

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has shuttered schools across the world, upending traditional approaches to education. The sudden shift to remote teaching and added caretaking responsibilities at home have created a uniquely stressful and demanding context for teachers' work. Major concerns exist about teachers' wellbeing during the pandemic and their ability to successfully deliver instruction remotely. Teachers have also expressed apprehension about their willingness to return to the classroom when schools are able to reopen. Even more troubling are projections of substantial student learning loss and the likelihood that differential access to technology and learning supports at home are exacerbating longstanding achievement gaps along racial and socio-economic lines.

The present paper outlines the substantial challenges created by the sudden move to remote teaching, the difficulties encountered by teachers in their work and the limited degree to which students can engage in learning. We have also tried to discover the supportive working conditions which have been far more successful at helping teachers maintain a sense of success during the pandemic.

Keywords: *remote teaching, education, classroom instruction, educational challenges, learning environment, future trends.*

JEL Classification: *I21, I29.*

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. This virus, also known as COVID-19, has dramatically changed the lives of people around the globe, touching all aspects of life, from health care to education and economy. In the field of education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact.

Despite the overwhelming consequences of the pandemic, this global crisis has also been an extraordinary time for learning. We are learning how adaptable and resilient educational systems, policy makers, teachers, students and families can be. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has shuttered schools across the world, it led to a decrease in using traditional approaches to education. The sudden shift to remote teaching and added caretaking responsibilities at home have created a uniquely stressful and demanding context for teachers' work. Major concerns exist about teachers' wellbeing during the pandemic and their ability to successfully deliver instruction remotely. Teachers have also expressed apprehension about their willingness to return to the classroom when schools are able to reopen. Even more troubling are projections of substantial student learning loss and the likelihood that differential access to technology and learning supports at home are exacerbating longstanding achievement gaps along racial and socio-economic lines.

The present paper outlines the substantial challenges created by the sudden move to remote teaching, the difficulties encountered by teachers in their work and the limited degree to which students can engage in learning. We have also tried to discover the supportive working conditions which have been far more successful at helping teachers maintain a sense of success during the pandemic. In the sphere of education, many of the measures that the countries have adopted in response to the crisis are related to the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels, which has given rise to three main areas of action: the deployment of distance learning modalities through a variety of formats and platforms (with or without the use of technology); the support and mobilization of education personnel and communities; and concern for the health and overall well-being of students. In this context, the main

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challenges were focused on the perceived effectiveness of remote learning solutions, forthcoming and on teachers and how they had to quickly reimagine human connections and interactions to facilitate learning. The role of teachers is rapidly evolving becoming in many ways more difficult than when learning took place only in person.

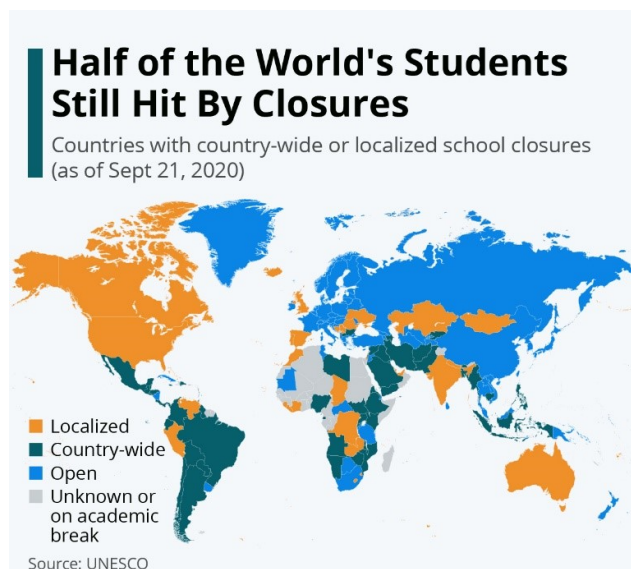
While countries are at different points in their COVID-19 infection rates, worldwide there are currently more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries affected by school closures due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, there were two crucial factors that have shifted due to the pandemic. First, pedagogical adaptations have proven to be pivotal as the traditional lecturing in-person models do not translate to a remote learning environment. No matter the type of channel used (radio, TV, mobile, online platforms, etc.) teachers need to adapt their practices and be creative to keep students engaged as every household has become a classroom - more often than not - without an environment that supports learning. Some countries are supporting teachers with this.

Secondly, the pandemic has recalibrated the way teachers divide their time between teaching, engaging with students, and administrative tasks. A large percentage of teachers did not consider being prepared to teach remotely, they were anxious and felt tired, and less than only a small percentage were happy or satisfied. The pandemic has highlighted the need for flexibility and more time for student-teacher interactions. In some countries, teachers were given autonomy to adjust the curriculum, lesson plans, and their time allocation which spread the teachers' feelings of pessimism and self-doubt.

