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Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bhutan: The School Principals' Perspective

Lotey Gyeltshen¹ and Alan Shoho²

¹Vice Principal, Arekha Middle Secondary School, Bhutan

²Provost and Chief Academic Officer at New Mexico State University, USA

*Corresponding Author, e-mail: loteygyeltshen@education.gov.bt

Abstract

The goal of this study was to look at online learning in Bhutan during the worldwide COVID-19 from the perspective of school principals. This research used a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews as the data gathering approach. The information was gathered from 18 school principals that were chosen through the purposive sampling method. In order to generate themes from the data acquired through the semi-structured interview questions, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process was used. The study findings revealed that online learning was beneficial during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was ineffective because of several challenges regarding parental support, resource constraints at home and at school, teacher-student competency in using online learning tools, and accountability in terms of student task assessment. School principals, on the other hand, were offering support through professional development for teachers and students on how to use online learning resources, as well as communicating with parents, students, and teachers with a monitoring system put in place. As a result, rapid support and collaboration from key stakeholders are critical in order to make online learning more effective.

Keywords: Bhutanese Education, Educational Challenges, COVID-19, Online Learning, Principal

Introduction

The global COVID-19 has greatly affected education throughout the world. According to a report by a UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2021), there are about 117 million children that are still

affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and Bhutan is no exception, where the teaching and learning of students were adversely impacted beginning in academic year 2020. In order to resume and provide the continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic, as in any developed country, the educational institutions in Bhutan have adopted virtual learning. However, the unpreparedness for such a move was a daunting task due to shortages of infrastructure and financial support necessary for virtual teaching and learning transformation (Dube, 2020; Mncube et al., 2021). The current pandemic has reminded every educator of the necessity of a new approach of teaching and learning that fits learners from various backgrounds under the support of school leaders and administrators. More than ever, the roles and quality of school leaders are felt to be important with several challenges to implement online learning, which may require leaders to change their leadership styles. Though the principles of effective leadership are constant (Leithwood et al., 2020), with the present global pandemic, a shift in school leadership to meet the current context is deemed important. Unlike in developed countries, where virtual learning in schools and school networks existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gurr, 2006), such a major practice in Bhutan emerged only after the pandemic.

Globally, studies have reported the impact of the pandemic on students' learning outcomes, teacher readiness, and the role of technology in maintaining continuity of education (Black et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Wangdi et al., 2021). In the context of Bhutan, existing research has primarily focused on students' and teachers' perceptions of online learning, stressing issues like technological competency, access to resources, and adaptability of the curriculum (Barker & Gossman, 2013; Jamtsho & Bullen, 2007; Limniou & Smith, 2010; Wangmo et al., 2020). Despite these contributions, gaps remain in understanding the perspective of the school leaders' views of virtual learning, who play a critical role in facilitating online learning, specifically in the Bhutanese context. Furthermore, while many studies have explored the challenges of online learning, less attention has been paid to the role of school principals during the prolonged disruption like COVID-19. Thus, this study aims to explore the broader institutional challenges and the innovative solutions adopted by school leaders. In doing so, it could help school policymakers design support for schools and their leaders if such a crisis takes place in the near future.

Research questions

1. What were the school leaders' perceptions of the implementation of online learning during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges that schools are facing with online learning?

