they considered effective for them, the challenges they encountered in learning, and their recommended ways by which the Catholic Homeschool could address their learning needs. Survey questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions was drafted and validated to gather specific information from homeschoolers. Phase II refers to gathering and analyzing data through a survey questionnaire consisting of six open-ended questions. These data gathered from homeschoolers through a survey questionnaire were coded and analyzed. From the results, the Senior High School Department of the Catholic Homeschool proposed a plan of action (Phase III: Make Decisions) to improve the curriculum design and teaching strategies to address students' learning needs.

Methodology

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted to identify the learning needs of senior high school students of a Catholic Homeschool. About 50 Grade 11 and 12 students were given a survey via email and messenger. However, only 23 students were able to complete the survey, 18 Grade 11 and 5 Grade 12 students. The survey consists of six groups of open-ended questions validated by a language and research expert. The survey questions include the following: (1) What do you want us to know about the way you learn? How do you study? How can we engage you? (2) What strategies work well for you? (3) What keeps you from understanding something? (4) How can we help you better with digital technology? (5) What do you want to expect in your learning space? (6) What mobile app or study apps do you use?

Students' responses were coded by an English language teacher according to themes that correspond to each research question. The coded themes were reviewed for accuracy by another English language teacher. Then, frequency count was done. Percentage was used to determine the preferred learning styles of homeschooled learners of a Catholic Homeschool; the challenges that they experienced that hindered learning; the teaching strategies that they believed would work for them; and their recommendations on how best the Catholic Homeschool could address their learning needs.

Results and Discussion

Based on the qualitative data gathered, the participants' different learning styles include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Students' Way of Learning or Preferred Learning Styles

Figure 3 shows the visual learners' preferred ways of learning new topics. 46% of the visual learners cited reading their textbooks and instructional materials while 14% stated writing notes while listening to class discussions. As can be gleaned from Figure 3, visual learners learn well from visual materials. They get to understand and process information easily when they get to read the texts and instructional materials (Barbe et al., 1979).

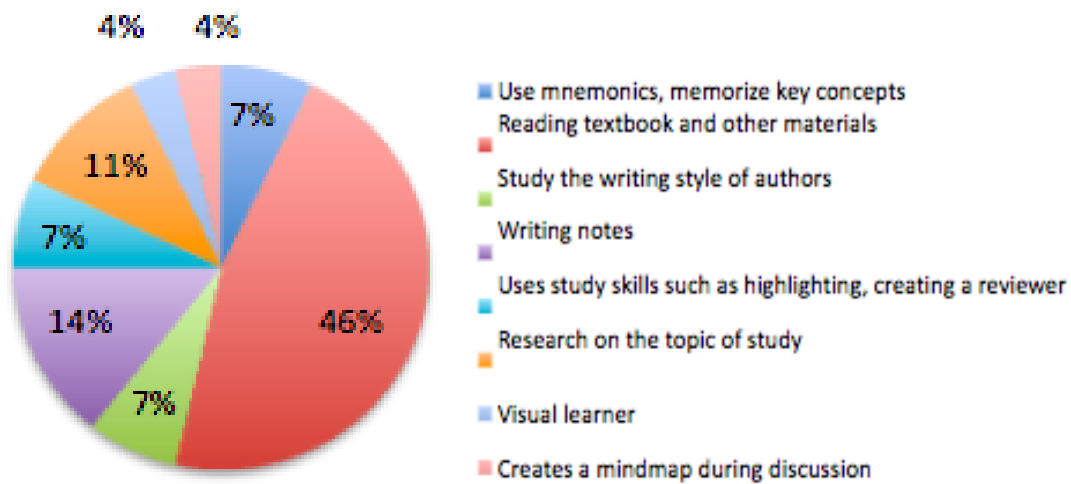


Figure 3. Visual learners' preferred ways of learning.

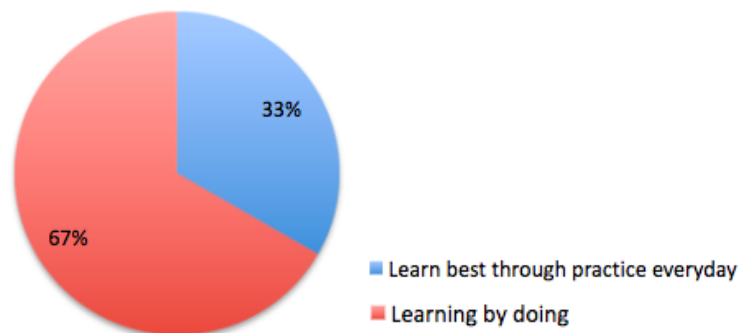


Figure 4. Kinesthetic learners' preferred ways of learning.

