Perspectives on the Factors Affecting Students’ Dropout Rate During COVID-19: A Case Study From Pakistan

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Abstract
Education has always been considered as the linchpin for a country’s economic and social development. The dropout rate in schools especially in developing countries has always been a problematic issue and the situation has further been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study primarily aims at studying the factors affecting the school dropout rate during the pandemic. Lockdown is the first step that any country starts to adopt for the safety of its general public. This severely affects the masses’ financial conditions, especially for the parents of students at risk, as the dropout rate increases with financial pressures. The slogan “stay home stay safe” has further aggravated the fear of the parents to send their children out and attend schools. The data for the study was collected from 20 public and private schools of two divisions, including seven districts of the province of Punjab, Pakistan, using interviews of policymakers, parents of dropouts, teachers, and students. The study is a corollary to several issues already highlighted in various other articles to transpire the details of drop-out rates in developing countries in general and Pakistan in particular. The study revealed financial conditions, lockdown effects, mode of learning, government policies, fear of death, the psyche of the parents, socio-cultural effects, the role of teachers and administrators, most affected level, and some contributory factors amongst the major factors. Finally, the study analyzes the effects of dropout and will help suggest measures to control the dropout rate in Pakistan in particular and developing countries in general.

Keywords
education, dropout, Pakistani schools, educational policy, COVID-19

Introduction
COVID-19, the bitter reality of the 21st century, is a pandemic that has badly influenced the human race globally (Gopalan & Misra, 2020). Because of the critical economic downturn and the social impacts evolving from joblessness, either on a temporary or permanent basis, revenue losses, and the dramatic constraints of quarantine has limited the people in their fundamental rights and freedom of movement restricting them to a level that is unmatchable in the history (Baldwin & di Mauro, 2020). The closure of educational hubs, be it schools or universities has resulted in deleterious effects on the educational system globally. The devastating effect didn’t limit itself to the health sector only but also amplified itself in economic sectors as well. This impact was far bigger than the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 to 2009. According to UNDP reports, it is very likely that Global Human Development, which may be gauged as an amalgamation of global standards in education, health, and lifestyle, will go down in 2020 for the first time (United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

While considering the situation of education in Pakistan, previously, it was observed that the dropout rate in rural areas of Pakistan is increasing day by day however, it drastically increased in urban areas from 10% to 25% during 2020 (Abbasi, 2021). This is because of the fear of coronavirus and the financial hardship caused by inflation. In the past few months, more than a million children have left the schools. To this end, the government has launched a specific "The

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Ehsaas Education Stipends (EES) program for primary, secondary, and higher education” to address the school dropout crisis in Pakistan where an estimated 21.7 million children aged 5 to 16 are out of school (Jamal, 2021). Education is the basic right of every individual and gives a clear way to the continuous growth of the economy and society (Gretchenko et al., 2018). No society will prosper if there exists a considerable amount of illiterate population and a substantial ratio of its children are out of school. For unprivileged masses, education is the only hope to earn a better living and the only way to assure socio-economic progress. The objectives of the study:

1. To find out the most affected level of dropout students during the pandemic in Pakistan.
2. To analyze the factors affecting the dropout rate.
3. To suggest measures for formulating strategies to reduce the dropout rate in Pakistan during the pandemic.

**Significance of the Study**

The study will prove beneficial for the regional conceptualization of the problem and visualizing the future course of action where it is required the most for understanding the problems and their solutions for the policy formation for the students at risk. This study will also beacon the way for the development of policies that will help us to achieve the goals of Education for All.

**Literature Review**

Education allows nations and native communities to steadily advance and fortify their systems of social justice, democratic establishments, and foster values of peace and harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect in the upcoming generations (Naz et al., 2019).

**Conceptualization of students’ dropout.** The researchers in the past have taken this out-of-school child and young generation as a problematic issue. Whatever the term we are using in the past under different conditions and cases like early school leaving, disconnection, stop-outs, or exclusion, they all represent the out-of-school student status or the school dropouts. Out-of-school is such a big phenomenon that is not only complex in nature but also has many subdivisions. Whereas, some of the researchers while studying the dropout cases classify certain conditions and criteria which also include students who are below in attendance or the students who leave the school before completing their legal schooling age, not because of death or getting admission to other schools (Mughal, 2020).

**Present conviction of school dropout.** Different research studies conducted on the dropout rate in high schools have taken it as a complex process, resulting from several alterable and unalterable factors, responsible for influencing the students to leave the institution before graduation (Christenson et al., 2001). Eckstrom et al. (1986) have given a much broader perspective regarding dropout phenomena which helps us to visualize beyond the factors associated with students like the socio-cultural background of the family, the behavior of teachers and role cum distance from school, and most effectively, the persistent affordability of the family which directly affects the students who drop out from the schools (Pong & Ju, 2000; Rumberger, 1987). To opt for further education certain attributes of the schools such as available resources, the structure, and the area occupied, the number of students in each class etcetera, play a decisive role in decision making (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Whereas, outside attributes of the school having a direct effect on students include, its location, social values, and the students’ composition (Lofstrom, 2007). Moreover, the empathic attitude of the teachers toward their students may result in less dropout ratio (Christenson et al., 2001). Appleton et al. (2008) based their views on student engagement theory, which advocates that once students develop a connection or belongingness with their schools, they are more presumably to retain themselves in the system. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) opine that low-performing students in the graduate entrance test which is implemented for the past few years put them at greater risk, thereby, pushing those students to drop out of the schools.

