



Essence of Teacher-Leaders' Mentorship in the ASEAN Region During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the mentoring experiences of 12 ASEAN educational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a phenomenological approach, it examined firsthand accounts of how the pandemic influenced teacher leadership and educational reforms. Top-level leaders from public and private basic education institutions across eight Southeast Asian nations participated in Zoom interviews, providing valuable insights into their mentoring practices.

Guided by the central question "How do ASEAN educational leaders describe their lived experiences in mentoring teacher-leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?" the study analyzed data using Modified Husserl's Framework and Moustakas' Process, revealing three key themes: Mentorship Experience During the Pandemic, Contributions of the Pandemic to Mentoring, and Pandemic Gains in Mentoring. Participants emphasized empowerment, technology-driven communication, and well-being prioritization as important components of mentoring amid challenges.

The findings showed that the pandemic reshaped mentoring by cultivating growth, strengthening collaboration, and transforming leadership practices. The study also proposed innovative mentoring strategies and offered recommendations for theory development, educational administration, policy-making, and future research extending to other Southeast Asian countries and various educational levels.

Keywords: ASEAN, mentorship, pandemic, teacher-leadership

Introduction

In a world shaped by Brittleness, Anxiety, Non-linearity, and Incomprehensibility (BANI) (Cascio, 2020), educational leaders and teachers played critical roles in ensuring learning continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much like healthcare frontliners, they navigated unprecedented challenges, highlighting the need for guidance and support (Misra, 2020). The ASEAN region, projected as an economic powerhouse by 2050, has long emphasized leadership development (Gallup, 2015; Rantanjee & Pyrka, 2015). Schools, as organizations, rely on educational leaders to cultivate teacher-leaders who drive innovation (Gabriel, 2005). Even before the pandemic, SEAMEO INNOTECH updated the competency framework for Southeast Asian school heads, defining five core leadership competencies (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2018; Chao & Taa, 2015). In 2021, Monash University's online forum, *Educational Leadership and COVID-19: ASEAN Reflections*, reinforced key leadership themes: continuity, resilience, compassion, equity, teacher well-being, and sustainability. Building on these themes, this research explores mentoring experiences and leadership challenges faced by ASEAN educational leaders during the pandemic, focusing on leadership development, mentoring teacher-leaders, and fostering innovation.

While mentoring is a recognized support tool (Truter, 2008), research on teacher leadership during COVID-19 remains limited, often prioritizing business succession planning over education (Bush, 2012; Mohd Salleh & Abdul Rahman, 2017). Existing studies, primarily rooted in Western perspectives, assume a universal approach, yet McDermott et al. (2011) advocate for tailored mentoring models. This study examines 12 ASEAN educational leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam, emphasizing their role in teacher leadership development. Aligned with the ASEAN Charter Article 35 (Chongkittavorn, 2019), this phenomenological research, grounded in a Global South perspective, reveals how pandemic-driven mentorship shaped teacher leadership, fostering adaptability and collaboration, ultimately contributing to an indigenous, ASEAN-relevant mentoring model for a post-pandemic world.

This study investigates how ASEAN educational leaders mentored teachers during the pandemic and its impact on elevating teacher leadership and school reforms. The core question is: *How do ASEAN educational leaders describe their lived experiences in mentoring for teacher-leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?* This research contributes to the theory by contextualizing education and expanding mentoring and leadership models in crisis management. In policy, it informs revisions emphasizing technology integration, flexible professional development, institutional support, collaborative learning communities, and mental health training. In practice, it provides strategies for sustaining teacher leadership through peer mentoring, professional development, and innovative teaching. Additionally, it encourages further research on the BANI framework and mentorship models in disrupted educational contexts, strengthening ASEAN's leadership in times of uncertainty.

Methods

Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, grounded in anti-foundationalism and interpretivism, to examine ASEAN educational leaders' experiences in mentoring for teacher leadership during the pandemic. Utilizing transcendental phenomenology, it follows Husserl's framework of noema, noesis, and epoche to uncover essential meanings through one-on-one interviews. This methodology enables the researcher to derive new insights into the strategies, skills, and innovations that emerged in mentoring teachers during a time of crisis.

Participants

Participants include 12 purposively selected educational leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Timor-Leste, comprising five males and seven females, with an average age of 42. They held leadership roles in private (8) and public (4) institutions, averaging 10 years and 3 months of administrative experience. Initial networking efforts, including collaborations with SEAMEO Innotech, were undertaken to recruit participants and ensure the study's relevance. The participants, selected through purposive sampling, include principals, assistant principals, head teachers, and coordinators with at least one year of experience in school leadership during the pandemic years (2019-2022). Their qualifications ensure that the study captures authentic, firsthand experiences in mentoring and professional development. The selection criteria prioritize individuals engaged in faculty development and mentoring programs, ensuring reliable and credible insights. Table 1 presents the participants' profiles, contextualizing their mentoring experiences and institutional backgrounds.

