Problems and Benefits of Elementary Schools Online Teaching during COVID-19: A Thematic Analysis of Parents and Teachers' Reflections

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Abstract

Most elementary schools' teachers and parents experienced the online teaching for the first time in Pakistan after schools' closure due to COVID 19. This study sheds light on the positive and negative aspects as per the experience of the parents and teachers during online classes using internet connectivity, and technology of computers and smart phones. This is a qualitative research and data was collected through structured interviews of the teachers and parents of eight elementary schools in posh areas of Lahore. Thematic analysis was applied after coding all interviews. Five themes based on problems included i) technological barriers, ii) stunt for fee collection, iii) disciplinary issues of online classes, iv) quality issues and v) screen time increase. While, the four themes for the benefits achieved through online classes were triangle involvement of parent-teacher-student, internet browsing/ research exposure of students, cost saving of uniform and travel, and lastly saving academic year during COVID-19. According to the results, most parents were initially against the online classes considering this exercise just a stunt for fee collection but gradually they were convinced about the benefits besides having concerns regarding internet connectivity, electricity load-shedding and availability of computers and smart phones for all children at home. On the other hand, teachers found increase in misconduct of kids and attendance issues in online classes. However, according to the teachers and parents, the major benefit of online classes was the transformation from conventional to search and research-oriented studies which boost up students' self-confidence. Furthermore, parents and teachers unanimously termed the online classes as 'savior of the academic year' during COVID 19.

Keywords: Elementary Education, COVID-19, Online Classes, Digital Literacy, Parents, Teachers, Students

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Introduction and Background

Education is an important component for the destiny of any country. Education helps people to construct a solid standpoint on different issues of life. Education is life blood for the development of any country (Doumbia, 2013). Education is essential for not only the personal level but on the national level as well. Poor education system may become the reason of defeat for the nation (UK Essays, 2017).

Japan, Russia, America and China have made tremendous progress with the quality based education system. The real backwardness of developing countries especially Pakistan, lies in the negligence of education as a separate field. Actually, lower literacy level is multiplied by failure students, lack of facilities and ghost teachers which depicts the poor picture of education's system (Lund, 2018).

The Pakistan Economic Survey 2017-18 says, "last year the literacy rate dropped by two percent from 60 to 58 percent (Derbyshire, 2020). This year it has remained same as 58 pc with no improvement". Pakistan oaths to uplift the literacy from 58% to 70% by four years. This goal could be achieved by giving access to educational institutions to approximate 22.8 million children with better chances and latest innovative technological improvements (Rehmat, 2020). However, the ground realities are different from the oath because poor educational access for the children is provided nationwide. After Nigeria, Pakistan is the only country with maximum number of children out of school. In 2017, Children aged 5-16 years which are actually 44% of this age group are not participating in educational system.

According to the Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training Education Pakistan (as cited by World Education Service, 2020) there are 22.3 million out-of-school children in Pakistan including 5 million in elementary education, 6.5 million in middle and 11.3 million in secondary education.

This worst situation is related to discriminations on the gender and socioeconomic position (Hunter, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch, from the elementary school, girls with 32% while boys with 21% are out of school (Human Rights Watch, as cited Hunter, 2020).

According to UNESCO report, 4.763 million comprising male and female students were out of school in 2017 while in 2018, 4.425 million children were out of school. Annual School census by Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) expressed that there are 60,502 private sector school while 52,231 public sector schools are in the Punjab province (PESRP, 2017: as cited by Khattak, 2018).

Pakistan was already fighting to keep students enrolled in the school, faced lockdown and closure of educational institutions in COVID-19 time-period. Educationists warn government about the risk of increase in dropout rates and decrease in literacy rate. This alarming situation during COVID-19 leads towards e-learning, online classes and digital literacy exposure to public sector (low resourced schools) and private schools. Some private school managed students' engagements by giving them homework and some online tasks (George, 2020).

