Article

Home Learning in Times of COVID: Experiences of Parents

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Abstract

The widespread prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic has affected academia and parents alike. Due to the sudden closure of schools, students are missing social interaction which is vital for better learning and grooming while most schools have started online classes. This has become a tough routine for the parents working online at home since they have to ensure their children's education. The study

presented was designed to explore the experiences of home learning in times of COVID-19. A descriptive qualitative study was planned to explore the experiences of parents about home learning and management during COVID-19 to get an insight into real-life experiences. Purposive sampling technique was used for data collection. Data were collected from 19 parents falling in the inclusion criteria. Considering the lockdown problem, the data were collected via Google docs form with open-ended questions related to COVID-19 and home learning. Three major themes emerged after the data analysis: impact of COVID on children learning; support given by schools; and strategies used by caregivers at home to support learning. It was analyzed that the entire nation and academicians around the world have come forward to support learning at home offering a wide range of free online avenues to support parents to facilitate home-learning. Furthermore, parents too have adapted quickly to address the learning gap that have emerged in their children's learning in these challenging times. Measures should be adopted to provide essential learning skills to children at home. Centralized data dashboards and educational technology may be used to keep the students, parents and schools updated.

Introduction

The Novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has already infected almost 3 million people in 148 countries has resulted in more than two hundred thousand deaths worldwide and has wrecked chaos around the globe. The crisis has already transformed into an economic and labor market shock. We are only beginning to understand the economic impacts of COVID-19, but many other issues have emerged and need to be urgently addressed, like the closure of schools and its impact on learning and the burden of education on students, parents and teachers.

Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an endeavor to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are hubs of social activity and human interaction. When schools close, many children and youth miss out on social contact that is essential to learning and development (Union, 2020). This has an immediate as well a long-lasting

effect, particularly for the more vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Online communication apps (WhatsApp, radio, television, cell phones, computer and network hardware, satellite systems, as well as various services available with them such as video conferencing and distance learning) are being used to ensure communication between teachers and students as well as among students in many countries. Interactive online classes are also providing opportunities for social interaction and facilitating the continuity of education for all via remote learning.

As much as these initiatives are found to be appropriate to address the need of the time, it has also given a tough routine to parents who are working from home and simultaneously taking the responsibility that their children's learning process continues seamlessly during the times of COVID-19. Hence, the purpose of this small scale research study was to explore the experiences of home learning in times of COVID-19 from parents' experiences.

Literature Review

From the time of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19), people have been impacted in one way or the other. Countrywide lockdowns have strongly impacted the lives of people of all occupations and all ages. The flare-up has also affected the education system across the world and has altered the lives of 1,576,021,818 learners in 188 countries (UNESCO, 2020). The lockdowns have put an unprecedented challenge on the governments to ensure that there should be continuity of learning (Chang & Yano, 2020). Several countries have adopted different measures to deal with the educational crisis.

To combat the problems of the outbreak such as that of the education system, the educational ministries and other stakeholders have taken a stand at national levels. Countries like Egypt, France, Italy, United States and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are pursuing distance education modalities via internet and online platforms for continuous education. China, Korea, Mexico, Rwanda, Iran, Peru and Thailand are using massive open online course (MOOC) styled lessons. The lessons are either delivered through apps, television or other media. Teachers have access to training through these avenues as well (Chang & Yano, 2020). In order to ensure children's learning continues, a collaboration between the telecom industry, school networks at different levels and the education ministry is needed (UNESCO, 2020). Governments have been launching (e.g. Saudi Arabia and UAE) awareness

campaigns on distance learning for parents, teachers, administrators and students (Chang & Yano, 2020).

Equality and inclusivity are also being maintained in the education level of different countries. Governments of countries like China and South Korea are providing devices and printed assignments to those who do not have access to technology. Meal plans are also being catered to by providing takeaways to students (Chang & Yano, 2020; Giannini & Lewis, 2020). Children who cannot be taken care of at home are being taken care of in schools in countries like France and Japan (Giannini & Lewis, 2020).

When parents and children collaborate in learning activities, bonding between parents and children increases as they are able to spend much more time together. Such instances allow parents to become a source of comfort in easing pain and worry and engage in conversations with their children to help them in alleviating their anxiety. It has been recommended that parents should be taught interventions on how to provide emotional support to children at times of uncertainty (Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, & Jiang, 2020). Online schooling system with parental support guidelines could help in improving the bond between children and their parents.