Table 1*Profile of the Research Participants*

Participant	Pseudo Names	Country	Sex	Age	Position	Type of School	Years of Service as Educational Leader
P1	Indiah	Indonesia	Female	40	School Principal	Private	18 years
P2	Indira	Indonesia	Female	28	Head Teacher Trainer, and Lead Curriculum Coordinator	Private	1 year
P3	Vienna	Vietnam	Female	31	Vice Principal	Private	5 years
P4	Vienne	Vietnam	Female	40	Vice Principal	Private	15 years and 3 months
P5	Philip	Philippines	Male	30	Head Teacher	Public	4 years and 3 months
P6	Philomena	Philippines	Female	67	School Principal	Private	12 years
P7	Philander	Philippines	Male	34	Head Teacher	Private	4 years and 8 months
P8	Bruna	Brunei	Female	42	Head Teacher / Senior Literacy Coach	Public	18 years
P9	Sing	Singapore	Male	48	School Principal	Private	13 years and 11 months
P10	Thad	Thailand	Male	31	School Principal	Private	7 years
P11	Malachi	Malaysia	Male	60	School Principal	Public	13 years
P12	Timora	Timor-Leste	Female	49	Ministry of Education - Training Teacher in Primary Level	Public	10 years

Instruments

The study employed a one-on-one semi-structured interview as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to freely share their experiences while ensuring consistency through a structured guide. This approach combined flexibility with systematic investigation, ensuring depth and reliability in qualitative research (Jamshed, 2014; Schensul et al., 1999). The interview guide underwent careful revision, initially containing 12 questions before being refined to one main question based on expert feedback. The central inquiry explored how ASEAN educational leaders described their lived experiences in mentoring for teacher-leadership during COVID-19.

To ensure data trustworthiness, transcribed interviews were shared with participants for verification. In cases of unclear utterances, confirmatory emails were sent with audio samples for validation. The total recorded interview duration was **8 hours, 20 minutes, and 41 seconds**, ensuring a comprehensive dataset for analysis. The main question used during the interviews was: *How would you describe your mentorship experiences with your teachers in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Procedures

The data-gathering process was divided into two phases: the Preliminaries and Actual Data Collection. In the preliminary stage, the researcher leveraged professional networks and international organizations such as SEAMEO Innotech, UNESCO, and ASEAN University Network to identify qualified participants. A participant qualification checklist was used to ensure the selected individuals met the criteria of the study. A total of 67 educational leaders were contacted via email and 50 via LinkedIn, with LinkedIn being the most effective platform for securing participants.

For the actual data collection, one-on-one Zoom interviews were conducted, focusing on mentoring experiences during the pandemic. Most interviews were conducted in English, with a language interpreter assisting a participant from Timor Leste. On the other hand, the researcher manually translated the interviews from the Philippines, which contained answers in Filipino. The video, audio, and live transcription features of Zoom were used for documentation and were supplemented by manual transcription for accuracy. The data gathered from these interviews contributed to a systematic understanding of mentoring practices for teacher leadership and its essence in ASEAN educational institutions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and adherence to data privacy laws. Participants were provided with a data privacy notice and consent form beforehand, ensuring their understanding and agreement to the recording of the interviews. The researcher anonymized participants' identities through pseudonyms, exclusion of school names, and blurred images in online interviews, and safeguarded sensitive information.

In addition, ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the editing and revision processes of this manuscript for the Philippine Journal of Education Studies. Both online and offline writing tools, office productivity software, and AI editing assistants and tools were used solely to assist the researcher in identifying grammatical lapses, refining language to meet expected standards for journal writing and publication, and proofreading the documents. The researcher did not omit the process of manually reviewing and human-assisting to validate all the improvements made using these tools for the reliability and correctness of information, in line with the original approach and ideas of the researcher.

Data Analysis

To capture the essence of the phenomenon, the researcher systematically analyzed the gathered data to develop a general description and establish complex thematic connections. Data analysis is crucial in research as it leads to interpretations, findings, and conclusions, validating or challenging a hypothesis. This study employed the Modified Husserl's Transcendental Framework of Moustakas (1994), specifically the Four-Step Process: Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis of Meanings and Essence. These steps ensured a thorough exploration of educational leaders' experiences in mentoring teachers during the pandemic for teacher-leadership development.

Using transcendental phenomenology, the data were thoroughly examined to identify the meaning units, systematically coded, thematically analyzed, and developed into textural and structural descriptions to derive the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). To mitigate biases, the researcher applied bracketing by setting aside preconceptions throughout the analysis (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In the Epoche phase, biases and prior experiences were set aside to allow a fresh perspective on the narratives of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). During interviews, the researcher strictly avoided personal judgments or subjective interpretations. Phenomenological Reduction involves analyzing individual experiences without considering participants' prior knowledge. Themes, textural, and structural descriptions were developed objectively, focusing solely on the shared mentoring experiences during COVID-19.