Non-attendance of school by the kids and young generation is an issue that is nearly faced by all countries. According to a UNESCO report in 2018, the number of children not attending school and high school students reached nearly 258 million (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2018). The UN General Assembly embraced an agenda for 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on 25 September 2015, duly signed by 169 signatories, with the vision to accomplish these targets by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Equal and equitable education for both boys and girls is one of the goals of the fourth SDG, that is, in primary and secondary education (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). Statistically speaking a very little was done as far as controlling the dropout of the students during their early childhood, secondary and high secondary school age after 3 years of education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2018). The mistake we usually commit in describing the school dropouts is that we don’t differentiate between those who attend the school but for some reason they cannot continue their studies and those students who never went to the school. Pakistan is in the ranking of the lower-middle-income country of South Asia, having a population of little over 207 million, out of which the majority resides in villages (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency [PILDAT], 2011).

All the previous studies to some extents have given the figures and ratios of the percentages of the dropouts but the major factors affecting the dropout rate from perspectives of the policymakers, parents, teachers, and students during
pandemic were not analyzed according to their degree of influence which this study exposed and suggests measures for their remedy. The study, therefore, is an effort to address this important gap in the literature.

**High rate of school dropouts in Pakistan.** Pakistan is in constant effort to provide basic education facilities to every citizen of the country. The low admission rate in schools along with a considerable increase in population size is causing an increasing number of illiterates in the country. Unfortunately, Pakistan is amongst the three top-ranking countries in the world that have the highest number of out-of-school children. To understand the educational condition of Pakistan it is imperative to first analyze a few of the statistics. To start with, in 2019 to 2020 the gross enrolment rate (GER) at National Level (6–10 years excluding pre-school) was 84%, and middle age (11–13) was 63%. The result showed that there was a 6% decline by 2019 to 20 in GER level (6–10) and a 1% increase in GER middle age (11–13) as compared to 2014 to 2015 enrollment of students. Whereas the net enrolment rate (NER) 2019 to 2020 at the national level including primary level (ages 4–9) was 60%, and Net Enrolment Rate (NER) Middle age (11–13) was 37%. The figures reflected a 5% decline in NER by 2019 to 2020 as compared to 2014 to 2015, and percentage remained stagnant for middle-aged children (5–16) who have never attended school, as well as those who have attended school and then left, are classified as out of school by 32% in 2019 to 2020 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2019–2020). Further, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2019–2020) survey highlighted that at the national level, the Net Enrolment Rate for ages between (10–12) showed a decline with 21% in 2019 to 2020 compared to 2014 to 2015, and percentage remained stagnant for middle-aged children (5–16) who have never attended school, as well as those who have attended school and then left, are classified as out of school by 32% in 2019 to 2020 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2019–2020). Further, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2019–2020) survey highlighted that at the national level, the Net Enrolment Rate for ages between (10–12) showed a decline with 21% in 2019 to 2020 compared to 2014 to 2015, and percentage remained stagnant for middle-aged children (5–16) who have never attended school, as well as those who have attended school and then left, are classified as out of school by 32% in 2019 to 2020 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2019–2020). Further, the survey report highlighted the key indicators of ICT that are, the percentage of the population of more than 10 years with mobile ownership, and the users of the internet in the last 3 months or with ICTs skills of the same age. Over the age of 10, 65% of men and 25% of women in Pakistan own a mobile phone. The utilization of the internet for men and women is 24% and 14%, respectively. In urban regions, 19% of computers are owned, compared to 7% in rural areas, while internet connectivity is available to 48% in urban areas and just 23% in rural regions. Mobile phones are used by 96% of persons in urban regions and 91% of people in rural areas (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2019–2020).

As a result, illiteracy is affecting every walk of life in Pakistan. Thereby, hindering Pakistan’s economic uplift, social evolution, and political stability. Low educational Indicators are pushing Pakistan’s ranking below 125th amongst the community of nations in the Human Development Index (HDI) for the last 20 years (Hunter, 2020).

To reach the desirable literacy rate, Universal primary education is required to be targeted as it plays a fundamental role. It enhances the literacy rate and boosts the economic development of any nation. All through the world, the role of primary education in contributing toward socio-economic advancement has captured the consideration of analysts, thereby, further increasing the importance of primary education in developing countries like Pakistan (Malik, 2015). The Millennium Development Goal #2 was also designed to improve the educational situation of developing countries which was the mutual agreement between the signatories’ countries in the universal declaration of Education for All, held in Jomtien in 2015, was to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Primary education usually starts at 5 to 6 years of age and continues through 11 to 12, although age requirements differ among countries Pakistan is constantly committed to obtaining Universal Primary Education under millennium development goal #2. Besides its meager resources, the Government of Pakistan together with the help of other establishments in the country is working to improve the primary education situation (Zakar et al., 2020).

