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Teaching the Privileged? Observations on the (UN) Inclusiveness of Online Education during Pandemic

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Abstract

Coronavirus pandemic has changed the existing norms of life all over the world. Among other areas of life, the pandemic has also hit the education sector, where recent statistics show that around 500 Million students worldwide were unable to access remote learning. In developing countries like Pakistan, which is amongst the top-twenty countries impacted by the pandemic, and where around 23 million children were already out of school, much of the progress made over the years has reversed. Drawing on 'Faucet Theory,' this paper questions the inclusiveness of online higher education and argues that the stories of successful shifting to online education seem to be unexclusive, representing only privileged students, while neglecting the under-privileged students. Exclusions faced by the under-privileged students, including those related to technological, financial, and social, have been highlighted through the present research, emerging from a close analysis of informal conversations with approximately 90 female students of undergraduate level in Pakistan. The study recommends further in-depth research unveiling the stories and implications for those left out in online education during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: coronavirus; COVID-19; online education; inclusion; privilege

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Introduction

When we heard about the spread of an epidemic disease called Corona Virus in late 2019, most of us did not anticipate that within a very short period, this disease will turn into a global pandemic, sabotaging life (almost) all over the world. On January 30, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) announced the epidemic of COVID-19 as a Global Health Emergency of International Concern(see World Health Organization, 2020), and only a weeks later, on March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (see Ducharme, 2020). Within the first year of its outbreak, the virus had already infected more than 52 million people and killed around one-and-a-half million people worldwide.

Apart from the health related concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic has badly affected the global economy as well(see McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Ozili & Arun, 2020; Torales, O'Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia, & Ventriglio, 2020). Like all the other sectors of socioeconomic life, the pandemic has also affected the education sector all across the world. A lot of schools and colleges, and universities have been closed temporarily, whereas another lot of schools, colleges, and universities were switched to various online and hybrid-learning platforms(see Chick et al., 2020; Ferrel & Ryan, 2020; Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020). Recent statistics by UNESCO (2020)reveal that by the end of April 2020, educational institutions were closed in approximately 186 countries, which affected approximately 74 percent of total enrolled students in the world, and evidently, students in Global Southern countries suffered more.

There is a lot of appreciation of how educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, have coped up with the pandemic by successfully imparting education through online mode. Not undermining the hard work done by the academicians and students, my paper questions the inclusiveness of online higher education during the pandemic. The question of my research study was, "Is the transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic equally inclusive for all students?

Review of Literature

Since social distancing is the requirement of this era, the majority of educational institutions worldwide have force-shifted to distant -online-mode of education. The rapid and 'forced' transition from offline learning to remote -online- learning has, at the same time, brought a lot of opportunities and challenges for the stakeholders. For example, authors

such as Carey (2020) highlight the opportunities offered by online learning. The author discusses that due to the forced transition, institutions that were previously reluctant to adopt modern technology have invested time, money, and energy in adopting modern technology. Online learning has also provided more opportunities for international collaborations given virtual classrooms allow to sermonize a large number of participants at any part of the world and at any given time. The author also mentions that many higher educational institutions worldwide have completely digitalized their setups to cope up with the need of the pandemic.

Not undermining the opportunities of online learning, Carey (2020) states that amid this rapid digitalization, the quality of teaching and learning is crucial to look at. Other authors, such as Bozkurt and Sharma (2020), Murphy (2020), and Zhang and colleagues (2020),highlight the challenges and constraints of online education that also need to be examined. The authors state that the quality of 'emergency remote teaching' during the COVID-19 pandemic is questionable because of the lack of online teaching and learning infrastructure, the information gap between teachers and students, inexperience of teachers, and the complex environment at home. Furthermore, issues related to the (in)competencies of teachers in using digital teaching platforms and pedagogy and lack of mentoring and support to teachers and students were also challenging for both teachers and students amid the pandemic (Huber & Helm, 2020).

Besides the literature exploring the pros and cons of online education, there also exists a broad pre-pandemic scholarship that emphasizes the ease online education offers to the learners. For example, (Cojocariu and colleagues (2014, p. 15) state:

> "Most of the terms (online learning, open learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, m-learning, for ex.) have in common the ability to use a computer connected to a network, that offers the possibility to learn from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, with any means."