The Imaginative Variation phase involved identifying themes through coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher facilitated in-depth discussions with 12 ASEAN educational leaders, drawing rich and insightful experiences on mentoring for teacher-leadership. Lastly, in the Synthesis of Meanings and Essence, the researcher integrated the themes, textural, and structural descriptions into a comprehensive summary that encapsulated the essence of the shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This synthesis reflected the core insights from the participants' mentoring practices. By following this structured framework, the study ensured an unbiased and systematic understanding of ASEAN educational leaders' mentoring experiences during the pandemic.

Results

Mentorship During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences, Challenges, and Gains

Mentorship Experience During the Pandemic

The 12 ASEAN educational leaders described mentorship during the pandemic as challenging, risky, transformational, and rewarding. The sudden shift to remote learning demanded immediate adaptation, pushing mentors and teachers to embrace change. P1-Indiah shared, "This pandemic made our school adjust and adapt quickly...

teachers had to accept these changes as soon as possible.” Mentoring was also risky, as leaders had to lead by example to gain trust. P12-Timora stated, “She had to be the first to get vaccinated to motivate others.” Despite the challenges, the experience was transformational, leading to digitalization and improved mentoring strategies. P3-Vienna recalled, “I integrated PD sessions into weekly staff meetings.”

Educational leaders empowered teachers by involving them in decision-making, building collaboration, and promoting innovation. P2-Indira noted, “Some teachers came up with excellent innovations in the classroom... we recorded their sessions for learning and discussion.” Recognizing the mental strain, leaders prioritized teacher well-being, ensuring clear communication and manageable workloads. P1-Indiah emphasized, “The key to success was listening to teachers and understanding the obstacles they faced.” Despite the physical distance, digital tools enabled mentorship continuity, reinforcing resilience and adaptability among educators.

Challenges Faced by Mentors and Mentees

The pandemic introduced significant hurdles, including work-life balance struggles, technological limitations, and resistance to change. P3-Vienna observed, “Different levels of internet connectivity and varying family conditions made workloads difficult to manage.” Adjusting pedagogy for online teaching was another challenge. P8-Bruna stated, “The first few months were a huge struggle...what worked before no longer applied in an online environment.” Resistance to change also emerged, with P9-Singh noting, “Initially, there was hesitation, but history shows that big challenges lead to change.”

A lack of emergency plans caused uncertainty. P1-Indiah recalled, “At the beginning of the pandemic, we didn’t know where to go. Every school faced the same problem.” Communication barriers, unreliable technology, and reduced personal interaction further complicated mentorship. P3-Vienna noted, “The lack of face-to-face interaction made staff uncomfortable sharing concerns.” Digital proficiency was another obstacle, as many educators were unfamiliar with new tools. P6-Philomena admitted, “I was comfortable with Word and Excel, but the pandemic forced me to adapt quickly.”

The mental and physical toll was profound. P6-Philomena shared, “Spending 6-8 hours daily in front of a computer was exhausting.” The stress of balancing professional and personal responsibilities weighed heavily on educators, emphasizing the need for structured support systems.

Gains, Lessons, and Future Directions

Despite the difficulties, the pandemic empowered both teachers and educational leaders, advanced digital transformation, and strengthened mentorship resilience in their school community. The experience underscored the importance of emergency

preparedness, contingency and recovery plans, digital competency training, and prioritizing teacher well-being. P3-Vienna shared, “So I’ve been thinking a lot about, you know, the fire drill, plan, the evacuation plan. So, when something huge and dangerous is happening, it’s great that we have a plan, and we practice that plan. We implement that, and we adjust that plan. But for COVID we had no time to prepare. So now, when it happened already, I think a plan, if we can reinvent my mentoring period, I would prefer that I had a plan, or to see orientation.”

Moving forward, schools must establish clear communication strategies, invest in technological training, invest in the human capital of the school, and integrate mental health support into professional development. These lessons will help create a more inclusive and responsive education system, ensuring that mentorship remains effective in any learning environment.

Essences of Mentorship Experience During the Pandemic

The ASEAN educational leaders and their mentees, despite their fearlessness, are human and have limitations, facing concerns and moments of doubt, particularly during the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one participant (P4-Vienne) expressed, the uncertainty of the situation led them to question their confidence and decision-making. However, their emotional resilience, coupled with their ability to acknowledge their emotions while maintaining tenacity and a positive mindset, distinguished them as leaders. This resilience also paved the way for opportunities, allowing both leaders and mentees to extend beyond their perceived limits and contribute meaningfully to their institutions. The pandemic provided mentees an equal chance to engage in mentoring and professional growth, while leaders maximized their expertise through peer mentoring and strategic grouping, a practice supported by studies such as those of Magongo (2021) and McLeod and Dulskey (2021), which emphasized the importance of structured mentorship and equity in professional development. Furthermore, relationships played a crucial role in navigating the challenges of the pandemic. Although physical distance hindered in-person interactions, the crisis became an avenue for fostering strong interpersonal relationships that enriched mentoring experiences and enhanced retention in schools. As P8-Bruna emphasized, prioritizing relationships was essential to successful mentorship. This aligns with research, including studies by Haidusek-Niazy et al. (2023), Patriarca (2015), and Pitton (2006), which highlight the importance of mentorship in professional and personal growth. ASEAN educational leaders also maintained the focus on academic goals, active communication, and collaborative work, similar to the findings of Adams et al. (2021) on school leaders’ resilience. Lastly, the pandemic reinforced a growth and entrepreneurial mindset among these leaders, pushing them to drive innovation, take calculated risks, and encourage continuous learning. P9-Singh noted that accountability and the ability to learn from mistakes developed a growth mindset among mentees, while P10-Thad shared how his entrepreneurial mindset helped him establish and improve educational institutions despite challenges. These elements of emotional resilience, opportunity,

relationships, and mindset, shaped the ASEAN educational leaders' ability to adapt, lead, and thrive amid uncertainty.