Perhaps most strikingly, after Nigeria, Pakistan has the highest number of out-of-school children globally. Almost 22.7 million Pakistani children between the age of 5 to 16 are out of school, and out of this 44% of this age group did not participate in education in 2017, dropout rates decrease substantially as children progress up the educational ladder (UNICEF, 2021).

Abbass (2020) highlighted that the major after-effect which Pakistan is facing after COVID-19 is an increase in poverty level, which is pushing many students either to child labor or early marriages. While highlighting the effects of COVID-19 further, Abbass (2020) stated that the private schools’ sector enrolled 38% of the children between 6 to 10 years before the spread of this illness. The high fee structure of the private schools and growing poverty level is yet another reason for the students’ dropout rate during this disaster.

Ban on gathering, social distancing, and travel restrictions was imposed worldwide to control this illness (Nicola et al., 2020). Fear of coronavirus is included amongst the major impact on people’s wellbeing, physically as well as mentally. Increased death anxiety amongst the parents of the children who are experiencing this fear is keeping their children at home to let them remain safe and secure. Therefore, COVID-19 has a direct bearing on the dropout of students in Pakistan (Shakil et al., 2020).

School closure is an effective social approach that is being pursued globally, but these efforts can have dire consequences for education and learning (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). The consequences in Pakistan due to school closures might have on the learning levels, admissions, and future earnings of children and students. Learning loss for the average student during
this period can take 0.3 and 0.8 years to cope with schooling. Pakistani children currently spend an average of 9.1 years in school, but due to the low quality of the school system, they learn only 5.1 years. Substantial effects will be experienced by the students, not only after the reopening of schools but will also go a long way as far as covering up knowledge deficiency is concerned (Abbass, 2020).

Shakil et al. (2020) while analyzing different studies in the realm of post-disaster contexts opine that the psychological impact of the disruption of everyday activity due to disasters, as observed in developing and developed countries, has serious repercussions on educational learning achievements. It is a proven fact that under extreme stress the mental ability and memory of the people are affected the most. Same way, school closures due to COVID-19 will not bear different results for students.

This study is based on the Austin theory of student’s engagement along with its levels and its assumptions for all dropped out students from primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels. It can be applied easily, possibly to all dropped out cases that have been observed to attain educational learning achievements. It is a proven fact that under extreme stress the mental ability and memory of the people are affected the most. Same way, school closures due to COVID-19 will not bear different results for students.

The qualitative research approach provides means and ways for understanding the existing phenomena of dropouts during the pandemic, rich data collected, and in-depth analysis of the views, opinions, and thoughts of the policymakers, school heads (both public and private), parents, teachers, and students. NVIVO 12 software was used for thematic analysis. The case study was both variant and multifaceted, involving the phenomena of students dropping out from school at a specific time and location.

**Methodology**

The research aimed to find how policymakers, school heads, parents, teachers of the different systems of schools in Pakistan see this phenomenon of dropout of students during the pandemic.

**Ethical Consideration**

Ethical considerations were kept at the forefront while conducting the study. Of course, the researcher was particularly aware of the prevailing situation while requesting for interviews from respondents at a time when people were anxious about the illness and experiencing the lockdown effects. Prior permission from the ethical committee of the university was sought before the conduct of this research. To ensure that all respondents felt comfortable no pressure from the researcher’s side was imposed regarding giving information. They were allowed to opt out at any stage of the interview.

**Research Approach**

Data collection for the research was done during the second and third wave of COVID-19 in Pakistan, that is, from November last year till April this year (2021) from Lahore and Bahawalpur divisions of Punjab, having seven districts, that is, Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Rahim Yar Khan, Lahore, Kasur, Nankana Sahib, and Sheikhupura. The data was mostly collected using virtual methodologies, like email, WhatsApp, telephonic interviews, etc. the researcher remained lucky to take a few face-to-face in-depth interviews with the policymaker, heads of educational institutes, and teachers at their workplace. To gain more information and in-depth knowledge the researcher also included the dropout students’ parents and took interviews from a few high school students as well. Digital interview of younger children was not selected as a sample of the study due to their age and maturity level (Lumby, 2012). The researcher did the telephonic interview with eight policymakers, out of which one was interviewed using Zoom and four were interviewed telephonically whereas three were interviewed face-to-face at their workplace. Same way 20 principals of the public and private (9 for girls’ and 11 for boys’ schools) were interviewed out of which 5 were interviewed face-to-face, 6 were interviewed using ZOOM, and the rest 9 were interviewed telephonically. About 30 parents and 6 teachers of the dropout students which were highlighted by the principals of the schools, were accessed on phone for an in-depth interview. The data was collected using a semi-structured interview and secondary data from newspapers, articles, websites, and blogs were used regarding students’ dropout ratio from schools in Pakistan. The province of Punjab especially in upper Punjab is male-dominated. The researcher often faced difficulties while taking data from government institutes as they thought it is laborious and private schools never wanted...
to expose their business secrets. Female researchers were often tricked to long official chains where she had to run across departments to departments for getting even a smaller task done. However, if the male accompanied the female researcher, then the situation would relax a bit. Whereas in lower Punjab the respect for ladies especially the learned class is admirable, however, the presence of male researchers along with females is often mandatory. Since research revolved around some of the parents who were from the unprivileged class of the society and they were not literate, therefore, the researchers had to read out the questionnaire and the consent form to them. Their views were more blunt, expressive, and sometimes exposed harsh realities.