Almost 90% of countries that responded to the survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19 conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2020) supported teachers by sharing guidelines stressing the importance of: providing feedback to students, maintaining constant communication with caregivers, and reporting to local education units to keep track of learning. As teachers started to implement these guidelines and recommendations, they found themselves balancing educating and providing feedback to students remotely, filling administrative reports, and taking care of their families. Some governments recognized early-on that their well-intentioned teacher support systems ended up generating burnout. Some educational systems decided to reduce teacher's administrative workload or encouraged teacher-student interaction during designated time after each class, avoiding a situation in which students contacted teachers through WhatsApp or text message throughout the day.

A high number of more than 800 million learners weren't able to attend class (as of mid-September) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO, that figure represents 48.6 percent of all learners worldwide - almost half of all students in the world. At the height of the pandemic in early April, 1.6 billion students - over 90 percent in the world, did not attend in-person classes. At that point, there were national school closures in 138 countries which later fell to 52.

Beyond providing guidelines and tools, some governments have leveraged existing professional development programs that worked before the pandemic. Thousands of primary



school teachers were trained to effectively use digital technologies in the classroom; during the pandemic, this in-service teacher training program transitioned from in-person to remote training. Similarly, other countries took an existing coaching program online to provide remote pedagogical support and strengthened their teacher training program. A large percentage of teachers were satisfied with the remote training received during the pandemic, but others expressed the need for further training.

Faced with the pandemic, countries have combined high-tech and low-tech approaches **to help teachers better support student learning**. Education leaders also designed a strategy that combines SMS, printed handouts, and continuous teacher feedback, taking advantage of the high mobile phone penetration in the country. The approach goes beyond providing low-tech materials: it gives information on how to access learning programs, ensures students access paper-based learning materials, and includes home visits to monitor distance learning activities. Teachers are also expected to provide weekly paper-based resources to students and meet them weekly to provide their marked worksheets and issue new ones for the week ahead.

Technology has also enhanced **government-teacher support**, adapting existing coaching programs to be delivered remotely, creating spaces for peer support programs or establishing EdTech hotlines for teachers (an educational technology information line to solve any technological question teachers might have).

Technology interventions should **enhance teacher engagement with students**, through improved access to content, data and networks, helping teachers better support student learning, as laid out in the World Bank's Platform for Successful Teachers, where effective use of technology is one of the key principles to ensure cadres of effective teachers.

In order to build back stronger education systems, countries will need to apply **those teaching initiatives that have proved to be effective** during the remote learning phase and integrate them into the regular education system. It is critical to empower teachers, investing in the necessary skills development and capacity building to exploit the full potential of remote and blended learning.

Equally important is to free teachers' time from administrative tasks, focus on what is pedagogically effective, and provide socio-emotional support for teachers. The pandemic and the extended school closures have changed the role of teachers and most of them were not prepared for such change; a comprehensive strategy is required for socio-emotional monitoring and psychosocial support to ensure teacher wellbeing and avoid burnout.

Conclusions

With a sudden move to remote and online teaching due to COVID-19 pandemic, teaching has become more challenging for both students and teachers with the emergence of new technological challenges and instructional strategies. Classroom learning was shifted to online learning in an attempt to mimic face-to-face teaching as well as maintaining active learning. A combination of asynchronous and synchronous teaching methods was found to be effective for content delivery, active learning and increasing student's engagement.

Trying to identify some of the problems encountered in online teaching, we have found out that many students and even teachers have low digital literacy. They find difficulties in operating the applications and platforms used for online learning. A logical reasoning behind this is that they did not use to study or teach through online learning and interact with the respective applications and platforms. On the other hand, some students were not punctual in attending the online learning as scheduled by the schools at certain time in a week. They are absent at the classes scheduled by schools and ask the teachers or their colleagues about what had been taught before. Other students use to submit their works after the deadline or complain about the workload they have to do in online learning. The absence

of adequate facilities for high technology integration becomes another problem in the online learning. It has been known that many students get troubled with unstable internet connection, inability to afford adequate internet quota, and lack of smartphones. Without adequate facilities, the teachers cannot carry out an interactive online learning. They can only give materials for independent learning at home, tasks or projects, and quizzes.

Planning and preparation should inevitably be done for better online learning in the future since online learning requires more time than face-to-face class to be well-prepared and ready. The teachers must be trained and prepared with sufficient knowledge and skill to maximize their practices in carrying out the online learning. The students have to be familiarized with online learning to enhance their digital literacy and refine their misperceptions about online learning.

The challenges encountered must inspire students and teachers to be reflective, open, creative, and adaptive to dynamic changes. It reminds them to keep exploring technology to enhance learning. To select and utilize suitable applications timely, teachers need practical preparation and learning on recognizing applications, organizing activities, maintaining students' engagement, and evaluating students' learning. Teachers and students are encouraged to have active participation in educational development opportunities to extend their competency on technology integration in all teaching or learning processes.

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