On the other hand, in Figure 4, a majority of the kinesthetic learners (67%) responded that they learned best by doing the activity or intended skill and by practicing this skill or activity every day. This finding was supported by Weimer (2013), citing the key principles by which students learn such as encouraging them to do more tasks and allowing them to discover things on their own. The teachers should not spoonfeed students with concepts that they have to learn, instead provide them engaging and interactive activities where they will get to construct knowledge collaboratively through critical reflections (Resilient Educator, 2018).

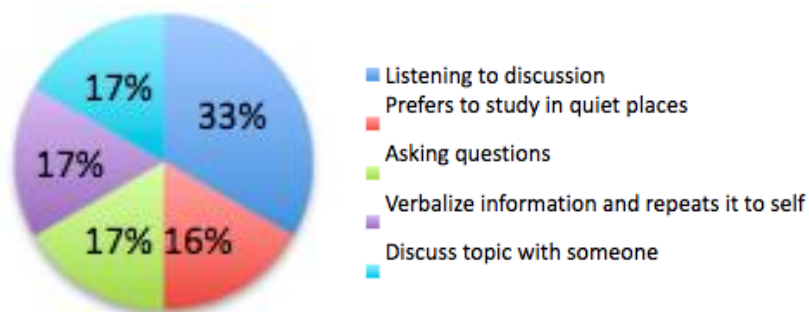


Figure 5. Auditory learners' preferred ways of learning.

On the other hand, Figure 5 shows that the auditory learners cited listening to class discussions, repeating the information to themselves, asking questions in class, and discussing a topic with a classmate as their top

answers when asked about their preferred ways of learning. Providing these learning activities to auditory learners will maximize their learning.

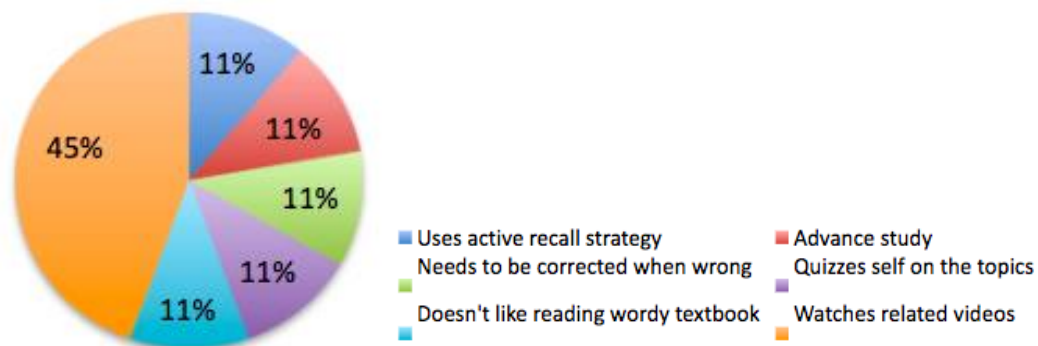


Figure 6. Multimodal learners' preferred ways of learning.

Some participants also shared their learning preferences that involve the use of multiple learning styles, with 45% stating that watching instructional videos is helpful to facilitate comprehension. Other responses include knowing the correct answers, studying in advance, applying self-quizzing, and using active recall strategies.

Further, results show that most of the participants (80%) followed a study schedule with 20% of them studying at night.

Knowing the students' learning styles can help educators plan their teaching strategies and learning activities that will address students' various learning styles. Studies have proven a strong correlation between learning styles and academic performance (Nja et al., 2019; Barokah et al., 2019; Fatemeh & Camellia, 2018; Vaisnav, 2013). Hence, matching the teaching strategies to students' learning styles will facilitate students' learning (Awla, 2014; Nja et al., 2019).

Challenges That Hinder Learning

External and internal challenges in learning were mentioned by the respondents. A noisy learning environment, the use of social media, complex information not simplified during class discussions or printed in instructional materials, and limited feedback from teachers on one's progress were external challenges identified that obstructed effective understanding. Whereas, one's lack of background knowledge on a topic/subject, procrastination, lack of discipline, and unorganized mind were mentioned as personal or internal difficulties that may affect their learning.

Apparently, students need a quiet environment to be able to focus on their learning. Another challenge is the distractions caused by social media. As Tuurosang and Amadu (2014) posited Facebook caused students' distraction and this makes them unable to focus on their studies. Other studies have also pointed out that excessive use of Facebook affects SHS students' academic performance negatively (Mingle & Adams, 2015).

Another interesting result is that young learners consider limited or lack of knowledge as a hindrance to learning. Anderson (1977) in his Schema Theory posited that students are able to process information if they have background knowledge about the topic. Conversely, processing what one reads or listens to may prove to be challenging if he/she does not have any background knowledge on the topic. The more the text becomes complex to understand if it contains technical knowledge that is hard to decode.

