Understanding the Experiences of Dropouts During COVID-19 Pandemic School Closure: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study explores the teaching learning experiences of school dropouts during pandemic school closure as well as the factors that influenced them to leave the school. The factors affecting dropouts during pandemic school closure were rarely studied in Bhutan. This study employed phenomenology as its method. A total participants of 12 dropouts of the year 2020, four parents, four teachers and four school principals were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The data was collected with semi-structured interviews consisting of four research questions. The collected interview data was transcribed and analyzed by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The findings demonstrate that abrupt school closures necessitated the use of online learning as a means of ensuring that education continued. However, there were concerns about student participation in online learning using digital platforms due to students' socioeconomic and technological challenges. These challenges were found to have been the cause of their dropping out of the schools. Students' socioeconomic background of their parents compelled them to provide support to their parents in the socioeconomic activities, thus, impacting their participation in the regular academic activities. According to the interview, variables that contributed to dropouts included socioeconomic

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issues, unfinished assignments, difficulties understanding lessons, lack of enthusiasm, a lack of smartphones and poor internet connectivity, pregnancy, and relationships. The study also identified online teaching pedagogy employed by the teachers as a significant contributor to student attrition. Though the study is limited to a district, the findings recommend the need to improve technological access, provide digital equipment and reasonably priced internet to underprivileged students and provide professional development programs for teachers on technical skills to improve their competency in using online apps for effective online teaching.

Keywords: academic task, COVID-19 pandemic, dropouts, lack of technology, poor internet connectivity, socioeconomic problems

Introduction

The importance of education to both individuals and societies is generally acknowledged (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016). However, the COVID 19 pandemic (CP)'s unprecedented global shocks to education has created the largest disruption of the education system (World Bank, 2020). The CP crisis brought education systems across the world to a halt, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners (The World Bank et al., 2021). Due to socioeconomic disparity, the calamity exacerbated learning disparities. Some students had to deal with challenging situations, which hindered their academic learning. It has been noted that several kids were compelled to leave school permanently. In 2020, the Regional Director of UNICEF in South Asia announced that the coronavirus has become an emergency that threatened children and young people in many ways, including their rights to learn (Kanju, 2020). In Bhutan due to CP, on March 18, all schools in the country had to close indefinitely. In order to have education continued and effectively delivered to the students, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in collaboration with Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), Bhutan Telecom, Volunteer Teachers of Bhutan and the Department of Information and

Technology implemented a national plan for Education in Emergency to impart education to the students. Lessons and tasks were delivered online bringing about a paradigm shift in the education system. Volunteer teachers planned the lessons and broadcasted on BBS television and BBS radio. A variety of online tools such as Google Classroom, Messengers, WeChat, WhatsApp, Telegram and etextbooks from the Royal Education Council were used to facilitate students' learning (Policy and Planning Division (PPD), 2021, p. 9). For those students who did not have access to mobile phones, computers and televisions, Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) were distributed to them (PPD, 2021, p. 2). On July 1, 2020 after more than three months, schools reopened and classes resumed for learners of grades X and XII. Subsequently on September 4, classes resumed for grades IX and XI. Conversely, some students did not come back to schools to resume their education due to various reasons such as, illness, opting for jobs, joining monastic education, changing schools, marriage, on rehabilitation programme, to help parents, opting to repeat next year, family issues, parents losing jobs due to pandemic (Rinzin, 2020; Dema, 2020; Pem, 2020).

Dropout is a severe problem for all countries globally (Ergün & Demir, 2017). School dropout in Bhutan is reported in earliest studies by Dolkar (2000) and Dorji (2005). Though the dropout rates had been as high as 5.7% in 1999 (PPD, 2009), it had reduced to 2.9% in 2018 (PPD, 2018) indicating the efficiency of the education system in the country. The annual education statistics show considerable reduction in dropout rates from 2002 at 5.5% until 2018 (PPD, 2009; PPD, 2018) before the CP. The academic session of the year 2020 recorded the highest dropout rate of 7.4% at tenth standard (PPD, 2020) and a considerable decline in 2021 at 5.8% at the same level (PPD, 2021). Although the statistics show improvement, it also indicates an importance to explore the issue that could lead to similar situations if lockdown is imposed in future.

When students drop out of school they lose the opportunity to acquire the required knowledge and skills for work and life.

Dropouts affect a youth's ability to access better economic opportunities (Kattan, 2015) and they become vulnerable to antisocial activities and behaviours (Jamtsho et al., 2015). Thus, understanding the experiences of school dropouts is fundamental to preventing students from leaving schools early and abating the negative consequences ultimately in such similar situations in future. Since not many studies are carried out on the experiences of dropouts during the pandemic in Bhutan, this study focuses on understanding the experiences of school dropouts during the pandemic and the reasons behind their dropping out of school.

Literature Review

Definition of dropout

The concept of dropouts is understood and explained differently. According to Gutiérrez-Domènech (2011), dropouts are young pupils who leave school before finishing the bare minimal amount of education needed to succeed in the job market. Students who enrol in a program of study at the university level but withdraw before earning a formal degree are known as dropouts (Larsen et al., 2013). According to PPD (2019), dropouts are children who were enrolled in formal schools but left before completing class X.

Dropouts are defined differently in various research. In this study, the word "dropouts" refers to students who were enrolled in school at the beginning of the academic year 2020 but have not returned to complete their education after the school reopened under the directives of the government.

Learning experiences

During the pandemic, most countries around the world adopted online learning to continue teaching learning processes. Online learning is a form of distance learning that uses electronic technology and internet platforms for conducting teaching and learning processes (Howlett et al., 2009). Tsegay (2020) asserts that online platforms afford professors and students the chance to engage in teaching and

learning activities from any part of the world, provided they have access to a computer and a reliable internet connection. Moreover, these platforms present benefits such as time and cost savings, as well as the removal of constraints imposed by geographical limitations. Google Classroom was found to be beneficial for collaboration where students could communicate with their peers, share files, ask teachers for academic support, and also submit assignments, and social media was shown to be effective in engaging the students in online learning (Kado et al., 2020). A study by PPD (2021) found online learning to have instilled the value of learning independently instead of always being dependent on teachers. The study further claimed that 78.60% of parents supported their children in learning during the pandemic.

Although online teaching and learning came as an answer to continue learning during the pandemic, it has several challenges in students transitioning into it. According to UNICEF (2020), some 346 million young people did not have access to the internet for remote learning. As a form of infrastructure, the digital does much to 'connect' us, however, 'digital divides' persist both in terms of internet access and the skills and competencies needed to leverage technology for collective and personal aims (UNESCO, 2021). The lack of technological gadgets and steady internet connection, having the responsibility to help parents in household chores and farm work, and digital incompetence among students and educators were found to be the barriers to efficient online learning (Chogyel et al., 2021; Wangmo et al., 2020).

