



Exploring the Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education Divide in Pakistan

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Authors' contributions

This work was done in collaboration among all the five authors. All the authors contributed equally to all the sections of this research. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Background: The education sector is badly shaken in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic as nationwide closures have impacted 89% of the world's student population.

Aims and Methodology: This qualitative, exploratory study investigated the impacts of COVID-19 on the prevailing education divide through focus group discussion. Focus group included purposefully selected two teachers (one male & one female), two senior headteachers (one male & one female), two Taluka Education Officers (one male & one female), two Assistant District Education Officers (One male & one female) and two Assistant professors of Education (one male one female). The focus group interviews were conducted from the participants through conference calls.

Results: Focus group discussion results showed that there could be variable impacts of COVID-19 across society, parents, input that students could receive from families during this pandemic,

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assessment, gender, and schools. These variable impacts could result in further widening of the existing education divide in Pakistan. The major reasons, as highlighted by the participants, are the weak education system and the prevalent digital divide in Pakistan due to the use of online learning resources. It is recommended that the authorities should engage economically sound local elders, Non-Government Organizations and volunteer educated persons to meet the technology-based needs.

Keywords: Impacts; COVID-19; education divide; Pakistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated health crises worldwide as almost all of the world has now been affected by it. This pandemic has affected almost all aspects of our everyday lives. This pandemic has various social, economic, and psychological impacts on our day to day lives. These effects have severe political, cultural, and social implications and have posed seen and unforeseen challenges to our daily lives. Like other countries, Pakistan has also taken various restrictive measures to slow down the spread of and contain this pandemic at the local level. This includes lockdown, closing the industrial and educational institutions, and stay at home orders among others.

There are various consequences of not going to school even for a short period as no other tool can replace the schools be it technology or something else. Regular attendance to school is necessary not only for learning but also it is the best tool available to raise the skills of the children. Social skills and awareness of the students can be raised during school hours. There is also an economic benefit of attending the school; it enhances the abilities of children. Every moment missed at schools could have consequences for the development of abilities and skills.

Everyone has a right for education [1] and Education is one of the basic rights that cannot be suspended even during times of war or other disasters. To provide continued learning even during these conflicts temporary facilities are set up. The situation in Pakistan is not different than the rest of the world where education institutions have been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There had been examples of the closure of education institutions in particular areas, like in Azad Kashmir area of Pakistan after earthquake that hit the area in 2004 and during heavy rains and Floods in 2010 and 2011 but those closures were not at such huge scale.

There are various divides in a typical Pakistani society. The Pakistani society is divided into Lower, Middle, and Upper classes and the development of such distinct groups has resulted in the widening of social gaps among the people [2]. The rural-urban division is still present and the private schooling growth trends showed a marked improvement in rural areas [3]. According to Zaidi [4], there is a deep and persistent digital divide in Pakistan between the big and the small cities, between the rich and the poor and between the ICT literate and IT stressed users [5]. Pakistani society is also divided into ethnic and sectarian foundations [6]. The deepening social divide in Pakistan is worsening the ecological divide [7].

The Pakistani education system is also suffering from various divides against itself. It is divided into various parallel systems ranging from the different mediums of instructions to different textbooks and different methods of learning. The medium of instruction is divided between English and non-English [8]. According to [9], Non-English medium is further divided into Urdu (which is the national language) and Sindhi (which is the language of Sindh province). The Pakistani education system is also divided across gender with separate schools for girls and boys [10]. The Pakistani education system is further divided into social, religious, and economic divisions; elite and non-elite, public and private, military and madrasah, rural and urban [11]. Pakistani education system is also divided on a formal and non-formal basis [12]. Education institutions are also divided on infrastructure basis with some affluent in physical facilities [13-14], while other even not having water for drinking and toilets [15,14]. Some education institutions are also divided concerning the quality of education being provided with many lacking even in competencies of quality education [11]. Education institutions are also divided based on the number of qualified teachers available; many education institutions face a shortage of qualified and motivated

teachers [16]. Female teachers are especially not available in rural areas with high student to teacher ratio. As a result of these divisions very good students of disadvantaged areas of rural Pakistan receive very inadequate education at primary and secondary levels; even regular schooling and formal education remain the area for only those who can afford it.

