

Rethinking Distance Education In Covid-19 Pandemic: Perspectives On Education Equity In The ‘New Normal’

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A. Introduction

In the midst of pandemic, distance learning is one of the most feasible pedagogic approaches to sustain education of mostly COVID-19 affected countries to help mitigate local transmission of the virus. However, with the introduction of new learning modalities in the pandemic, according to Azorin (2020), “there are doubts as to whether this will allow for the arrival of a pedagogical renewal movement or whether education will simply return to square one when the de-escalation phase ends.” (p. 1).

UNESCO (2002) defines distance education as “any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is thorough an artificial medium either electronic or print.” (p. 22). In addition, according to Moore & Kearsley (2011), distance education is about “teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through

technologies, as well as special institutional organization” (p.2). The definitions specify ‘different place from learning’ and use of ‘technologies’ in the teaching and learning process. In the context of pandemic, since face-to-face teaching at schools is neither feasible nor encouraged, the students have to learn essential concepts in any possible setting (e.g. at home). Both definitions describe the separation of learners in time and space from co-learners, teachers, learning sources, and even school environment especially the physical classroom setup.

Distance education becomes a viable means to address the current situation of bringing education at home where teachers and learners are geographically separated from each other. However, distance education or distance learning is not a new concept in the field of education. Its origin can be traced back since the 1850s from the early onset of ‘correspondence’ or ‘correspondence study’. In the advent of technological development, new media were introduced in education and the used of radio, television, fax, and computer for distance learning were unprecedented. The term ‘correspondence’ became delineated in a way to the ever changing education landscape in a contemporary education to be more inclusive in its definition. In 1982, the term distance education was formalized by the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), formally named as the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), (Zawacki-Richter, 2017, p. 612).

In this paper, a comprehensive literature review and analysis of ontological framework on distance education in the midst of pandemic were initiated. The focus of the paper is to explore the opportunities and understand the challenges of technological innovations that shifted the paradigm of distance education from its inception to the current practices utilizing the definition of Garrison

(1985) (as cited Zawacki-Richter, 2017) in the three milestones of technological innovations which are the (1) print media, (2) telecommunications media/multimedia, and (3) the personal computer. Particularly, the paper focuses on the third milestone exploring online education as an integral part of distance education and how this modality creates educational opportunities at the same time education inequity. Also, the paper discusses how technological innovations are relevant to the continuity of learning in a COVID-19 pandemic. The author also employed reflections grounded on Freire's Critical Pedagogy particularly on the perspectives of education equity vis-à-vis distance education in the 'New Normal'.

B. Discussion

1. A Critical Pedagogy: Education Equity in the 'New Normal'

The pandemic affected millions of students and teachers around the world. The health crisis prompted the world's authorities and experts to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 especially in the education sector. As the world seeks to find viable solution to end this pandemic, the education sector on the other hand is trying to cope with the 'new normal' in teaching and learning. Inevitably, the situation calls for diversified or differentiated approach to learning such as hybrid, blended learning or online modality as face-to-face teaching and learning is not feasible. However, learners and teachers are faced with marked difficulties and lingering doubts on how to make the learning experiences of distance education 'transformational' rather than 'prescriptive' and 'emancipative' rather than 'restrictive'.

In addressing education in the midst of pandemic, various educational institutions across the globe are adapting

different modalities in distance education. Despite the perceived setbacks, the most of these institutions shifted to synchronous and asynchronous learning using various learning delivery modalities such as modular, online, TV/Radio-based Instructions, among others. Remarkably, digital learning is chosen by most of the educational institutions as feasible alternative to actual classroom teaching. The advent of technological innovations in distance education is unprecedented and online learning for instance, made learning possible despite geographic and distance between learners and teacher. In addition, online education is not a new pedagogical practice in the 21st century. However, despite online learning's unquestionable importance in bridging education in the pandemic, not every learner has access to internet connection to include availability of gadgets and viable space for learning. With this kind of scenario, teaching and learning will not be achieved fully especially with the vulnerable and marginalized sectors of our society. Furthermore, collaboration and teacher and student relationship is imperative for over-all learning.

The 'New Normal' in education stems collaboration among teachers, learners, parents, the community and other relevant stakeholders to continue learning. However, in this collaboration, it is imperative to consider the agency of the child especially how learners adapt to the new modalities of distance education, alongside the desires and capability of parents or other adult decision-makers for the child's learning (Carter, et al., 2020). It is also important to take note that with this, the teachers, among others, are faced with gargantuan task to make sure learning continuous despite the pandemic. In addition, not all teachers are armed with profound knowledge and skills in addressing the emergencies in distance education. For example, the online grasp is one

of the most essential skills to possess during this pandemic by the teachers, but it is also considered as the main challenge for educators and academic institutions worldwide. While it is urgent in this situation to capitalize on the 'collaboration' among the key stakeholders, it is also important and necessary to consider the adaptability of the learners and the capability of the teachers in this shift of teaching and learning (Mohammed et al., 2020, p. 72).