One of the main obstacles to online learning was students facing problems such as difficulty comprehending and understanding online materials provided by the teachers due to the lack of personal interaction (Chogyel et al., 2021; Kado et al., 2020; Wangmo et al., 2020; Chung et al. 2020). Increasing workload was another obstacle to online learning. Students felt that their workload had increased because teachers compensated for the lack of onsite classes by additional assignments which demotivated students to

complete their assignments because it was too much (Doolan et al., 2021).

Other challenges to efficient online learning during COVID-19 included lack of motivation, dwindled psychomotor concentration and impaired memory which made learning difficult for students during the pandemic crisis (Lovrić et al., 2020). Students also faced difficulty in distinguishing between free time from study time, thus making them dislike studying from home (Doolan et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020). Distractions such as watching Netflix, YouTube, and other online videos, and lack of sufficient time to complete the tasks were some of the challenges faced by the students in South Korea during online learning (Friedman, 2020).

Factors influencing dropouts

Lack of interest, grade repetition and overage, poor academic performance, teaching pedagogy, regulatory practices, and lack of teacher concern are the school-related factors affecting students' decision to drop out. Socioeconomic problems, teenage pregnancy, marriages, family finances, illness, employment, and student mobility are the pull factors affecting school dropouts.

A study by McDermott et al. (2019) asserted that students stop attending school because of boredom and lack of relevance to their lives. Even during the pandemic, one of the biggest barriers to students finishing their education was their lack of interest in learning. UNESCO (2020) projected that extended school closures may lead to increase in dropout rates due to loss of interest and lack of resources to continue. Students need to value education in order to keep up the interest in studies and not to drop out from the school. The study by UNESCO (2021) in Kenya identified teenagers between the ages of 10 and 19 who chose not to attend school did so because they did not value education.

Gewin (2020) cited that almost all students who convert to remote learning received lower grades than they might have

otherwise or failed the course, and it is particularly bad for the most vulnerable and struggling students. Kidman et al. (2022) claim that the epidemic convinced students who were already academically lagging that continuing to invest money in their education was no longer worthwhile. Children, therefore, decided to work and earn money instead of pursuing their failed academics.

Regulatory practices such as punishment by teachers was one of the major factors for dropout found in the study by Adam et al. (2016) and Farooq (2016). According to Rafique and Ahmed (2019) among secondary school students, physical punishment was negatively linked with academic self-efficacy while being favorably associated with dropout. A study on girl dropouts by Ramanaik et al. (2018) stated that students fear punishment from teachers for staying absent and not performing well in studies. PPD (2018) reported punishments such as scolding, beating, suspension and termination caused students to drop out. While poor student teacher relationships cause students to acquire a bad attitude toward school, increasing their chance of dropping out, positive student teacher relationships help students stay in school (Shah et al., 2019).

One of the potential predictors of students dropping out is repeating a grade and being beyond the age limit. According to numerous studies, the primary cause of pupils leaving school was repeating a grade after failing an exam (Ogresta, 2021; Salman, 2020). Repeating a grade is not popular with students. Repeaters and older pupils become disinterested in their education because they feel inadequate (Witte et al., 2013; Gondwe, 2016).

The inexperience in online teaching affected the quality of instruction. Lack of experience with online lecture tools and navigating the online environment were concerns raised by faculty and students (Yaseen et al., 2021). Teachers used the same instructional techniques consistently, resulting in difficult-to-understand lectures and assignments, reducing students' satisfaction and participation in online courses by

50% (Ishak et al., 2021). Insufficient understanding, homework completion, and lack of support led to students dropping out (Ogresta, 2021). Colbert (2017) posits that children drop out of school because they do not receive enough one-on-one attention and support from the teachers.

One of the main factors for dropout is socioeconomic problems. There is a large volume of published studies (Gyamtsho, 2018; PPD, 2018; PPD, 2019; Salman, 2020) describing socioeconomic problems as the projecting factor for dropouts. A recent study by Wangmo and Tshewang (2022) found socioeconomic factors as the most prominent factor for TVET trainees to drop out from the institute. PPD (2019) established that food insufficiency and dropping out had significant relationship regardless of gender; however, this causes males between the ages range of 6-24 who experienced food insufficiency to drop out at a higher proportion than females of the same age range.

According to a study by Sabates et al. (2010), income levels and income growth both lower the incidence of dropout, so the higher the percentage of time spent working, the higher the likelihood of dropping out. This indicate that students who face socioeconomic challenges are at greater risk of dropping out of school. Similar findings are brought out in a paper by Salman (2020). The study reported that male dropouts expressed their excitement and pride in now working for a living and hinted that school was a place where they 're-discovered' their poverty. Once children drop out and start making money, it is very difficult to get them back in school (Gettleman & Raj, 2020).

Orphan hood is another risk faced by children because when their parents die they risk dropping out of school, especially if they are from a poor family (Choden et al., 2014). The study also found other risks to leaving schools such as having to work at home and look after their ageing parents and poor parents sending their children to the monastic schools, especially boys, as it is less expensive.

Girls are predicted to be significantly affected by the global school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a rise in dropout rates and exacerbating gender disparities in education. UNESCO (2020) highlights that adolescent girls will be particularly impacted, facing a higher risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy, and forced marriage. Studies (UNESCO, 2022; Kidman et al., 2022) have identified teenage pregnancy and marriage as key factors contributing to girls dropping out of school. Birchall (2018) suggests that societal pressures and challenges faced by girls and their families are significant contributors to this issue.

The involvement of parents in their children's education is crucial. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes the importance of parents supervising their children's study at home, as failure to do so, especially during extended school closures, can lead to higher dropout rates. However, the extent of parental involvement varies among individuals. According to PPD (2021), most literate parents supported their children academically by overseeing their daily learning, providing moral support and guidance, and assisting them with online resources like Google Classroom and YouTube videos. Non-literate parents, on the other hand, mainly offered financial and moral support due to other obligations and household concerns (PPD, 2021).

Teaching experiences: Opportunities and challenges

Amid the closure of schools during the pandemic, teachers encountered both advantages and difficulties in transitioning to online teaching. Numerous studies have shown that the COVID-19 outbreak presented an opportunity for teachers to re-evaluate the shift from traditional to online teaching methods, promoting digital transformation (Dhawan, 2020; Morreale et al., 2021). Tsegay et al. (2022) suggests that teachers have expanded their pedagogical practices by incorporating diverse teaching approaches and integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into their lessons.