The impact of a prolonged closure of education institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be investigated. Previous researches suggest that there had been various socio-economic impacts of such closures. In 2009, a school was closed for one week to contain the pandemic after a kindergartener tested positive for pandemic influenza A/H1N1 in Taiwan. This one week closure of school during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak found that 27% of families could not go to work with 18% losing income as a direct result of it [17]. An estimate in the UK suggested that protracted closures could cost 3% of UK GDP [18]. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic need for commodities and manufactured products has decreased and the need for medical supplies has significantly increased; the food sector is also facing increased demand due to the panic-buying and stockpiling of food products [19]. Various steps taken by Pakistan to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have effects on the prevailing education divide as these also included the prolonged closure of education institutions. The education sector is badly shaken in the wake of this pandemic as nationwide closures have impacted 89% of the world's student population [20]. Like education institutions of developed countries, the educational institutes in Pakistan have also adopted the strategy of making use of digital platforms to engage students and to cope with evolving situations. However, no previous study has addressed the issue of the education divide for the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevailing education divide in Pakistan. To achieve this objective following research questions were asked from the focus group participants:

RQ1: What could be the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the already existing Education Divide in Pakistan?

RQ2: Provide reasons why do you think so about the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic?

2. METHODOLOGY

For this qualitative, exploratory study, the focus group interview was conducted from a sample of ten experts. Focus group included purposefully selected two teachers (one male & one female), two senior headteachers (one male & one female), two Taluka Education Officers (one male & one female), two Assistant District Education Officers (One male & one female), two Assistant professors of Education (one male one female). The focus group interviews were conducted from the participants through conference calls. All the participants were arranged in a single group. Each participant was provided with a list of questions that were to be explored in this study relating to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant was given half an hour for brainstorming about the impacts and then were requested to explain the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers recorded the focus group discussion and transcribed it as it was in local languages (Sindhi and Urdu). The discussion lasted for two hours. Following questions were asked from the focus group participants:

1. What could be the noticeable impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the already existing Education Divide in Pakistan?
2. Provide reasons why do you think so about the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic?

The collected data were analyzed using an inductive approach. This comprehensive approach is most suitable where little or nothing is known about the study phenomenon [21]. Inductive analysis is the most common approach used to analyze qualitative data [22]. The thematic content analysis method was used to analyze the collected data which is the most common method of data analysis used in qualitative work [23]. The process involved transcribing interviews, analyzing transcripts, identifying themes within those data, and gathering together examples of those themes from the text and validating. Validation was ensured by returning the analyzed draft to respondents and asking them to go through the draft of analyzed data to validate or refute, the researchers' interpretation of the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ I: What could be the noticeable impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the already existing Education Divide in Pakistan?

3.1 Variable Impacts across Society

All the participants were of the view that the impacts could not be uniform as it could affect different segments of the education system differently. They substantiated their view by quoting that our education system consists of different segments and our schools are one part of it. Our schools which are the actual place of learning are also not uniform. In the words of male Assistant Professor "Our schools are composite of strikingly different processes and different school systems impact differently on different students." This is similar to the way students are different from each other in a significant way. In the words of the female Assistant Professor, "each student has his/her unique background for culture, socio-economic status, domestic environment, resources at hand, opportunities and support that he/she receives from outside the school". Previous research suggests that all these factors have significant input in the education process. Because their actual lives are outside of the schools, these unique differences highlight the variable impact of this pandemic on the life of each student. In the words of male Assistant Professor, "some students could receive no negative impact of this pandemic because of high-quality learning opportunities in the form of informal homeschooling coupled with Digital facilities of learning". Others could not be in a position to have access to even homeschooling and quality of homeschooling could be like as they could be even deprived of learning opportunities. This could result in a big disadvantage for those belonging to the disadvantaged segment of Pakistan as parents belonging to those disadvantaged segments lack basic skills, time, or interest to support and help their children at homes. In the words of female Assistant Professor "in fact, they could be even struggling to find a single meal in a day as many are those which come from below poverty line backgrounds".