Finally, participants of the study mentioned that limited feedback from teachers also proved to be a challenge for them. Feedback is an important mechanism for learners to know their progress by identifying which concepts are comprehensible for them and which are not. Without teacher feedback, learners will grapple with understanding of certain topics; hence their learning can be hampered. To address this concern, educators should provide timely feedback for students to understand academic lessons.

Instructional Strategies That Work for Students

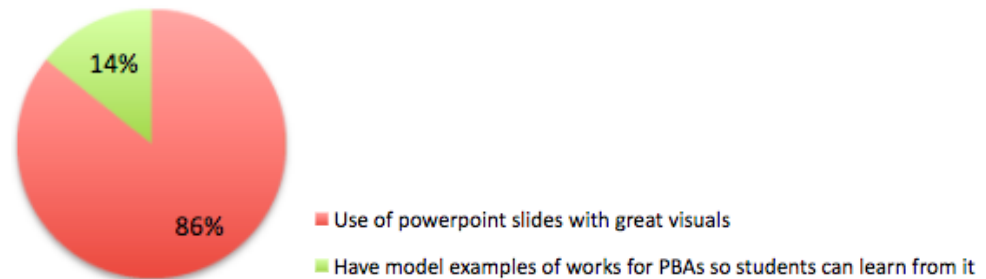


Figure 7. Recommended visual strategies.

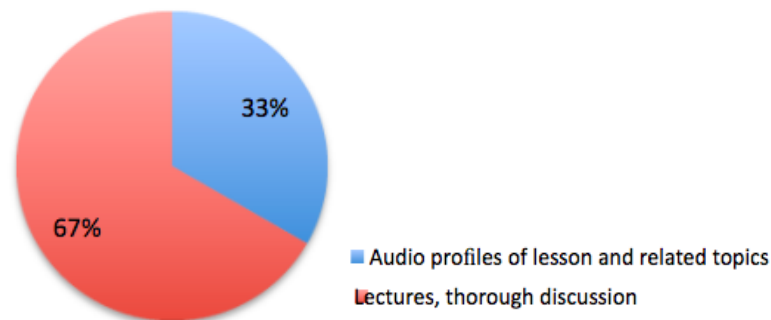


Figure 8. Recommended auditory strategies.

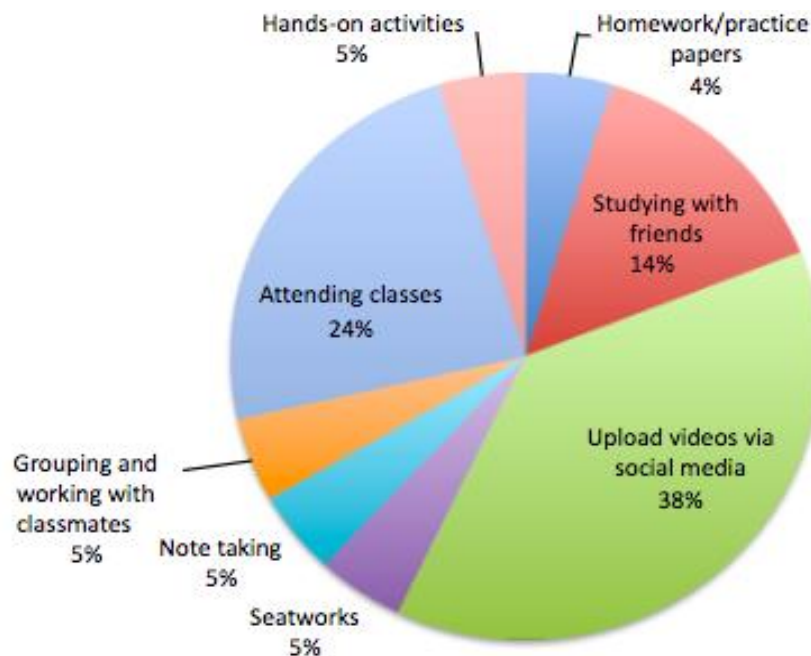


Figure 9. Recommended multimodal strategies.

The recommended visual strategies of the participants in Figure 7 are the use of discussion slides with great visuals (86%) and providing sample outputs for the projects. The recommended auditory strategies in Figure 8 include lectures (67%) and recorded audio files of the lessons (33%). Several multimodal strategies are also recommended (Figure 9) with the regular uploading of instructional videos to the school's learning management system, attending the face-to-face classes, and studying with friends or peers as top responses. Moreover, exemptions in taking the major exams, additional points in projects, and connecting the lessons to the interest of the students work well to motivate learning. Class instruction should also entail simplifying difficult concepts and accomplishing the class requirements with teachers' guidance. Additionally, students would want to have an encouraging learning environment with open and friendly communication with their teachers (67%).

