Navigating HyFlex Learning: Experiences of Senior High School Students in a Provincial Private School in the Philippines

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Senior High School (SHS) students with Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) learning in a provincial private school in the Philippines. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) with 100 Grade 12 students of Colegio de San Francisco Javier (CSFJ) during School Year 2025–2026. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: preference for face-to-face learning, digital inequality and technical barriers, distractions in the home learning environment, concerns about academic quality and readiness, and calls for holistic student support. Students consistently highlighted the effectiveness of face-to-face classes for comprehension while describing online and self-study modes as supplementary. However, persistent challenges such as unreliable internet, limited device access, household responsibilities, and financial strain limited the inclusivity of HyFlex learning. Moreover, students expressed anxieties about the quality of flexible learning and their preparedness for higher education. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of scholarships, mentoring, emotional care, and access to facilities to support their success. These findings affirm that HyFlex cannot be understood solely as a technological model but as a comprehensive system that requires academic, financial, and psychosocial support. The study underscores the need for institutions and policymakers to balance flexibility with equity and rigor, aligning interventions with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Keywords and phrases*: HyFlex learning; flexible learning; digital inequality; senior high school; qualitative research; Philippines; student support; education equity; SDG 4; SDG 3; SDG 10*

Introduction

The global shift to flexible learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed educational systems and continues to shape pedagogical practices today. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) institutionalized flexible learning through CMO No. 4, series of 2020, later reaffirmed in CMO No. 6, series of 2022, ensuring its permanence beyond emergency contexts. Flexible and Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) learning models, which allow students to choose between face-to-face, synchronous online, and asynchronous modes, are intended to expand access and promote learner autonomy (Beatty, 2019). Yet, despite the promise of flexibility, questions remain about equity, effectiveness, and readiness for higher education, especially among learners outside metropolitan areas.

Existing studies show that Filipino students tend to prefer face-to-face instruction, citing better comprehension and stronger engagement compared to online classes (Barrot et al., 2021). However, digital inequality—including limited internet connectivity, lack of devices, and unsuitable home environments—remains a major barrier (Baticulon et al., 2021). More recent qualitative research has emphasized that students in provincial schools face compounded difficulties, from unstable connectivity to shared household gadgets and additional family responsibilities (Catama et al., 2025). Alongside these barriers, students express anxieties about whether HyFlex learning compromises academic quality and their preparedness for college (Santiago et al., 2021). These findings suggest that while HyFlex may offer flexibility, it also risks reinforcing existing inequalities if structural supports are insufficient.

Despite the growing body of research on flexible learning in higher education, limited attention has been given to Senior High School (SHS) students in provincial private schools, particularly in Zamboanga del Norte. This study addresses that gap by exploring the experiences of SHS students at Colegio de San Francisco Javier (CSFJ) in Rizal, Zamboanga del Norte. Using focus group discussions (FGDs), the study sought to answer the following questions: (1) How do students usually learn best? (2) What do they find easy and difficult about online classes? (3) Do they have reliable internet and devices? (4) What worries them about studying in college under HyFlex? and (5) What support would help them succeed? By foregrounding student voices, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on HyFlex learning and provides insights for strengthening policy and practice in alignment with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using focus group discussion (FGD) as the primary method of data collection. The approach was chosen to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of Senior High School students regarding HyFlex learning. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth

exploration of meanings and insights that cannot be fully represented through quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Colegio de San Francisco Javier (CSFJ), located in Rizal, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines. CSFJ is a private diocesan school serving both junior and senior high school students. The institution adopted flexible learning strategies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in alignment with Department of Education (DepEd) directives, making it a relevant context for examining student experiences with HyFlex learning.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were 100 Senior High School students enrolled at CSFJ during School Year 2025–2026. They represented different strands under the Academic Track (e.g., HUMSS, ABM, STEM, GAS). The sampling technique used was total enumeration, wherein all Grade 12 students in the school were invited to participate to ensure comprehensive coverage of perspectives. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents/guardians in compliance with ethical standards.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) facilitated by the researchers. Students were divided into manageable groups of 10–12 participants per session to encourage open dialogue and reduce inhibition. A semi-structured FGD guide was used, containing key questions such as:
1. How do you usually learn best (face-to-face, online, self-study)?
2. What do you find easy when classes are online?
3. What do you find difficult when classes are online?
4. Do you have reliable internet and devices for online learning?
5. What worries you about studying in college under HyFlex?
6. What support would make it easier for you to succeed?

Each FGD lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a classroom setting familiar to students. Discussions were audio-recorded with permission, and detailed field notes were taken by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was employed:

1. Familiarization – Transcribing the discussions and reading transcripts multiple times.

2. Coding – Identifying significant words, phrases, and ideas.
3. Generating Categories – Grouping codes into broader patterns.
4. Theme Development – Organizing categories into overarching themes.
5. Reviewing Themes – Ensuring themes accurately represented the data.
6. Writing and Interpretation – Linking themes to literature and research objectives.