Contributions of the Pandemic on Mentoring

Contributions to the Development of Teachers' New Skills

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted teachers and their skill sets. With the rapid transformation of the educational landscape, such as the shift to virtual and hybrid learning environments, educators were prompted and required to swiftly master and adapt to new technologies, teaching methodologies, and updated pedagogies.

Amid the heightened challenges during the pandemic, teachers and educational leaders navigated digital platforms, engaged in collaborative mentoring, provided emotional support to one another, and maintained student and stakeholder engagement from a distance. The mentoring sessions during this period placed significant emphasis on nurturing good mental health and well-being due to the unprecedented challenges. As a result, teachers became more empowered during the pandemic, gaining greater technological proficiency and improved communication skills. P1- Indiah and P5- Philip shared, "Okay, so post-pandemic, what I see is that teachers are more tech-savvy. They can choose the best apps to support teaching and learning in the classroom more efficiently, and they can also adapt quickly," and "There were teachers who excelled not only in traditional communication but also beyond the usual 'teacher role.'" and "There were teachers who were good not only in the usual communication or the typical 'teacher thing.'"

The pandemic also heightened teachers' ability to prioritize their mental health and overall well-being through activities and reflection. P3- Vienna and P6- Philomena mentioned, "They learned to reflect," and "We also provided them with training on the benefits of mental health awareness, which is very important for both teachers and students."

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a turning point for educators, pushing them to embrace change, enhance their skill sets, and prioritize their well-being. The challenges they faced ultimately strengthened their resilience, deepened their expertise, and reinforced their commitment to both personal and professional growth. As education continues to evolve, these lessons will remain invaluable in shaping a more adaptable, technologically proficient, and emotionally supportive learning environment for both teachers and students alike.

Skills Implemented and Newly Discovered Skills of the Mentor

The ASEAN educational leaders serving as mentors during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a wide range of skills while adapting to the challenges of virtual and

remote learning. Their proficiency in technical, soft, analytical, digital literacy, and crisis adaptability skills highlighted their capacity to lead amidst uncertainty. As P11-Malachi shared, “Global pandemic, I always say, this is part of the challenges for us. This is the time that we show our talent.” Despite physical restrictions, mentors fostered a sense of community, utilized various communication platforms such as email and messaging apps, and engaged stakeholders effectively. P9-Singh emphasized, “Now the other soft skill is to make sure that they are clear in how to go about speaking because parents are watching as well.” These efforts improved transparency and strengthened relationships within the school community.

The pandemic pushed mentors to embrace digital tools, master learning management systems, and explore educational platforms to sustain learning. As P3-Vienna noted, “The biggest lesson that I learned, of course, is those ‘digital skills.’” These newfound competencies reinforced their commitment to lifelong learning and continuous professional growth. Moreover, the mentors encouraged positive mindsets among their mentees, understanding that resilience and adaptability were essential for learning. By documenting best practices and using data analysis, they streamlined mentoring strategies and enhanced their leadership roles.

In summary, the diverse skills implemented and discovered by the ASEAN educational leaders not only enriched their capabilities but also strengthened their adaptability and innovation. These experiences will continue to guide them as they navigate the evolving educational landscape with confidence and expertise.

Essences of the Contributions of the Pandemic on Mentoring

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted mentoring among ASEAN educational leaders, emphasizing lifelong learning, empowerment, attitude, and data-drivenness. Lifelong learning emerged as a vital component, as mentors embraced continuous skill development to stay ahead and effectively guide their mentees. P6-Philomena affirmed, “What the teacher knows, I should know too,” highlighting the necessity of joint training. Similarly, P5-Philip stressed the importance of forward-thinking leadership, stating, “As a school leader, you need to think three to four steps ahead of your teachers.” This aligns with studies by Kram and Isabella (1985), Sezgin et al. (2020), and Kutsyuruba (2012), which position mentoring as integral to career development and professional growth.

Empowerment was reinforced through open communication, collaboration, and shared expertise. P1-Indiah noted, “We don’t go through long meetings anymore... we discuss within the group.” This supports the findings by Adams et al. (2021) and Gainey (2009) that two-way communication minimizes misinformation and strengthens community support.

Attitude played a crucial role in navigating pandemic challenges. Leaders emphasized the importance of proactive mindsets in adapting to abrupt changes. P9-Singh observed,

“Those with the correct attitude lead classrooms and colleagues better.” This supports Handrianto et al. (2022) and Mubuuke et al. (2020), who found that teachers' attitudes shape mentoring strategies and professional growth.