Teachers faced numerous challenges during online teaching, including a lack of computer skills and technological literacy, impeding their effective use of online teaching platforms. Research has indicated that teachers struggled with computer skills needed for online teaching and creating digital teaching materials (Hassan et al., 2020). Consequently, subject teachers, particularly in technical subjects like Chemistry, Physics, Economics, and Biology, found online teaching inconvenient and ineffective due to their practical and technical nature (Kinga & Wangchuk, 2022). Moreover, teachers experienced a lack of confidence and confusion when adapting to new platforms such as Google Classroom (Hashemi, 2021; Tsegay et al., 2022). Student engagement suffered, with low participation and incomplete assignments (Leech, 2022; Hashemi, 2021). Tsegay's study (2022) emphasized that limited physical and emotional interaction resulted in weak student-teacher relationships, reduced learning interest, and ineffective learning. Technical issues, such as late joining, frequent disconnections, and poor internet connectivity and power supply, further compounded the challenges (Hashemi, 2021; Gautam & Gautam, 2020). Furthermore, educators encountered difficulties in conducting online instruction due to over half of the students lacking smartphones and internet access, preventing the assignment of tasks and evaluation of grades. Online teaching also presented issues regarding the limited understanding of students' activities and emotions, making it challenging for teachers to gauge their well-being and assess their written work accurately (Kinga & Wangchuk, 2022; Todd, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Apart from online learning, teachers' initiatives of reaching out to students staying in remote villages who do not have the means or resources to buy mobile phones and television have been reported in the media and in papers (Lhamo, 2020; UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). Rinzin (2020) reported that teachers had risked their life travelling during monsoon to ensure students staying in the village are studying.

Methodology

This study aimed to gather participants' perspectives on school dropout scenarios, adopting an interpretive worldview that recognizes multiple realities. The focus was on understanding individuals and their perceptions of the environment. The study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to interpret common experiences related to the phenomenon of dropout. Purposive sampling was employed, and snowball sampling was used to reach additional respondents. The sample consisted of 24 participants, including twelve dropouts (6 males, 6 females), four parents (2 males, 2 females), four teachers (3 males, 1 female), and four school principals (4 males). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth experiences. A pilot study was carried out to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions. Data source triangulation was used, involving school dropouts, parents, teachers, and school principals as the four data sources.

Results

Learning experiences

Most of the dropout respondents mentioned joining and using Google classroom, Telegram, Messenger and WeChat to communicate with their teachers, and carry out the assigned tasks. Some of them had their parents buy them new personal phones while others used their parent's phones for their studies.

The respondents expressed comfort in home learning, "I could study whenever I want" and getting enough time for study in the beginning of their stay at home during the school closure. In the later days a few of the respondents had their attention diverted to working in the farm and home to help parents, working for wages and running shops. A respondent seriously studied for five to six hours a day for around five weeks until she found herself pregnant. Correspondingly, most of the parent respondents agreed that their children were studying seriously in the beginning of the school closure. A parent

shared incidences of seeing the dropout with books opened and spread out on the table.

Respondents found mobile phones useful in contacting teachers and friends to clarify doubts, browsing the net for more information on the topic and discussing assignments with friends. With the advantage of being able to use mobile phones and explore the internet, respondents were able to seek help from friends, teachers and the internet for more information and clarification. Respondents became independent learners, saw improvement and gained confidence in themselves and their learning.

Learning challenges

Figure 1 illustrates the learning challenges faced by the dropout respondents when they were at home during the pandemic school closure. The prominent challenge raised by all the respondents was the pedagogical fatigue caused due to the writing tasks assigned by the teachers repeatedly. The other challenges voiced out were exhaustion from social engagement, social media distraction, parent's misapprehension, poor network connectivity and recharge, and lack of personal smartphones.
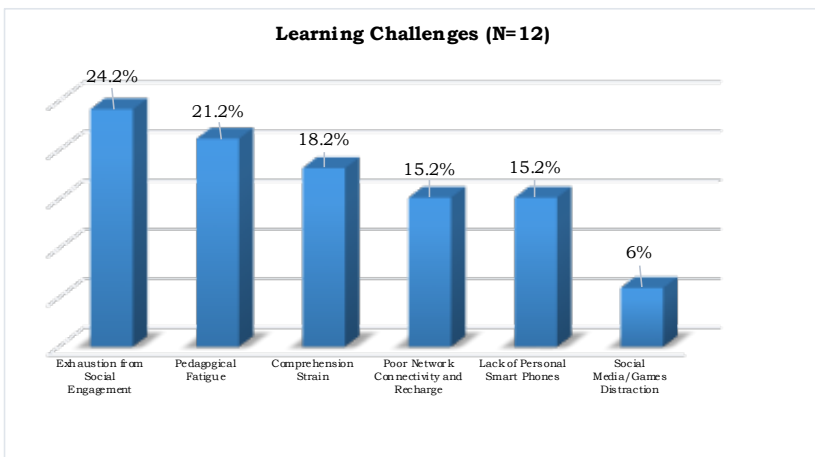
Figure 1. Challenges faced during the online learning

Eight dropouts narrated helping parents in agriculture work, business, and household chores during the day and studying only at night. As the school closure extended, respondents got involved increasingly in farm work and household chores that they could not get enough time for their study during the later days of the school closure. They had to tend to livestock; cut grasses for cattle and goats; cook feed for pigs; look after the poultry and even plough, plant, and weed the whole day. By the time the work was done the dropouts got tired and could not work on the task assigned by the teachers. Occasionally, two dropouts went to work in construction sites to earn extra cash.

Interestingly, a parent respondent, noted that "in the village it's always like that, when the cattle moo, one needs to go and see, when the goat bleats, one has to leave the cup of tea to feed. So whatever little is studied might be getting forgotten".

A student respondent (SR4) had to do household chores and look after the pregnant mother and sick father. SR4 reflected that after a few weeks at home, it was tiresome to work as well as study. In the later period, study was totally forgotten because of the family issue that mentally disturbed the respondent.

Pedagogical fatigue

Dropout respondents reported teachers assigning tasks such as copying notes, writing answers to the past questions, reading notes and texts from their textbooks during the pandemic school closure. SR1 remarked, "Similar tasks kept on coming" and so when it was time for submitting the assignment, the dropout "asked from friends and submitted the same image of the assignment to the teachers". SR3 cited getting fed up and so "did not check the notifications at all in the later days".