A digital educational platform for low resourced schools named "Illm Exchange" was launched by Centre for Economic Research Pakistan (CERP) to cope with the deficiencies appeared due to closure of schools for undecided extended period of time. Students from low income families can get benefits from this channel to connect with their studies in this time period of Corona. There are many challenges in Pakistan regarding digital education. Many families have only one smart phone and data availability is another important hurdle in e-learning. To accelerate towards digital literacy many telecom companies also play role in smooth data delivery and connection speed (CERP, 2020).

There are many factors which hinder the acceptance of online classes and e-learning. Lack of cultural familiarity about full-time online education and absence of technological support (internet) also damaged virtual educational system. Moreover, in Pakistan internet connectivity is approx. 36.8%. According to Economic Intelligent Unit's yearly report Pakistan is standing at 76th number from 100 countries in the perspective of availability, accessibility, connectivity and public's ability to use the websites (Saeed, 2020).

Dependence on parents has increased a lot in online classes which is a major shift of the academic burden from teachers to parents. This digital divide has put uneducated parents in trouble. Elementary school students aged 5-12 years (grade 1 to grade 5) are more dependent on their parents for online connectivity and e-learning process (Gonzales, Calarco, & Lynch, 2020).

Objectives of the Study

This study will help understand the main challenges faced by teacher, parents and students of elementary schools in digital learning (online classes) during COVID-19. Additionally, current research work will shed light on benefits of online learning of elementary school students as well. This study is about the private elementary school teachers, parents and students' issues in online classes and benefits drawn from online classes during CIVID-19. The main objectives include:

- To explore how far online classes are helpful to elementary school students
- To investigate the most important obstacle faced to attend e-classes during COVID-19
- To gauge the parents' will and intention to go for this transition from literacy in general to digital learning during the pandemic
- To search the benefits taken by students, teachers and parents of elementary schools by online classes
- To know the tendency of acceptance of technology-supportive online classes to cope with educational deficiency occurred due to closure of schools in this pandemic

Research Questions

Following research questions were designed to achieve the study objectives:

Methodology

RQ1: What are the main problems faced by elementary students' teachers and parents during online classes due to in Lahore, Pakistan?
RQ2: What are the advantages of e-learning during COVID-19 as perceived by the teachers and parents of elementary students in Posh areas of Lahore?

This is a qualitative research conducted with the help of thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis is adopted where the concern is to get something from human views, thinking and knowledge about a particular situation by conducting interviews and survey responses (Caulfield, 2019).

Data was collected through the structured interviews of teachers and parents conducted by using the medium of WhatsApp. All elementary schools of Lahore's posh areas were the population for the study. Eight elementary schools from the posh areas of Lahore were taken as sample including Model Town, Johar Town, Cantt, DHA, Faisal Town area. Later, structured interviews were conducted from teachers and parents of the selected schools as n= 8 teachers+8 parents= 16.

Table 1
Details of the selected schools, parents and teachers interviewed

Name of Elementary School	Parents	Teachers
Garrison Academy Junior	Parent 1	Teacher A
Lahore Grammar School	Parent 2	Teacher B
Divisional Public School	Parent 3	Teacher C
Defence Public School	Parent 4	Teacher D
Wapda Girls School	Parent 5	Teacher E
Punjab School	Parent 6	Teacher F
City School	Parent 7	Teacher G
Beaconhouse School	Parent 8	Teacher H

In the first part of interviews, the teachers and parents were asked about the challenges faced by them due to online classes during the pandemic of COVID-19. While in the second part, teachers and parents were questioned about the positive aspects of digital learning during this pandemic. Father, mother or any active family member who was engaged with children of elementary schools in making possible to take online classes at home were considered as 'parents' in this study. While the section head teachers of eight different elementary schools were taken as 'teacher' for this research study.

