

The COVID-19: impact on education

Ven Dr. Olganwantte Chandasiri

Department of Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Mihintale, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The decline of education in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic is now at the centre of conversation. Technology, challenges and mental stress are key concepts linked to the subject under discussion. The dialogue does not occur within the confines of the South Asian region. It is a global discourse. The Corona pandemic aka COVID-19 is a much-discussed subject. Steps are taken to contain the pandemic in many developed as well as underdeveloped states and Sri Lanka is no exception. The world is visibly shaken by various mental disorders stemming from the pandemic. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic life structure (flora and fauna excluded) is perilous. The situation in Sri Lanka is more catastrophic than that of the developed countries. The scientific methodology introduced to control the catastrophe includes isolation, social distancing and community containment. It is the key weapon to decelerate the spread (A Wilder-Smith 2020). This is an oft-referred-to fact established by the WHO as well. However, the general public's ignorance is a major debacle which resulted in the expansion of the catastrophe. This essay underscores that the individual lifestyle has been shattered mentally in the face of this pandemic with special reference to pupils and students particular. Not only the pandemic victims but their family members must also be considered on a special scale. The mental stress faced by the personnel attached to defence and health sectors must also be taken into consideration. The persons under quarantine will most likely have a weakened immune system owing to fear, resentment and stigma as they feel victimised to an unnecessary extent. Sri Lanka Navy soldiers who underwent quarantine recently are a case in point. They were portrayed as criminals. The media coverage given was largely negative. Willing or unwilling, the quarantine is compulsory for many thousand. Barred access to social life, imposed regulation and prohibition of certain activities will worsen the mental condition of the individuals. Countries with developed technological expertise conduct counselling, video conferencing to reduce social distancing, telephone conversation and online encounters as a remedial measure. The citizens would not feel isolated at all (Alexande 2020). On the other hand, this determines the patient's stress levels too. A risk of heart patients also exists. The conflicting mental conditions prevalent among the health staff might also affect the containment of the pandemic. Vigilant dieting, constant exercise and modifications in daily activities will ensure a healthy phenomenon (Paul Carter 2020). The current situation will influence the future society too. Education sector requires special attention at this juncture. It applies not only to Sri Lanka but the whole globe.

Keywords: COVID 19, education, Schooling, assessment

Introduction

Everyone has a right for education (Joel Spring: 2000) [3]. The accelerated expansion of the pandemic resulted in strict steps taken to shut down schools and universities across the country. The delay to reopen the institutes will affect the student mentality. If the common people, health workers and elders are affected, the students and pupils would not be an exception. It will affect the mental health of pupils and students as well. However, no comprehensive study has been carried out on the mental health of pupils and students compelled to cope with the pandemic. Certain key points should be factored in.

1. Assessing or inquiring the mental condition of pupils and students during the pandemic.
2. Establishing a theoretical foundation in intervention to improve the mental health of pupils and students.
3. Establishing a foundation to publish national and state policies (Ziwei Fang: 2020)^[7]

According to studies, the students mentally affected during the pandemic show symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress (Mei *et al*: 2011). Research points to 24.9 per cent of the university students suffering from depression. The university students are under the impression that it would affect their future employment prospects. Negative

implications would occur in mental health in absence of proper interpersonal communication (Xiao, 2020; Kmietowicz *et al*, 2020).

Parental income and a close relative or friend becoming a COVID-19 patient are another vital aspect that affects the pupil/student mental health drastically without a gender difference. Importantly, the urban pupils and students are less prone to depression than their rural peers (Shigemura *et al* 2020). At the moment, Sri Lankan students enjoy protection in villages more than cities. Sometimes, the urban students are better informed about the pandemic situation. The rural students' attitude towards the pandemic is low-key. Factors such as lower income of parents, tendency to lose job, pay-cuts and miscellaneous parental pressure would not be ideal for the pupil/student mental health. Some students lose one parent; some lose both parents. This also has an impact on their mental health. The way the rural students are affected varies from that of their urban peers. A permanent parental income might be a protection. But most students lack that protection.

School education

Schooling is the best weapon in terms of national policy to enhance skills. The school-going stage is an entertaining period. It is the perfect opportunity to enhance social skills

as well as social awareness in addition to establishing a foundation on development. A considerable discriminatory gap exists among the four million schoolchildren in terms of urban and rural setting. The private school system has a different set up. The pupils from rural backgrounds may have certain reasons to be reluctant to go to school. Even the pupils with technological equipment at home will have to be guided. The parental guidance requires knowledge on technological equipment. The global education has experienced not only the school closures, but also the delays in examinations. Human Rights organisations emphasise the need to protect children's right for education. They point out that the education shall continue uninterrupted with the aid of technological equipment while curbing domestic violence. Many facets of the children deprived of freedom must be considered.