Lastly, data-drivenness became essential in decision-making and evaluating educational practices. P4-Vienne stated, “We use data and set important goals at the beginning of the school year,” underscoring its role in shaping instruction and assessment. Misra (2020) similarly noted that data documentation mitigates inequities in faculty evaluations.

Overall, the pandemic reinforced these four essences in mentoring, shaping resilient and innovative educational leadership in ASEAN schools.

Pandemic Gains on Mentoring

Teacher Leadership in School

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped teacher leadership, as observed by 12 ASEAN educational leaders. During this period, teachers became more empowered, building collaboration, autonomy, leadership, and innovation.

Collaboration strengthened relationships between teachers and school leaders, fostering open dialogue. P7-Philander shared, “I realized that my teachers and I became closer,” while P8-Bruna noted, “When we returned to school, it was very supportive, having conversations about how they were coping.”

Autonomy grew as teachers gained confidence in decision-making. P1-Indiah observed, “Teachers now make choices inside the classroom, as long as they align with school policies.” Leadership opportunities expanded, with key teachers assuming greater responsibilities. P4-Vienne remarked, “All the key teachers in my department who transferred to another campus have assumed better leadership positions.”

Innovation thrived as teachers evolved into problem-solvers. P5-Philip emphasized, “Teachers are not only leaders but also innovators.” Mentorship revealed emerging leaders. P2-Indira reflected, “We noticed new potential leaders emerging during mentorship sessions.”

Teachers embraced advocacy, exceeding expectations in mentoring and peer support. P5-Philip highlighted, “Many teachers have emerged as difference-makers.” Lifelong learning became a priority, with teachers demonstrating self-regulation. P2-Indira noted, “Instead of relying on leaders for solutions, they took the initiative to problem-solve.”

Moreover, a culture of compassion flourished. P6-Philomena and P7-Philander shared, “Teachers became more compassionate leaders, prioritizing student well-

being.” Administrators also supported teachers through initiatives like tech-pairing programs.

Teacher leadership extended beyond schools, strengthening stakeholder engagement and global networks. P4-Vienne shared, “Our teachers connected with peers from different countries.”

In summary, the pandemic was a transformative period for teacher leadership. Educators emerged as empowered leaders, innovators, and advocates, promoting collaboration, autonomy, and compassion. Moving forward, sustaining these leadership advancements will be essential in shaping the future of education.

Reinventing Mentoring During the 1st Year of the Pandemic

ASEAN educational leaders emphasized that reinventing mentorship during the pandemic required adaptability, contingency planning, and innovation. They highlighted the need for contingency and recovery plans to ensure effective mentorship. P5-Philip noted that readiness is the key. It is important for school leaders during the pandemic to imbibe the VUCA mindset, as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity demand preparedness. On the other hand, others stressed collaboration with stakeholders, particularly in rural areas, and the need for flexible systems.

Mentorship adjustments included structured approaches like T-Grow and integrating technology into traditional methods. P8-Bruna shared that what she does in face-to-face settings, she also does online. The only difference is technology. Leaders recognized that crises demand evolving strategies, as one stated that future crises will require new skills and platforms.

Challenges, such as skill gaps and retrenchment, led leaders to assess human capital and match teacher competencies with school needs. They advocated for a holistic approach, balancing character development with technical skills. P6-Philomena remarked that mentoring is twofold, developing character and technical expertise.

Being an effective mentor requires a growth mindset, strong leadership, lifelong learning, and stakeholder coordination. Leaders reflected on adjusting their leadership styles, embracing servant and distributed leadership models, and anticipating teachers’ needs. P5-Philip also emphasized that a leader must think three to four steps ahead. Coordination with communities, including religious institutions, was also seen as vital.

Ultimately, the pandemic underscored the need for mentorship to be dynamic, resilient, and forward-thinking. Moving ahead, ASEAN educational leaders aim to sustain and refine these strategies to support teachers in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

Focus Areas of Mentoring Teacher-Leaders in the Post-Pandemic World

The post-pandemic era has reshaped education, bringing new challenges and opportunities for students and educators alike. In reflecting on this shift, the pandemic taught the school leaders and mentees resilience, but returning to in-person learning reminded them of the irreplaceable value of human connection in education. This sentiment captures the collective experience of navigating the transition and underscores the importance of adaptability and community in learning environments. Hence, future mentorship should emphasize leadership development, teacher support, and well-being. Sustainable programs that document best practices will guide professional growth. In this context, contingency planning and technology integration remain critical. Furthermore, social-emotional learning, adaptive teaching, and decision-making skills will be key priorities in mentoring teacher-leaders for a resilient education system.

In the post-pandemic world, ASEAN educational leaders emphasize the need for sustainable and data-driven mentorship. P2-Indira stated, "We want to have a more sustainable mentorship program. One way to achieve this is by documenting best practices that teachers have implemented so that others can use them as references for learning."