3.2 Variable Impacts across Parents

All the participants agreed that variable impacts could also be observed across parents. In a

traditional Pakistani society, children have many siblings to compete for achieving their parent's attention. This could result in more uneven responses of parents having more children as parents are more uneven than inanimate technology. Financially sound, university graduate parents will only two children may offer a lot of help and support to their children. On the other hand, a family comprising of the poor, single, uneducated parent with six children could face a complex situation. Children belonging to such families could have to struggle to get the attention of his/her parent. Even if they succeed to draw the attention, the parent could not be able to help him with homework in the absence of technology. For such parents, survival could be a more significant issue than homeschooling learning. In those families, this could be in the second position in terms of priorities. In words of the male headteacher, "their worries could be survival, not homeschooling". Previous research also supports this view. According to [24], schools are less variable than families.

3.3 Students Could Receive Variable Inputs

All the participants were of the view that variable inputs that each student could receive in his/her learning during these crises could not supplement the equal amounts of inputs that they would have received at schools. Björklund and Salvanes summarized and evaluated recent empirical research on education and family background and found that the chief input into a child's learning comes from families and they occupy a central position in a child's education [25]. Current homeschooling trends coupled with online teaching is deemed to balance the absence of input students otherwise receive from schools. This looks unlikely to generalize evenly over the whole population as all the parents could not be able to do homeschooling successfully; because the extent of help each student could receive from his/her family could be uneven. According to [26], the help received by each student could vary in terms of availability of time to teaching, parent's cognitive inability, resources at hand, and knowledge each family has. "It is always difficult to teach something that you do not know yourself. Ultimately all these events could only increase the already existing inequality for the disadvantaged segment of Pakistan" (senior male teacher).

3.4 Variable Impacts on Assessment

According to the majority of the participants, the impacts of present closures of schools and interruption in regular learning due to pandemic could also have variable impacts on assessment. Assessments are necessary to give information about students' performance. The information gathered through different forms of assessments gives information about students learning difficulties and present levels of achievement; the absence of information about both these aspects may have negative impacts on the students. Present decisions of the authorities to promote students up to eighth grade and canceling exams of secondary and higher secondary levels could impact different quarters of students variably. Senior male headteacher quotes "Promoting students without assessment may help advantaged during pandemic more than disadvantaged, but could later cost all them generally and disadvantaged especially". This is also supported by previous researches. Andersen and Nielsen identified the effect of testing on student learning measured after a gap of two years due to measuring break down in the IT managed testing system of Denmark. The authors found that participating in attest two years later increased the score in reading tests and mathematics tests; the reading score increased about 0.1 SD. The authors also found that students with low socioeconomic backgrounds had larger effects. The study further found that schools with many students from such backgrounds are hesitant to get the performance of their students measured [27].

3.5 Variable Impacts across Gender

The impact of this pandemic could be variable across genders also. All the participants agreed on the view that girls' students could be more impacted than boy students and they could be the hardest hit of the crisis in terms of the education divide. They are the hardest hit because they have not only to take economic losses but also help their parents in taking care of their other family members at the cost of learning. This is also supported by a recent study by Malala Fund (2020) that used data from the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic in several African countries to project that approximately ten million of secondary level girls could not be able to resume their studies after a pandemic has ended [28]. All the participants agreed that social and cultural norms are major obstacles to access the

internet thus they are the major contributing factor to further widening of the digital divide which could eventually increase the existing education divide. This is because the internet is deemed inappropriate in the hands of women in our society and they are not allowed to express themselves online. In the words of female Taluka Education Officer "In our society female access to the internet is often monitored by male family members of her family".

3.6 Variable Impacts across Schools

Most of the participants agreed that there could be similar impacts of this pandemic on students of public and low fee private schools as they are more or less similar to each other but these could not be uniform when compared to students of high and medium fee private schools. Many of those high and medium fee private schools situated in metropolitan areas especially were already blending their traditional teaching with technology. Variable impacts could also be observed across students of rural and urban schools. In the words of male Taluka Education Officer, "this pandemic could cost more to the students of rural areas private and public schools as poor children of rural areas could remain deprived of virtual educational opportunities". This is consistent with the available data. According to data from the PTA website about 69% of the Pakistani population do not have access to the internet. This disparity is more prevalent in rural areas. This highlights that children of these populations could remain deprived of their right to learn during this crisis.