Closure of universities, teaching and assessment

This subject deserves a broad discussion. Long- and short-term solutions must be sought to redress the issues embedded therein. The closure of universities affects the student education. Cancellation of common assessments as well as the continuation of assessments is a tough task. Action should be taken to decelerate the negative consequences. The undergraduates who would be graduates in a short period are the most affected. This affects not only their assessments. This is a global phenomenon. Even once the pandemic is over, they might turn to a low-pay employment in a fallen economy. The closure of education institutes is burdened with the unfinished assessments. Low-cost alternatives could be sought while cancelling the common assessments. The postponement of research conferences, sports events (internal and inter-university) will enforce alternatives. Experiment is underway to investigate the alternatives to teach and learn at the universities.

Activities with modifications take place in the Sri Lanka national university structure. Emphasis must be placed on the previously mentioned social background as well. The teacher-centred learning is being converted into the student-centred learning. A certain kind of agitation is visible in teachers and students about switching to the *Internet alternative*. Lessons are already prepared and transmitted to the students on WhatsApp. This is however not without barriers. Switching to the online mode has its own share of issues. The circulars issued by the University Grants Commission too have practical obstacles.

It is pertinent to mention here a few key points raised from a questionnaire handed to 20 undergraduates randomly chosen at the Sri Lanka Rajarata University. The common question posed to them is whether they are interested in online learning from home. Everyone responded in the affirmative. However, 60 per cent of the respondents claimed to have no internet connection at home. The lack of technological facilities, barred access to institutional libraries and incapability to prepare lessons properly are major aspects. The lack of access to technological facilities should also be investigated. In the meanwhile, attempt to complete mid-semester exams is also observed. This has an effect on many subject areas in a diverse form. How is it possible to conduct online courses on laboratories, music and arts? How do you gauge the quality? (Sahu: 2020) ^[6]. Not only Sri Lanka, but the whole world pays attention to this issue. Some textbooks can only be taught in the classrooms. Literary appreciation is hardly teachable online. Sometimes

the courses designed to teach in a personal scale would not be teachable online. Moreover, the student's tendency to play fraudulent cannot be certified online. On the other hand, lack of internet access will affect the students' assessments and grades.

The unnecessary anxiety that the pandemic will have a negative effect on the grades must be taken off the students. Proper advice must be issued on mid-semester exams, assignments and project activities. We must particularly be sensitive towards the student with lack of internet access without being glued to the belief that the majority shall have access to internet. Consideration on sympathetic grounds must be applied to the grading when a certain student is unwell (hence challenging to follow a course online). Laboratory-involved and fine-art related subjects cannot be taught online. Therefore, it is more appropriate to introduce a grading system based on the student's activities done so far.

Conclusion

This is the epitome period for the policymakers to cast a look at the world with a new perspective. Emphasis must be paid to the teaching and technology methodology. A blended learning system is more appropriate. The structure of the courses must change. Information about revisions and amendments must be updated on the university website. A change in the personal attitude makes it possible to create a world with a novel education system.

References

1. Alexander Bäuerle, Eva-Maria Skoda, Nora Dörrie, Juliane Böttcher, Martin Teufel, Psychological support in times of COVID-19: the Essen community-based CoPE concept, *Journal of Public Health*, fdaa053, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa053>
2. BMJ Covid-19: Doctors are told not to perform CPR on patients in cardiac arrest, 2020. 368 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1282>
3. Joel Spring (200) *The Universal right to education*, Lawrence Erlbaum Association publishers, Mahwah, New Jersey, London.
4. Kim SW, Su KP. Using psychoneuroimmunity against COVID-19. *Brain Behav Immun*. pii: S0889-1591(20)30391-3, 2020. DOI: 10.1016/j.bbi.2020.03.025
5. Paul Carter, Michael Anderson, Elias Mossialos. Health system, public health, and economic implications of managing COVID-19 from a cardiovascular perspective, *European Heart Journal*, ehaa 342, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurheartj/ehaa342>
6. Sahu P. Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. *Cureus*. 2020; 12(4):e7541. doi:10.7759/cureus.7541
7. Wenjun Cao, Ziwei Fang, Guoqiang Hou, Han M, Xu X, Dong J, *et al*. The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China, *Psychiatry Research*, 2020; 287(112934). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934>.
8. Wilder-smith A, Freedman DO. Isolation, quarantine, and social distancing and community containment: pivotal role for old-style public health measures in the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak. *J Travel Med*. 2020 Mar 13, 2020, 27(2). pii: taaa020. doi: 10.1093/jtm/taaa020.