3. What should schools and their leaders do to better support their teachers in using online learning?

Literature review

The COVID-19 has severely affected teaching and learning across the world. It has imposed numerous challenges on the current situation for the school leaders. Studies have already revealed that principals have been noted to experience highly stressed due to workloads, a lack of resources, interpersonal conflicts, and internal pressure (Elomaa et al., 2021; Nitta et al., 2019), which the current pandemic has further added to. For instance, a study conducted by Upadyaya et al. (2021) among principals in Finland concluded that 41.4% of the principals showed high levels of stress related to their workload, work burnout, and COVID-19 related concerns, yet the schools managed to provide teaching and learning effectively. However, this may not be the case in many underdeveloped and developing countries where a lack of educational resources, financial support, internet connectivity, socioeconomic background, and other issues are a major constraint. This difference requires immediate attention in order to minimize the digital divides that are obtained with teachers' lack of training in technology usage in instructional practices for example (Schleicher, 2020), Therefore, the principal's role and purpose as a digital-Leader need to be considered. According to Avolio and Kahai (2003), the purpose of digital leadership is to establish relationships and to communicate information with followers using information technology. However, as is often said, the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning requires a positive attitude of school leaders. For instance, a study conducted by Gyeltshen (2021) on the relationship between principals' technological leadership styles and teachers' use of information and communication technology (ICT) in Bhutan found that the principals moderately supported the teachers' use of ICT in teaching and learning. This leads to a dilemma on the part of the principal in terms of support in the use ICT as a tool for teaching and learn during the COVID-19, but, the pivotal roles of principals during such a crisis cannot be denied; in fact, the principals role as a communicator has been deemed very important for motivating the trust and satisfaction among teachers and communities (Madlock, 2008; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). As in many parts of the world where schools and educational institutions have recognized the importance of learning management systems (LMS) to accomplish a synchronous or asynchronous learning approach (Rasmitadila et al., 2020), Bhutan has been introduced to such reforms for the first time. Yet, the implementation was a challenge for the schools and parents. Further, for the first time, intensive use of virtual teaching and learning came into

play only with the outbreak of the current pandemic. Thus, successful adoption at the school level was an immense challenge.

Research design

The qualitative case study approach was used in the present study as this approach helps to know the in-depth understanding of the experience and phenomena from the participants' perspective with reference to time and context (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Wellner & Pierce-Friedman, 2019). Furthermore, such methods are becoming more popular in deeper finding on why and how phenomenon occurs in the educational discipline (Cresswell, 2003), providing a deeper level of insight into particular issues.

Methodology

To explore school principal's perspective of online learning during the global pandemic, this study followed a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2000) as this approach allows researcher to gather broader and in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation.

Research site and Sample selection

The population of this study consisted of school principals from one province in Bhutan. There were 36 school principals in the location, and for this study, a total of 18 school principals were selected using a purposive sampling method as they better understand virtual learning at their own schools. In addition, the respondents shared similar professional experience in terms of school location which might allow them to share (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001) effectiveness of online teaching and learning in their school.

Data collection and Analysis

The data was collected using interviews through semi-structured questions as this type of approach allows the researcher to generate a broad range of items to understand the issues in-depth from the perspective of respondents (Guest et al., 2017). This provides wider and broader views on the topic. Before the interview was conducted, interview questions were sent to two expert reviewers to ensure the reliability of the questions. After ensuring the reliability of questions using expert reviews, the participant consent form was asked from the selected participant. Furthermore, the data gathered

from each principal respondent were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4...P17 and P18 to retain the confidentiality of the statement shared by the respondents.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to generate themes from the data gathered, as this method helps researchers to identify, examine, and describe patterns within the data sets. To draw themes, Braun and Clarke's six-step technique was followed: The first step was data familiarisation, where I read and reread the transcripts and audio recording to note initial ideas. The second step involved generating initial codes mainly to identify and capture important features from the data. The third step was looking for themes, during which I re-examined and grouped the codes to generate potential themes. This was followed by the fourth step: reviewing themes, during which I checked coded data and themes mainly to ensure they are consistent, coherent and distinct. The fifth step involved defining and naming themes to reflect the core meaning and relevance and the final step was writing final reports.

Research results

This qualitative case study was conducted with the principals of schools in one of the provinces in Bhutan as stated. The respondents answered the semi-structured questions individually in order to ascertain the important emerging themes that would justify the underlying research question, which aimed at studying the perceptions of online learning, the challenges that the schools and school principals faced, and the strategies that the schools and school principals used to ensure the quality of online teaching and learning. The results of the study are discussed based on the following questions, under which the themes are explained.

