

COVID-19: Introducing a strange transition in our education system

In a matter of weeks, coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed how students are being educated around the world. The education sector of Bangladesh is also experiencing a strange transition. Those changes give us a glimpse at how education could change for the better – and the worse – in the long term.

With the coronavirus spreading rapidly across the globe, countries have taken swift and decisive actions to mitigate the development of a full-blown pandemic. In the past few months, there have been multiple announcements suspending attendance at schools and universities. According to UNICEF, around 1.6 billion children are unable to attend school in person due to COVID-19 and to maintain social distancing.

Never before have so many children been out of school at the same time in any scenario. Be it Bangladesh or any other affected country. The risk-control decisions have led millions of students into temporary 'home-schooling' or 'online-learning' situations, especially in some of the most heavily impacted countries. These changes have certainly caused a degree of inconvenience, but they have also prompted new examples of educational innovation.

Although it is too early to judge how reactions to COVID-19 will affect education systems, some signs suggest that it could have a lasting impact on the trajectory of learning innovation and digitisation.

COVID-19 has become a catalyst for educational institutions worldwide to search for innovative solutions in a relatively short period. To help to decrease the spread of the virus and to flatten the curve, schools around the world, including Bangladesh, have adopted online learning, on an untested and unprecedented scale.

Students' assessments have also moved online, with a lot of trial and error, while

many assessments are being replaced with other approaches. For example, many schools in Bangladesh are making assessments based on students, previous test scores, assignments scores, and other procedures. If the pandemic continues for a long time, then the schools will adopt different innovative approaches for student assessments.

Besides the challenges of student assessments, there are several other challenges that schools, parents, and students of Bangladesh might have been facing due to online learning transition. The most significant loss that learning and development professionals experience with this abrupt stop of face-to-face learning delivery is the positive impact that a classroom environment can have. Particularly in terms of fostering connection and collaboration between learners is a valid concern. In-person social interaction has a richness that might feel hard to replicate in the digital world – but it is not impossible.

The solution is to incorporate the positive lessons from face-to-face into our digital strategy and to create online, active blended learning. A combination of both interactive classes and pre-recorded classes can be an effective strategy to continue the engagement of the students and to replicate face-to-face lessons into the digital world. Schools around the globe, including Bangladesh, are trying to incorporate these effective strategies through Google Classroom and Google Meet. The adaptation of interactive classes and pre-recorded classes varies from Grade to Grade. Some Grades are using both of these approaches together, while others are only using one.

Navigating through Google Classroom and Google Meet will not be a problem for secondary or advanced students. However, it will be an issue for younger students, and

that is where the next challenge of online learning arises. Parents need to support the children to navigate the technology. For many parents, the sudden leap into online learning brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic may be an additional challenge presented during an already stressful time.

Moreover, not all parents are tech-savvy, so they first need to learn different ways to navigate the technology themselves before helping their children. Thankfully, most schools around Bangladesh are providing guidelines to parents, and teachers are helping the parents to navigate the websites properly.

On top of it, language can also work as a barrier, especially in Bangladesh. Schools around the country cater to diverse groups of students and parents. As English is not the first language and most of the platforms that are being used to conduct classes are in English, the language barrier can work as a challenge, especially for the parents who are not well versed in English. Regarding this, the schools and the teachers are trying their best to offer simple guidelines and helping the parents and the students to navigate the platforms seamlessly.

Apart from these, there is more to schools than attending various lessons. There are extra-curricular activities, sports, games, art and craft, fun, and, most importantly, interacting with friends and peers. Schools like DPS STS School Dhaka are encouraging extra-curricular activities through online learning. Sports coaches and teachers from dance, art, and music classes are uploading videos for the students. The students can practice playing instruments, singing, painting, art and craft, and various sports from their homes.

On top of it, schools are also sending crossword puzzles and fun challenges to help keep up the continuous growth in critical thinking of the students. Students are encouraged to upload videos of their

activities, such as craft. These approaches have the power to motivate the children to continue learning various things and not being lazy during the pandemic. Moreover, these activities will keep the children's minds diverted to more productive things than the crisis that is going around them.

Furthermore, the teachers are always conducting video conferencing with each other and trying to find various ways to conduct classes in innovative ways. All Grade teachers are trying to come up with new ideas to make the lessons enjoyable, like showing children the video of Sesame Street regarding COVID-19. Young children do not understand the concept of COVID-19 and the current situation.

There are still many schools in Bangladesh that have not adapted to distance learning due to a lack of penetration in the technology sector. However, it is high time for every school around the country to adjust to distance learning as no one knows when the pandemic will end. Schools that have already adapted to distancing learning have realised the advantages of this approach. And maybe once the pandemic ends, they will continue to use this approach but only as an additional tool – especially for children who will be unable to attend the school due to sickness or other reasons.

The virus caught everyone unprepared. It is a difficult time, and educators across the world are experiencing new possibilities to do things differently and with greater flexibility resulting in potential benefits in the accessibility to education for students. Coronavirus is changing everything. It is creating a new world. A world that we don't know of yet, but people, along with the educational system, must be resilient to adapt to new changes that the pandemic will bring.

By Madhu Wal