In critical pedagogy, teacher and student relationship should embody the nature of cooperation, collaboration, and re-creation of knowledge as critical agents in the society. For instance, digital learning and pedagogical practices associated with it should reinforce or even build deeper connection and ensure constant teacher-student and student-teacher relationship as co-producer of knowledge. More than the instruction, it is also essential for the teachers to build further rapport with their learners especially how this pandemic revealed societal problem. According to Freire (1970), there is no such thing as neutral education. For him, education either brings conformity or freedom.

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators (Freire, 1970, p. 69)

The current deplorable situation of digital inequity during the pandemic especially in reaching the gaps on providing continuity of learning should be re-assessed. The digital inequity or divide creates a barrier for learners to achieve

inclusive education. Inevitably, the educational system bounded with one-size-fits-all approach (e.g. online learning) in addressing education in the pandemic becomes oppressive to the vulnerable and marginalized. Furthermore, the inaccessibility and unavailability of internet connection and gadgets for online learning, for example, could be the inevitable results of a class-based society. Freire (1970) radically rejected class-based society (Macedo, 2005) where interplay between oppressed and oppressor is prevailing. Therefore, the challenge of education equity is how to make distance education more inclusive to the different types of learners regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, gender, and religion during pandemic. The concept of digital divide or digital inequity is not a new concept in education. Interestingly, UNESCO (2020a) estimated that about 826 million people do not have access to household computers or internet-enabled devices in their homes worldwide. These million individuals around the world have no internet accessibility and even gadgets for online learning to start with.

However, the digital inequity or divide during the pandemic should not hinder teacher and learners to re-create their knowledge and discern about realities of the world. Digital learning should be an opportunity to allow learners and teacher to discover the world around them – not to create further divide in education inequity. Furthermore, distance education should support learners and ensure access to education for everyone. Garrison (1985) (as cited Zawacki-Richter, 2017) introduced the three generations of technological innovations that shifted the paradigm of distance education. These technological innovations became monumental and their humungous benefits to education are unquestionable. It made education available to everyone despite geographic

boundaries, transformed 21st century pedagogy to what it is today.

Therefore, the educators in all levels of instruction must ensure that implementing distance education should not be oppressive ensuring that education is still relevant and inclusive despite the pandemic. In addition, distance education should be diversified and consensual—such as in the development of the learning plan—between teacher and learners. As Freire (1970) emphasized:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption (Freire, 1970, p. 54)

Furthermore, the evidence-based and pragmatic approaches to distance education should not solely focus on the learning outcomes but rather how to create meaningful and transformative learning experiences for the learners in the pandemic (Aguiera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020). Distance education should not disregard the humanness of the learners and consider the flight of the families affected by the health crisis especially their pedagogical preparedness to cope with the current situation.

While we offer glimpses into our own approaches for supporting teachers and families engaging in ERT during this crisis, we want to be careful not to frame our work as “best practice,” but instead as our best attempts at upholding our commitments to critical pedagogies, humanizing relationships, and reflective practice during this crisis (Aguiera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020).

2. Inclusive Education in the Face of Pandemic

Education is a universal right, a fundamental concept fostering equal opportunities for all learners regardless of race, ethnicity, cultural group and religious affiliation (Sali and Marasigan, 2020). Inclusivity of education plays a pivotal role in the development and growth of education, perceived as a fundamental philosophy throughout UNESCO's programs. In 2015, the world leaders developed the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to include specific targets ensuring the access to quality, inclusive, and relevant education by 2030. The international covenant is still valid to ensure continuity of learning in the different countries around the world despite pandemic.

The current education response prompted the education sector to shift to distance education facilitated by mostly technology-aided modality. The essence of inclusivity and equitable continuation of learning for learners in crisis-affected and conflict-torn communities of the marginalized and vulnerable sectors of our society including displaced people such as refugees should be reflected. According to UNESCO (2020b) COVID-19 Education Response, "the wholesale adoption of such strategies without careful consideration to existing inequalities in education, notably the divides in connectivity and digital literacy, or language of instruction, risk being deepened and becoming entrenched beyond the current crisis." (p. 3).

