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Novel Transformation and Change in Schools' Practice of Distance Teaching in Pakistan

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Transformation and Change in Schools' Practice of Distance Teaching in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the implications of distance teaching in the current epidemic situation on learning from students', teachers' and parents' perspectives, and discuss ways to transform current learning scenarios with secure, equitable and conducive learning at and/or outside the schools. The analysis suggests deeper reform in policy and practices to enhance student deep learning in the current scenario and beyond.*

Keywords: Distance teaching, deep learning, cognitive presence, classroom assessment.

Background and Context

This paper discusses the implications of a current epidemic situation on learning from students', teachers' and parents' perspectives. It also discusses ways to transform current learning scenarios with secure, equitable and conducive learning at and/or outside the schools. The qualitative analysis suggests numerous reforms in policy and practices to enhance students' deep learning in the current scenario and beyond. Our informal interactions and conversations with parents, students and teachers inspired mutual critical reflection on each other's experiences of online teaching, learning and related issues and challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic had led to a closure of schools affecting millions of children's education across globe. According to a UNESCO report (2020) on global monitoring of schools closure, a number of 990,324,537 learners affected world-wide during COVID-19 so far (UNESCO, 2020). Many children appeared disconnected with their regular educational activities due to the absence of educational facilities within the physical boundaries of a school. The schools could not have anticipated such kinds of challenges and appeared less or not prepared to address the issues of sustaining the continuity of students' learning, immediately, from a distance.

The high fee private schools hurriedly put together online education to ensure the continuity of learning. Whereas, the low-fee private schools slowly and gradually appeared active in adapting the distance learning modes. The government of Pakistan introduced

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Tele Education to address the issues of continuity of education of the disadvantaged students. These varying conditions make it imperative that any attempt to bring a degree of equivalence across these systems must be comprehensive, encompass learning, teaching, teacher education, assessment and physical resources. Hence, the schools in Pakistan, as per their own circumstances, have adapted various models of distance learning i.e. Asynchronous, Synchronous, Recorded lectures and Hybrid models.

The literature and discourse viewed the closure of schools as a grave risk to the continuity of learning, having a negative effect on students' social and emotional growth. In parallel, safety guidelines are developed around reopening the schools. These all efforts show an element of care towards the students' physical safety.

The strategies reflect the education sector's responsiveness towards ensuring continuity of education, but there is no evidence if the proposed strategies were critically examined in light of parents' students' and teachers' conceptual and contextual constraints. There is no discussion if the distance learning has exposed students with new learning paradigms and better learning outcomes, since historically the country has been facing ongoing education crises in terms of providing quality education to all children. Theoretically, quality education defines learning as both process and product, and its outcomes go beyond rote memorization to include higher level of thinking, such as application, problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, and reflexive capacities. This theoretical position towards learning is contrary to underpinning the traditional approaches, which refers to an understanding of students as an empty vessel into which the teacher must put knowledge.

Given the background, the paper addresses the key questions:

1. Which innovative pedagogical strategies in Pakistani schools have been introduced that could prove to be the best fit for quality learning within/ outside school boundaries?
2. What are the new roles (and consequent capacity building requirements) for schools and educational institutes to ensure deep learning outcomes in the current scenario? (e.g. action oriented and responsible citizenship, creative and critical thinking etc.,)?
3. What new roles are teachers, students and parents be taking on to support quality learning at home, especially in relation to the current scenario? What challenges do they face?

The responses were gathered from parents, teachers and students of public and private school systems. These stakeholders were approached through personal contacts. Informal individual telephonic conversation and a few group talk was organized to gather the stakeholders' perspectives and views on their experiences about distance teaching.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical position underpinning in this paper is that unless a student goes through deep learning, any attempt, distance and/or face to face, will stay at the superficial level.

In fact, it could be viewed as a delivery attempt but not learning. With this the questions arise: what does learning look like in classrooms (virtual and/or face to face)? Are our students prepared for addressing future challenges? Can they analyse, reason, offer solutions and communicate effectively/ logically? Do they have the capacity to continue learning independently and/or collaboratively? According to the Pakistan Vision 2030, "Education is a key driver of economic growth because of its positive linkages with employability, entrepreneurship, empowerment of women and productivity – conditions that are all conducive to building a knowledge-based productive economy where our youth are better skilled, productive and scientifically trained to compete with the fast changing global trends". How are we going to move from what we have now? How are we going to change the education paradigms in our country?