To ensure accuracy, transcripts were reviewed independently by the researchers and then reconciled through peer debriefing. Representative student quotes were retained to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles. Informed consent was secured from both students and their parents/guardians. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing student responses and avoiding disclosure of names or personal identifiers. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Data integrity was ensured by transcribing and analyzing responses without alteration or fabrication. The study aligned with the ethical guidelines of the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Social Research (2022) and institutional protocols.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the focus group discussion (FGD) with one hundred Senior High School (SHS) students of Colegio de San Francisco Javier (CSFJ) on their experiences and perspectives regarding HyFlex learning. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in five interrelated themes: (1) Preference for Face-to-Face Learning, (2) Digital Inequality and Technical Barriers, (3) Distractions in the Home Learning Environment, (4) Concerns about Academic Quality and College Readiness, and (5) Calls for Holistic Student Support. Each theme is illustrated with excerpts from student voices and situated in relation to existing scholarship and policy.

Theme 1: Preference for Face-to-Face Learning

Students consistently expressed a stronger preference for face-to-face classes over online or self-study modes. Many emphasized that comprehension was clearer when interacting directly with teachers and classmates. One student explained, *"Mas ganahan mi sa face-to-face kay makasabot mi ug maayo"* (I prefer face-to-face because I understand better). Another noted that while online classes were "convenient," they still lacked the clarity and discipline of classroom learning.

This theme shows that while HyFlex education is designed to provide flexibility, students still equate quality learning with in-person interaction. It suggests that face-to-face teaching remains a benchmark for comprehension and academic seriousness.

These findings echo Barrot et al. (2021), who reported that Filipino students found

online learning less effective than traditional classrooms despite its accessibility. Similarly, Santiago et al. (2021) emphasized that students often questioned whether flexible modalities could match the depth of face-to-face teaching. Together, this evidence suggests that institutions implementing HyFlex must ensure that digital options are complemented with robust in-person instruction.

Theme 2: Digital Inequality and Technical Barriers

One of the most pressing concerns was unequal access to internet and devices. About half of the participants reported having home internet, while one-fourth admitted they had none. As one student remarked, *"Walay internet sa balay"* (We do not have internet at home). Others complained of poor connectivity: *"Lag ang gadget ug signal"* (The gadget and signal are lagging).

This theme highlights the digital divide as a systemic barrier to HyFlex learning. Students with stable access can engage more fully, while those without are excluded from participation. Digital inequality is not merely technical but social, deepening existing inequities between households.

The present findings mirror the national survey of Baticulon et al. (2021), which found that medical students in the Philippines identified unreliable internet and lack of gadgets as their greatest barriers. Catama et al. (2025) also reported that provincial students often shared devices or struggled with outdated technology, making them more vulnerable to exclusion. These reinforce the idea that HyFlex cannot succeed without institutional and policy measures that bridge the digital divide.

Theme 3: Distractions in the Home Learning Environment

Even for students with connectivity, the home was often described as a disruptive environment for online learning. Common responses included noise and family responsibilities: *"Daghan kaayo ug saba sa balay"* (There is too much noise at home), and *"Si mama ug papa magsugo samtang klase"* (My parents give chores during class).

This theme underscores that HyFlex is not just about access to technology but also about the conditions in which learning takes place. Many students lacked quiet spaces, struggled with competing household demands, and found it difficult to maintain focus in informal settings.

These observations are consistent with Peralta et al. (2024), who found that nursing students reported higher stress levels when forced to learn in noisy or unstable home environments. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) emphasized that psychosocial stress and lack of learning spaces at home were global challenges during the pandemic shift to remote education. This suggests that institutions must not only address technical access but also provide psychosocial and community support to improve the home learning experience.

Theme 4: Concerns about Academic Quality and College Readiness

Many students expressed anxiety that HyFlex learning might compromise their preparedness for college. One shared, *"Mahadlok mi kay basin dili mi ka-cope sa college"* (We are afraid we might not cope in college). Others worried about declining standards, saying *"Ang quality sa education mahimong bati kung internet lang"* (The quality of education will deteriorate if it is only internet-based).

This theme indicates that students associate HyFlex with reduced rigor and fear it will not prepare them for higher education. Concerns about quality undermine confidence and may affect motivation and performance.

These findings align with Santiago et al. (2021), who observed that students in flexible settings questioned whether learning outcomes were equivalent to traditional models. The CHED Memorandum Orders on flexible learning (CHED, 2020; 2022) explicitly caution institutions to uphold quality standards despite the shift in modalities. Peralta et al. (2024) likewise documented students' fears of being underprepared in nursing programs. Taken together, this evidence shows that ensuring rigor and quality assurance is central to sustaining trust in HyFlex education.