In normal circumstances, I would agree with what the authors have stated in the quotation above, presuming that the quotation is about the ease for people who choose to opt for online education. However, in the case of the 'forced' transition to online education amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I fear that where this transition might have brought ease for some, it has excluded and made vulnerable many other learners, which is

the focus of this paper.

What also lacks in online education during the pandemic, but otherwise as well, is empathy. Various authors have emphasized the lack of empathy in disporting online education as a significant barrier to learning(see, for example, Brelsford et al., 2020; Doyumğaç, Tanhan, & Kiymaz, 2020; Evans, 2020; Sentas, Malouff, Harris, & Johnson, 2018). Most of these authors have emphasized on including empathy in online education to improve its quality. UNESCO (2005) has also recommended empathy as a tool of 'inclusion' in education; suggesting to (i) recognize, acknowledge and involve the key players in support of education, (ii) making attitudes and values more inclusive, (iii) designing curricula that is more accessible and flexible, (iv) and empower all those are involved. This guideline by UNESCO (2005) can make education more inclusive; online or offline.

Being an active part of academia during the COVID-19 pandemic and being a researcher who has a keen interest in studying (in)equalities and (un)inclusiveness in various aspect of life, I was interested in observing the difference in online learning opportunities available to different students, their different levels of performance given their opportunities, and the fact that despite all the differences and adaptations, the evaluation criteria for students remained the same as the one we had before pandemic, which made the basis of this research paper.

Theoretical Framework

According to the "Faucet Theory" by Entwisle and colleagues (2001), educational institutions usually work on the principle of equality, providing equal benefits to children belonging to all socioeconomic backgrounds. In this case, the 'faucet' flows equally for every student. However, the authors further argue that during school breaks (or absenteeism (Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020)), the faucet only flows from the students from higher socioeconomic classes, where they, due to their financial and time privileges, tend to excel in their educational learning as compared to the students coming from lower socioeconomic classes. This creates and maintains hierarchy in educational institutions, where students from privileged backgrounds are on the top.

While the original theory by Entwisle and colleagues (2001)claimed that during the school, the 'faucet' of education flows equally on all the students without any discrimination, literature shows that the Pandemic (online) education has made their claim invalid. This paper focuses on exploring the (un)inclusiveness of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The section that follows provides an overview of the methodological choices of my paper.

Methodology

To answer the research question, my data come from extensive covert (non)participant observation and informal conversations with young female university students of undergraduate level in Pakistan for over a period of seven months. The observations were noted from March 15, 2020, to October 15, 2020. In total, I observed five classes which included approximately 90 students, primarily 18- to 22-year-olds. Being an insider, I had easy access to the classes and already established rapport with the participants. The students belonged to different socioeconomic classes and different geographical regions inside Pakistan. Their household composition, educational qualification and professions of parents and other family members, and family support also varied. Although most of the observed students ultimately managed to participate in online classes, assignments, quizzes, and exams, this paper represents the voices of those unprivileged students who struggled with participation in online education due to various reasons.

On average, I observed at least 13 hours a week, divided into four weekdays. Informal conversations were held even outside the observation times. My observation technique was a mix of the participant and non-participant observation; therefore, the students were not informed beforehand to avoid the 'Hawthorne effect', that is, an effect due to which individuals modify their behavior when they know that they are being observed(see Sedgwick, 2012). To record the observations, I followed Atkinson and colleagues' (2012)methods of note-taking; I carried a separate notebook and recorded extensive observation notes, trying to write exact words where possible. Since the student-teacher interaction was bilingual, I recorded observations bilingually using the roman script of English and Urdu language. For written informal conversations through chat, I kept the screenshots in a separate folder to keep the record. To maintain the anonymity of students, I have used pseudonyms in this article while using direct quotations.

Coding. I coded the observation notes in a qualitative software called Atlas.ti. I did inductive coding, where the codes were not pre-defined; rather, they emerged from the data (Williamson, Given, & Scifleet, 2018). The three most commonly emerged codes are presented as the main thematic findings of this paper, including (i) technological exclusion; (ii) financial exclusion; and (iii) social exclusion.

Limitations. Firstly, since it was a teacher-student relationship between the participants and me, the (perceived) power-relation could influence the behavior of the students. Secondly, there could also be a possibility of the Hawthorne effect. To minimize these limitations, I chose the covert observation method.