The literature review suggested to engage students in deep learning processes in everyday context, with the ultimate intention of improving the quality and effectiveness of student learning outcomes (Entwistle, McCune, & Walker, 2001). Students' engagement in deep learning processes result in broader learning outcomes i.e. understanding and making sense of the concepts, thinking for themselves. Looking for patterns and principles, relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience. Examining argument cautiously and critically. This is contrary to the outcomes received when learning is viewed as receiving, and learners are mainly teacher and textbook dependent – learning starts and ends by formalized timetable, students mainly memorizing facts and treating course as unrelated bits of knowledge, and face difficulty in making sense of new ideas. This learning is then certified by teachers' and/or examiners' judgment on students' responses on a paper and pencil test. These evaluative judgments are open for misinterpretations of students' learning due to teachers' and assessors' limited practices in the assessment of learning.

Fink (2005) defines learning outcomes in terms of 'change in knowledge, skills and disposition' which are important for learners' life - for the author no learning can occur if there is no significant change. Defining change, the research refers to change in

- Students ability to understand and remember specific information and ideas. For example: what fraction is (and what is not); what democracy is (and is not)
- students' abilities to critical thinking, creative thinking, communication and problem solving skills
- Students ability to see and make connections between different things/ideas/subject and life
- Students' understanding about themselves and about others - appreciating how and why other act the way they do. And how can they interact with them effectively - this will enable them to care for themselves and for others.
- Students' learning about how learning takes place, and how to develop self-directed learning -reflective skills to understand how could they learn best.

In this theoretical stance, learning is not only the acquisition of information but a search for meaning and its personal significance to the learners. Also it is important for

students to learn how to use and integrate the subject knowledge with other realms of knowledge and understanding its personal and social implications and so forth.

With these theoretical perspectives, the next sessions analyse the information received from learners, teachers and parent's views about the distance teaching and its implications.

Data Collection Methods

The analysis done in this paper is situated in qualitative research paradigm, since it aimed to understand the key stakeholders' experiences and perspectives on distance teaching. These stakeholders involved students, teachers and parents from public and private sectors. Overall 20 participants from Karachi and Gilgit shared their views. Purposeful sampling approach was used to invite the participants in the discussion on the research focused. Data included online group and/or individual conversation with the stakeholders. They shared their experiences and concerns with regards to distance teaching in the current scenario. The next section offers thematic analysis of the stakeholders' perspectives.

Stakeholders' Perspectives on Learning: Opportunities and Challenges

Awareness & Comfort in Using Devices for Continuity of Learning

Our findings indicate that overall teachers appeared busy in mechanics of conducting distance teaching depending on the resources available. Mainly, teaching was organised in two ways: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous was viewed as an alternative version of virtual face to face – where both of, teachers and learners, participating at the same time. However, students mainly see them at the receiver end, where they would listen to the teachers' talk and/or explanations and would answer to teachers' questions if they were asked.

We found two versions of asynchronous. Some schools would share the student with recorded lectures and give tasks to students using online links to be completed in their own time. Some schools asked parents to come and collect the homework and syllabus. The teachers, initially unaware of using the technology for learning, eventually became skillful in their operations. Similar, responses were got from parents and teachers whose children, are affiliated with high fee private schools. The teachers and students from high fee private schools appear more comfortable with the use of technology as an educational device due to their frequent use of the technology and school based orientation training.

Delivery and Amount of Received Content

The teachers found it easy to deliver large amount of content online. Since the students were sitting in front of the devices, keeping them mute; and/or doing homework given,

the teachers found saving time and energy which required to address classroom management issues face to face. The student silence was regarded as less destructive during teaching.

Students were also happy for not going to schools with heavy bags. They felt relaxed about the flexible timings and to be on their own. They did not find any issue of missing peers and /or socialization due to two reasons:

- Urban setting students did have online interaction through playing video games.
- Rural setting the children had access to friends and colleagues of neighbours for socialization and involvement in outdoor games.

Limited Cognitive Presence

The students found themselves either listening to the teachers; and/or doing homework with parents' and/or private tutors support. Mainly the tasks required reading and copying text from the textbooks. For example, asking students to read the topic from the textbook given on page, and answering the questions. The responses required defining, labelling and drawing mainly.

In public sector schools and other low performing private sector schools, the homework assigned was mainly based on textbook exercises which were not taught in schools. The home task was designed as a mandatory alternative to classroom teaching practices. However, the students shared their reflections by quoting their discomfort over such practices. While talking to a group of students, it was brought into light that such learning practices put parents as well as students in great trouble, because, most of the students belonged to low income social backgrounds having no access to internet facilities. Their illiterate parents could not understand their challenges as well, thus such home tasks proved to be greater hindrance in facilitating learning at homes.