3.7 Education Divide Could Widen

All the participants were of the view that the existing education divide could further widen as a result of this crisis. "Students facing economic, geographical or political challenges, underrepresented ethnic or minority groups, those with mental health and learning challenges and physical disabilities could be more prone to losing ground in Pakistan, and economically sound are most probable to receive less negative impacts of this pandemic" (male Assistant Education Officer).

This crisis could also widen the education divide in terms of drop out as Pakistan has a 73% drop out for middle school students. Pakistan has a great risk of increasing this dropout. In the words of female Assistant Education Officer "as a result

of this sudden disconnection in schooling, many could never resume their schooling". Another reason responsible for the widening of this gap is that our present education systems also don't equip children with skills like adaptability, time management, and informed decision making needed to live in this ever-changing and unpredictable world.

All the participants were of the view that despite present challenging situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students are likely to be less affected on average in terms of learning when compared to learning of the previous generation during similar closures in the past due to technology. But this technology-based advantage could also have uneven impacts across our society. According to the female Taluka Education Officer, "even the impact of technology could be uneven across those families having access to the internet". This could be so because some families could be better users of this technology than others as they would not have needed skills even if they were not economically weak. Further, educational technologies are supplements to the schools not replacement of it, especially when it comes to kindergarten level children and children with learning disabilities. In the words of male Assistant District Education Officer "younger and children with learning disabilities may be seriously unlucky".

RQ2: Provide reasons why do you think so about the impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic?

3.8 Weak Education System

Majority of the participants were of the view that one major reason of this further widening of Education is the weakness of our education system as most of the students facing the negative impact of this pandemic could come from economically, geographically and politically disadvantaged segments of our society who are enrolled in government schools. In words of male Assistant Professor "they are already part of the crisis as not all students belonging to these segments of society even learn, are already struggling with poor reading and writing skills, insufficient number of teachers and low-quality teaching".

3.9 Digital Divide

All the participants were of the view that the digital divide will also be a major reason for this

further widening of the education divide in Pakistan. Already existing digital divide has been exposed during this crisis and could become more widened if educational access is governed by the access to the latest technologies. This digital divide could raise unequal learning opportunities for students of disadvantaged families. This pandemic has rendered millions in the world school less. According to UNESCO, about 90 percent of the world student population has been affected by this pandemic [20]. To cope with evolving situations, like developed countries of the world, Pakistani higher education institutions specially and some schools generally have adopted the policy of virtual teaching using digital platforms. All the participants agreed that this strategy is not exclusive owing to the prevailing digital divide in Pakistan. When it comes to accessing digital platforms for virtual learning, students belonging to rural areas could be more affected as they could not have access to this digital world either due to the non-connectivity of the internet or too slow internet connections to operate these platforms. In words of female Assistant Professor "this pandemic has emerged as a litmus paper for class differences that are part of our inequitable society".

Previous data also suggest that a digital divide is prevalent across our society where only sixteen percent had smartphones in 2016; these smartphones are an essential tool in today's digital platforms of learning. According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Annual Report 2019, internet access in Pakistan stands at around 35 percent, with 78 million broadband and 76 million mobile internet (3/4G) connections [29]. Owing to prevailing class differences and unavailability of infrastructure, access to these digital platforms of learning is generally limited to the students belonging to economically advantaged segments of our society residing in urban and semi-urban areas of Pakistan.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative, exploratory study investigated the impacts of COVID-19 on the prevailing education divide through focus group discussion. Focus group discussion findings show that there could be variable impacts of COVID-19 across society, parents, input that students could receive from families during this pandemic, assessment, gender, and schools. These

variable impacts could result in further widening of the existing education divide in Pakistan. The major reasons, as highlighted by the participants, are the weak education system and the prevalent digital divide in Pakistan due to the use of online learning resources.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Authorities should make sure that all the students have access to the technology and the internet they need to be connected during this pandemic.
2. Pricing plans may be reduced to a minimum possible during this extraordinary situation.
3. Authorities should engage economically sound Local elders, Non-Government Organizations and volunteer educated persons to meet the technology-based needs.
4. Authorities should create hotspots around those areas where the internet is available free of cost so that children and families can go to get internet access.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per university standard guideline, participant consent and ethical approval have been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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