1. What are the school leaders' perceptions of the implementation of online learning during the pandemic?

Leaders are the change-makers that can transform the teaching and learning process at their schools. Therefore, when the participants were asked about their perception of online learning, two different themes emerged after the discussion and analysis as follows.

Being helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic

The respondents stated that teaching online was helpful for students as it gave them the opportunity to learn. For instance, one of the principals (P1) shared the following: *"the adoption of online learning allows the process of learning something beyond the norm where a learner has access*

to all relevant topics in each subject, which is otherwise not affordable or imaginable during this pandemic time.”

Another respondent (P3) noted the following:

Online learning is the best method to ensure undisrupted education in situations like lockdowns brought on by COVID-19. It is good to leverage and embark towards the use of technology in teaching and learning purposes rather than merely being idle and of no help to children during a pandemic.

These statements from the respondents indicated that resorting to and adopting online learning provided continuity in the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of effectiveness

The majority of the respondents revealed that though the adoption of online learning supports the continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic, it was not very effective when it came to implementation. This was clear from one of the respondents (P2):

I believe the adoption of online learning is one of the inevitable solutions to keep continuity in the teaching and learning process in the school during the pandemic. However, the effectiveness level of this noble option remains a challenge at different levels in different regions due to a lack of uniformity in requirements.

Another respondent (P5) stated the following “*The adoption of online learning in such times is effective if all the components like internet facilities, parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds, and knowledge of using online learning platforms are met.*” This suggests that effectiveness in adopting and using online learning during such a global crisis is a major concern that could have impacted the quality of teaching and learning at large. It also illustrates the importance of having the appropriate infrastructure, professional development, and technical support in place in order to create an effective online teaching and learning environment.

2. What are the challenges that schools are facing with online learning?

The switching of teaching and learning from face to face to virtual has become mandatory all over the world. The online learning mode has been well regarded during situations such as COVID-19, but adapting to such a mode has its pros and cons. Similarly, when the respondents were asked about the issues related to virtual learning, the following four important themes were revealed.

Lack of parental support

Most of the respondents noted that there was a lack of parental support during the teaching and learning online owing to the parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds, imposing major setbacks on

supporting their children during online learning. This was clear from one of the respondents (P7) who shared the idea that “*parents in the far flung areas do not initiate their children’s learning since they themselves are illiterate.*” Another respondent (P8) stated the following: “*I feel learning happens only for students whose parents are educated and know the importance of online learning.*” These statements given above reflect that the effectiveness of online learning somehow depends on the parents’ support to continue learning at home.

Students’ and teachers’ competency with online learning tools

The respondents came to the conclusion that the adoption and use of online learning depends on the competency of teachers and students in using online learning tools, which many of the teachers and students lack. For instance, one of the principal respondents (P11) stated the following: “*even some teachers are not fully aware of how to go with online learning.*” Another stated, “*Not all teachers are equally equipped in terms of how to use knowledge. While many of my teachers are information technology (IT) savvy, a handful of my teachers are beyond any help to cope with the requirement.*” Furthermore, a respondent (P13) added that “*like teachers, the majority of our children were not aware of online learning apps.*” This without a doubt conveys that there are still many teachers and students that are not proficient in using online learning tools.

Lack of resources at home and school

Online learning will not be effective if access to learning facilities is not met. Similarly, all of the respondents stated that the lack of resources at home for students to learn virtually was a major challenge. One of the principal respondents (P 4) mentioned that “*some of the important challenges we faced were the non-availability of smartphones, computers, televisions, and poor internet connectivity both at home and school. This has really affected online learning.*” Another principal (P15) added that “*due to the lack of IT facilities and provision of internet connectivity regularly at home, it has severely affected student participation during online learning.*” These quotes strongly indicate that, by and large, access to online learning facilities both at home and at school was a significant challenge for every school to be concerned about.