Comprehension strain

Student respondents raised the issue of facing difficulty in comprehending the notes and texts. Writing answers and

assignments without understanding the texts seems to worsen the weaker students' difficulty in working on the assigned task. According to SR 2, reading notes without teachers' explanation was not as understandable as it was in classroom teaching. Students lose their interest and becomes demotivated to learn when they face this challenges, for instance, SR7 expressed, "sometimes when we want to study but do not understand the texts, then we lose out interest in studies". Additionally, students who were already poor in academic performance face more difficulty in understanding the texts, as in the expression by SR8, "I was already poor in studies and online learning was more difficult as I could not understand the text and the notes. So I thought I would have more difficulty if I go to school".

Correspondingly, a parent who was interviewed expressed that children were experiencing challenges in learning because they lacked the ability to comprehend. The parent stated, "My child couldn't grasp the concepts and had difficulty learning, especially since they were already struggling academically." Furthermore, the parent mentioned that the extended period of school closure had resulted in the child to lose interest in studies.

Lack of personal smartphones

Five dropout respondents used their parent's phones to study, three respondents had smartphones bought by their parents for online learning, one of the respondents had an old smartphones and one respondent did not have a smartphone with anyone in the family to assist in online learning. Using parent's phones had disturbances when the parents themselves needed the phones to make and receive calls which lasted longer sometimes. Old phones had connection and visibility issues. The student could not carry out the assigned task or attend any of the online learning sessions which might have taken place due to the technical issue of his phone. The respondent who did not have a phone did not share the situation to the school authority and so did not get a SIM. The respondent who was in higher secondary class felt embarrassed to share this socioeconomic situation to the

school authority and teachers. This challenge reiterated in the form of the respondent not attending to any academic task assigned by the teachers.

Poor network connectivity

Network connectivity, availability of data package recharging facilities in shops of remote areas of the Dzongkhag and financial constraints in buying data packages hindered students in downloading notes from the Google Classroom and other social media apps. SR2 and SR8 found it 'irritating' and SR6 lost interest in carrying out the assigned task when notes could not be downloaded due to poor network connectivity. Similarly, SR8 and SR11 mentioned difficulty in opening the page and retrieving the documents sent by teachers from social media. Downloading got slower and copying notes delayed. Recharging of the data package was another issue as SR2 could not ask for the recharge every day. The respondents (SR8, SR9) residing in remote rural areas found parents facing financial constraint and so could not ask for recharge often.
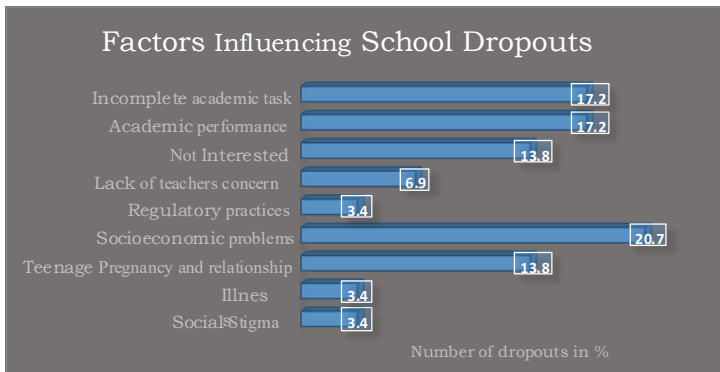
Social media/games distraction

Respondents, SR2 and SR12 mentioned the distraction from the social media and attraction to playing games on the phones as one of the challenges to online learning. SR2 "sometimes got engrossed and distracted by the social media" that led to the postponement of writing the task to the next few days. It was justified as, "we think that, since we don't have to go to school tomorrow, I will do the homework tomorrow. So the works stay pending" (SR2).

Factors that influenced students' decision to drop out of the school

A summary of the factors influencing dropout is shown in Figure 2. There are nine factors that have arisen from the interviews of the four school dropouts and their respective parents, teachers and school principals. Each of the dropouts have their own distinct reasons for dropping out from the school. However, there were also other contributory reasons that was described by the respondents. The school related

factors dominate the non-school related factors. Amongst the factors, socioeconomic factors from the non-school related factors predominate and from the school related factors, the incomplete academic task and prior poor academic performance outweighs the other factors.

Factors Influencing School Dropouts

Factor	Number of dropouts in %
Incomplete academic task	17.2
Academic performance	17.2
Not Interested	13.8
Lack of teachers concern	6.9
Regulatory practices	3.4
Socioeconomic problems	20.7
Teenage Pregnancy and relationship	13.8
Illnes	3.4
Social Stigma	3.4

Figure 2. Summary of factors influencing school dropouts (N=24)

Socioeconomic problems are the prominent factor influencing dropouts followed by incomplete academic tasks. Overall, the school related factors comprise 61% of the respondent claiming them higher than the non-school related factors which comprised only 25 %. The school related factors are the significant factors over the non-school related factors.

Incomplete academic task

Incomplete academic tasks was one of the determining factors for five student dropouts to leave school. These respondents could not carry out the assigned task because of heavy farm work during the day (SR1), unable to join the class group Telegram due to the cell phone issues (SR5), internet connectivity issues to download the notes (SR6, SR11), lack of smartphone (SR7) and difficulty in understanding and writing the task (SR11). These students feared punishment from teachers (SR7), feeling of awkwardness of being the only one

with incomplete tasks in the class (SR6), and facing difficulty in completing (SR11).

Without the tasks done the students could not go to the school in fear of the punishment. All these students feared unknown consequences of not writing the assigned task. However, educators explained that sharing the learning materials and tasks online was to keep the students engaged during the pandemic school closure. Teacher respondent (TR1) explained that they were not strict about who was completing and who wasn't completing the assigned task but had kept on checking with the students' time and again just to make sure that they at least were able to grab a little or whatever was shared to the students.

Academic performance

Students' reasons for leaving school are being academically weak, being aged for the grade, low self-esteem as a result of better performance by their sibling and also due to demotivating situations. Being academically weak inhibited their comprehension power of the tasks assigned by the teacher. Low self-esteem of the respondents were evident in their statements such as, "become older and feeling ashamed to study", "I was not so good in studies" and "my siblings are better than me in studies". Parent respondent (PR4) observed their eldest "is poor in studies and can't even perform well in exams".

Being not so good in studies gave them stronger reasons to drop out.

Not interested in studying

Four dropout respondents mentioned dropping out of the school because they were not interested in studying. They were interested in other areas such as agriculture and in business. The reasons other respondents gave was not being good in studies and the tedious long distance walk of more than an hour from home to school daily and another hour from school to home.

