

Editorial

Consequences of COVID-19 on children's learning and their responses

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Abstract

This article briefly highlights the effects of COVID-19 on schoolchildren's learning and their needs. The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the education system, among others. Lockdowns and school closures during COVID-19 reduced children's learning opportunities, leading to a long-term impact on their ability to learn. The learning loss is yet to be known as the world is still suffering from the virus and its variants. Teachers have struggled to complete the course and students were under pressure to study many lessons in a short window of time in order to make up for the school time lost during the pandemic. Because of vaccination including the booster dose against COVID-19, in addition to other preventive and control measures adopted by the public, the prevalence of COVID-19 has reduced. The government of Nepal and other stakeholders have made a decision to reopen schools and continue facilitating student learning face-to-face and through alternative teaching-learning approaches, ensuring health promoting school.

Learning Loss of Students

The pandemic COVID-19 has demonstrated its catastrophic impact on the lives of people globally. The world's development stalled for some time. In terms of education, the pandemic has had a negative impact due to school closures. The lives of millions of individuals have changed drastically in different ways. Regardless of their academic standing, it is said that the majority of students have lost their enthusiasm for attending schools and universities (Life Catalyst, 2022). UNESCO (2020) reports that school closure affected 80 per cent of children's education globally (Lancker & Parolin, 2020) and 434 million children's education has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures in South Asia (UNICEF 2021). As an initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the government of Nepal decided to close schools and imposed other significant restrictions. The effects of school closure on children's health, education, and development, as well as on family finances and the economy as a whole, have become increasingly evident. According to a survey conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021), about 41% of the countries globally extended their school years and 43% of the countries prioritized only particular areas of the curriculum in order to make up for lost time and give students what they needed to succeed. In Nepal also, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) has developed and used a curriculum adjustment framework according to UNICEF-2020 (MoEST, 2020).

In the context of Nepal, in order to limit the spread of COVID-19, the government of Nepal enforced a first statewide lockdown from March 24 through July 21, 2020, restricting domestic and international travel, border closures, and non-essential services. All schools and institutions in Nepal were shut down when the lockdown began. Children were forced to stay inside their homes (Sharma et al., 2020). Exams were delayed, which led to disagreement among students who wanted to finish their grades. Similarly, the country imposed a second lockdown on April 29, 2021. The stay-home order was lifted after four months on September 1, 2021 (Kathmandu Post, 2022).

Many schools in Nepal were used as quarantine and isolation centres during the lockdown. As a result, it affected the learning of the students for a long time. The pandemic interfered with children's physical, emotional, and social development. They were unhappy during the pandemic. The elder children were assigned responsibility for caring for their younger siblings, they could not play outside with their pals and skipped their daily free lunch at school in the community schools. Nearly 90% of the parents reported that they were worried about their children falling farther behind and relapsing what they had learnt previously due to extreme disruptions (Mishra, 2020). Similarly, the pandemic caused learning loss among young children.

The government suggested that schools should make provisions for online learning during the school closures but there were various obstacles that prevented schools from offering online classes. Teachers and students encountered three basic different barriers to online learning; the first-order barrier at the school level, the second-order barrier at the teacher level, and the third barrier at the system level (Shrestha et al., 2021). Numerous issues with the continuity of student learning emerged because of the closure of schools during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, curfews, self-isolation, social isolation and quarantine have harmed students' general physical, mental, emotional, and social wellness. These situations resulted in increasing mental and emotional problems among students. The estimated prevalence of mental disorders in Nepal's 29 million inhabitants is above 4%, or over 1.1 million people, with an extra 5.2% of 13–18-year-olds. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has gotten worse (WHO, 2020). A study that tracked the psychosocial status of Nepalese individuals throughout the pandemic in 2020 shows that half of the respondents experienced at least one psychological symptom (WHO, 2020). WHO issued a warning over the rising levels of stress, loneliness, despair, dangerous alcohol and drug use, and behaviours such as self-harm or suicidal thoughts (Mahatoet al., 2020). According to Nepal Police, more than 2,000 people committed suicide while the nation was in a state of lockdown as a result of the government's resolve to halt COVID-19 from spreading (Neupane, 2020).