Considering the teaching strategies that the homeschoolers of Catholic Homeschool preferred, teachers, therefore, should use various teaching strategies and learning activities that will address students' learning styles (Awla, 2014; Nja et al., 2019).

Another interesting finding is that students perceived that they learn best if teachers would upload online videos to supplement their learning. This finding corroborates that of Kosterelioglu's (2016) study that shows that the use of video clips has improved students' memory and intelligibility of the learning process.

Finally, homeschooled students perceived that connecting the lessons to their interests would motivate them to learn. As Sanchez (2010) pointed out, learning is orchestrated by connecting the lessons to students' interests and real-life experiences.

Ways to Respond to Learning Needs

The participants recommended different ways on how to address their learning needs in terms of instructional materials, communication, e-learning, and class instruction. A majority of them (43%) have shared that uploading the discussion slides of the lessons and instructional videos to the school's learning management system would be ideal as learning materials to review during their free time. 67% stated to receive prompt responses from their teachers on online inquiries and obtain suggestions or tips on how to better understand the lesson or accomplish the class project. As for e-learning, most of the respondents would want the school to continue its use of the learning management system which includes Google Classroom and Moodle. On class instruction, 45% of them opted to receive detailed instructions or tips in accomplishing their class projects and to be given a chance to apply their learning in creative ways other than the standard projects or outputs assigned in the class.

Furthermore, they also stated their ideal learning space that can contribute to facilitating learning. All of the participants mentioned that a relaxing, motivating, and fun environment would be conducive to learning. They preferred a simple space layout with separate classrooms for each class instead of one big hall. Furthermore, the presence of a teacher/support, a timely feedback system to track learning progress, and a flexible learning schedule were expressed as essential components of this ideal space.

As regards digital applications and websites that teachers can use to maximize their learning, students' top answers include Khan Academy, Youtube, and Google classroom. Others have mentioned Quizlet, Edmodo, Facebook messenger, and Photomath as useful sites or applications for studying.

Conclusion

Most of the learners in the Catholic Homeschool when the study was conducted were visual learners and preferred different learning and teaching strategies for their optimum learning. They also opted to have a friendly

learning environment where they could openly communicate with their teachers about their academic progress. Moreover, they preferred to have online instructional videos as supplementary materials for their learning. Hence, educators should design instructional materials and learning activities that match students' learning styles. They should also establish open communication with their students so that the latter can consult regarding their challenges in understanding difficult concepts from the assigned readings. Finally, teachers should create instructional videos that are simple to understand and relevant to students' interests and life experiences. They can also utilize educational videos that are easy to comprehend and that offer practical applications of academic concepts. As what previous studies (Awla, 2014; Nja et al., 2019) posited, matching the teaching strategies to students' learning styles will facilitate students' learning. Hence, determining the students' learning needs considering their preferred learning styles and instructional strategies and addressing these needs by providing solutions through a proposed revision of the school's curriculum design and academic programs will more likely result in improved academic performance of the learners. Therefore, considering the findings of the study, schools may consider following the proposed three-phase model of Needs Assessment by the Office of Migrant Education (2001) to maximize students' learning in the classroom.

With regard to the challenges in learning, a noisy environment, excessive use of social media, limited or lack of knowledge on topics/lessons, textbooks and instructional materials with complex or technical language, and limited feedback from teachers are obstacles that the homeschoolers struggled with in their homeschooling experience. To facilitate their learning, teachers should consider providing students with a quiet environment conducive to learning so that the students will be able to concentrate on the lessons being discussed in the classroom. The classroom must not be so quiet that it prevents students from engaging in educational discussions with fellow students. Teachers should also guide students to use social media as a tool for learning and to avoid activities that waste their time like posting photos and browsing through friends' news feeds. As regards limited knowledge on topics, teachers should teach students strategic reading such as highlighting important ideas in a text, writing notes, or annotations to simplify a difficult concept, outlining key ideas of a text read, and researching for some background information on the key concept discussed in a text to contextualize it to facilitate text understanding.

Finally, as previous research (Uukkivi & Labanova, 2018; Australian Christian College, 2020) stated, digital apps and online learning materials were significant to keep the students engaged. Hence, teachers should maximize the use of social media and digital apps as tools for learning. Educators should also set guidelines in the use of social media for learning and not for time-consuming social activities that distract them from their studies. To expect positive learning outcomes using social media, educators have to plan and schedule their students' learning activities and identify social media platforms appropriate to use. They should also educate their learners in the proper use of social media for their studies because as Mazman and Usluel 2010 stated, if social media like Facebook is used for information sharing, communication, and collaboration relevant to school projects, it can be a tool for learning. However, if social media are not properly utilized, it will negatively affect the learners' academic performance (Feng et al., 2019; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Mingle & Adams, 2015).

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