



The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on student's E-Learning Experiences in Kerala

Dr. Juginu. M. S

Assistant Professor in Natural Science, Buddha College of Teacher Education, Muthukulam

Abstract: Nearly 1.5 billion learners in more than 190 countries have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history ever before. The world's student population has been severely affected by the closures of schools, institutions, and other learning spaces. This has brought profound changes in all walks of our lives. The traditional educational practices have been significantly disturbed by social distancing and restrictive movement policies. The relaxation of restriction and reopening of schools is another challenge with many new standard operating procedures put in place. Many researchers have shared their works on teaching and learning in different ways. Several schools, colleges, and universities were forced to discontinue face-to-face teachings. Most people feared the loss of the 2020 academic year or even more in the coming future. The need of the hour is to innovate and implement the alternative education system and assessment strategies. The COVID -19 pandemic has created an opportunity to introduce digital learning. Kerala, the state with the highest literacy rate in India, has added another feather in its hat amid all challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, conducting over 6,000 online classes in which more than 43 lakh students from pre-primary standard to Class 12 attended. The digital classes, titled 'First Bell' commenced from June 1, 2020, as an interim arrangement for regular classes, and are telecast through the government-owned KITE VICTERS educational channel under the KITE (Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education). This article aims to provide an encyclopaedic report on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student's Teaching and Learning Experiences.

Key Words: Internet Use, Learning, Pedagogy, COVID-19

Introduction

Almost all countries and territories have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Countries all over the world cautioned their citizens to take responsive care. The precaution strategies have included handwashing, wearing face masks, physical distancing, and avoiding mass gatherings and assemblies. Sintema (2020) contended that lockdown and staying home strategies have been put in place as the needed action to flatten the curve and control the transmission of the disease. Samrat Sharma and Mayank Mishra (2021), noticed that the first case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kerala which was confirmed in Thrissur on 30 January 2020. As of 18 November 2021, there have been 50,84,035 confirmed cases, test positivity rate is at 9.16% (13.02% cumulative), with 49,84,245 (98.03%) recoveries and 36,847 (0.72%) deaths in the state.

According to Niha Masih (2020, initially, Kerala's success in containing COVID-19 was widely praised both nationally and internationally. Following a high number of cases being reported in March, Kerala had, by April 30, reduced the rate of increase of new cases to less than 0.25% per day. However, in mid-May, there was an increase or "second wave" of new cases, following the return of Keralites from other countries and other Indian states. In July, a large local group of cases was identified at the Kumarichantha fish market in Thiruvananthapuram. There was a third surge in cases post-Onam, with a high number of new cases reported in late October in Malappuram, Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Thrissur districts. Active cases peaked at 97,525 and started to decline from November, before bouncing back to over 4,00,000 in May 2021 following the state elections.

The author of Business Standard India (2021) noted that on 12 May 2021, Kerala reported the largest single-day spike with 43,529 new cases. According to Ghosh and Abantika (2021), during 27–28 July Kerala reported 22,129 and 22,056 new cases respectively, accounting for more than 50% of daily new cases in India in those days. The state, however, has the low case fatality rate in India - 0.7% - compared to the national average of 1.2%. Active cases have since been on a decline.

The Kerala government has announced a State-wide lockdown from May 8 to 16. The directive was issued by the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan taking into consideration the surge in COVID-19 cases in the State during the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Several schools, colleges, and universities have discontinued face-to-face teaching. There is a pressing need to innovate and implement alternative educational and assessment strategies. Dhawan (2020), contended that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to pave the way for introducing digital learning.

Research highlights certain paucities such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, the information gap, the non-conducive environment

for learning at home, equity, and academic excellence in terms of higher education. This article evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching and learning process across Kerala.

Pedagogy for Online Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closures of schools, training institutes, and higher education facilities in most countries. According to Sumitra Pokhrel and Roshan Chhetri (2021), educators have adopted various online platforms to deliver quality education. Online learning can be an entirely different experience for the learners and the educators, which they must adapt to with little or no other alternatives available. The entire education system has adopted “Education in Emergency” through various online platforms. Subedi et al., (2020) reflected that e-learning tools have played a crucial role during this pandemic, helping schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools.

The learners with fixed behavioural settings find it difficult to adapt and adjust, whereas the learners with a growth mindset quickly adapt to the new learning environment. There is no common pedagogy for online learning. There are a variety of subjects with varying needs. According to Doucet et al. (2020), different subjects and age groups require different approaches for online learning. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020), reviewed that online learning also allows physically challenged students with more freedom to participate in learning in the virtual environment, requiring limited movement.

As schools have been closed to cope with the global pandemic, while governments, frontline workers, and health officials are doing their best to slow down the outbreak. The education systems are trying to continue imparting quality education for all during these difficult times. Many students at home/living space have undergone psychological and emotional distress and have been unable to engage productively. Petrie (2020) opined that the best practices for online homeschooling are yet to be explored.

Some of the online platforms used so far include unified communication and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and Blackboard, which allow the teachers to create educational courses, training, and skill development programs. They include options of workplace chat, video meeting, and file storage that keep classes organized and easy to work. They usually support the sharing of a variety of content like Word, PDF, Excel files, audio, videos, and many more. These also allow the tracking of student learning and assessment by using quizzes and the rubric-based assessment of submitted assignments.