Remarkably, distance education became an important milestone in making education available to everyone. However, at some point, it still suffers from a lack of perceived legitimacy (D'Agustino, 2012). At the end of 2019, the data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre show 50.8 million people were internally

displaced due to conflict and disasters—almost half of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are under the age of 25 (UNESCO, 2020b). The threat of the pandemic even made their situation worse or exacerbated. A one-size-fits-all approach to mitigate threat of education disruptions during pandemic is not suitable. In ensuring inclusive education, one should consider various options available in the implementation of distance education in the face of pandemic.

3. The 4As of Distance Education

According to Brindley et al. (2004), “distance education” or “distance learning” is “the overarching term for media-based learning and teaching” (p. 13). The central focus of distance education should make education available to everyone by bridging the distance or geographical separation in the teaching and learning. Aside from digital technology including online learning, there are different pedagogical approaches that can be utilized (e.g. correspondence, media-based including radio and television). In addressing education in the pandemic, initial assessment is essential and should be initiated to understand the situation of every learner including the teachers. With this measure, providing and adapting certain modalities in distance education becomes inclusive.

In guiding the major stakeholders, one should assess and analyze the 4As of distance education before implementing distance education measures in this time of pandemic: (1) accessibility (2) availability (3) adaptability and (4) acceptability (see Figure 1.0).

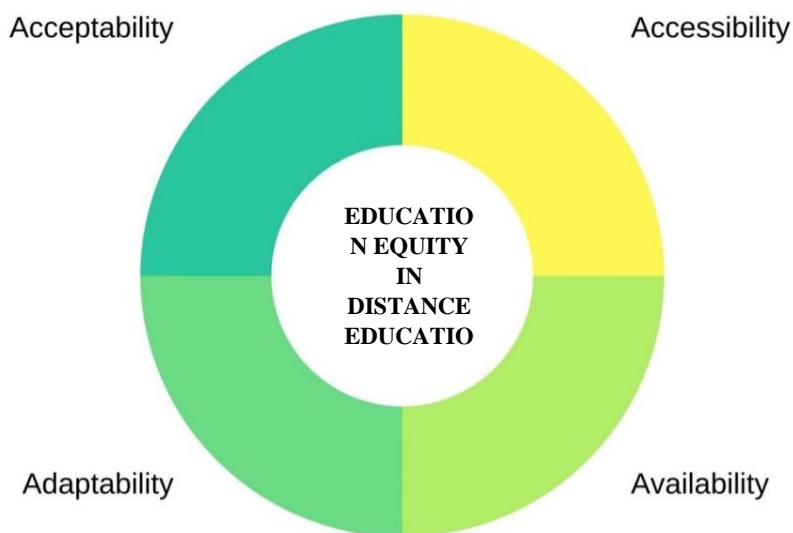


Figure 1.0 4As of Distance Education

4. Accessibility

The accessibility of distance education to both learners and teachers as major stakeholders should merit consideration. There are issues on limited resources and poor infrastructure and issues that refer to the sustainable provision of distance education in developing areas (Zawacki-Richter, 2017) that should be addressed for accessibility.

According to Huang et al. (2020), maximizing and utilizing the Open Education Practices (OEP) which is part of acquiring relevant Open Educational Resources (OER) “can expand the opportunity of accessing high quality educational contents by the learners” (p. 58). There are various advantages using e-learning as part of the instruction where technology is one important aspect of distance education. However, how can we make sure that

there is democratization of digital equity for distance education? How can we make accessibility of online learning modalities inclusive to all types of learners?

As emphasized, digital equity is imperative for distance education to be effective and sustainable in long term depending on needed time for recovery from the pandemic. While the focus of distance education is to bridge the gaps when face-to-face teaching is not possible because of the threat for sustained localized transmission, issues of accessibility should not foster inequity and digital divide that would increase the gap of learning opportunities to the learners especially the marginalized and vulnerable population in our society. Netolicky (2020) added that:

The realities of education in a COVID-19 world have brought equity into even sharper focus as governments, systems and schools interrogate access to internet, tablets, laptops, printers, learning technologies, stationary, parent involvement and community support. Many of these issues have always been there, but a light is now shining more brightly on the inequities between schools, families and students.

5. Availability

Many developing countries around the world have difficulties in the availability of different media or multimedia platform including decent telecommunication for distance education. In recent years, educational innovation such as the 'Open University' became an integral part of bringing education available to learners across the world. In 2008, the term Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) was first introduced by Dave Cormier. Generally, many MOOCs share a common goal of bringing

large numbers of learners together in a common environment for a course delivered as a set of online lessons (Porter, 2014 as cited in Huang et al., 2020).