To gather in-depth information from the participants, the researchers kept ordering and altering the sequence of the questions, and the questions were asked from the interviewees in the language they understood according to their exposure, using appropriate probes during the interview. One more point of coordination was selection of peaceful full interview place with the consent of the interviewee, which was amicably done. The duration of interviews varied between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes and comprised of the following questions for the policymakers:

**Questions asked from the policymakers and school’s heads.**
1. What is the importance of education in your opinion?
2. Do you think that the COVID-19 has seriously affected our education and caused us an intellectual loss?
3. In your viewpoint what are the particular reasons for students dropping out of school during the pandemic in Pakistan?
4. What was the most affected level of education which had the maximum dropout ratio?
5. Was this dropout rate also gender-biased?
6. Role of government/heads and teachers in minimizing dropout of students?
7. How can we control and minimize the dropout ratio at the school level?

**Questions asked from the parents.**
1. Do you think that education is important for the life and progression of your children?
2. Do you consider that COVID-19 has affected the education of your child and his/her progression in life?
3. What were the reasons which forced you to drop your child out of school?
4. Do you think that there is a difference between learning in private and government schools and why?
5. Do you think the online education system is of any help to the students?
6. What assistance do you require that can help your child from preventing dropping out or getting re-enrolled in school during the pandemic?
7. What are your own experiences and challenges you faced being a father/mother which forced your child to get dropped out of school during COVID-19?

**Questions asked from the students.**
1. Did you like your school?
2. Do you miss your teacher and peer group?
3. What do you think your mom and dad thought while deciding to drop you out of school?
4. What you did after leaving your school?
5. Do you want to go back to school?
6. To what extent pandemic has affected your academic goals?

The researcher adopted the language which was preferred by the interviewees and they felt comfortable conveying their point of view. Since the researcher was having command over local and national languages, therefore, she could know the dialects, words, and their specific usage under different circumstances, thereby conveying the exact meanings of the phrases which the interviewees wanted to convey. This meant a vivid representation, understanding, and keeping the diction and dialect intact in the literal sense of all those who participated in the study.

**Data Analysis**

Along with qualitative methods, an inductive data analysis approach was used, to develop a holistic understanding regarding participants’ views, opinions, the way they see, hear, and understand (Creswell, 2014) the students’ school dropout scenario. A thematic analysis strategy was used to establish a theoretical understanding of the collected data. There was a variety of data collected in the process of interviews which was sifted, organized, and arranged under different themes to make the whole data pass through an inductive process which was used to take out a detailed set of themes (Harding, 2018) keeping in view the relevance of the material to the objectives of the research study. The themes were extracted from the interviews and documents. The data was read over repeatedly to know the stress points to extract the main themes and subthemes. To this end, the researcher also used NVivo 12 for generating codes and making them into separate themes. To align the study, the researchers referred back to research questions and the objectives to check that the themes were coherent, related, and had inferences to be drawn for this (Leedy et al., 2014).

**Results**

**Findings of the Study**

The arrangement presented keeping in view the factors affecting the dropout rate during the pandemic. Related, translated anonymized quotations were used from the write-out of the interviews data and the same has been included, to
highlight the core issue of the study. Pseudonyms are used instead of the names of the participants.

**Importance of Education**

The key finding of the research is that the importance of education for all cannot be undermined in any case. To grow and develop, individually and as a nation is only through education, which is a major vehicle for the transformation of the country. Policymakers and heads of institutes along with teachers had a broad horizon regarding the importance of education. However, some of the students and parents relatively had some different priorities under the present pandemic environment.

_P1_ & _P6_ were of this view,

“Education will reap a better future for the students and their families. They need to understand that with education only they will be able to get good jobs, can raise their existing socio-economic status and can become a useful member of the society, which is true for the nations as well.”

_H4_ & _H11_ revealed,

“Education plays a fundamental role for everyone. It is key to success and opens many venues. It transforms the personality, grooms, our thoughts, and improves our dealings.”

_Respondent PA 3_ & _P30_,

“Education these days is more of a business, totally a burden on us. It is just pocketing money by some influential people to fulfill their desires and I am already short of money these days.”

**Pandemic Effects on Education**

The pandemic has affected every walk of life and has made the attainment of education difficult or nearly impossible for a larger population of students struggling to survive under difficult economic challenges. The closure of schools globally has put deep effects on teaching and learning. It will take many years to overcome these learning losses.

