



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN INSIGHT INTO UNPRECEDENTED EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA DURING COVID - 19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has become a global health crisis, but its effects are not confined to health sector. Education is one of the most sensitive sectors that is severely affected by this pandemic. Worldwide school closures have resulted in fears of downfalls in literacy rates in many countries. Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian country that has got sustained detrimental effects of COVID-19 pandemic both medically as well as socially. Sri Lankan general education system which is traditional classroom-based education had to move to online education in order to keep in pace with educational momentum. This rapid shift has created many challenges; the main concerns are problems related to access a suitable devices and readiness and preparedness of the system to absorb online education. This critical review intends to explore more on to these challenges with statistical background where it re-emphasizes that the said challenges are predominant in the Sri Lankan education system and they have to be addressed immediately if the online education to be an effective alternative for traditional class-room teaching. This article further highlights the dearth of research in these concerns and essentiality of conducting impact surveys in order to take effective remedial policy decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Global situation: The corona virus; catalogued as COVID-19 is one of the critical perennial epidemics that the contemporary world is facing. Emerged in Wuhan, Hubei province in China in latter part of 2019, spread of COVID-19 has led to dramatic loss of human lives and challenging public health, food-systems and the world of work (WHO, 2020). Detrimental effects of COVID-19 has affected all countries in the world without prejudice be it either a developed country or developing country where the World Health Organization declared it as a 'global pandemic' on 11th of March 2020 (Jena, 2020). Education is the one of most critically affected sectors by this pandemic across the globe. In fact, COVID-19 pandemic has resulted the largest educational crisis in the recent history, forcing a recorded number of students; more than 1 billion of children to stay away from schools, universities and other educational institutions (UN report, 2020). Further, the UNESCO report (2020) has revealed an alarming data, that at the peak of first wave of pandemic; from mid- March 2020, in over 190 countries nearly 90% of world student population has been abundant the formal education due to nationwide closures. According to the same report, even after 18 months of the first strike of the pandemic, the situation has not improved significantly, which states '... half the world's students are still affected by partially or full

school closure and over 100 million additional children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading as a result of the health crisis...' (p.2).

Sri Lankan situation: Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries that is severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Home to about 21 millions of population, from the first outbreak of pandemic in mid-March 2020, by the end of May 2021, Sri Lanka is witnessing the raging third wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Local health authorities are reporting over 2500 cases a day with rapid rising of death toll as well (Health Promotion Bureau, 2020). This has prompted the Sri Lankan government to impose nationwide strict travel restrictions including lockdowns. When considering the consequences of this unprecedented crisis on disruption of education globally, Sri Lanka is not an exceptional of these realities. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, education has put to a halt rendering national academic schedules futile. All schools, universities and all other educational institutions were close on 12th March 2020 suspending all academic activities (Adaderana, 2020). Although the schools and other educational institutions are re-opened in certain grades (where national examinations are to be held) for few weeks or few days sometimes during the period where the pandemic is in control, sudden fluctuations and uncontrollable outbreak resulted in indefinite sporadic sudden closures. As a repercussion of school closures, most of the schools have moves to online education, but there is a growing disquiet on its impact on financially disadvantaged students' cohort both educationally and emotionally (Rameez

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et al., 2020). Sri Lanka has been providing universally free education from preschool to tertiary level from a parliamentary enactment in 1943 and 'right to education' has been legitimated from the 1978 constitutional reforms itself and education is declared compulsory from the age of 5 to 14 since 1998 (Fernando, 2015). The resultants of interrupted education due to near-total school closure during pandemic has instigated long-term implicational in the education system of Sri Lanka. These impacts go beyond mere loss of learning time, including increase in drop-out rates, poor nutritional status among students, increasing techno-vulnerability and creating an obvious digital divide where rural and improvised student population are made susceptible and threatened of devoid of access to education with the onboard of home-based online learning (Hayash *et al.*, 2020). Disproportionate experience of loss of educational opportunities mostly by the vulnerable, has deepened the inequalities at a crucial time where the country is landing on the decade of action towards realizing the targets of Sustainable Development Goals in 2030 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020).

