

# Sri Lanka: Learning in the times of COVID-19

Monday 23 November 2020, by [NAJAB Nadhiya](#), [PALANSURIYA Natasha](#), [SALMAN Yumna](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2020).

**In an attempt to contain COVID-19, the number of children and youth not attending schools or universities is rising. With no end to the pandemic in sight, most of the world's population had to make a sudden shift to the online world while adapting to new ways of learning and working.**

The island-wide curfew imposed in mid-March to contain the spread of the virus in Sri Lanka lasted approximately two months, with a complete restriction on movement. The decision compelled learning to make an abrupt shift to the digital realm, mainly due to the uncertainty of when normal life would resume. The period of curfew saw widening gaps in educational inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic. Online education was a new phenomenon for most school-going children and their parents, and the lockdown revealed the urgent need to find long-term solutions to the obvious disparities in terms of distance learning.

Now, seven months later, after a short period of near-normalcy, community transmission of the virus is back, bringing back the question of the effectiveness of remote learning.

## Digital literacy in Sri Lanka

According to the Computer Literacy Statistics of 2019 published by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), only 29 per cent of the population aged 5 to 69 years used Internet facilities at least once during 2019. Only 22.2 per cent of households owned a laptop or desktop, and much of Sri Lanka's Internet connectivity is via mobile broadband as the usage of smartphones in Sri Lanka is at 70.9 per cent.

Where does Sri Lanka stand in terms of digital literacy? Statistics show that 44.3 per cent in Sri Lanka are digitally literate. As defined by the DCS 'a person between the ages 5-69 who can use a computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone on their own' is defined as digitally literate. But being digitally literate is much more than being able to merely use any of these devices, which sheds some light into the digital divide existing in our society.

## Education during lockdown

Education in Sri Lanka is meant to be free and equal, however, this was not the case even during pre-COVID. There existed a disparity in educational achievements, mainly dependent on the students' socio-economic backgrounds. Adding to this, due to the sudden halt in physical learning, students were expected to use digital resources to access schooling, which created the possibility for the gap in educational attainment to widen even more. Given the situation, quality of learning became dependent on Internet coverage, economic status of the family to access digital devices, and digital literacy of the students or parents to utilize technology for learning.

As the world continues to change, embracing technology for the purpose of learning seems like the only plausible next step. Nevertheless, learning cannot and does not happen in isolation. Despite

children having high levels of technical literacy, they require assistance and supervision to effectively engage in virtual learning. In turn, parents or guardians must don the hat of a teacher on top of their existing responsibilities. Therefore, mothers who worked a full-time job had to also allocate a certain amount of time for guiding their children during online classes while also juggling household obligations.

### **Left behind?**

For households that have shared devices for the entire family, overlapping online lessons and work commitments posed a challenge. In the case of online lessons, the parents had to pick which child gets preference. However, what happens when a family has two children, both in examination grades?

In households with limited resources, children do not always have access to learning materials. For instance, WhatsApp was chosen as a communication method since not all students had the facilities to participate in real-time video-based learning. Even so, some students were unable to access WhatsApp groups because the household did not have smartphones. In cases where the parents resumed travelling back to work, children were only able to gain access to the lesson a day later.

When physical teaching resumes, students who have little to no access to smartphones, laptops or an Internet connection run the risk of being at a further disadvantage as teachers will have to meet the differing needs of students. Inevitably, this could contribute to the surge in school dropouts due to the challenge of bridging the learning gap.

### **Future**

With uncertainty continuing to prevail, the question of how education will be carried out in the future still stands. Will schools notice the students who have been left behind due to lack of access to technology? Will the government introduce systems to combat inequality in terms of online learning facilities?

Perhaps the pandemic has presented us with an opportunity to realise that we have much to do for the future of our nation's education system, lockdown or not.

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The Sunday Times

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