Accountability in assessing students work

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning, without which the process of teaching and learning will be incomplete. The respondents confirmed that the students’ assessment was burdensome and, at the same time, there was an issue of accountability for the students’ work submitted. Accordingly, a respondent (P6) stated the following:

First and foremost, not all students respond to the given tasks on time, and at the same time, a lot of children have no idea how the answers are responded to when asked by teachers face to face, so they just copy and paste the answers of their friends. Additionally, it is difficult to see how teachers comply with what the children have written and how the teachers respond to the children.

Another principal (P14) confirmed the following: “*Schools were not able to check the students’ learning, and at the same time, we couldn’t even rely on the work submitted.*” The statements given by these participants confirm that assessing students’ work was somewhat unfair as there was no proper correcting or checking system to assure that the task was completed by the child himself or herself.

3. What should the schools and their leaders do to better support their teachers in using online learning?

Keeping in mind the importance of online learning in continuing the teaching and learning process, the schools and their leaders were entrusted with major roles to support learning despite several challenges, and the following three themes emerged from the interviews.

School familiarization with online learning tools

The majority of the respondents indicated that since the teachers and students did not know how to use the online tools and applications, the schools conducted professional development initiatives for both the teachers and students. This was elaborated by one of the principals (P9) in the following:

Teaching an online course requires different methods from the traditional classroom, so it’s important that teachers adapt or develop their skills for the online learning environment, to make their materials effective and engaging for learners. Thus, I made sure that all the teachers attended professional development programs related to conducting online classes and sharing online resources with the children.

Another added (P10) the following: “*As a school principal, we provided adequate orientation and familiarization programs for the students on the use of various online learning apps like Zoom and Virtual Meet, use of Google forms, Google Classroom, telegraph, and We Chat.*” This clearly points out that the school principal, as the head of the organization, ensured that teachers and students are familiar with online learning tools.

Communication using online learning

Communication is the key element for having a successful school. Whether it is a management process or academic learning, it is imperative to ensure that every stakeholder knows what is happening

with the teaching and learning process in the school. For instance a respondent (P8 & P12) affirmed that *“as a school principal, I made frequent reminders to students, parents, and teachers on the importance of online teaching and learning.”* Another principal (P18) stated the following: *“The school made parents aware of the importance of electronic gadgets at this time of the pandemic and if such a pandemic occurs or lasts for years to come.”* One respondent remarked that *“the school passed information to parents on the task completion of their child.”* It is evident from all the remarks of the participants that the school established a partnership with parents through proper communication.

Monitoring of online learning

Providing checks and balances for teaching and learning is the key to enhancing learning outcomes. The principal respondents’ interviews established that in order to have proper teaching and learning online, a monitoring system is essential. For example, one of the participants (P17) stated that *“to make sure the students attend the class, the teachers are asked to find out the reasons for not attending the classes, and the school helps those students. The teachers also made sure to attend every class without fail”*

Another principal (P16) added that the: *“school administration maintains and verifies proper records of the teaching and learning of each child by the teachers through Google Sheets.”* From these statements, it can be seen that the school principals have put in place a proper monitoring system to produce effective online learning.

Discussion

The current study looked into virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic from the standpoint of school principals, specifically looking at perceptions, obstacles, and approaches implemented by the schools. COVID-19 has been a nightmare for educational leaders and other school stakeholders (Smith & Riley, 2012), but many countries have found their own ways to keep learning as a continuous process through the adoption of online learning. However, the effective adoption and implementation of learning virtually vary from country to country. On the one hand, online learning was found to be successfully implemented; on the other hand, it was found to be inefficient (Bahasoan et al., 2020). This variation was attributed to a lack of resources at the school level and at home (Morgan, 2020). The adoption and implementation of virtual learning were found to be helpful during the COVID-19, but, it lacked effectiveness in the context of Bhutan.