Theme 5: Calls for Holistic Student Support

Finally, students emphasized the need for comprehensive support systems. They mentioned not only financial aid but also mentoring, emotional support, and provision of facilities. Typical remarks included, *"Kinahanglan mi ug financial support"* (We need financial support), and *"Dili lang training pero moral ug emotional support pud"* (Not only training but also moral and emotional support).

This theme shows that students view success in HyFlex as dependent on more than technology. They called for scholarships, psychosocial care, training, and mentoring to build their resilience and confidence.

These results are consistent with Baticulon et al. (2021), who found that psychosocial support and financial assistance were crucial for sustaining students in online programs. Catama et al. (2025) also emphasized that institutional mentoring improved student confidence. UNESCO (2020) has similarly called for inclusive recovery strategies that combine financial aid, teacher training, and psychosocial support. This suggests that HyFlex must be embedded within broader student support ecosystems to be truly equitable.

Across these themes, three cross-cutting issues emerge: equity, well-being, and readiness. Equity issues center on access to internet and devices; well-being concerns relate to stress and distractions in home environments; and readiness refers to students' doubts about quality and preparedness for college. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires holistic institutional policies aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).
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Conclusions

This study examined the experiences of one hundred Senior High School students from Colegio de San Francisco Javier (CSFJ) regarding HyFlex learning. Through focus group discussion (FGD) and thematic analysis, five major themes were revealed: (1) preference for face-to-face learning, (2) digital inequality and technical barriers, (3) distractions in the home environment, (4) concerns about academic quality and readiness, and (5) calls for holistic student support.

The findings conclude that face-to-face instruction remains the most trusted and effective learning modality for students. While online and self-directed learning provide convenience and flexibility, these are not perceived as sufficient replacements for classroom interaction.

The results also highlight systemic inequities in internet access, device ownership, and home learning conditions. These barriers limit student participation and reinforce educational inequality. Digital access challenges are compounded by financial strain and psychosocial pressures, making online modalities less inclusive than intended.

Furthermore, students expressed significant anxiety about whether HyFlex prepares them for college. Concerns about lowered standards, heavy reliance on unstable technology, and stress from home responsibilities contribute to fears of being academically underprepared.

Finally, the study concludes that HyFlex education can only succeed if paired with robust institutional and policy support. Students require not just technology, but also financial aid, mentoring, emotional care, and structured academic guidance. Thus, HyFlex should be understood as a comprehensive system of support rather than merely a mode of content delivery.

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Schools and Administrators
- Strengthen the face-to-face component of HyFlex to maintain academic rigor while allowing flexibility.
- Establish mentoring and tutoring programs to help students adapt to online and self-study components.
- Invest in campus learning hubs with reliable internet and devices for students lacking home connectivity.

For Policy-Makers (CHED, DepEd, LGUs)
- Develop programs that reduce digital inequality, such as subsidized internet, gadget loans, or community Wi-Fi centers.
- Ensure that flexible learning policies explicitly address academic quality assurance and align with existing standards.
- Provide financial assistance and scholarships targeted at disadvantaged learners to support equitable participation.

For Teachers
- Balance convenience and rigor by designing engaging lessons that combine interactive online activities with structured classroom instruction.
- Incorporate mental health sensitivity into pedagogy, recognizing the stress students face at home and online.
- Offer orientation sessions on self-study strategies, time management, and digital literacy to build student readiness.

For Guidance and Support Units
- Create psychosocial support programs including counseling, peer support groups, and stress management workshops.
- Provide academic advising to help students navigate HyFlex requirements and transition into higher education.
- Develop family engagement activities to raise awareness of students' home learning needs and reduce household distractions.

For Students
- Strengthen self-management skills such as discipline, time management, and independent learning strategies.
- Actively seek and utilize available mentoring, counseling, and scholarship opportunities.
- Advocate for their needs by participating in school feedback mechanisms to improve HyFlex delivery.

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Disclosure: Use of AI Tools

In compliance with Threshold's guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in academic research, the authors disclose the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT for enhancing the quality and clarity of the manuscript. ChatGPT was utilized to assist in refining the language, structure, and formatting of the text, ensuring a high level of academic rigor and coherence. The authors confirm that all data analysis, critical interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript were conducted independently by the research team. The AI tool was employed strictly for editorial assistance and did not influence the scientific content or ethical considerations of the study. All intellectual contributions from the AI tool are in accordance with the authors' original intentions and have been reviewed and approved by all co-authors. The use of ChatGPT complies with Threshold's ethical standards and guidelines for transparent reporting of AI involvement in research. The authors remain fully responsible for the integrity and accuracy of the content presented in this paper.

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