Regulatory practices

One of the respondents expressed discomfort being in the class as a contributory factor for leaving school. The respondent voiced fear and sometimes frustration for teachers who beat the students. In the respondent's opinion, "teachers drink and come to the class drunk. They don't teach well. They beat us when they come under the influence of alcohol". Congruently, one of the parent respondents also expressed partiality shown by teachers as one of the reasons for students to drop out of the school.

Lack of teacher's concern

According to SR1 and SR5, teachers were not concerned whether the students were seriously studying and writing the assignments. Teachers did not call or video call them or any friends to find out if they were studying and writing assignments seriously.

SR5 expressed that no teacher made phone calls to enquire about how the dropout was doing the assignments and tasks. SR5 was unable to connect to any of the class group chats to access notes and information from teachers. The dropout could not do the tasks and so had to leave school because of the fear of unknown punishment and consequences of not doing the assigned task.

Grade repetition

Grade repetition and being aged was found to be a contributory factor for students to dropout. A parent respondents described:

> The virus came and it disturbed my child's study. After coming back home, my child did not want to continue the studies after came back home. My child did not want to study anymore. Being a repeater, lockdown and school closure happening, time was being wasted. My child wanted to look for some small work and stay home to do some agriculture work.

Staying home and helping parents in the farm work after the school closure had made the student realize the importance of time and the time that would be wasted in repeating the same class again rather than doing some worthwhile work at home.

Congruently, principal SPR2 and teacher TR3 mentioned coming across a few students who are aged and matured for the grade level because of repeated failure. SPR2 expressed that these students usually have low self-esteem and so are vulnerable to dropping out of the schools.

Teaching pedagogy

Online teaching pedagogy during the pandemic school closure took place in the form of copying notes and writing assignments and answers to past question papers. Some dropouts could not comprehend the notes and found difficulty in writing assignments and so had them incomplete and undone. Correspondingly, principal respondents also conveyed that online teaching mainly consisted of assigning tasks to the students. The respondents expressed that the mode of teaching was not very effective. Some Principals noted that teachers were not much abreast with the Google classroom and so the easy strategy adopted by teachers were posting as many notes as possible which eventually bogged down the students.

All the teacher respondents communicated that the online teaching mainly consisted of giving students tasks such as copying notes, writing answers to past questions and writing assignments as they were not able to conduct teaching face to face, the students might have had difficulty in understanding.

On the other hand, a few principals and teachers are of the opinion that teaching pedagogy would not have influenced students to drop out because they did not get any complaints from the students on the teaching pedagogy. TR4 stated, "I did not hear students complaining about dropping just because the teaching methods or strategies were unsuitable to their needs."

Socioeconomic problem

All the student respondents expressed socioeconomic factors such as parent's illness, labour shortage during the paddy cultivation, parents' and siblings' illness and financial constraints in the family as the reason for their dropping out of the schools.

SR1 revealed that when the school was reopening paddy cultivation work had begun and there was farm labour shortage at home. SR1 described:

> When the school reopened and it was time to go to school, the seasonal summer work had also come. There were only two of my old parents who cannot work much in the field, so my mind changed as there was no one to work at home. My brother was still at Thimphu hospital because of the accident that cut his hand. He stayed in the hospital for two months and thereafter he stayed with elder sister in Thimphu. When it was time to report to the school, I had even given a party to my friends. In my school days, I used to drink alcohol. All my friends were also drinking. Giving parties before going to school was our culture. Whoever goes to school has to sponsor drinks and treat the rest of the friends in the village. All my friends do not go to school. However, when I woke in the morning, I didn't want to go. While sleeping, I thought a lot about my old parents with no one to help them. They are going to suffer. The seasonal work had just begun and we had not even started. If it had ended, it would have been fine. There was no farm labour from our home to go to others' houses because only then we get a helping hand from others. I wanted to help my parents. Though my father was only 55 years old, he was drinking alcohol at that time and didn't do much work. Mother has to always request him to do work. I thought we should go to school to get an education. Even if I stay in the village to help my parents, that's also the purpose of the education. That night, thoughts of my old mother suffering even more at this age changed my mind. Even if I go to school,

I would be worried about my mother and home that would not let me concentrate on studies. My performance in the exam would decline. The home pressure will not let me do well, my studies will not go well. Thus, my mind changed suddenly and at once. My packed things had to be left like that.

Congruently, all the teacher and principal respondents stated that dropout students come from a low socioeconomic family background. They could not stay idle at home and so joined construction sites as helpers in order to earn some cash. Eventually, a few of them wanted to continue working and leave school.

Teenage pregnancy and relationships

Two respondents expressed becoming pregnant and not being able to go to school. SR2 shared that she did not actually think of dropping out of the school. She had to leave because of the pregnancy.

I did not think of dropping out of the school. I wanted to complete my studies and find a job for myself. So, I studied and did all the tasks assigned by the teachers during the online teaching. Sadly, I had to leave school because I became pregnant. I never thought that I would become pregnant when I had a physical relationship with my boyfriend. When I found out about the pregnancy, I did not know what to do. Thoughts about my parents and what they would say strike me, making me so worried. I broke the news to my boyfriend but I was too scared to tell my parents. He was also so worried and scared that he did not know what to do and what to advise me. I wanted to abort the pregnancy, before my parents and other people knew about it so that I would be able to continue my studies. Subsequently, I took painkillers because I had heard people say that a pregnant woman should not take any sort of medicine when pregnant. Nothing happened to me. The same day, in the afternoon my cousin came to meet me. I talked to her about my

situation but she did not know what to do about it either. In the evening when my parents came home, I acted normal but deep down I was too scared and ashamed of myself. I was feeling so bad that I wanted to commit suicide. That very evening, my boyfriend sent a message saying that he wants to marry me and would look after me and the child. I told him that I was still a student and my parents would be disheartened so I do not want to get married and have a child. I wanted to continue my studies. In the next few days I also could not tell my parents. I pretended to act normal. I did not come out of the house much. When I had to go to the shop to meet my mother, I stayed outside because I was feeling sick and was getting morning sickness.

Finally after two weeks, as advised by my boyfriend and his sister I revealed it to my mother. My mother cried. I cried. I told her that I took medicine to get rid of the pregnancy and that I cannot even kill myself. She told me to not think about taking medicine and worry too much. She then called my boyfriend who had gone to his village to take me away. The next day my mother sent me away.

Sometimes, I regret thinking if I could at least have a class 12 certificate, I would have been able to do something.

Some principal participants, teachers and parents noted marriage and pregnancy as one of the reasons for students to drop out.

Poor network connectivity

Though dropout respondents had challenges in downloading the reading materials due to poor network connectivity, none of them mentioned it to be the factor for their dropping the school. However, all the principals and teacher respondents mentioned having no phones and poor network connectivity caused some students to miss online classes. SPR1 stated, "few were of the idea that they have missed out on so many classes.