There were examples which indicate that in public schools, the tasks were designed by a centralized committee, teachers were responsible to deliver them to the parents/students. Some parents shared that most of the topics around which the tasks were designed were not covered by the teachers through recorded lectures. This could be an issue of students' dependent attitude.

Also no evidence of students' receiving feedback was gathered. Parents were not sure if teachers marked the submitted work. In few public sector schools, the home tasks submitted manually were although checked, but in the absence of a descriptive and timely feedback mechanism, the home tasks were either not examined or conventional practices of copy checking mechanism was followed by the teachers. While asking students about learning from the task given, they did not provide any explicit response in terms of the outcomes. The main response was 'ask my teacher'.

Perhaps the students are not habitual of learning from a distance since the cultural set-up at home engaged them mainly with social contact with others. From students' perspective, it was comfortable to stay at home. They also found it flexible to learn from distance, since they could easily switch off to another activity if get bored from listening to the teacher lectures. Online learning methodology increased students' passiveness in

the process, as well as the attitude. The students easily got engaged in any other activities if get bored, since they knew that they are out of the range of teachers' direct observation. Students were not found in any activity which could promote deep learning. From parents' perspective, in case of young children, they would mainly attend the class with their children since the distance learning kept them at the distance from teachers.

Time and Cost

The parents found online learning expensive in terms of time and money. A mixed group of respondents of a focus group discussion reveal that their children going to both public and private sector schools demand provision of mobile phones, internet devices and other resources related to them. They said that the homework given outlines many topics be searched from internet and provide responses. "I had to minimize so many expenses so that I could buy an expensive mobile set for my daughter. But I am not sure if she is using it purposefully or not because she seems always busy using it and upon asking she would mention her home task"; a parent having a lower income shared his concerns. This statement was endorsed by many of the parents taking part in discussion. This shows that the alternatives used for learning have multiple aspects that impact not only learning but students, their parents, their economic status and is challenging an overall social fabric. Organizing generators to address disconnectivity due to frequent and long hour load shedding was seen as an additional burden on the parents. Some parents shared that the schools did not deliver the online lessons/task if the fee was not paid in a timely manner.

Discussion

Overall, the learning remains very limited and students' perspectives on learning have been silent. Students were not found in any activity which could promote deep learning. Many of the schools although opted hybrid models of online learning but that could not cater to the essence of deep learning. The teachers were mainly unaware of the contemporary online teaching. Teachers and students from some private schools were able to integrate technology in their teaching and learning due to internet accessibility and at school training opportunities. On the other hand, due to lack of technological awareness and resources, public schools found it difficult to continue with teaching and learning through distance learning with the help of internet and other technology-based resources. These schools would mainly provide the children with homework tasks, syllabus and a schedule for submission of the tasks. The parents were expected to receive the homework tasks manually. However, overall, the existing virtual learning systems adapted by the schools is dominated by a transmission mode of teaching, a predominantly teacher-cantered and/or textbook focused transmission of knowledge which is conceived as a finished product for students who are expected to listen /read and complete the prescribed tasks. The distance learning whether, synchronous or asynchronous (through Moodle or manual homework) have further increased teacher-oriented and one-way teaching method with further minimizing opportunities of child-to-child interaction. Analysis of the stakeholders' con-

Table 1
An overview of learning during Pandemic

	Pre Pandemic /Earlier	During Pandemic/ Today
Mode of learning	Face to face within confined boundaries of a classroom Textbook or teacher's input bound + homework for reinforcement and practice	Students staying at home with no carrying of heavy bags Synchronous /virtual interactions Asynchronous /homework tasks working on their own time
Focus of Learning	Listening to the teacher's lectures; Reading from textbooks; solving problems with given formulas, answering teachers' questions (verbally and/or in writing)	Listening to the recorded and/or online lectures. Receiving the tasks, completing the tasks and submitting online or manually.
Teacher Role	Delivery of lesson/lecture	Deliverer
Student Role	Sorting out classroom management issues	Singular authority in teaching
Parent Role	Receivers of knowledge Limited to attend the TP meetings or collecting students' results (depending on schools' mechanisms)	Listeners, Followers Providing electronic resources & learning space at home in addition
Classroom Assessment	Ensuring their kids going to schools Bearing the cost, subject to level of schooling Low order thinking questions and paper pencil text (frequent and ongoing)	Collecting homework and syllabus (applicable to public and low fee private schools) Helping and/or providing help their kids in completion of homework No online paper and pencil tests
Amount of Content delivery	Marking the tests Less content due to students' disturbance in classrooms More time in dealing classroom management issues	Mainly homework No descriptive feedback on the homework. More content was delivered

versation also reveals that by and large distance teachers mainly deliver content from the textbooks rather than delivering the curriculum focusing on deep learning strategies.