Codes and Themes

Responses from the parents and teachers during the interviews were arranged in a sequence to get better 'familiarization' of the interviews text. After getting general idea about the data the researchers did coding before making themes of the study. Through coding, researcher highlighted important parts of the interviews and labeled 'codes' to describe the terms, phrases or sentences expressed by the respondents.

After generating codes, 'themes' were derived from the common/similar codes. In this stage the repetition of concepts or terms was eliminated by generating single theme for common type of 'codes'. One theme is basically a combination of codes.

"Reviewing the themes" was done as next stage of the analysis by re-thinking that: are themes compatible with the codes accurately or any change is necessary? Then proper names/labels were given to the themes, five themes for the challenges/problems of online classes and four themes for the positive aspects of online classes during this pandemic was named for the current study.

Thematic Analysis of Parents' Interviews

Data gathered during parents and teachers' interviews was organized into various codes and then themes for the analysis using the technique of thematic analysis. In the first part of analysis, codes extracted from parents' interviews regarding the benefits and problems of online classes during COVID-19 arranged in a sequence as:

Table 2

Benefits and drawbacks of online classes according to parents.

No.	Benefits of online classes	Drawbacks of online classes
Parent 1	• Increased teaching time span. • Teacher is available at more flexible hours.	• Parents Overburdened • Internet issues • Poor technological support • Resistance for innovation
Parent 2	• Safe stay at home with study • Transportation cost reduced • focus of parents and teachers on student.	• Lack of one-to-to interaction between teachers and students. • Students unable to comprehend properly in online classes. • Lack of energy level. • Fee collection tool
Parent 3	• Students Less burdened by staying home • Students becoming self-sufficient in technology	• Not 100% understanding. • Carelessness of pupils • online classes for the sake of fee collection
Parent 3	• increased parental control • No restriction of timetable. • Students more responsible • Easier student-teacher access.	• Parents with two or more children are not able give gadget to each child • Children lack self- discipline. • eyesight problems, headache
Parent 4	• Students are engaged in some constructive work. • Helpful in the vacation work completion	• Lack of real dialogue • A stunt of school to recover the fee from students • No discipline in online class
Parent 5	• E-learning and digital device uplift kids' confidence • Research oriented habits	• Number of absentees • Students use other gaming apps while taking class. • Extra burden on kids. • Schools concerned to get fee
Parent 6	• Safe from the wastage of one academic year	• Literacy level of parents • IT incompetence • Diversity of cultural background of parents and teachers.

| Parent 7 | • Relieved from pick and drop
• Students' in-touch with studies. | • Mismanaged by parents of two or more kids |
| Parent 8 | • Widens the exposure of kids.
• Positive use of technology rather than playing games. | • Reduced Physical activities
• Internet issues
• More burden on parents. |

Thematic Analysis of Teachers' Interviews

In the second phase of the interviews, selected teachers (section heads) of the selected schools were questioned about the benefits and problems they faced while conducting online classes during COVID 19 period. Following codes are based on their interviews:

Table 3

Benefits and drawbacks of online classes according to teachers

No.	Benefits of Online Classes	Problems of Online Classes
Teacher A	• Online classes are safe way • Parents-teachers' assistance increased. • Good consumption of Students' time • Fee justification feel among parents	• Less attentive class • Short attendance • Indecent behavior • Interference of parents during lectures
Teacher B	• More exposure to digital learning. • Latest resources/ apps used in lesson delivery • Smart working.	• Technological issues • Unattended child with gadgets • Less interactive class • Much time wastage
Teacher C	• Students and teachers stay safe home • Easy availability of teachers and students to solve issues on the spot	• Workload on teacher • Internet distortion • Illiterate parents can't cope up. • Screen time makes students hefty
Teacher D	• Excellent to involve students through Videos & recorded lecture by safely staying at home • Easy interconnectivity of students and teachers	• No Class decorum • Teacher overburdened. • Negative effect on vision • Deduction of salary of teachers • jobless parents facing financial crises
Teacher E	• Frequent Students- teachers' interactions • students and teachers punctual on timetable	• Students can't understand properly • Practical and artwork issues • Technology distortion • Short attendance