_P 2_ & _P4_ acknowledged in the dialogue,

“The schools were directed to go for remote learning strategies to reduce, coop up, and minimize the learning losses. However much through experience, it has been learnt that the damage has already been done and it would take considerable time to revert all that what has been lost especially for a developing nation like Pakistan.”

_PA11_ & _PA19_ bewilderingly affirmed that,

“I am a less-educated parent and cannot help much in their studies. My children cannot understand what is being taught online, their progress and interest in studies are visibly reduced.”

**Increase in Dropout Rate From Schools**

The downturn of the global economy and the closing of the schools is paired shocks for the developing countries, which will have a long-lasting effect on education and its development. A speedy response from the government is needed to tackle the issue of disengagement of the students because of the pandemic which has started growing unprecedentedly.

While collecting the data the closest word connections relating to dropouts with the help of NVivo 12 are shown in Figure 1. This word tree is created as part of a text search query. This word tree is generated with the help of NVivo 12, when a user may click on any of the branches to the left or the right of the focal word i.e “Dropout” to see the entire sentence or phrase which has been used at different places in the data set such as, “health declines student vulnerability increases for dropout, resultantly inequality increases, social unrest increases.”

_Respondent head H15 & H20 emphasized_

“Well, our school is amongst the leading schools of the country and started our online classes immediately after the lockdown was announced. Students’ dropout is increasing considerably, especially in pre and primary classes.”

_H16_ and _H2_ revealed,

“We do extend the facility of online teaching at school level, moreover, the government has started TV channels and programs on the radio during COVID-19 to reduce the learning losses. But due to the affordability of these items, many of our students couldn’t get the advantage of these facilities, thereby, failing to continue their studies.”

_Respondent PA 20_ uncovered that,

“My son and daughter both have been going to school for the last 6 years, but due to some reasons my son is not able to develop an interest in the school. Every third day he is saying I don’t want to go to school. This pandemic has further aggravated the situation.”

**Factors Affecting the Dropout Rate From Schools**

The global economy is facing the most difficult and testing time after the advent of this illness, whereas, the world was facing learning crises in education even before this critical and crucial time of the pandemic. A student dropout is often taken as an outcome of some crucial happening and it is typically labeled as the antecedent of dropout. A student dropout is often taken as an outcome of some crucial happening and it is typically labeled as the antecedent of dropout. Leaving school, however, is the result of that process that started way before the time when a student quits the school.

_Hierarchy chart._ The hierarchy chart as shown in Figure 2 by NVivo 12 tells the magnitude of each factor, that is, the percentage to which a factor is effective in dropout rate.
After data analysis, we came to know that the major factors affecting the dropout rate during the COVID-19 are the economic crunch and the effects of lockdown. Most of the respondents expressed their concerns about their affordability and financial state. Mode of learning, government policies, and fear of death are also the few challenges that play their role in the increase of dropout ratio of students. Few contributory factors are affecting the drop-out rate during this pandemic. At the primary level of education, girls and students of the marginalized background were also identified as the most affected level. Socio-cultural effects, the psyche of the parents, and the role of teachers and administration are also identified as key factors affecting the students at risk.

**Economic setback due to COVID-19.** The key finding of the research is that the biggest effect during the pandemic is the economic setback that is faced globally as well as individually (see Figure 2). The well-being of many people has been affected due to this pandemic’s economic consequences. During this period of economic turmoil, many will manage to survive, and many will succeed by bringing innovation and turning this illness into opportunity by updating their current businesses keeping in view the changing realities of the current era.

One of the eminent policymakers P5 affirmed that,

“The impact of this illness started from the first lockdown and it has severely damaged the economy and social setup of Pakistan up till now. The loss has approached in trillions, which is not good for a developing country like Pakistan. It is CRIPPLING OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM which already needs a major revision”

Key parent respondents PA 24 & PA 22 uncovered that,

“I am the owner of a small cloth shop. The lockdown and the restrictions imposed by the government have nearly put my business to a halt. To feed my family is the biggest tension which is affecting my health and my children’s education a lot.”

School Head respondent H6, H14 & H9 impeccably mentioned,

“I am head of a private school and due to the pandemic, I am close to closing my school. Parents are not paying the fee, and I have got no money to pay my staff.”
Impact of closed down activities during COVID-19. One of the findings of this study is that the closing of schools has impacted the social and economic sector of the people globally. The percentage to which this factor affects the dropout is shown in Figure 2. The marginalized families are facing this impact more for their children. This disparity will further deteriorate the already existing socio-economic gap in the education system and other sectors of life.

Key head school respondent H15 assertively revealed,

“Lockdown affects the socio-economic domains of all the people.”

One of the teacher’s respondents T3 impeccably mentioned,

“I didn’t receive the pay during the lockdown, I am seriously thinking of changing my profession which may be able to support me during lockdown.”

Students’ respondent S3 affirmed that,

“...I am getting fat and physically de-shaped.”