E-learning became an attestation of a borderless classroom as feasible modality being part of distance education facilitated by electronic technology. According to Guha and Maji (2008), the delivery media in e-learning can be categorized into the following heads: (1) print (e.g. textbooks, course book, study guide); (2) Audio (e.g. streaming audio, audiotapes); (3) Video (e.g. streaming video, videotape, cable television); and (4) Data (e.g. web pages, computer based training content, computer files, and online tests. The E-learning is imperative to the contemporary education. As discussed by Guha and Maji (2008):

It aims at increasing the knowledge, skills and productive capabilities of the learners in a global situation. E-learning is important not only for economic reasons but it has significant social benefits as well. By broadening access to high-quality education and training opportunities to the various segments of society, it has a potential to reduce the economic disparities caused by denial of education to the economically deprived sector of the population offering them better work opportunities and income growth at all levels.

However, e-learning as a contributory factor for significant social benefits and reducing the economic disparities for deprived sector of the population should be analyzed in multifaceted ways and perspectives. This may not be applicable to learners in conflict-affected and displacement contexts including intersecting inequalities for girls and women and those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020b). Furthermore, needs assessment and education

planning delivery are pivotal to ensure education equity during the pandemic.

This can be contextualized and enhanced through conducting or using education needs assessment of the most vulnerable populations. Any assessments should be coordinated and collaborative, this will likely involve coordination mechanisms such as the Education Cluster and/or Local Education Groups. [...] In light of COVID-19 particular attention should be paid to access to technologies, connectivity, digital literacy and the hidden costs of distance learning. Finally, it is vital to stress that nuance is needed and education planning delivery for vulnerable learners in this context should be context and language specific and not be assumed to be benign and risk-free. (UNESCO, 2020b).

6. Adaptability

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the government to respond to the entire gamut of education sector especially the implementing schools to adapt to the 'New Normal' of education. The drastic changes were inevitable and the only way to ensure the continuity of education is through adapting and diversifying distance education modalities that will benefit the teacher and the learners.

The disruption of “regular learning threatens to exacerbate the existing global shortage of qualified teachers in the future” (p. 1). According to Darling-Hammond (2006), teacher qualities are determinant of student achievement. However, the pandemic urged teachers to adapt to the current situation and required to learn the different modalities of distance education without sufficient guidance, training, support and resources (UNESCO, 2020c). School leadership plays a

vital role in the preparedness of teachers in adapting innovative pedagogical practices in a remote learning set-up. It is also essential to the over-all sustainability and quick response to make sure every learner will have equal access to education in various forms and modalities in distance education.

Furthermore, most learners especially those from the low-income family and marginalized sector continuously struggle to meet both ends of adapting to remote learning. The distance education should somehow mitigate and not burden the learners and their families in the educative process. For instance, interaction between teacher and learner in the online environment should consider certain skills for effective teaching and learning process. As discussed by D'Agustino (2020):

Learner technology skills will be an important consideration when adapting course content. While it is advisable to vary the modes of delivery (video, audio, text), it is also to important to avoid erecting technological barriers to accessing the content. Instructors should be mindful of the technology requirements (software, hardware and expertise) that will be required of learners to participate in the course. Learner technology skills may limit an instructor's ability to include more advanced and complex interfaces (virtual environments, simulations and games) in some cases. Also, technology guides that will provide support (for installing required plug-ins, for example) should be provided for students.

According to Hall et al. (2020), the progression to designing 'well-structured, evidence informed online learning experiences' in preparation for normalised, blended/ hybrid learning situation in schools and

universities is a good practice. Certainly, school leadership is essential to the over-all sustainability and quick response to the make sure every learner will have equal access to education in various forms and modalities in distance education. A holistic approach includes the eventualities and uncertainties of education in the 'New Normal' should also prioritize the social and emotional support of the learners and fundamental human needs of the teacher. Moreover, for Netolicky (2020):

Schools are meaningfully continuing the education of their students in ways appropriate to current circumstances but with fundamental human needs, compassion and kindness at the forefront. At this time more than ever, we must consider humans before outcomes, students before results and well-being before learning.

The adaptability in distance education is multifaceted and encompassing not just in teaching and learning. Aside from considering the significance of learner's agency, the desires and capability of parents or other adult decision-makers for the child's learning (Carter et al., 2020) as part of the instructional process is unparalleled. In this time of crisis, it is tantamount to include the parents and guardians in the planning phase of learning.