To realize this vision, mentorship must focus on leadership development, teacher development, humanizing teachers, development of contingency plans, and trust-building.

Leadership development is a critical aspect of mentoring teacher-leaders. P4-Vienne and P1-Indiah highlighted the importance of coaching teachers to become leaders with a clear goal of supporting their teams rather than controlling them. They emphasized that empowering teachers with responsibilities within small teams helps build leadership capacity.

Teacher development is another significant focus, with an emphasis on providing support beyond resources. P5-Philip stressed that proper technical assistance is crucial for teachers to reach their full potential. When teachers receive the necessary guidance and assistance, they can accomplish more than expected.

Humanizing teachers is an essential element of mentorship. P1-Indiah emphasized that mentorship should not only focus on academic aspects but also consider teachers' values and well-being. Recognizing teachers as individuals with personal needs is vital because they are shaping young minds.

The development of contingency plans is necessary to prepare for future emergencies. P12-Timora reflected on the need for preparedness, particularly in response to crises like COVID-19. They pointed out that in Timor-Leste, there were

no specific emergency response topics in teacher training, highlighting the importance of integrating these into professional development programs.

Lifelong learning and technology integration also play a significant role in mentoring teacher-leaders. P7-Philander shared their experience of being assigned to select and implement educational technologies during blended learning, which proved to be a challenging task. They stressed the importance of training administrators and teachers on how to effectively integrate technology into the learning process.

Aside from these mentoring processes, ASEAN educational leaders also hope that mentoring sessions for teacher-leaders will focus on developing skills in social-emotional learning, adaptive learning, and decision-making.

Social-emotional learning is a key area of development. P9-Singh emphasized that mentoring should focus on attitude, growth mindset, and soft skills such as listening and collaboration. Creating a safe environment where teachers can learn and experiment without fear of failure is crucial for their professional growth.

Adaptive learning and leadership are also central to effective mentorship. P3-Vienna highlighted that it is not just about providing knowledge or skills but also about cultivating an adaptive mindset. The ability to continuously find better solutions and adjust to changing circumstances is an essential trait for teacher-leaders.

Decision-making skills must also be developed through mentorship. P4-Vienne pointed out that communication must be accompanied by a commitment to action. If leaders do not follow through on their commitments, they risk losing the trust of their team, which is a serious issue in leadership.

Mentorship programs should also help teacher-leaders build systems that encourage their mentees to develop a growth mindset and embrace lifelong learning. P4-Vienne and P10-Thad emphasized that having the right mindset as a leader greatly benefits the people under their guidance. While technical skills can be taught, the ability to absorb and internalize a leadership mindset is what truly makes a difference.

Through these mentoring processes and skill development, mentors must provide mentees with opportunities to expand their networks, improve communication, enhance school performance, and strengthen stakeholder involvement. P8-Bruna, P11-Malachi, and P10-Thad noted that the increased use of online platforms during the pandemic has allowed teachers to connect more easily and create opportunities for collaboration. They also emphasized the importance of focusing on student achievement as the ultimate goal of mentorship

while ensuring that parents and the wider community are actively involved in the education process.

Thus, in the post-pandemic world, mentoring teacher-leaders requires a strategic and sustainable approach that prioritizes leadership development, teacher support, humanization, contingency planning, and trust-building. Equipping educators with the necessary skills in social-emotional learning, adaptive learning, and decision-making ensures that they remain resilient and effective in their roles. By cultivating a growth mindset, embracing lifelong learning, and strengthening connections with stakeholders, teacher-leaders can drive meaningful change within their schools and communities. Ultimately, a well-structured and data-driven mentorship program will not only empower teacher-leaders but also create a more responsive and future-ready education system in the ASEAN region.

Essence of the Pandemic Gains on Mentoring

Autonomy emerged as a significant impact of the pandemic on the mentoring experiences of ASEAN educational leaders. They aspired to maintain autonomy in the post-pandemic world, allowing teachers to find meaning and purpose in their work. Autonomy was also seen as taking full responsibility for shaping one's professional and personal growth. By granting autonomy to both mentors and mentees, confidence in leadership increased, enabling them to tailor solutions to their school's unique challenges, make informed decisions, manage resources efficiently, encourage innovative teaching practices, and maintain strong stakeholder engagement. Trusting individuals to perform their roles with integrity was also an essential aspect of autonomy. De Klerk and Barnett (2020), along with Dworkin (2015) as cited in Wermke and Salokangas (2015), emphasized that teacher autonomy provides coherence to their lives and encourages responsibility for their personal and professional development. Walugembe (2022) highlighted that increased autonomy was one of the positive individual-based outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Netolicky (2020) also stressed that educational leaders must navigate the balance between accountability and autonomy. The participants echoed these sentiments: "Actually, teachers know what they are doing. Just give the instruction, and they can do it" (P11-Malachi); "People who work with me need to find a way to get it done" (P10-Thad); and "Everybody owns the school, not only the principals or the heads" (P1-Indiah). Ultimately, autonomy enabled schools to navigate the crisis with agility, ensuring the well-being of the school community while lowering administrative barriers and supporting leadership.