Challenges of online Teaching and Learning in Kerala

The users— both educators and learners—face frequent hiatus while using the available platforms and online educational tools. Some of the challenges identified are summarized as follows:

Murgatroid (2020), broadly identified challenges with e-learning are accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and educational policy. Most people have issues related to internet connection and access to digital devices. The students from poor families are unable to afford online learning devices and, online education poses a risk of exposure to increased screen time for the

learner. The families in which both parents are working, do not get enough time to care for their young learners is another challenge. The innately motivated learners are relatively unaffected in their learning as they need minimum supervision and guidance whereas the vulnerable group consisting of students who are weak in learning face difficulties. The learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds but academically competent are unable to access and afford online learning. Sintema (2020) has observed that the level of academic performance of the students is likely to drop for the classes held for both year-end examination and internal examination due to reduced contact hours for learners and lack of consultation with teachers when facing difficulties in learning/understanding.

After a lot of trial and error, uncertainty, and confusion among the teachers, students, and parents, student assessments are carried out online. The strategies adopted to conduct online examinations vary as per the convenience and expertise among the educators and the compatibility of the learners. Due to the large student population, Appropriate measures to check plagiarism are yet to be put in place in many schools and institutions. The education system in schools, colleges, and universities across the state has been severely impacted due to the ongoing situation.

The majority of the students have now engaged in online classes, spending additional time on virtual platforms, which have left children vulnerable to online exploitation. Increased and unstructured time spent on online learning has exposed children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as a greater risk of cyberbullying. As a result of the strict containment measures, most families have been relying on technology and digital solutions to keep children engaged in learning, entertained, and connected to the outside world, but not all children have the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to keep themselves safe online. Some students opined that they had to attend to their ailing parents/ grandparents/family members and take them to hospitals for a regular check-up. By evening, when they are back home, it becomes difficult for them to keep engaged with the lessons. The parents of the lower grade students feel that it would be better to let the children repeat the next academic year.

The majority of students in tribal areas like Idamalakkudy, Attappady, etc do not have access to smartphones or TV at home in addition to poor internet connectivity. There is no or less income for a huge population due to the closure of businesses and offices. Continuous access to the internet is a costly business for the farming community whose average income is relatively low. Online live video classes are encouraged by most; however, some economically disadvantaged students have expressed that the face-to-face online class consumes more data packages. The teachers are in utmost confusion as to whom to listen to and which tools to adopt. Some think pre-recorded videos could help; however, this would restrict interactions. It is difficult to design a proper system to fit the learning needs and convenience of all students.

Opportunities for Teaching and Learning

There are several opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic for the unprepared and the distant plans of implementing an e-learning system even though there have been overwhelming challenges for educators, schools, and institutes. It has forged a strong bond between teachers and parents than ever before. Home-schooling increased the support of the parents in the learning of their students.

The use of online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and social media, and various group forums like Telegram, Messenger, and WhatsApp are explored and tried for teaching and learning for the first time to continue education. This can be used further even after face-to-face teaching resumes, and these platforms can provide additional resources and coaching to the learners. Doucet et al. (2020) observed that teachers must take creative initiatives that assist to overcome the limitations of virtual teaching. There are incomparable opportunities for cooperation, creative solutions, and willingness to learn from others and try new tools as educators, parents, and students share similar experiences. In this pandemic period, many educational organizations are offering their tools and solutions for free to help and support teaching and learning. Online learning has created many opportunities to teach and learn in innovative ways rather than the teaching and learning experiences in the normal classroom setting.

Discussion

United Nations (2020), reported that as of October 2020, 98.6% of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.725 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries. Therefore, making learning from homes has been the need of the hour. The teaching methods used for face-to-face learning are not feasible for online learning. Teachers who are technologically backward require proper professional development and training for the online and distance teaching-learning process. Authentic assessments and timely feedback are essential components of learning. Doucet et al. (2020) reviewed that a very crucial part of online distance learning is the availability of helpful formative assessments and timely feedback to the online learners. This is found to be challenging for educators and the education system.

The students now experiencing home schooling during this COVID-19 pandemic, the conducive environment at home for all standards and socio-economic conditions is not uniform. Studies should be carried out to support the hardest hit economically disadvantaged groups. During this pandemic, there have been prepared varieties of online infrastructure by many educational firms and made free for learning. Learners of varied economic backgrounds cannot get access to these online infrastructures which is still a challenge.

Students with special needs require additional training with support and guidance. The ignorance of many caregivers and parents hinders the learning of this group of learners. Therefore, there is a need for investing time in research to find out the best alternatives for the special educational needs (SEN) of these learners. It is challenging for educators to find the authenticity of the work and the actual learning taking place, as all the assignments and examinations are carried out from home. Even though many parents guide and support their children during their learning process, the extent and degree of support vary greatly. No proper criteria are developed so far for the grading of students which is another area of study.

Conclusion

The study concludes that suitable strategies and platforms for different class levels need to be analysed further. The feeble internet bandwidth and costly data packages lead to inadequate accessibility and affordability in many tribal colonies and certain rural areas. More research should be conducted to explore and investigate effective pedagogy for online teaching and learning. Another important area of study is found to be the need for developing tools for authentic assessments and timely feedback. The students from varied economic backgrounds should get the online facility in an affordable manner which is identified as a challenge, for which the developer of the educational tool could focus on customization. The state education department must invest more in the professional development of teachers, especially on ICT and effective pedagogy by considering the present scenario. The ways for making creative online teaching and interactive through user-friendly tools is another area of research and development. This would assist and prepare the education system for such uncertainties in the future. The teachers and students/ learners should be oriented on the use of different online educational tools is the lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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