Lastly, COVID-19 unfastened doors on schools and education institutions to forge meaning partnerships with different government agencies, private sectors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and "community-based intergenerational learning that involves families, teachers and principals through multidirectional sharing and learning from one another" (UNESCO, 2020d, p. 4). Adaptability in the 'New Normal' of education in the grassroots depends on the relationships build with other

equally important stakeholders in the community. As stated by Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020):

The deep relationships principals have with their communities provide an opportunity to control the terms of what schoolwork looks like: grading policies, school communication, teacher support and parent engagement should be indicators of professionalism and determined by principals' knowledge of their school. Finally, this moment, perhaps more than any other, allows the norm of service to shine through. Principals, who we found define themselves as educators first and foremost, can define what is best for kids in the pandemic.

7. Acceptability

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably created a space for pedagogical explorations and innovations to better suit educational needs during this crisis. These innovations should be relevant and inclusive. Hence, the key for acceptability of distance education during pandemic is contextualization.

In the context of online learning as an alternative to face-to-face teaching, UNESCO (2020e) estimated about 826 million people worldwide do not have access to household computers or internet-enabled devices in their homes. In addition, 706 million have reportedly no internet connectivity while 56 million students are deprived of mobile networking connectivity. However, some countries attempt to provide internet connectivity including purchasing gadgets for the learners.

The essential question is: How can we assure continuity of education for all learners despite the digital divide and inequity across the world? To consider, a significant

number of educators “have not taught online are at a loss of online teaching strategies that reflect their professional practices and identities” (Zhu et al., 2020, p. 1). Certainly, the teachers are given the chance to “restructure their teaching and modify student assessments and adjust reporting requirements” (Sahlberg, 2020). In addition, learners are given more autonomy to direct their own learning and maximize the situation for discovery learning with the help of scaffolding from significant others. Furthermore, in this pandemic, contextualizing approach in distance learning highly depends on the parents’ acceptance especially in parents with children in basic education. With this, it is necessary for parents to be part of the educative process not just as a support system but as change agents. Zainuddin et al. (2020) and Sahlberg (2020) further supported that:

Teachers, school authorities and parents are urged to engage in institutionalized dialogues to address the learning needs of each individual child. On the home front, parents are becoming increasingly engaged in their children’s home study programmes, while getting involved in the challenges of changing systems. Home based learning allows parents the latitude to make decisions that impact home based instruction, such as homework and discipline. (Zainuddin et al., 2020).

Even when teachers had freedom to restructure their teaching, modify student assessments and adjust reporting requirements, learning from home was based on similar pedagogical logic than what it was at school. Students were expected to learn in the same pace and in the same ways regardless of where they were. The parents’ role was to make sure that their children stayed on schedule and that

they completed assigned tasks and homework on time. (Sahlberg, 2020)

There are few alternative pedagogical approaches aside from solely depending on online learning that are worth mentioning allowing contextualization of distance education in the time of pandemic. To name a few, the following are possible alternative pedagogical approaches that could be explored and contextualized: (1) home-based instruction; (2) self-directed learning; (3) blended learning; (4) reflective learning; and (5) community-based intergenerational learning. In the face of pandemic, searching for an overnight solution to a problem that calls gargantuan task to make sure learning is not disrupted is overwhelming for everyone affected. Acceptability entails consultation from, engagement and involvement in the implementation of all major stakeholders as an essential factor in the sustainability of the desired pedagogic approaches employed under distance education during pandemic. Campbell (2020) emphasized that:

The experience of this pandemic has made clear that teachers, school leaders and education systems are key to building better societies. But they require broader support. Concerns of equity and access must be part of a wider public policy agenda focussed on eliminating inequality, amplifying the voices of our often marginalized or forgotten community members and ensuring education is the vehicle through which we empower, champion and lead our communities. In doing so, out of a global emergency could come a renewed sense of humanity and belief in the unparalleled power of education.

C. Conclusion

In the COVID-19 pandemic, distance education became a viable option to address the current situation of bridging education where teachers and learners are geographically separated. Furthermore, the health crisis prompted schools to adapt and implement evidence-based and pragmatic approaches to emergency remote teaching. However, in adapting different learning modalities and pedagogical framework in pandemic, one should not solely focus on the learning outcomes but rather how to create meaningful and transformative learning experiences of the learners. The consensual implementation of major stakeholders, especially between the learners and the teacher, in addressing education in the time of pandemic should anchor their thrusts on the 4As of distance education in enacting various modalities of which these factors should be considered: (1) accessibility (2) availability (3) adaptability and (4) acceptability. In addition, contextualization or diversifications of instruction are essential factors in the sustainability and equity of education for all learners in the midst of global health crisis. Lastly, distance education in pandemic should not disregard the humanness of the learners; cooperation and collaborative learning is still encouraged especially anchored with critical theory and reflective practices. After all, the focus of distance education is to bridge the gaps in education and not to further exacerbates inequity among the vulnerable and marginalized sectors in the society.

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