Technical challenge: Technological divide in Sri Lankan education system during COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic situation has urged and compelled the schools and other educational institutions to deliver their lessons through online platforms and portals (Drane *et al.*, 2020). This is seemingly a fair movement to try to maintain the momentum of educational opportunities. However, it is evident that students are facing a series of challenges which are contextually sensitive and unique. They are forced to concentrate on the studies as usual even when life issues are predominant in an uncertain environment created by the pandemic (Dias and Eliatamby, 2020, July 27). Sudden shift to online education has jeopardized their usual routine. Previously, the traditional face-to-face classroom, despite various disparities has functioned as a leveler to a certain extent among different economic and social backgrounds to a common shared learning space. Switching to 'online learning at home' inevitably has affected the economically deprived students as they are unable to access a suitable device and required connectivity to engage in classes. Most of the public schools have shifted their traditional teaching-learning to online mode. As per Department of census and statistics computer literacy data (2019) 22% of households i.e., every one out of five households in the country owns a desktop computer or a laptop computer. But, this average is consolidated with the 38% of urban sector and 19.7% of rural sector, cueing a great concern on the student population in disadvantaged, rural areas. According to the same statistics report, 7.8% of total population are fixed internet subscribers while only 34.11% of the population have access to internet through any channel. Out of these accessibility data, only 52% of school aged students have access to a smart device or a computer and only 40% has a secured internet connection- which is essential for online learning (After Access and LIRNEAsia, 2019). This reveals an electric data that less than half of the student's population in the country can be benefited by the online learning where the rest is not. On the contrary 86% of population has access to televisions and 63% has access to radio (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019). Tackling this advantage, the Ministry of Education has launched regular distance learning programmes through a dedicated television channels - 'Gurugedara' which delivers lesson in both national languages - Sinhala and Tamil.

Simultaneously, these lessons are broadcasted through Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation radio channel (Nanayakkara, 2020). This effort mainly targets the students who do not have access to online classes. This is indeed a dawn of relief especially to estate sector, where the statistical data shows that access to radio (71.4%) and television (85.3%) reports the highest over other digital devices in estate sector (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020), yet an impact study on this is to be conducted to collect data on its effectiveness, productivity and usage. However, as schools are conducting their individual lessons online, students still have to look for alternative ways to get access to a proper device and having an uninterrupted internet connectivity which is still an unresolved challenge (AdaDerana24, 2021).

Pedagogical challenge: readiness and preparedness for online education in Sri Lanka: It is impossible for any type of platform or a distance education mode to replace the dynamisms of a vibrant classroom (Stone and Perumean-Chaney, 2011). A classroom is not just merely a learning space; it is rather a space of interaction, cultural bonding, building solid life-long friendships and overwriting any social differences. Sri Lankan teaching-learning system was totally traditional classroom based method, with minimum penetration of technology (National Education Commission, 2014). Hence, shifting the paradigm to total online education as a consequence of COVID 19 pandemic, it undoubtedly has created much stress among teachers, students as well as on the society (Fazluhaq, 2021). Teaching in an online environment requires great deal of technical precision and specialization in order to convert a classroom-based lesson to virtual environment and deliver it in an online platform (Liyaganawardena *et al.*, 2014). Pedagogies have to be converted, simplified and adjusted to a context which can approach to a diverse student population distantly. However, it is not easy to superimpose the traditional classroom teaching modalities to online teaching (Telles-Langdon, 2020). Hence, this shift to online education has generated an obvious technophobia among considerable teacher population at the beginning where they are often mortified for not being adequately tech-savvy (Lanka Education, 2020).

Apart from the concerns surfaced in transferring a larger volume of material online and difficulties associated with absorbing content through a digital screen, online education has reinforced teacher centered education where students have become passive listeners in most of the times, as opposed to active classroom learning (Room to Read, 2020). Rather mechanized education environment created through online learning and restricted life pattern due to health crisis in the country made it more difficult for teachers to relate the subject content with the day-to-day life. Further, curriculum materials, lecture notes and lesson deliverance need to be re-designed to be suitable for online learning (Focus, 2020). Hence, mere rush in covering the syllabus on-time has become an apparent extra burden on teachers, students and even on parents. Due to minimal use of technology or blended educational methodologies in the usual classroom previously, (unlike in western classrooms) online education has become monotonous and dull if not for creative approaches which should be developed by teachers according to their contexts (Ministry of Education, 2021). Consequently, teacher's preparedness to conduct a lesson content online as well as their readiness in dealing with technological devices, which is rarely used previously, is a challenge (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020).

Online learning, being tech-savvy is also a huge concern among students also for learning purposes, as the new shift is not the usual. All these uncertainties and doubts directly impacts the learning confidence and their overall performances ultimately (De Silva, 2020). These pedagogical challenges are intricately interwoven with social balancing, efficient management and technical know-how, where the teacher should be comfortable first to percolate the level of comfort to students subsequently. Hence, the preparedness and the readiness of both the teachers and students to go onboard with online education remains one of the major concerns in the education system today in Sri Lanka (Pulse, 2020).