In Pakistan not much has been done on the national front to manage the educational crisis during the pandemic. Overall Pakistan has 8,636,383 students enrolled in pre-primary institutes, whereas students enrolled in primary and secondary schools are 22,931,305 and 13,357,618 respectively (UNESCO, COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response, 2020). The private educational system across Pakistan has opted for giving children homework so that they may adhere to the curriculum that was planned for the year; however, they later announced summer vacations when the situation provoked unpredictability (Hasan, 2020). In spite of restricted access to internet, online classes are being held at the university level (Ali, 2020). Schools and colleges have been asked to promote children to the next grade (Saeed, 2020) and low-cost schools are at the brink of closure due to the crisis (Yousafzai, 2020). As such, uncertain times have brought in confusion and poor access to adequate education in Pakistan.

The implementation of an education system at the national level in response of coronavirus outbreak and schools being closed can be supplemented with a

curriculum that involves prental guidance and COVID-19 related awareness. This would help in improving the education systems at large and reassure learning attainment in home settings. Such programs can also yield benefits in students autonomous learning development to get a sense of responsibility towards self growth and development. Very recently, the government has launched official tele-education via its national television broadcasting. However, the impact of the tele-education and the quality of curriculum delivery is yet to be researched. Until recently and even at current times, most parents are found to be facilitating learning at home and research around it is limited, especially in the context of COVID-19. Hence, this research will share personal experiences of parents managing learning at home during the times of COVID-19.

Methodology

The current study is aimed at exploring experiences of parents regarding home learning and management during the times of COVID 19. Qualitative research studies allow the researchers to explore the phenomenon from an individual's personal experiences in varying situations and circumstances. The descriptive qualitative design was used to administer this study so that relevant responses could be sought to get insights into parents' real-life experiences amidst COVID 19.

Participants

Purposive sampling was the most suitable choice for the selection of the participants, specifically, in times of COVID whereby people are more under the global trauma of internalized fear and anxiety. Also, in qualitative research, mostly the sample is purposeful to the need of the research and the phenomenon under study as it allows the researchers to set underlying assumptions related to the context where participants are based and select research samples based on inclusion criteria. For this research study, a set of 35 parents from urban areas of Pakistan having command over the English language, spending at least 3 hours formally teaching their children, having access to the internet and no COVID or related morbidities in the house were chosen to be a part of this study. Out of these only 19 parents opted for the study.

Instrumentation

The data collection instrumentation consisted of two sections: demographics

and a set of three open-ended questions related to COVID and home learning. Interview option was not available as most parents opted to receive the form online and preferred to fill it via Google Docs forms. The option of form filling was chosen by the parents for several reasons out of which technology bandwidth and noise at home were the most commonly stated ones, as they mentioned most of the family members were at home and it would be hard to focus on a telephone interview. Considering the COVID lockdown, the researchers opted for the e-mail of link of the word form to all the participating parents.

Data Analysis

Manual thematic analysis of the data was done. Question wise documents were prepared and query was run to explore the word frequency for each of the questions. Open coding from the acquired data was done at an initial stage and themes and sub-themes were formed. The codes, themes and sub-themes were verified by all researchers to confirm coherence in interpretation.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were ensured throughout the study. The participants were given an informed consent message via the social media platform and were asked to volunteer for the study understanding all the rights of withdrawal and refusal. There was no data sought which could exhibit participants' direct identity like names, telephone numbers, address, area or national identification number.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the current data set: Impact of COVID on children's learning; the support given by the schools; and strategies used by caregivers at home to support learning. Table 1 highlights the demographic details of the participants.

Table 1
Demographics

Variable	Responses	F
Age Range	above 40	2
	35-40	8
	30-35	6
	25-30	3
Number of Children	5 and above	
	3 to 4	1
	2 to 3	3
	1 to 2	15
Parenting Status	Single	4
	Joint	15

Theme 1: Impact of COVID on Children's Learning

This theme entails three sub-themes: (a) impact on daily routine; (b) difficulty in shifting to the online mode of education: and (c) impact on social development.