Approaches to education during COVID-19 learning. It is clear from the analysis that COVID-19 compelled the school to change its mode of learning overnight. The level to which this factor affects the dropout is shown in Figure 2. Thereby, opening new vistas of diverse learning through e-learning, where teaching-learning activities were undertaken using remote and digital platforms.

One of the Policymaker respondents P2 impeccably mentioned,

“We have also started Tele schooling and radio programs for those students who cannot afford the mobiles or computers. Measures are also taken to bring improvement in the public schools’ infrastructure also. We are also working with some NGOs for the provision of food and books to the marginalized sector.”
**Parent respondents P 7 & P10 assertively revealed,**

"I work on daily wages; this lockdown has put us in the condition where my family sometimes sleeps without taking any food. How can I think of buying of TV or Radio for their education."

**Effects of policies by the academia.** With school closure and altogether shifting of classes online in different parts of the world, many are still in a lurch whether to go for online learning or will carry on face-to-face teaching mode and how this change in teaching and learning would affect the global education market.

**Key policymaker P3 auxiliary declared,**

"Our government has taken a lot of initiatives in school reforms. Measures are also taken to bring improvement in the public schools infrastructure also"

**Policymaker P6 affirmed,**

"Our government has launched multiple programs for the education sector and to improve the literacy level. Our priorities include re-admission of the dropout students through the provision of equal education opportunities to the deprived sectors in our society."

**School Head H12 affirmed,**

"Whatever the policies I don’t find any reason for closing the government schools especially in rural areas where the effects of the pandemic are almost negligible"

**Parent respondent PA6 affirmed,**

"I was not literate and I desired my child to become a literate and honorable citizen. Unfortunately, my desires have perished and my dreams are ruined.

**Distressed environment.** The speedy spreading of this illness and the condition of uncertainty and fear have put stress, anxiety, and psychological impacts on the mental health of individuals worldwide. The percentage to which this factor effects the dropout is shown in Figure 2. The conditions are neither favorable nor encouraging for all those who were in an advantageous position before the pandemic erupted.

**Parents PA17 & PA23 affirmed,**

"Although I am economically stable, I am afraid to send my two kids to school, because I fear for the loss of their lives. Making them sit at home will protect them from this pandemic or becoming a carrier of this pandemic which can affect elders at home."

**Respondent PA13 & PA14 acknowledged in the dialogue,**

"My children are the most precious gift God has blessed me with. I will not send them to school, and limiting this exposure will save them from coronavirus.

The Affected Community and The Level of Education. The devastating effects of this illness have touched every strand of society and have given exceptional challenges in all the fields, be it the education, health sector, food industry, and the economy as a whole. The closing of schools has indeed impacted pre and primary levels, girls, and less economically stable students the most. The percentage to which this factor effects the dropout is shown in Figure 2.

**School head respondents H19 & H4 revealed,**

"We have a reasonably high rate of dropout cases from the school especially of girls in pre and primary levels."

While supporting the gender biases **Respondent PA10 bewilderingly acknowledged in the dialogue,**

"I don’t want to send my younger daughters to school in a pandemic environment. Since my son has the main responsibility of earning, therefore, I will support him for education. For my elder daughter, I think it’s better to fulfill my obligation i.e., ‘the marriage of my daughter’."

**Respondent parents PA8 & PA23 both affirmed that,**

"My economic condition is bad and the level at which he studies is very low. I am planning to put him in some auto workshop to become yet another source of earning and a helping hand to me and my family."

**Lack of learning due to lesser peer interaction and learning environment.** One of the findings of the research is that distance education techniques adopted in the wake of coronavirus have restricted the social learning of the students which was very much there in traditional mode, that is, face-to-face learning.

**Respondent S2 & S1 revealed,**

"I miss my school too much, my friends, my teachers. Our fights, discussion on topics, and running in playgrounds. I miss that all."

**Respondent PA12 uncovered that,**

"The whole day my son and daughter are sitting on computers and trying to learn through online lectures. after the lecture, both of them are complaining about the understanding of the lecture."

**The psychological barrier of the parents.** The researcher also found out that the media is creating so much hype on pandemic and its effects that people are counting figures and arresting them inside their houses to avoid being a victim of
covid 19. Some of the participants who were nearby were assured time and again for observing strict SOPs for having a face-to-face interview but they flatly refused and resorted to telephonic interviews only.

Policymaker P1 was of this view,

“I am afraid you are not aware of the latest figures of pandemic affected people in our country which has increased up to fifteen hundred people per day. I suggest we better have a telephonic only.”

Lady parent respondent PA13 revealed,

“I don’t even visit my closest relatives and neither allow my children to do so.”

Head H9 & H6 affirmed that,

“Schools have been closed because of a reason that the epidemic should not get out of control due to mass interaction of people i.e., teachers, students, transporters, bookshops and all the other fields related to continuing the cycle of education.”

Parents’ respondents PA4 & PA9 expressed,

“I don’t want my children to die. There is a pandemic outside. Don’t you understand?”