Parental partnerships in children’s education have been highly regarded in many countries. Nevertheless, lack of parents’ participation and the support of their children’s learning at home due to

several factors, such as lack of time, the inability to become teachers at home (Lase et al., 2020), difficulty with balancing one's personal life and child learning responsibilities, the children's motivation regarding remote learning and accessibility to online resources (Garbe et al., 2020) and the parents' socioeconomic factors (Treviño et al., 2021) have been seen to greatly influence the children's learning. Correspondingly, the lack of parental support of their children's online learning was one of the obstacles that hindered the proper implementation of learning virtually at the schools in Bhutan. Furthermore, it was revealed that the students' family income level and knowledge of information technology affected the effectiveness of their learning online (Mok et al., 2021). Further, the teachers' competency in using technology and their educational opportunity to learn technologies to become digitally competent were found to be influential in adapting to online teaching and learning (König et al., 2020). This was true of the current findings of the study as the study found that the teachers and students lacked digital knowledge that imposed on the smooth conduct of online teaching and learning. Successful learning through online platforms depends upon technological availability and access, individual challenges, cultural challenges, and course challenges (Almaiah et al., 2020), which vary from country to country. Likewise, a lack of resources, i.e. technological gadgets, Internet connectivity, and television, both at home and at school significantly influenced Bhutanese students' learning. Online learning provides flexibility, accessibility, and comfort in teaching and learning during disruptive situations. However, ineffectiveness and complexity in maintaining academic truthfulness were found to be challenging (Mukhtar et al., 2020), though assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. In view of this, assessing students' work was found to be burdensome and there was a question of integrity in the tasks submitted by children during the online learning, particularly in Bhutanese schools where the adaptation of virtual learning has taken place vigorously during COVID-19. However, the schools continued to teach during such times because of efforts put in by the teachers, led by the school principals.

A positive impact of the current pandemic was that it reminded school leaders to take up different leadership roles rather than the everyday normal leadership principles, particularly during such a global pandemics where the leaders have had to focus on recognizing impending risks, commencing measures to reduce and deal with their effects, and, once the acute crisis period has passed, re-establishing a feeling of normalcy (Boin et al., 2010). In particular, school leadership during crisis management was inevitable. One of the key qualities of an effective school principal is his or her capacity to address the school's needs and challenges through professional development programs. This is because effective principals can maintain high levels of competence by establishing conviction and by

creating structures that support teacher learning either by connecting with external or internal expertise (Youngs & Bruce, 2002). Likewise, in order to address the challenges that arise in having effective teaching and learning through virtual environments, the principals conducted professional development activities for both the teachers and students, mainly to familiarize them with the use of online learning tools. In fact, the principals took the role of effective communicators that set up two-way communication, sharing information and obtaining feedback throughout the school community (Bolman & Deal, 2002, Marzano et al., 2005). In the same way, the principals' constant and regular monitoring of academic activities helped to improve instructional effectiveness, staff motivation, academic roles, and develop strong communication with parents and community (Farid et al., 2020). Thus, during online learning, monitoring by school principals was a key strategy to be put in place to continue teaching and learning successfully.

Limitations and Future research

This study was qualitative in nature with a small sample size, which raises the issue of generalizability to a wider population (Thompson, 2011). In view of this, future research should focus on a mixed method approach with a larger sample size. Another limitation of this study is that it only covered one province out of Bhutan's 20 provinces; thus, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all schools because the perceptions, challenges, and steps taken by the schools and principals in other provinces may differ.

Conclusion

The teaching and learning in the schools of Bhutan are predominantly traditional in nature (i.e. face to face) and catered to the needs of both the teachers and learners until 2019. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time, educators were made to rethink the modern systems of learning that would help with the continuance of teaching and learning during peaceful times as well as during disruptive situations. Moreover, all of the stakeholders involved in the education process recognized the importance of blended learning, but it was not easy to accept virtual learning owing to the challenges of such a reform. Correspondingly, the findings from this study show that schools positively accepted the shift from traditional ways of teaching and learning to technology-based learning, yet when it came to implementation, it was challenging, mainly due to the several challenges that occurred at school and at home for the school leaders, teachers, students, and parents, who needed immediate technical support.

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