They couldn't get good network connectivity so they could not catch up with the adapted curriculum. Because of that reason, they thought that they would fail the exam so they wanted to repeat next year". Since all the communication was taking place online, these students missed most of the online classes. Two teacher respondents stated that the students faced low internet connectivity as they were staying in the remote villages. TR1 explained:

> Students were missing a lot of online classes which happened continuously to cover up the syllabus. We're giving them tasks. Students who could not attend the online classes, could not even submit the tasks. I think it got piled up and so they started to get demotivated. So I think it shook their confidence.

On the other hand, SPR2 noted that these reasons may be a contributory factor but they were not the primary factor influencing students to drop out. He expressed, "the data package was way too expensive for students. Yet, there are students who didn't drop out, although they haven't participated in online teaching."

Lack of parental guidance

School principals pointed out the lack of parental guidance as a factor for dropout.

SPR2 opined, "I think it's the parents' lack of guidance. They don't have much concern about their children, because they're illiterate and uneducated". Teacher TR2 expressed that the failure from the parents' side to monitor their children had led to the use of mobiles for other purposes and not in their studies. Parent respondents (PR1, PR2) noted that they have other work such as running a shop (PR2) and tending to the livestock and other farm work (PR1) and could not monitor their children's learning.

Teaching experiences: Opportunities and challenges

Teacher respondents shared that the pandemic has taught them to explore their Information Communication Technology (ICT) competencies and use in their daily lessons. One of the new Google based platforms that they used for the first time was Google Classroom. These were not heard and used prior to the pandemic. For instance, TR4 stated, "I have heard about Google classroom for the first time during the one session orientation provided to us."

All the respondents talked about the use of ICT during the school closure. Respondents explained that there was a paradigm shift in the use of technology in teaching and the belief that mobile phones were most disruptive to the one most essential. Respondents found school closure and the online learning an eye opening not only to the teachers but also to the policy makers and the ministry as well. TR2 noted, "teaching and learning can take place anywhere, if both the parties are willing, it is not necessary that we have to have a concrete school".

Respondents saw lessons broadcasted in the television and the radio and introduction of SIM was a blessing, as most students in the Dzongkhag were from rural homes and they lacked television and radios. Educators expressed that students were able to learn better with the copy of learning materials in their hand than online learning with fluctuating network connectivity. SIM also gave teachers insight into how to go about online teaching.

Educators shared that online learning brought relationship between teacher and students and teacher and community closer. According to TR1, her bonding especially with those students who were active got better:

> I felt more connected to my students, like when I was teaching them, you know, when they were responding, when they were sharing their tasks, when they share

their problems, I felt that deep connection with my students more than I felt in all the years

Challenges

Numerous barriers to teaching during the pandemic school closure were pointed out by the educators. School principals described that the school authorities and other higher authority were not prepared for the change in the mode of education delivery to the students. Everything happened so fast and everyone was shocked with the sudden directives to close the school. The school closure disrupted the academic session.

Teacher respondents mentioned difficulty in using Google Classroom by themselves as well as by the students as only a few hours of orientation to the app was provided to them by IT teachers before the school closure. A teacher stated that the difficulty in using the app both by the teachers and students could be the reason for students not giving good responses. Moreover, the lack of mobile phones with the students hampered the proper conduct of the online teaching. Internet connectivity was another major challenge the students faced as they were living in remote villages. Recharging the data was another issue faced by the students. According to a teacher, students could not afford to recharge their data package and so they could not continue with Google Classroom. The teacher opined that the parents could not afford and so students did not respond. The teacher had to recharge for some students so as to have the students submit the assignments.

Other challenges were difficulty in contacting students as some students who did not have mobile phones had given incorrect mobile numbers and contacting them had to be routed through "Gups", "Tshogpas", parents and to the students thus posing difficulty in communicating messages.

Another challenge cited was the difficulty in getting all the students in the online learning session. For most of the sessions, only 10-15 students out of 35 would be active.

Teachers could not know how much the students were able to understand from the online teaching conducted because students were found switching the work. Same assignments were found to be sent by most students.

Discussion

Learning experiences

The study found that there were both learning opportunities and challenges in online teaching and learning during school closure online learning. The analysis of the data of the dropout respondents revealed that online learning through Google classroom and social media was most beneficial in seeking help and interacting with friends and teachers. It is consistent with the findings of Kado et al. (2020) who reported that online learning was effective in engaging students.

One of the opportunities was that students became independent learners. However, it also found that internet connectivity was a challenge for them to further enhance their independent learning. The houses in remote villages with only a few shops that sold vouchers which got exhausted most of the time were an added difficulty to the already poor network connectivity. This finding is corroborated by the study conducted by Gautam and Gautam (2020) in Nepal where they found erratic network issues and expensive internet cost inhibited online learning. Exhaustion from social engagement was another challenge the respondents faced due to their living in rural homes with their parents who expected them to lend their hands in every farm work and household chores. PPD (2021) reported similar findings where they declared that parents from rural regions desired their children to help them with their household chores. It was exhausting for the students to work in the day and study in the evening and at night. This finding is consistent with the findings of Wangdi et al. (2021) where they also found that students were engaged in farming activities with their parents and hardly got enough time to attend online classes thereby losing interest in learning. The current study found students eventually lost interest and

lagged behind in their assignments and academic tasks as they got more involved in farm work and household chores. This result is in agreement with the one obtained by Gettleman & Raj (2020), Makino et al. (2021), and Sabates et al. (2010) where they found, higher the proportion of time spent in working, the greater the risk of lagging behind their studies.

Pedagogical fatigue due to the same mode of learning; copying notes, writing questions and answers to past questions, writing project works, and assignments, facing difficulty in understanding the text at times bored the students to further continue the academic task. Eventually, the learners submitted the same image of the tasks submitted by their friends or sometimes ignored the notifications. Similar finding was reported by Chogyel et al. (2021), Kado et al. (2020), and Wangmo et al. (2020) in their studies conducted in Thimphu, Haa and Punakha consecutively where they found students facing problems such as difficulty comprehending and understanding online materials provided by the teachers due to the lack of personal interaction.

A prominent finding of the study is the lack of personal smartphones to carry out online learning. The study revealed that students who did not have personal smartphones used their parents' phones for online learning, while those who did not have smartphones with any of the family members skipped the online lessons. Similar practices of students using parents' smartphones was reported in the study by Wangmo et al. (2020).