The mentoring sessions of ASEAN educational leaders during the pandemic created safe spaces characterized by empathy and compassion. These sessions became platforms for teachers to openly share their difficulties, anxieties, and challenges brought by abrupt changes. In response, leaders incorporated topics on mental health and psychosocial support into professional development programs.

The mentoring process cultivated a sense of community, providing emotional support and professional resilience while strengthening mentor-mentee relationships. Participants acknowledged the significance of these spaces: “I acted as a school counselor, and we counseled each other. Sometimes, even after working hours, we had to be available” (P3-Vienna); “I will slow down and prioritize mental health with teachers” (P7-Philander). Gotian (2020) noted that mentorship evolved during the pandemic, emphasizing human and empathic connections. Oglethorpe (2020) further affirmed that mentoring in times of crisis empowers individuals by equipping them with essential skills and resources to cope effectively.

ASEAN educational leaders hoped to sustain mentoring as a platform for identifying emerging and aspiring leaders. The pandemic revealed individuals willing to step up, as well as potential leaders who previously doubted themselves. Mentoring was envisioned as a means to nurture leadership at both formal and informal levels, ensuring the continuity of their legacy. Bowman (2014) highlighted that mentoring attracts, motivates, and develops new leaders while encouraging experienced teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. A participant emphasized this: “I give them tasks to stretch them, along with encouragement, but I don’t announce it to anyone. I give them responsibilities to prepare them for the next level” (P9-Singh). Another added, “I want to duplicate myself in my teachers because I want some of them to become principals or coordinators. Wherever they go, they should be equipped”(P6-Philomena).

Authenticity in mentoring was crucial for ASEAN educational leaders, guiding teachers toward finding a deeper sense of purpose in their profession. The pandemic provided an opportunity for meaningful discussions on personal and professional goals, reinforcing their role in education and nation-building. Mentors connected teachers’ aspirations to the school’s vision and mission, encouraging deeper commitment and fulfillment. A participant stated, “If I’m older, how will society be? I want to build a school that helps kids think, and that starts with teachers who inspire and shape that vision” (P10-Thad). The study of Koki (1997) emphasized that mentoring must be purposeful and carefully planned to develop teachers’ skills and knowledge effectively.

Furthermore, the pandemic facilitated networking among ASEAN educators, enabling them to collaborate through virtual platforms. Online benchmarking allowed teachers to exchange innovative methodologies, resources, and best practices, creating global interconnectedness. Easy access to professional development opportunities enhanced educators’ adaptability, resilience, and innovation. A participant noted, “We go global. I encourage my team to expand their connections. The pandemic presented opportunities, making it easier to connect with colleagues worldwide” (P4-Vienne). Ratanjee, and Pyrka (2015) emphasized the importance of professional networking in cultivating leadership. Similarly, Monash (2021) highlighted that ASEAN educational leaders valued collectivism and support from professional communities during the pandemic.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, mentoring nurtured a culture of innovation in education. Leaders and teachers were compelled to embrace uncertainties and develop creative solutions tailored to the needs of their school communities. ASEAN educational leaders aimed to integrate innovation as a core focus of mentoring, equipping teachers with versatile skills and forward-thinking mindsets to shape the future of education. Encouraging explorations of creative strategies, adaptation to new technologies, and engagement in innovative practices strengthened resilience and preparedness for unprecedented times. In the post-pandemic world, supporting a culture of innovation through mentoring ensures sustainable educational growth and transformation.

Conclusion

Mentorship Experience During the Pandemic

The mentorship experiences of the 12 ASEAN educational leaders during the pandemic illustrate a period marked by significant emotional range, challenges, and adaptations, ultimately highlighting their resilience and commitment to their roles and communities.

It can be concluded that the mentoring experiences of the 12 ASEAN educational leaders during the pandemic encompass a range of emotions, adversities, and adaptations. Their mentorship experiences are considered a period of immense growth, challenges, adjustments, and collaboration. This description reflects the determination of the ASEAN educational leaders, together with their mentees, to continue their commitment to their roles, to the school community, and to the stakeholders.

It was also concluded that despite the challenges or obstacles in mentoring their teachers posed by the global pandemic, the ASEAN educational leaders were still able to reflect, embrace the opportunities that arose, and provide guidance and a sense of direction to teachers during unprecedented times. It is also noteworthy to add that with their experiences during the pandemic they were able to realize that mentoring should have been more sustainable and data-driven.

Contributions of the Pandemic on Mentoring

The COVID-19 pandemic had multifaceted contributions to mentoring teachers, that influence communication, technology, pedagogy, stakeholder partnerships, and mental health. ASEAN educational leaders saw these effects as transformative, reshaping mentorship practices and teaching methods. This revolutionized mentoring to include technology, emotional support, collaboration, and creativity, promoting adaptability in education.