Measures Followed to control COVID-19

As the number of victims of COVID-19 increased at an alarming rate, the MoEST closed all schools and educational institutions until the end of April 2020 to control the spread of Coronavirus. On March 18, 2020, MoEST issued an order to prohibit the proliferation of COVID-19 across the educational system in schools by postponing the grade 10 Secondary Education Exams (SEES) scheduled to start from 6 Chaitra 2076 BS (19 March 2020) until further notice (My Republica, 2020). In the same way, all education facilities-public, community, private, basic and secondary schools, colleges, and universities were shut down until the end of Chaitra (12 April 2020). Similarly, all training programmes offered by privately and publicly owned training facilities and educational consultancy firms were stopped, and all conferences, workshops, seminars, and training organized by INGOs and NGOs were suspended until 12 April 2020. Also, Nepal applied a smart lockdown after the 2nd wave.

Efforts Made to continue Students' Learning

Despite the virus spreading quickly in many nations, including Nepal's neighbours, the government of Nepal responded to the outbreak in a number of ways. The government and all stakeholders worked together to support students' learning by providing teacher training for online delivery of the lessons, publishing self-learning materials, hosting online classes portals, disseminating closure user group sims, offering portal learning, etc. (RTI, USAID, 2022). Education resilience is regarded as crucial to reopening lost learning, comprehending students' families, offering suitable counselling and support to both students and parents, promoting learning through mixed approaches, and cooperating with international organizations. Similarly, for the continuation of home-based learning during the pandemic, some other options such as printed materials, radio, TV, home visits, phone calls, SMS, digital, (audio) books, video conferencing etc., were also used (RTI, USAID, 2022). Situation analysis on the effects of and responses to COVID-19 on the education sector in South Asia (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2020) and Student Learning Facilitation Guidelines-2020 categorized the responses for learning via the internet as:

"Students who have access to all services, students with access to the internet, students who have access to a computer or a phone but do not have (regular/reliable) internet access, college students who possess cellphones (non-smartphones), students with access to radio or television, and students who lack access to any of the aforementioned resources, and students who require extra services." (MoEST, 2020a, p-1)

The radio programme was proven a valuable source of information as it broadcasts the latest updates. Some radio channels are available 24 hours a day. According to the Nepal Media Survey (2019), more than 60% of households in Nepal have a radio (Save the Children Nepal, 2021). During the pandemic, the government launched a series of "radio-based learning" that was broadcasted on local and national FM stations in order to raise awareness of the importance of learning and to encourage stakeholders and caregivers to support children in learning. The programme was produced and broadcasted in accordance with self-learning materials endorsed by the Nepal Education Cluster and the MoEST. The tendency to listen to the radio has grown more after the COVID-19 pandemic because people in the hardest-to-reach communities believe that radio was reliable for news, views, and options linked to COVID-19 (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2020).

More importantly, three policy documents, including the Emergency Action Plan for School Education 2020, Student Learning Facilitation Guideline 2020, and Framework for School Operation 2020, were published by MoEST in 2020. These policy documents were assumed undoubtedly and in the development of the ability to bounce back from challenges students confronted in their academics brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, according to UNESCO and UNICEF (2020), the government of Nepal gave the following principles and regulations with the idea that local governments would be in charge of assisting, organizing, and carrying out local responses like- Contingency Action Plan (approved 28 July 2020), Alternative Learning Facilitation Guidelines (approved 16 June 2020), Emergency Action Plan for School Education (approved 22 September 2020), School Health Safety and Sanitation Guidelines (approved 27 August 2020), School Reopening Framework (approved 19 November 2020) and Closed User Group (CUG). School Reopening Framework (MoEST, 2020b) suggested facilitating management which emphasized various alternative approaches to running classes in the school:

"Conducting classes in the same shift for all grades and students, conducting separate classes or levels in different shifts, shortening the duration/period of school opening and class, starting classes either for lower or upper grades first, considering the situation (risk and ease), conducting classes in turns so that certain grades are conducted on certain days and the remaining other grades on other days, conducting classes in turns so that some students of the same grade attend class on some day or shift and the remaining students on other day or shift and conducting classes a few days a week, a few hours a day." (MoEST, 2020, P-6)

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected Nepal's educational system. The amount of students' learning loss cannot be restored unless appropriate actions are planned and implemented in a timely manner. Although the online classroom is a different way to teach and study during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been adequately accessible and user-friendly to teachers and students who are not digitally literate. The primary causes of this reality are manifolds such as lack of proper funding for education, lack of IT expertise among teachers and students, lack of IT amenities and gadgets in schools, and lack of even the most basic IT equipment among children and their families. However, the government and education authorities have made some efforts to continue students' learning by applying alternative modes of teaching learning and maintaining physical distance, hand hygiene and wearing face masks, among others. Additionally, the pandemic has also raised parents' awareness of the well-being and education of their children and awarded the teachers to enhance their IT-related skills and adequately sensitized them to ensure their schools are safe and healthy.

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