Findings and Discussion

The research findings are provided following three different yet interrelated themes. In all three of the themes, 'health' remains the overarching -contextual- finding:

Technological Exclusion. The first theme that emerged from my code is 'technological exclusion.' Under this theme, I will elaborate in the context of health, how access to technology benefits some of the (privileged) students, whereas makes the under-privileged ones more vulnerable to inequality and excluded from learning. My data show two types of technological exclusion; the first is inaccessibility of digital infrastructure, and the second is digital (il) literacy.

Where most of the students had access to wireless internet at home, only a few of them had their own computer or laptop to work on. However, it was very obvious to observe that students who had greater bandwidth of internet could participate better during online classes, whereas those who had a slower internet connection kept struggling with connecting and reconnecting in the class. Besides the health issues, a lot of students and their families had to face, the fear of being left behind in their courses was much of a problem. The following is an excerpt from my informal communication with one of the students.

> *Nida*: I am sorry ma'am I could not inform you earlier that I cannot attend the class. My brother is COVID positive, and we had to move to a relative's house to stay away from my brother. We had no internet access there, and I could not request anybody to go out to buy a mobile data package for me. I hope you understand…
>
> *Ruby*: Hey Nida. I am sorry to hear about your brother. I hope he feels better soon. Don't worry about the class; I will upload the recording. Please watch it when you can and mark your attendance.
>
> *Nida*: Thank you, ma'am. And what about the assignment? The deadline is the day after tomorrow, and I haven't started yet…
>
> *Ruby*: Relax! How can you do the assignment if you don't have access to the internet? You will need the internet to do the

> research, right?
> *Nida*: Yes, ma'am… But the Class Representative (CR) told me that you have said late submissions will result in deduction of marks?
> *Ruby*: Yes, I said this. But you have a genuine problem. You have informed me that you are unable to do it. This is fine. Try to get internet access and let me know when you can do the assignment.
> *Nida*: Thank you, ma'am.

The conversation illustrates health and family-related stress due to the pandemic, which was multiplied by the stress related to their academic performance. In such situations, the families who were directly affected by the virus were kind of excluded from online education, and in fact, got lesser grades as compared to the students who remained unaffected directly.

Since all the assignments, quizzes, and exams were held online, technologically unprivileged students did not only suffer in learning, but it also affected their exam performance due to lack of technological infrastructure. Obviously, there was a lot of difference between the exam papers, which were typed on a computer, and those which were typed on a mobile phone. Apart from the content, the submission timing, formatting, layout, and presentation also varied to a great extent, which affected the grades.

With the shift to online learning, pedagogical techniques also changed and became more digitalized. As a result, students were expected to use more digitalized ways of making assignments and participating in various class activities. This gave benefit to those students who had access to a better internet connection, up to date digital infrastructure, and digital literacy. Since these digital mediums were not taught in class, the expectation from all the students to use them was unfair for some.There were students who used to do much better grade-wise in offline classes and could not do well in online learning because they were technologically unprivileged.

Financial Exclusion: The second theme that emerged from my data is 'financial exclusion.' Since digitalization demands financial flow, which a lot of families were struggling with due to unemployment and lesser work opportunities amid the pandemic, under this theme, I will elaborate on the unaffordability of online learning and 'poverty of time,' under the broader context of health.

While there exists broad pre-pandemic scholarship (for example, see Ajaz, 2014)claiming that distance and online education is comparatively

cost-effective, the findings of this research show contrary. Opting for online education by choice might be cost-effective for some; the forced transition to online education was not cost-effective for a lot of students. Many of them had to buy equipment such as -among other things- 'laptops, "computers, "internet connection," smart phones, 'and a 'desk to work on.' In such a time of economic crisis, where a lot of people became jobless or had lesser work opportunities, this was a huge burden on pocket, resulting in the benefit of those who could afford, while excluding the unprivileged students.

Online education not only demanded technological equipment but also a lot more time and effort than usual -offline- education. On average, the students mentioned that they used to spend around 30 hours per week on their offline studies, whereas they mentioned spending on an average, at least 40-45 hours on their online studies. This affects their work-family balance and makes them compromise other things they need to do, including household chores. The following excerpt from an informal conversation with one of the students reflects the same:

> *Ruby*: Hey Hiba. I see that you have not submitted your mid-term assignment. The deadline was tomorrow. You were also not there during our last class. Is everything alright?
> *Hiba*: Ma'am I am really sorry can you give me one more day? I thought the deadline is weekend…
> *Ruby*: But it is clearly written on the assignment that submission deadline is Friday 11:59 pm. I had also mentioned it during the class. How did you not see it?
> *Hiba*: Yes, ma'am… I was not in the last class because my grandmother is sick, so we had a lot of guests at home. I could not read the assignment details, and I don't know why I was so sure that submission deadline is Sunday. I am sorry… Please give me another day
> *Ruby*: It is okey. What happened to your grandmother? Is she feeling better now?
> *Nida*: Ma'am she is a heart patient; she is on bed since last three to four months.
> *Ruby*: I am sorry to hear this. How did you manage before?
> *Nida*: Ma'am it was manageable before lockdown. I stayed some extra time in the university and finished my assignments etc. But now, because I am at home, everybody expects me to sit with guests and do housework. Nobody understands that I have to do work...
> *Ruby*: I can imagine! This is with all of us. Best of luck, and please try to make a timetable and fix some hours strictly for your studies…
> *Nida*: Thank you ma'am… I will!

The conversation shows the struggle female students have to do for work-family balance, during online education. I also observed that students, who belonged to the upper-middle class or upper class, had house help, so they had lesser household responsibilities as compared to their fellows belonging to the middle class or lower-middle class. As a result, students coming from privileged families had more luxury to spend time on their studies, and the unprivileged students were double burdened.

Social Exclusion: The third theme that emerged from my data is 'social exclusion.' In the text that follows, I will elaborate my findings on social exclusion in terms of the learning environment at home in the broader context of health. While in offline education, universities provide equal infrastructure facilities to all the students, it was contrary to online education. Since online education demanded the students to study at home and participate in online classes from home, the learning environment varied for all the students. Here, variables such as -among others- education of the parents, number of siblings, education of siblings, size of the family, age of the family members, size of the house, health condition of the family members, occupation of other family members, and marital status of the student played their part. Due to the gendered division of labor, girls are expected to participate in housework, which made it difficult for a lot of students to participate in online classes, especially in the morning. Furthermore, where students who had a private space to study felt comfortable in switching on their cameras and unmuting their microphones when they want to speak, students living in smaller houses could not do so because of background noises and unwanted visuals. This resulted in lesser participation opportunities for unprivileged students.

Figure 1 summarizes the forms of exclusions in online education during the pandemic. The figure shows technological exclusions in the form of inaccessibility to digital infrastructure and level of digital literacy, financial exclusions in the form of unaffordability of learning equipment and poverty of time, and social exclusions in the form of the learning environment at home. The figure also shows the 'health' condition as an overarching factor in all three of the themes.

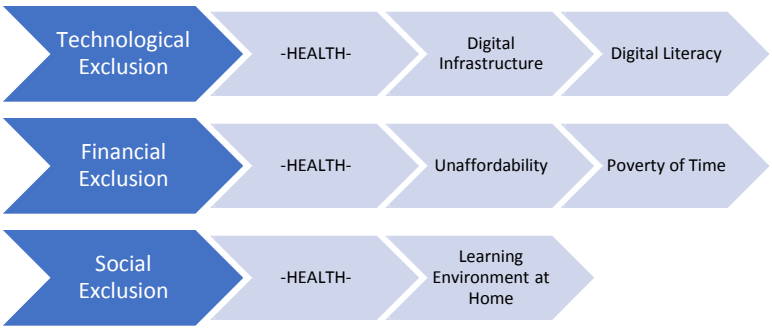

Figure 1. Various Forms of Exclusions in 'Forced' Online Education

Conclusion

Based on extensive (non) participant observation of undergraduate students during online education, this paper finds out that the transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic was not equally inclusive for all the students. The results show that in online education, the 'Faucet' flows only for privileged students, which Entwisle and colleagues (2001) claimed flows equally for all students in offline schools. Besides the physical and mental health challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic, inaccessibility to digital infrastructure, lesser digital literacy, unaffordability of technological equipment, poverty of time, and unfavorable learning environment at home, exclude the unprivileged students from learning and make them more vulnerable. In the text that follows, I offer some recommendations for people future researchers and academicians, based on the findings of my research.

This paper highlighted the concerns of those unprivileged students whose voices were not heard otherwise. For future research, my research recommends further in-depth research discussing the stories and implications of/for those left out in online education during the Coronavirus pandemic. For practitioners, my research recommends 'empathy' as a tool of inclusion, following the guidelines of UNESCO (2005) (see section0 for details).

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