It can be concluded that the contributions of the COVID-19 pandemic on mentoring teachers were multifaceted, encompassing different challenges and opportunities

related to communication, technology, pedagogies, partnership with stakeholders, mental health, and well-being. The ASEAN educational leaders acknowledged the transformative nature of these effects and their contribution to the evolution of mentorship practices and teaching-learning processes.

In conclusion, the pandemic had a profoundly revolutionary and transformative impact on mentoring, broadening its definition to encompass the use of technology, emotional support, collaboration, and creative teaching techniques. The difficulties forced mentors and mentees to learn new skills, work creatively together, and build community, ultimately resulting in a more flexible and resilient educational landscape.

Pandemic Gains on Mentoring

Mentorship has been pivotal in guiding teachers through remote learning challenges, which nurture adaptability and collaboration. Despite initial concerns, the 12 ASEAN education leaders recognize the pandemic's transformative gains in mentoring that shape relationships and practices. Their aspirations for post-pandemic mentoring guide strategies for addressing challenges and cultivating innovation. The pandemic's legacy includes lasting pedagogical shifts and a renewed focus on equity and innovation in education.

It can be concluded that mentorship played a crucial role in guiding mentors and their teachers overcame the challenges of remote and online mentoring, working, teaching, and learning while honing a culture of adaptability, resiliency, and collaboration. In relation to this, despite the negative perceptions of the ASEAN educational leaders and their teachers to the outbreak of the pandemic, they still consider COVID-19 as a crisis that ushered in transformative impacts on mentoring within the educational landscape. It is because the pandemic gains in mentoring were both immediate and long-term affecting various areas such as the relationship between the mentor and mentees and mentoring practices that are aligned with the needs of the contemporary world.

The pandemic gains in mentoring in this study were also pondered as gathered aspirations and visions of the participants on what kind of teacher-leaders should have in the ASEAN and what were the focus areas of mentoring teachers to achieve this. In connection with this, the ASEAN educational leaders also acknowledged these gains as their guide in developing strategies that address the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing them for honing tier teachers in case the world experiences another kind of pandemic. Moreover, the enduring legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic is the lasting pedagogical shifts, a renewed emphasis on inclusion and equity, and the importance of continuous innovation in the realm of education.

Findings contribute to understanding mentoring strategies during crises and ASEAN's role in achieving SDG 4. The mentorship experiences of the 12 ASEAN educational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a journey of transformation, resilience, and innovation. Despite the challenges posed by an uncertain and rapidly changing

educational landscape, these leaders demonstrated an unwavering commitment to guiding and supporting their mentees, adapting to new realities, and building collaboration. Their experiences reflect not only the struggles of remote learning and shifting pedagogical approaches but also the emergence of new mentoring practices that emphasize adaptability, emotional well-being, and data-driven decision-making.

The pandemic's impact on mentoring was multifaceted, reshaping communication, integrating technology into mentoring practices, strengthening stakeholder partnerships, and reinforcing the need for mental health support. It expanded the definition of mentorship to include digital facilitation, emotional resilience, and creative problem-solving, ensuring that learning communities remained connected and engaged. The crisis, though disruptive, became a catalyst for long-term transformation in education, inspiring ASEAN educational leaders to develop strategies for sustainable, future-ready mentoring.

In reflection, the COVID-19 pandemic redefined mentorship by promoting innovation, strengthening mentor-mentee relationships, and highlighting the indispensable role of teacher-leaders in shaping resilient and forward-thinking educational systems. As the ASEAN region moves beyond the pandemic, the lessons learned from this period will continue to inform and inspire mentorship practices, ensuring that education remains dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to future challenges.

Overall Conclusion

The overall essence of teacher-leader mentorship in the ASEAN region during the COVID-19 pandemic was reshaped as human experience, transformative, and adaptive practice that not only responded to crises but also contributed to the development of a new culture of leadership. This new culture of leadership emerged because of the adaptability of teachers, quick thinking, rapid embrace of digital literacy, and prioritization of their well-being. To summarize, the essence lies in transformation, empowerment, and innovation. The experiences of these ASEAN educational leaders serve as testaments to the power of mentorship, not only in navigating crises alongside their mentees, and school community, but also in exercising their autonomy, and in shaping the future of their schools in the post-pandemic era within the ASEAN region.

Furthermore, this research contributes to education by documenting and analyzing mentorship experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how ASEAN educational leaders guided their teachers through professional, emotional, and technological challenges while sustaining their commitment to their schools and communities. Additionally, the study further established how the pandemic reshaped mentoring by integrating technology, emotional support, and collaboration, and identified its lasting gains, including the development of data-driven, innovative, and resilient mentoring practices designed to prepare teacher-leaders for future educational disruptions.

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AI Use Declaration:

Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the editing and revision processes of this manuscript for the Philippine Journal of Education Studies. Both online and offline writing tools, office productivity software, and AI editing assistants and tools were used solely to assist the researcher in identifying grammatical lapses, refining language to meet expected standards for journal writing and publication, and proofreading the documents. The researcher did not omit the process of manually reviewing and human-assisting to validate all the improvements made using these tools for the reliability and correctness of information, in line with the original approach and ideas of the researcher.

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