Already existing problems causing school dropouts. The researcher found out that the world was facing a learning crisis and millions of young and primary school students were out of school even before this devastating illness. The problem of learning losses due to dropout has become more worse with this coronavirus.

Policymaker P7 unveiled that,

“If you go through recent researches, you would find that the dropout from the schools was already on the increase, the pandemic has just aggravated the situation.”

Respondents Heads H18 and H19 and Teachers respondents T6 expressed,

“We are having some issues, like price hike in recent years and affordability factors which are already causing a dent in the educational field, especially the dropout cases.”

Respondent parents PA18 unveiled that,

“Pandemic or no pandemic I had already decided to drop my child out of the school. He sits with me in my shop nowadays.”

Respondent Student ST1 revealed,

“My teacher, I think he doesn’t like me much and says that I should try my luck somewhere else apart from education.”

Role of academia. One of the findings of this study is that all the countries are in an emergency mode of learning and using ICTs technologies, the only way to connect the students to avoid learning losses in pandemic. In these hard and testing times, proper training of teachers and upgrading the available facilities will keep us in the right direction until this illness fades away.

Respondent head H10 & H18 impeccably mentioned,

“Besides best of our efforts to train our teachers on the online education system. The dropout rate of the students is still on the increase.”

Respondent policymaker P7 Highlighted,

“The Ministry is working on upgrading our existing public school’s infrastructure and training of teachers but parents’ satisfaction can only be assured if they observe some academic growth in their children, which probably not up to the mark presently causing a high rate of school dropout students.”

Parent respondent PA45 explicitly mentioned,

“I know once I was a student when the teacher was in class, he kept us alert all the time but today with muted microphones and videos mostly the students sleep during the lectures and the teachers also just try to fulfill their obligation. No physical presence of teachers means no impact on the class, resulting in the least learning.”

Student ST4 revealed,

“My teacher is very boring, always giving lectures and doesn’t know how to involve the students in studies.”

Discussion

The researchers in the current study found that it is essential to understand the importance of education for all, as it also affects to a large extent from micro to macro level, the economic conditions of societies, communities, and even nations. The same has also been strongly supported in the study by Van (2020) who while commenting upon the economic uplift of the developed countries declared education as the main factor which gave boost to the economic stability of developed countries. Moreover, it has been revealed in this study that the closure of schools, colleges, and universities is a vivid reflection of the effects of COVID-19 which is giving rise to learning losses and an increase in inequality for which adoption of new technologies and latest types of equipment to continue the teaching-learning processes for avoiding any further loss in academics has become our utmost requirement. A similar idea has been represented by Geven and Hasan (2020) in their study, in which the authors advocated that inequality in society is on the rise because of non-provision of equal educational
opportunities to the deprived class they also emphasized on providing online learning and teaching facilities to the students to avoid further learning losses along with building up students’ and teachers’ capacity in acquiring or creating new technologies in Pakistan. On the other hand, the socio-economic consequences due to pandemic are the biggest challenge that is faced by the people in Pakistan that have also been claimed in various studies conducted on Pakistan economy during COVID-19. For instance, Khan (2021) in his study has conducted a thorough assessment of COVID-19 and its socio-economic effects on the major cities of Pakistan. Besides the socio-economic effects, the pandemic has an overall role to play with the psyche of the people, making them conscious of their children’s lives and having them locked inside their houses which is a severe depressive moment affecting both the mental and physical health of the students and the parents in Pakistan. Shakil et al. (2020) presented similar results in their study arguing that during lockdowns, self-isolation, social distancing, the closing of schools, and no outside home activities have infused fear of death and increased depression amongst the masses. Parallel to this, accessibility to e-learning due to the lack of resources and affordability factors in the country has also increased the dropout rate in Pakistan. The current finding is in accordance with Rasheed et al. (2021), Haider et al. (2021), and Ilonga et al. (2020). In addition to all the above findings, there was an overall decline in maintaining the educational lot intact before the pandemic as well for which the researchers in the past have already enlisted several causes for the increase in the rate of dropout students. In Pakistan, the most affected level for dropout cases has been observed in pre and primary levels, especially the girls and the students from marginalized societies. Main reasons for drop out of students included lack of policy guideline, absence of good governance and management, keeping a fast pace to meet up with the challenges of the modern world and carryout a reappraisal of our education system. World Bank Group (2020) in their report likewise highlighted the disastrous effects, the most affected groups especially girls of early childhood education, and the potential increase in the dropout rates due to COVID-19 in schools education. The report suggested policy guidelines to manage, handle, move forward with speed, and revamp our education system.

All this does not mean that we are not determined to reduce the dropout rate and are nowhere even closer to eliminate the causes for which we are having intellectual loss to our societies, especially for Pakistan and the third-world countries. If we analyze each and every above-listed factors, then it may be appreciated that all these factors have been addressed to some extent in response to the effects of COVID-19, however, their utility and effectiveness have not been up to the expectation of the masses as yet. Therefore, a need is felt to go an extra mile while improvising and thinking of new ways and means of tackling the modern-day problems, thereby, keeping momentum in the academic and intellectual flow to reduce both the effects of COVID-19 and seize hold of dropout rate from the schools.