Impact on the Daily Routine

It was revealed that parents found sudden closure of the schools extremely disturbing and they were concerned about their children's routine. Parents believed that through schools, a formally structured routine is followed on most days of the week and this helps children to understand the importance of time, scheduling and doing assignments on a given timeline. All these elements of systematic routine help them shape their future work habits. According to a few parents, school plays a significant role in disciplining children. To this one of the parents mentioned:

> *"COVID 19 has influenced my children's learning in two ways; formal schooling and socialization. Like, preparing for school and activities on time, listening to others especially teachers, maintaining different work folios, playing with friends, following a disciplined routine and so on. All these aspects are important for a child to become a responsible, task-oriented, disciplined and socially acceptable."*

On the other hand, parents also expressed that they feel children are now more responsive to their health and hygiene practices and religiously follow hygiene routines without reinforcement. However, a scheduled learning routine is still a major gap in times of COVID according to a few parents. Many felt that children were deprived of their access to schools, friends, exams and sports due to countrywide closure and lockdown.

Difficulties in Shifting to Online Learning

Parents were concerned that a major change their kids have had to see is an abrupt transition from physical classes to online classes, something that a vast majority of children in Pakistan are not used to. The discipline that kids learn while getting ready for school, engaging in various activities, using different methods to learn their subjects in classes is difficult to maintain when education has become remote. The seriousness that the physical presence of a teacher can instill in their pupils is seemingly not possible with online learning. Another factor that hampered their learning was highlighted by the parents in the following words:

"Distance learning is problematic when teachers are themselves not trained for it."

"Teaching is moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale. Student assessments are also moving online, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone."

It was evedint that not only the children found this new way of learning unusual, but the teachers as well who were faced with an unprecedented need to switch to their computers from textbooks and blackboards. For decades our education system has been based on a very particular pattern and a drastic change like this has shown how unequipped the system is in other modalities of learning. This ultimately means that our children's learning is being compromised and their parents are rightfully concerned. The loss of physical classes also means that there is no longer any peer-learning opportunity.

Impact on Social Development

A large number of parents were worried that in the wake of the pandemic, the social development of their children was affected at a deep level. Especially in the case of younger children, loss of interaction with peers and their normal environment had influenced the development of their social and emotional skills. Access to parks, libraries and other public places was no longer available and this could negatively affect their confidence level. Schools play a huge role in disciplining and polishing social skills; remote learning has taken away that opportunity from children and parents were now looking for other ways to help develop these skills.

"Going to school is not only about subject learning, but also social relationship and peer to peer interaction along with developing social skills. That's why it is important to stay connected with the schools. This is the time to develop social-emotional skills. The role of parents and family, which has always been extremely important, is critical in that task."

Parents also identified that physical interactions like shaking hands, hugging, celebrating in parties, eating and praying together are important for tolerance and harmony, and hence play a key role in their kids' social development. At the same time, they also realized that this could be turned into an opportunity to increase family bonding and engage in various activities together.

Theme 2: Support Provided by Schools

This theme entails three subthemes: (a) he role of online classes; (b) the responsibility of schools in spreading COVID-19 awareness; and (c) challenges faced in the execution of remote learning.

The Role of Online Classes

Parents discussed how schools had been trying to play an active role in their children's lives post lockdown. The most common practice had been the initiation of online classes to help maintain a healthy learning schedule for the children. Applications like Zoom and Google Classroom have come in handy and most children are found listening and taking notes at least a couple of hours during weekdays. Announcements and more passive interaction are being maintained via

social media platforms of Facebook and WhatsApp. Off-screen work is also being given to students as one of the parents commented:

"Teachers upload content and due dates are given to ensure students are on task. Repeated messages come from the schools to inform us about what to expect and what to do."

It is evident that some schools had taken appropriate measures in this time of crisis to ensure that education is not compromised and children can retain at least some part of their routine lives even staying at home. Preparing electronic worksheets, sending daily reminders and involving parents in the process are achievable and potentially effective ways to maintain the flow of studies. Parents also mention how teachers keep reinforcing the importance of playing games and staying physically active indoors.

Responsibility of Schools in Spreading COVID-19 Awareness

Parents also pointed out that in addition to teaching their relevant subjects through online classes and social media platforms, teachers are also focusing on awareness regarding the pandemic. They teach students about the various preventive measures and emphasize on why they are important, hence making parents' job of keeping the children indoors much easier. Some suggestions were also given, especially pertaining to the mental health of children and addressing the stigma attached to the virus. It is without a doubt that children are faced with an unprecedented situation, where their normal lives have been massively disrupted. Given their age group, it could be harder for them to accept facts and the current uncertainty we are grappling with. Schools can facilitate this process and provide mental health support.