The other findings are poor network connectivity and data shortages. Additionally, the recharging issue for the data packages due to the parent's inability to afford recharges regularly posed challenges to students' learning at home and made them vulnerable to adopting other means such as going to friend's house and involving in relationships. Similar challenges of lack of smartphone and internet access issues can be found in the studies conducted by Tadesse and Muluye (2020) and Chung et al. (2020). These barriers pose challenges

for downloading notes, interacting with friends and teachers and to carry out quality online learning.

Though dropout respondents saw comfort in home learning, they became engrossed in social media and mobile gaming which got them distracted from their daily studies and postponement of their learning to other days and eventually piling up academic tasks. These results correspond with research conducted in South Korea by Friedman (2020) and in Greece by Kostaki and Karayianni (2021), which identified common challenges faced by students during online learning. These challenges included frequent distractions from platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and other online videos, as well as insufficient time to adequately complete tasks.

Factors that influenced students' decision to drop out of the school

The study conducted by Adelman and Székely (2016) revealed several factors that contribute to student dropout rates. In most cases, multiple factors were identified as causes for individual students to drop out. These factors include a lack of interest in studies, the need to assist sick parents, and an inability to complete academic tasks. Interestingly, the data indicated that school-related factors were more influential than non-school-related factors, but socioeconomic factors were found to have the greatest impact on dropout rates. The various socioeconomic problems that contribute to dropout rates include the need for a labor force in agricultural activities, having sick parents, and requiring a literate person to manage a shop. The demographic profile of the study indicated that the majority of the students' parents were farmers. This finding is consistent with a study by Wangmo and Tshewang (2022), which also identified socioeconomic factors as the most significant contributors. Other studies, such as those conducted by Gettleman and Raj (2020), Gyamtsho (2018), and Salman (2020), have also highlighted poverty as a major factor leading to dropouts.

Another significant finding of the study is the influence of prior academic performance on student dropout rates. This finding aligns with the results of studies conducted by Adam et al. (2016), Gettleman and Raj (2020), Ogresta (2021), and Kidman et al. (2022), which suggest that students who struggle academically may perceive education as no longer worthwhile. The COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the difficulties faced by academically weak students, making it harder for them to comprehend lessons delivered through online platforms and further demotivating them from continuing their studies.

Similar findings were observed in studies by Witte et al. (2013) and Gondwe (2016), which revealed a loss of interest in studies among repeat students. When students perceive themselves as incompetent in academic subjects, they may seek alternative areas where they feel more capable.

The study also identified the incompleteness of academic tasks as a significant factor contributing to dropouts. Students often experienced guilt for not completing their assignments and feared being the only ones with unfinished tasks, which could lead to punishment from teachers. This finding stands out from the others because it is not commonly reported in previous studies, making it a unique contribution to the literature.

Furthermore, the study identified regulatory practices within schools as a contributing factor to dropout rates. Negative experiences in school settings discouraged students from continuing their education. These findings align with the views expressed by Adam et al. (2016) and Ramaniak et al. (2018), which indicate that negative experiences can lead to feelings of dejection and disappointment among students. The study also highlighted punishments such as scolding, beating, suspension, and termination as factors leading to dropouts, as reported by PPD (2018).

Lack of teacher concern for students' learning during school closures was another finding of the study. When teachers did

not show concern or provide support, students were less likely to take their studies seriously and complete their assignments. Teachers' support, encouragement, and understanding of students' situations and difficulties have been shown to reduce dropout rates in studies by McDermott et al. (2019) and Ramanaik et al. (2018). The study data indicated that teachers and principals faced challenges in reaching all students due to incorrect contact numbers, lack of mobile phones, and network connectivity issues. A study by PPD (2021) also reported similar findings, where students were unable to receive support from teachers due to geographical location, lack of amenities such as smartphones, network shadows, and being away from home for herding.

Lack of interest in studies emerged as another significant factor for dropout rates. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Hynes (2014) and Salman (2020) which have reported students' declining attachment to schooling and reduced interest in education during school closures. Respondents in the study expressed disinterest in returning to school, stating that they were more engaged in activities such as socializing with friends, pursuing business ventures, or engaging in agricultural work, which they found more interesting and profitable.

The study also revealed that teenage pregnancy and being in relationships were triggers for female students to drop out. The data indicated that access to smartphones and increased intimacy with boyfriends through chats contributed to physical relationships and unwanted pregnancies among female respondents. Similar findings of teenage pregnancy and marriage as causes for student dropouts have been reported in studies by Adam et al. (2016), Gondwe (2016), Kidman et al. (2022), and UNESCO (2022). Additionally, the data showed that male students predominantly dropped out due to socioeconomic problems, while marriage or pregnancy was the main factor for girls, supporting the findings of Kadzamira et al. (2020).

Grade repetition and being overage in class were also identified as factors influencing dropout rates. Respondents who repeated grades or were older than their classmates often felt embarrassed and demotivated to continue their studies. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Gondwe (2016) and Witte et al. (2013), which found that repeaters and overage students tend to lose interest in studies and perceive themselves as incapable.

Other findings of the study included long-distance travel to and from school and social stigma. Long-distance travel, identified as a major factor in the study by Adam et al. (2016), was also found to contribute to dropout rates. Some students preferred walking long distances from home rather than staying in hostels, but the prolonged travel exhausted them. PPD (2018) reported that even when transportation services were available, some students could not afford them, leading to dropouts.

According to teachers and principals, other factors influencing dropouts included ineffective teaching pedagogy, lack of smartphones, poor network connectivity, and a lack of parental guidance. Ineffective teaching pedagogy was highlighted as a major challenge, as some students did not have access to smartphones and online teaching was hindered. Teachers assigned writing tasks to keep students engaged, but comprehension difficulties arose, particularly for academically weak students, leading to a loss of interest in studies. These findings align with the study by Paul (2021), which identified technical and digital divides as the main causes of school abandonment. Ishak et al. (2021) also found that traditional teaching strategies, such as lectures and homework, hindered students' comprehension, resulting in decreased satisfaction and reduced participation in online courses.

The study emphasized the importance of parental support and monitoring to encourage children's academic progress during school closures. However, contrary to the expectations mentioned in UNESCO (2020), teachers reported that parents did not adequately supervise their children's learning at home.

Illiteracy among parents and their lack of knowledge in assisting with academic work, coupled with other commitments and domestic issues, hindered their involvement in their children's education. These findings align with the findings of MOE (2021), which indicated that non-literate parents' engagement was limited to financial and moral support, with some unable to support their children's online learning due to various commitments. Therefore, the study suggests that parents actively monitor their children's academic progress.