It is now evident that a new system awaits Pakistani society to upgrade its educational system which is both progressive and reachable for all the classes of the society. To this end government of Pakistan has started with uniform syllabus up to the higher secondary level. This is a positive step toward the educational approach. The only thing we as Pakistanis need to do is to help reach the students at all levels so that they are not left out of the scene under worst educational environment. Distribution of free lap top schemes to brilliant students right from their early ages with free educational network surfing will help a lot in this regard. All out efforts must be done to establish 4G internet connections at far flung areas where the taxes from the service lending company will be minimum may also be introduced so that these incentive based coverages get more popularity and can attract maximum investment.

**Implications for Research, Practice, and Society**

Pandemic has reassured us one thing that if we are willing to learn there are a thousand ways through which learning can be carried out. It has two implications one is to try out something which has already been successfully practiced, that is, Virtual learning, which has been thoroughly practiced, now the students are also accustomed to this type of learning environment. The second is not to stop over here, what we need to have is to think of more advanced and better ways of teaching and learning processes besides just relying upon ICT technologies. This will open doors for microchip development of a superior nature which may lead to an artificial learning environment without the physical presence of teachers, students, classes, or even the environment thereof. This will further ensure a whole new world of technological advancement where computers and microchips will act so smart that options for all types of questions regarding education, jobs, shopping, health issues, investments, business, behaviors, warfare, tactics, politics, strategies, decisions, improvements, and researches will be provided. The only thing one needs to do is to choose the best option available that is so economical that we need not worry about the dropout rate of students.

**Suggestions/Recommendations**

1. It is time to realize the pressing need for education in the general masses. Social media in this regard can play a vital role in reshaping the mind and building up the perception of the importance of education. Thus, making it realized that education is as essential as oxygen for life.
Figure 3. Concept model of students’ dropout during COVID-19.
2. It has revolutionized the world overall. It no longer restricts itself to orthodox means but it is combined with a variety of new techniques to make it more attractive for the users. Academia may have to learn how IT should be used more constructively in interesting ways which are both eye-catching as well as persistent for the students.

3. Restoration and capacity building in the education sector.

4. Issues requiring attention in the general social environment to improve the education sector. These issues include:
   
   (a) Uplifting of the social status of masses by generating an alternative source of income even during pandemics like online jobs and health-related job activities.
   
   (b) Limited measures to increase social connectivity with proper observance of COVID-19 Standard operating procedures (SOPs) like social distancing, hand sanitization, wearing of masks.
   
   (c) Adopting innovative means overcoming the decline in dropout rates from schools like educational movies and games with funfair activities and eye-catching views.
   
   (d) Revision of government policies from time to time so that education is not affected in any case.
   
   (e) Provision of a healthy atmosphere, that is, providing motivation lectures and talk, physical activities like Yoga and games that will help in building up the immunity, lesser COVID 19 patients, lesser dropout rate.
   
   (f) As a law, the minimum level of primary education must be declared by the government. This will improve the overall perception of education.
   
   (g) Restoration of best learning practices, that is, through peer group by observing proper SOPs of COVID-19.
   
   (h) The most important is to make up the mindset of the parents and build up their will not to drop out of their children from school.
   
   (i) Tackling of additional influential factors like improving the attendance, teacher student’s relationship. Improving the role of teachers and school administration will also contribute toward less dropout of students from the schools.

Conceptual Model

The concept model as shown in Figure 3 made with NVivo 12 software shows how different factors govern the dropout of the students. The most challenging is the economic crunch with problems of affordability and adverse financial burden faced by the students and their parents due to the pandemic. The situation was further aggravated by the Effects of lockdown which was one of our responses to COVID-19 thereby causing learning losses and a variety of other challenges besides turning the crisis into opportunity. The overall impact of the pandemic in education altered the Mode of learning, amended Government policies and infested the fear of death at a larger scale amongst the parents. This seized the education for students at risk especially the primary students with low economic status that too mostly the girls although there were some other contributory factors as well but socio-cultural effects, the psyche of the parents and role of the teachers and administration also played their part in ultimate drop out of students from schools.

Conclusion

If we are thinking that we are stepping into the next century within academic turmoil especially for the developing countries then all that we have achieved scientifically during the last two centuries is going to be ruined. It is because the generation with intellectual losses will not be able to sustain the scientific development, research, and advancements of the previous centuries as they will be left out of the marathon which requires them to remain in step with advanced countries. The effects of this educational debacle will not only be restricted to research and development only but on a larger spectrum will have devastating effects on economic, political, social, intellectual, ethical, and moral values as well. The dropout of students hence needs to be addressed especially in developing and underdeveloped countries on a crash program basis if we want to save our future. It is also to realize that the world today is a global village where we rise and fall as region and not as separate countries. This pandemic has shown us that not only the developing countries but the far-reaching effects of the pandemic have also shaken the developed countries. Any effect be it, intellectual or economic, will have an overall impression either positive or negative throughout the world.

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