Challenges Faced in Executing Remote Learning

It is understandable that this wave of innovations in learning is not always convenient, especially given the fact that the transition has been abrupt rather than gradual. Hence, parents are concerned about the challenges that remote learning has brought for them and their children. Online schooling requires the availability of computers and internet at exact hours as needed. Any technical issues related to the requirements could result in the child missing out on learning. This is especially

challenging when there is more than one school going child in a family due to the possibility of classes clashing, as one of the parents remarked:

> *"Classes are conducted on specific timings, so we have to be available with the internet at any cost, it's difficult when we have more than 2 kids at home going in the same school having classes at the same time."*

Parents also mentioned how they have had to take care of homework more than ever, including explaining worksheets and other tasks. On-screen, students sometimes shy away from asking questions or internet lag disallows asking questions, leading to all queries being diverted at parents, some of whom have their own work to complete from home.

Theme 3: Strategies used by Caregivers at Home to Support Learning

This theme entails the following sub-themes: (a) maintaining a strict schedule; (b) engaging in creative activities; and (c) difficulties faced in keeping children busy.

Maintaining a Strict Schedule

Parents around the world are rightfully concerned about how their children's routines are disrupted extensively. To combat this issue, they have designed homemade time-tables according to which children should have something to do at most times and should have a normal sleep-wake cycle. Implementing a schedule helps children feel less restless and more productive. It can also prevent unnecessary internet and computer time. One of the parents wants to begin and end her child's day just like normal school days and commented:

> *"A proper timetable is set where my child wakes up at 8:00 am as he has Zoom classes. Till 2:00 pm he has to complete his given task of each subject, during that we both sit together to give my support in completing the school task. I also work from home so I am busy with him. After lunch and nap in the evening, we watch movies or cartoon sometimes and at night some board games with the whole family."*

Engaging in Different Creative Activities

Parents agree that the lockdown has brought with it seemingly limitless time and this could be a unique opportunity to try out new things and ideas. They believe in getting creative with the kids, which positively affects both the parties and makes the days look fruitful. From arts and crafts to cooking, from dancing to singing, parents and their children are open to all ideas. Some of them have also enrolled the kids in online courses so that by the end of this period the children will have acquired some soft-skills and structured knowledge too. A respondent explained:

> *"(We) take help from Pinterest, (play) indoor scrabble game for improving vocabulary and different activity books for math and science. (Engage in) reading and cooking activities at home."*

One parent had recommendations for other parents too:

> *"Paragraph Punch guides students through the writing process. They can practice spelling words with Spelling City. Sumdog offers math and spelling practice in an individualized and engaging way. OT Toolbox offers developmental activities for kids. Delish hosts cooking classes for kids."*

Parents also discussed organizing religion classes, video calling relatives from across the globe, playing crosswords and reading online stories.

Difficulties Faced in Keeping Children Busy

Although parents are trying to the best of their abilities to keep their children engaged in meaningful activities, there are some challenges that they recognize as well. A number of children are considering this time as a vacation from school, hence they want nothing to do with a normal school-like routine. Instead, they want to sleep and wake up according to their own wish and spend the rest of the time playing video games and watching cartoon/movies. This is a potential threat to their social, educational as well as physical development. Their lifestyle is becoming sedentary with limited outdoor access and they are not used to physical activities inside their house, probably because of the lack of space.

As one parent remarked:

> *"Kids are not very serious. Rather they are wasting their time playing games. Sleeping and waking up late is a habit (now). There aren't many (physical) games at home and the kids have also started eating more."*

Another parent also commented:

> *"As a working parent, it is very difficult to manage nowadays. We assign daily 1 to 1.5 hours to studying at home with worksheets, workbooks, videos, and reading apps, but the school sessions are difficult to manage as we have a grandmother to take care of the kids at home and she is not so technology-oriented."*

It is especially challenging if the parents are working from home or offices, and have their own schedules to follow. Keeping their children in check all the time, now that house help is not available has become cumbersome and parents end up allowing the children to do things their way.

Discussion

It is imperative to note that in times of a pandemic and global trauma, specifically of a novel kind, it is hard to explore relevant literature to suit specific inquiry. In addition to it, the participants of this study were parents from urban areas of Pakistan who are already vulnerable to the consequences of global lockdown and school closures and are learning to adapt to the new routine of work from home and learning from home. The findings highlighted above are true reflections of their lived experiences.