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that the factors influencing dropout rates were significantly triggered by the pandemic-induced school closures. The dropout respondents were students who were studying in 2020, and had schools not closed due to the pandemic, these dropouts would have continued their education in that year. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of the dropout problem, with factors such as lack of interest in studies, socioeconomic issues, academic performance, parental support, and the impact of the pandemic playing significant roles. Addressing these factors requires comprehensive efforts from educational institutions, policymakers, teachers, parents, and communities to create a supportive and conducive learning environment that promotes student retention and success.

Teaching experiences during the pandemic school closure

The study revealed some fascinating and unique opportunities that educators encountered during the closure of schools due to the pandemic. One notable finding was that teachers realized that teaching could take place from any location and did not necessarily require a physical classroom. While teachers were already familiar with online seminars and conferences, the idea of teaching students who were in different places through online strategies was completely new. This shift from traditional to digital teaching methods allowed teachers to explore their ICT (Information and Communication Technology) competencies and incorporate them into their daily lessons. Online platforms, as highlighted by Tsegay

(2022), enabled teachers and students to teach and learn from anywhere in the world as long as they had access to a computer and a reliable internet connection. This approach saved time and money and eliminated space constraints.

Another interesting finding was the sudden closure of schools during the academic session, which came as a shock to teachers. It was their first experience using online platforms for teaching, and this unexpected situation prompted teachers to explore their ICT competencies further and apply them in their lessons.

The most positive finding was that the relationship between teachers and students, as well as the bond between the school and the community, strengthened during the pandemic. Teachers developed stronger connections with their students through increased interaction. Schools and communities collaborated to ensure that students had access to essential reading materials, even in remote locations. Contrary to previous research suggesting that limited physical and emotional interaction could lead to reduced class participation and weaker student-teacher relationships, this study's findings indicated otherwise. Possible explanations for this included the active participation of a smaller number of students in online teaching, the students' willingness to seek clarification from teachers, and the comfort shy students found in interacting through messages, thanks to their access to smartphones and the internet.

The study also found that teachers went the extra mile by visiting villages to reach their students. These visits, conducted to provide mobile teaching and deliver SIM cards to students, gave teachers a chance to experience and understand the students' village life. Similar initiatives were reported by Tenzin (2020), highlighting teachers' dedication to keeping education alive even during crises and suggesting their ability to adapt in future unforeseen events.

However, the study also identified challenges that teachers faced during the school closure. Lack of computer skills and technological literacy hindered the effective use of online teaching platforms. Teachers' limited competency in using tools like Google Classroom resulted in them primarily uploading reading and writing materials on Google platforms and social media. Similar findings were observed in studies conducted in Afghanistan and China, where teachers lacked confidence and faced confusion when introduced to new platforms like Google Classroom for online teaching. The reliance on traditional face-to-face teaching methods prior to the pandemic limited teachers' digital competence, and their lack of prior experience hindered the effectiveness of online teaching during the school closure.

Furthermore, teachers encountered difficulties in ensuring the attendance of all students during online sessions. Various factors contributed to this, including exhaustion from excessive social engagement, pedagogical fatigue, poor network connectivity, lack of smartphones or personal phones, and distractions from gaming and social media. Similar findings of student absences in classroom participation and failure to complete required tasks were reported in studies by Leech (2022) and Hashemi (2021). Additionally, the study uncovered an interesting observation where students were found submitting identical images of assignments, indicating that they were circulating and copying assignments among themselves.

Overall, the study highlighted the opportunities and challenges that emerged for educators during the pandemic-induced closure of schools. It emphasized the need for teachers to enhance their digital skills, adapt to online teaching platforms, and address the various barriers that students faced in remote learning settings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the experiences of school dropouts in Tsirang Dzongkhag during the COVID-19

pandemic school closure in 2020, as perceived by the dropouts themselves, their parents, teachers, and administrators. The findings suggest that the obstacles to learning outweighed the learning opportunities during the pandemic school closure. School-related factors were found to be more influential than non-school-related factors in contributing to dropouts during this period.

The main barriers to learning identified were exhaustion from social engagement, pedagogical fatigue, comprehension issues, lack of personal smartphones and internet access. These barriers were associated with factors influencing dropouts, such as socioeconomic problems, incomplete academic tasks, academic weaknesses, lack of interest, teen pregnancy, and relationship issues. The study found a clear link between the challenges of online learning and the factors leading to dropouts during the pandemic school closure. It indicates that the primary reasons for dropouts were due to the learning challenges they have experienced during online learning in pandemic school closure time.

Analysis of the interviews revealed the prevalence of socioeconomic problems that captured students' attention, causing them to prioritize resolving these issues and helping their parents over focusing on their studies. This finding suggests that students may choose to prioritize family issues over education in similar situations in the future, emphasizing the need to address socioeconomic problems promptly to prevent dropouts.

The lack of technological access and internet connectivity among students, as well as the limited technological competency of teachers in online teaching, hindered effective teaching and learning during the pandemic school closure. Considering the possibility of future lockdowns, it is crucial for the government to address these challenges and maximize the potential of online teaching and learning.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to a small sample of four secondary schools in Tsirang Dzongkhag. Thus, the findings from the study would not represent the dropouts from all over the country and so cannot be generalized to the schools of the other Dzongkhags.

Recommendations

The present study investigated the experiences of dropouts during pandemic school closure. It is important to note that learners lacked technology and internet access to fully embrace online learning. Thus, the study recommends the government to improve the technological infrastructure of the country and lower the internet cost so that every student in any village could study without any disturbance from the poor internet connectivity.

Students dropout were mostly caused due to the socioeconomic problems at home such as needing a helping hand, sick parents, old parents, and lack of sufficient income to buy smartphone and data pack. Therefore, the study recommends diversifying economic opportunities and enhancing medical facilities, provide digital equipment and reasonably priced internet to underprivileged students.

The study saw the need to provide professional development programs for teachers on technical skills to improve their competency in using online apps for effective online teaching. Professional development programs are also needed in areas such as mentoring and student support so as to develop teachers' skills on providing appropriate guidance, support and care for the students. Therefore, the study recommends the education ministry for immediate action.

The study also recommends the schools, the need to create awareness on the importance of education to the parents and the community, and promote parental engagement to support and improve the learning and development of their children.

Teenage pregnancy, marriage and intimate relationships are major causes for dropouts. Therefore, this study recommends schools to strengthen and include life skill education as one of the important activities in the school. Educate students on sexuality on a regular basis; in the beginning, the mid and the end of the academic session.

The dropout participants are dropouts of a year, 2020 only. It would give a better picture of the dropouts if longitudinal study covering the years before and after the COVID 19 pandemic could be undertaken. It would also give provision for comparison in the number of dropouts and the factors affecting the dropouts.

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