The distance teaching mode appears to increase students' passiveness in the learning process, as well as their learning attitude because many of the students did not show interest in distance learning activities their respective schools offer. The students easily got engaged in any other activities if bored, since they knew that they are out of the range of teachers' direct observation. Parental constraints and contextual realities were not taken into account in the administration and timetabling of distance teaching mode. A quick jump to distance teaching showcase schools' efforts in continuity of learning is not enough and effective but also had negatively impacted students' experiences of learning.

The findings indicated a wide range of diversity in availability of distance teaching and learning. The analysis of conversation reveals that students and teachers of public schools are not digitally literate. Some private schools differ markedly from public and other low income private schools in their efforts to introduce and integrate distance teaching. Digitally literate teachers were able to benefit from the existing and emerging technological resources in terms of their uses, they found it difficult to effectively use various methods and techniques for promoting child centered learning. However, they lack pedagogical skills in designing online instructions and activities aimed at combining deeper level learning of subject matter knowledge (conceptual understanding) and student cognitive development such as critical and analytical thinking. Moreover, the digital divide may further add socioeconomic gaps in the education system.

Our findings are generally in line with the discourse in the literature on teaching and learning at schools at pre-pandemic time in Pakistan. The main challenge to achieve reform in classroom teaching has been to build the capacity of teachers who could make significant contribution to the re-conceptualization and improvement of the quality teaching, learning and assessment in classrooms. Historically, various initiatives, had been taken to help schools to transform the deep leaning from surface learning. However, no reform in classroom practices has been observed and reported. The learning opportunities have been more limited. Teaching remains a delivery task which has further increased passiveness of learning.

A review of the national curriculum and policy indicate deep learning approach which emphasizes on the process of construction of knowledge through investigation, argumentation and problem solving. Students are active learners rather than passive recipients. Together, this the process of students' learning can only succeed when teachers possess subject content knowledge, knowledge of pedagogical skills; and possess competency in using these skills while engaging students in learning. It is expected that teaching for concept building could create spaces for creative thinking, problem-solving, and innovative learning for learners ([National Educational Policy, 2009](#)). Since the teachers' own experiences are related to traditional teaching they could not plan distance teaching differently from conventional teaching. Concluding, it is important to consider that what students do is more important than what the teachers do, and if, students do not find themselves engaged in distance learning then there is a concern of teachers' wasting their student earning time and motivation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, distance teaching, in Pakistan, is not based on pedagogical shift /insights; the current scenario indicates integration of some mechanics to continue students with learning from distance. Pandemic situation could have been seen as an opportunity to transform learning spaces and outcomes. It was unfortunately used in limited way – due to not well thought out learning principles /theories and engagement the technology was used for delivery of knowledge. Missing cognitive presence has increased student's disengagement with learning processes. Perhaps there was a need to reinvent learning because unless a student goes through deep learning, any attempt, distance and/or face to face, will stay at the superficial level. In fact, it could be viewed as a delivery attempt to learning but not learning.

There was no evidence if the students are prepared for addressing future challenges. The distance teaching mechanics do not appear to engage students in, reasoning, offering solutions and communicating effectively/ logically independently and/or collaboratively. The stakeholders, specially parents and students appeared unaware and experienced of understanding and making sense of the concepts, thinking for themselves, looking for patterns and principles, relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience and examining argument cautiously and critically. This is contrary to the outcomes received from conventional approach to teaching; when learning is viewed as receiving, and learners are mainly teacher and textbook dependent – learning starts and ends by formalized timetable, students mainly memorizing facts and treating course as unrelated bits of knowledge, and face difficulty in making sense of new ideas.

The discussion indicates that the most important challenge for education givers is to prepare their teachers through rigorous training programmes so that they can shun the conventional methods of teaching and switch to more interactive distance teaching strategies like games, project work and other similar approaches. Learning is not delivery – it requires teachers and student's intellectual engagement and should be evident in terms of learning outcomes as discussed earlier. Holistic teacher education programmes on what learning is and how children learn the best face to face or from distance is the great need of today and tomorrow. To raise students learning motivation teachers need to design video games along with the synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching to engage student in meaningful learning and need to.

Teachers require ongoing teacher education with availability of school-based support to gain confidence and with motivation in understanding and usability of better teaching, learning and assessment practices in their physical and/or distance classrooms. Additionally, school systems, individually and/or collaboratively should establish centralized monitoring systems to ensure effectiveness of distance and/or face to face learning to strengthen quality of teachers' practices

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