Teacher F	• Good triangle of student-teacher-parents • Time saving • Technological smart usage and will to perceive innovatively • No extra transportation and time consumption	• Load shedding, net problems • discipline issues • Student's indecent behavior. • Poor Check n balance
Teacher G	• Time and Fuel saving • Kids learn under supervision of parents • Lack of traffic and road accidents	• Harassment issues • No Practical's in labs • Lack of competition • Confidence damaged • No co-curricular work
Teacher H	• Optimum Utilization of time • Proficient e-leaning and gadgets use • Reduced uniform costs • Best comfort zone	• Lack of physical interaction • Health issues. • Load shedding • Poor Quality and quantity of education

Converting Codes into Themes

From the above data arranged after interviews of parents and teachers of elementary schools, all similar codes were put under one theme. Afterwards, all important themes were 'named' to show the problems and benefits of online classes during COVID-19 in very systematic way:

Problems of Online Classes

A total of five themes were extracted from the interviews of teachers and parents regrading problems faced during online classes:

Theme 1: Technological Barrier

Theme 2: Disciplinary Issues

Theme 3: Increased Screen Time

Theme 4: A stunt for fee collecting

Theme 5: Poor Quality of education

Benefits of Online Classes according to Parents and Teachers of Elementary schools

Four themes were extracted from the interviews of teachers and parents regrading benefits of online classes:

Theme 6: Research exposure of students

Theme 7: Cost saving

Theme 8: Triangle involvement: Parent-Teacher-Student

Theme 9: Saving Academic year

Results and Discussion

In the themes numbered 1 to 5 parents and teachers' interviews regarding their problems due to the online classes were measured. Following are the details about all themes of the study:

Theme 1: Technological Barrier: When interviewed, parents and teachers responded that in a developing country just like Pakistan, electricity load shedding is huge barrier towards online connectively. Also, all the students are not well equipped with gadgets to comprehend in online classes. IT incompetence and Parents Illiteracy is also a factor in technological barrier. Students have to rely on their parents' devices for online classes, if a family have more than two kids, this is impossible for parents to manage online classes of all the kids simultaneously. However, poor Internet connection linkage is also a hurdle towards e-classes.

Theme 2: Disciplinary Issues: In online classes, as teacher do not have that sort of control on students, some students behave indecent and damage the decorum of class. In the Pandemic this was the 1st time in history of Pakistan to take online classes of elementary schools' students, so no rules and regulation are applied on such e-classes which ultimately encourages student to be violent and harass the class through negative commenting. Parents are busy, sometimes, in their works and kids are with the gadgets for online classes without the any supervision. Resultantly, many damages to decorum and discipline of classes happen.

Theme 3: Increased Screen Time: Parents expressed online classes lead to the increased screen time on gadgets, laptops and smart phones leaving worst effects on eyesight of the students. More screen time makes students, teachers hefty and tired. No sports activities and extra-curricular are possible because of online classes engagement, this enhances the chances of medical issues to kids.

According to an American study, kids' screen time has increased by 70% in COVID-19 time-period (American Optometric Association, 2020). In one online session there should a healthy activity like yoga, dance. A rule of 20-20-20 should be followed means children should take a break of 20 seconds after screen time of 20 minutes from a 20 feet away (Chunduru, 2020).

Theme 4: A stunt towards collecting fees from students: Majority of the parents regarded online classes just as a stunt for collecting fees from students and nothing else. Parents when interviewed, expressed that online classes have many issues like health issues and many more barriers rather than conventional classroom environment. They said there is no as such fruitful impacts of online classes but just a tool to recover fee from parents.