The findings revealed that the major concern of the parents was related to children facing the problems due to sudden school closure and a complete lockdown on social gatherings. Many newspaper opinions and notifications also talked about the loss of learning and its impact on students (CDC, 2020; Jinshan, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). There are various reasons and factors for it. Children have been cocooned in homes due to the possible threat of contracting the virus, while

research and evidence so far suggest that children are seemingly not at a high risk of severe infections and they could be asymptomatic and could be carriers of the disease to adults and the elderly. Although schools had to go under government-mandated lockdowns to ensure social distancing and collective good of the nation, school closures present a possible threat of stress and anxiety among children. Schools are thriving places for children to interact with their peers and adults in various indoor and outdoor learning environments. More importantly, school days ensure a healthy routine for children, which plays a critical role in their robst growth and development. The timing of the extended lockdown also is critical. The academic term comes to an end towards April and May, thus according to the academic calendar of most public and private schools, whether they offer matriculation or O & A Level programs of education, the months of February and March are focused towards syllabus completion and assessments. Moreover, the cancellation of board examinations worldwide and in Pakistan has also impacted students' preparation. Just about every academic activity came to a sudden standstill, resulting in a negative impact in children's routines, mindset and future (Mitsuru & Okutsu, 2020; Razzaque, 2020; UNESCO 2020).

To address these challenges, schools have played a phenomenal role in flipping the conventional model of teaching and learning. While they have provided induction and paraphernalia for teachers to conduct online learning, they have also persevered in inducting parents and students to use the online apps (Razzaque, 2020; RNZ, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). However, things have not been as easy as they may seem. Many teachers had to speedily overcome camera consciousness and be able to deliver 'live' classes. Special content had to be created in the form of audio notes, PowerPoint presentations, use of digital whiteboards and online learning tools. Moreover, conventional methods of communicating with parents include circulars and notes in diaries. Few schools have short messaging service and WhatsApp or email communication channels with parents. While those few schools who seem to have utilized technology as best as possible with seamless communication to parents via videos, graphics, online guides and support, it was a first time and a unique challenge for many schools. They may have to evaluate how effective their outbound communication has been and whether parents and students are able to get the help they are intending to give in the first place.

Parents on the other hand, have had to overcome the challenges of being

locked-down as well. Following the closure of schools, offices and public places were also locked-down (Dai & Lin, 2020; Jinshan, 2020; UNESCO 2020; Xia, 2020; Xie & Young, 2020). While most parents have been helpless in how to keep their children engaged, many have tried to befriend technology and grapple with online learning. Those already familiar with technology and online tools were far more effective in creating a routine of learning at home with their children, including activities and home assignments given by the schools, and using more online resources for reading and home-based activities. Many mothers have been using Facebook groups to interact with the community on how to keep their children engaged with pot painting, indoor gardening, simple games, worksheets and activities. Quite a few parents have been able to use free services that have become available for pleasure reading, including audiobooks, e-books and flipbooks.

All things considered, the entire nation and academicians around the world have come forward to support learning at home, offering a wide range of free online avenues to support parents and children. Moreover, parents too have adapted quickly to address the learning gap that has emerged in their children's academic lives in these challenging times.

Conclusion and Recommendations

These are uncertain times for humanity in general and for the young developing minds in particular. To mitigate the physical and mental health consequences, the government, Non- Government Organizations (NGOs), academia and parents must provide a structure by utilizing regular routines, communication and developing new partnerships. The literature is still evolving, but some lessons can be learnt from the previous outbreaks (Decosimo, 2019) and countries who were initially affected (Wang, 2020).

Home learning has emerged as a substitute to the conventional schooling methods, which should be made effective to provide essential learning skills to children at home using the limited available resources. Online resources which are adapted to our curriculum's expectations can be implemented at home. The curricula should incorporate cautiously curated online courses which include physical and psychosocial components other than the academic goals (Mason, 2018). The limitations remain like how parents with different educational backgrounds will follow through the instructions; therefore, online schooling to

support home learning can be a go-to strategy where teachers deliver education online. Centralized data dashboards, an adaptive interactive educational technology can be used to measure, monitor, organize and analyze data to keep the students, teachers and schools on target (Papamitsiou, 2014). Opportunities for enhancing teachers' quality and lifelong professional development should be encouraged to be at the forefront of this transformative process.

For academia, this comes as an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of different educational approaches and develop their own hybrid model of teaching and learning suited to specific educational needs. Input from families should be sought to create a learning environment that benefits everyone.

The above-mentioned strategies will cause disruptive innovations in the education delivery system in the long term, which will further require feasibility testing, quality control and regulation. Thus, the government should establish regulating bodies to keep a check. Similarly, adjustments to the current educational budget should be made to incorporate such educational reforms in the ime of emergency.

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