DISCUSSION

This study informed through available literature and secondary data on the most predominant challenges that the teachers and students facing during this impetuous paradigm shift of education in Sri Lanka; from an accustomed traditional classroom teaching to online mode, during COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident that there is an obvious digital divide which has to be addressed immediately and to operationalize alternative learning spaces. Access to a reliable device and uninterrupted connectivity is critical, mainly based on geographical and financial differences (Alvarez Jr, 2020). Disproportionate resource distribution is exponentially expanding. These unprecedented educational expenses are adding to economic stresses of the teachers as well as students (Adnan and Anwar, 2020) which also further the realities of equitable education which is expected through 'free education' and 'compulsory education' policies of Sri Lanka. As online education is the way-out in tackling the educational disruption occurred due to the pandemic, government should take steps to eliminate the burden of accessing the devices and connectivity either through government provisions or through public-private partnerships; as this new shift should not be an aggregate on already existing inequalities entrenched in the Sri Lankan education system. Teaching online is different from teaching face-to-face. Lessons have to be converted to be digital-friendly; be simplified and easily digestible and should mostly be self-explanatory (Stacey and Wiesenber, 2007).

In Sri Lankan situation this is a novel shift, hence requires expertise is not yet achieved by the side of teachers as well as students. Therefore, it is mandatory to have immediate professional development programmes if the outcome of the online education is to be productive. These capacity development programmes should focus on advance techniques and technology of online teaching as well as on how to keep the learners engaged and motivated and suitable assessment methods. On the other hand, as a secondary effect of the challenges discussed in this article, retaining capable teachers especially in rural and estate sector is challenging and have become a major issue. Hence the government should consider on providing special incentives for them in order to ensure education continuity. Some of the optimistic arguments of this satiation of shifting traditional classroom to online education is that it has brought-in a critically needed technological diffusion in transforming the heavily content based, rote Sri Lankan traditional education system to match the future demands of fourth industrial revolution (Dulmin *et al.*, 2021). If used aptly, online education can result in much more effective meanings of teaching-learning and also can be used

as an effective avenue of teachers' continuous professional development and also fostering students' independent learning. Considering the uncertainties stipulated by the health authorities on the COVID-19 pandemic and its possibility of future occurrences, distant/ online education might sustain in the system for an unpredictable period of time. Therefore, Sri Lanka needs to take rapid, crucial and decisive policy actions in order to ensure quality and equitable education opportunities to all. Currently, there are several progressive measures being introduced and practiced in the Sri Lankan education system. It is planned, for the urban and rural student clusters who do not have adequate access to online classrooms and for those could not afford to come online are to be provided television sets to make the 'Guru Gedara' education channel accessible; for this there is a considerable allocation proposed by the 2021 national budget (Ministry of Finance, 2020). Further the ministry of education's national e-learning platform 'e-thaksalawa' is upgraded and facilitated online learning from grade 1 to advance levels free of charge (Ministry of Education, 2021). Through these measures it is expected to minimize the adverse effects during prologue school closure especially for poor and vulnerable students who are disadvantaged due to lack of resource and facilities.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka made a remarkable, rapid shift to online education after all educational institutions were obliged to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. When studying the global scenario during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several positive steps taken to face the challenges of accessing proper devices and empower teacher and students to engage in online education confidently. However, the loss of learning time due to school closures is an obvious reality and is likely to increase with time due to predicted uncertainty of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the global evidences reveal that effective recovery measure taken through online education will be able to remediate the system once the schools are reopened when it is coupled with usual instructional re-orientation. Hence in order to keep the momentum of education continuity, it is imperative to identify the key challenges of online education and address them with immediate effect.

The scarcity of authentic data and information that critically analyze the most crucial challenges of online education in Sri Lanka; difficulties in access to a suitable digital device and readiness and preparedness of the process needs more research emphasis as it is currently under-explored with special reference to general school system. However, while digital education is the seemingly effective method of providing education to students during school closure, it is important to ensure that the technology does not amplify the prevailing inequalities in the education system of Sri Lanka as well. It is not only that the authority should concentrate on providing necessary digital devices and providing required infrastructure facilities including connectivity but empowering the teachers and students to be comfortable in the tech-space and to use the online education with precision is also equally essential to minimize the possible digital-divide. These are the main concerns that the future research and policy concentration should be focused on, if the technology based online education is to compensate the physical teaching-learning process till the schools re-open.

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