Theme 5: Quality education is compromised: Teachers and Parents both were convinced on the point that eminence of education is affected in online classes. Due to the compromised discipline, IT incompetence and lack of physical one-to-one interaction, educational quality is dropped badly. Students are taking online classes just as a fun, which ultimately hits on quality of education.

Benefits of Online Classes

Following themes were formulated to highlight the benefits gained through the online class and e-learning during the pandemic.

Theme 6: Research exposure of students: Teachers believed that students are more inclined towards self-researched on different topics from the internet. So, the aptitude of students increased with the use of technology and digital media. Students are proficient in e-leaning and utilizing the gadgets and software. They are going to be used to with these social networking sites and applications.

Theme 7: Cost saving: Teachers said in their interviews that in the scenario of online classes, no physical appearance in school is necessary and it saved money of parents on transportation, uniform and bags etc. By this smart way of teaching using online medium, cost management is very beneficial which is really a blessing in the context of COVID-19 period.

Theme 8: Triangle of parent-teacher-student: As students of elementary school are not self-sufficient to attend online class without parental guide, parents are present to help them. So, online classes provide a platform to interconnectivity of parents, teachers and students to multiply the academic proficiencies of kids. Parents help child to cope with online class's requirement to excel in the education.

Theme 9: Saving of academic year: Teachers and parents viewed that in the worst situation of COVID-19 disaster, online classes are blessing to retain and sustain in the academic year and to continue the studies without any resistance. E-learning and digital media are vital in the upcoming lives of people and online classes have provided our students to gain the full fledge benefits of e-learning.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to know about the challenges faced by teachers and parents during online classes of elementary school students due to COVID-19 lockdown and the benefits obtained from the online classes. The study revealed that in the beginning a majority of parents believed that online classes were just a stunt for fee collection by schools, however, gradually they started realizing the benefits of the technology linked classes despite of their limitations and other concerns. Also, parents strongly believed that technology adoption and gadgets availability is compulsory for e-learning, as for the parents having more than two kids it was a problem to manage online classes of all their children simultaneously. Electricity load-shedding also remained a hurdle in the smooth conduction of online classes. Parents were also concerned about increase in screen-time due to online classes. On the other hand, teachers faced increased disciplinary issues, as chances of students' lack of attention and misbehavior raised during the online classes as compared to conventional classroom environment. Most teachers believed there were no rules and regulations to regulate online classes. According to the teachers, the environment of competition, which is the vital aspect of learning in traditional classes, was loose as compared to traditional classroom.

Coming toward the positive aspects of the online classes, parents found their children becoming technology-friendly opening gateways to online search resources while quenching their quest to know about the queries in their minds, thus giving them new experience of digital learning. By staying home students accommodate the things online and patents saved expense of transportation and uniform clothes laundry. The online classes brought parents and teachers closer and formulated ideal triangle of teacher-student-parent for best learning outcome. Teachers believed that parents were more involved and concerned about the kids' studies. While summing up the teachers and parents, despite some concerns, believed that online classes helped saved academic years of their students besides opening new horizons.

Recommendations

Based on the results yielded from this study, it is recommended to school administrations:

- To build the e-skills in students regarding some online soft wares and applications helpful in e-learning.
- Some seminars maybe organized to introduce new e-learning innovative methods to parents which help them in their children online education.
- On permanent basis, computer courses may be included in the syllabus

Funding and Ethical Considerations

This data collection and its analysis is solely based on the efforts from the authors who did not receive any funding from any institution. Formal permission was taken from the schools' authorities before getting students and teachers responses in the structured interviews. It was make sure that the identity of the respondents remained anonymous to avoid any potential harm.

Authors Credit Statement

Muhammad Shabbir Sarwar conceptualized the idea, operationalized the key terms, also, he finally reviewed and edited the article. Javaria Shafiq worked on the original draft, collected the data and analyzed the data applying thematic analysis, while Waqar ul Haq also contributed in the data collection.

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