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Impacts of pandemic on education sector in Thailand

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1. Introduction

Coronavirus Disease 2019 or COVID-19, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), is genetically related to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) emerged in 2002, and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) arisen since 2012. Although the SARS-CoV-2 is less fatal than the SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, its rapid spread has resulted in much more adverse aftermaths around the globe (Petersen et al., 2020). Consequently, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020b), since its first outbreak of an unknown cause of virus-related pneumonia in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province of China (WHO, 2020a), which was predicted with the anticipated possibility to remain more than months or even years. According to the latest report from WHO as of August 24, 2021, the pandemic has extensively dispersed with an immense number of over 210 million confirmed cases and 4.4 millions of deaths universally (WHO, 2021). As a result of this biggest outburst which has considerably affected every sector worldwide, there was an estimation that over 7000 of medical workers who were a frontline troop laid down their lives to save others globally in the first period of the incident outburst (Amnesty International, 2020). In addition to the health sector, the economies of several countries were anticipated to descend into recession and depression. Furthermore, the recession will be the most extensive in the last three decades in which one of the underlying factors is diminution of manpower due to lay-offs from business disruption (World Bank, 2020).

As a matter of fact, Thailand had experiences with some previous infectious disease outbreaks such as SARS-1, H5N1 avian influenza, pandemic H1N1 influenza, and MERS prior to
the coronavirus pandemic; the previous lesson learned and operational skills helped Thai health-care officials to quickly assess and understand potentiality of the situation, and be able to provide supporting and effective preparedness from the Ministry of Public Health to the general public. Therefore, in the case of Thailand, the Department of Disease Control under the Ministry of Public Health promptly activated emergency operations and assigned an incident commander to monitor the situation, as well as prepared workforce and health-care facilities to respond to the outbreak (Department of Disease Control, 2020; WHO & MOPH, 2020). However, the number of daily new cases rapidly increased to more than 100 cases reported in March 2020. The National Emerging Infectious Diseases Committee—the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA)—therefore, was immediately set up to improve the response capacity at the national level. A series of public health measures were announced to control the spread of the virus. The enforced and voluntary actions were also implemented to fight against the pandemic, such as the termination of public gatherings, the social campaign to “stay home, stop the virus, save the nation,” the closure of sport and entertainment venues, remote working measures, etc. As a result of well implementation and the low level of infected cases of 3810 with less than 60 deaths (as of October 31), Thailand earned international appreciation for its ability to manage the pandemic situation within the country effectively. However, besides the disruption caused that all relevant authorities have to deal with, this lethal incident has urged them to reconsider the existing operational process, discover new effective means and new sources of knowledge, and shift from the traditional paradigm and operation to something better. Moreover, it has spotlighted an important role a community plays as a social unit for the country’s development, as well as in the management of concurrent COVID-19 in which the impacts on the community level and its responses crucially need to be closely paid attention to.

Another relevant factor playing as an integral and supporting part is the village health volunteers (VHVs). VHVs are local volunteers who are engaged in a training program in order to voluntarily assist government official health personnel in providing basic health care, information, and education to their communities. The program has been thoroughly operated which has successfully become a key foundation of the community in Thailand for over 40 years. Presently, there are approximately 1.05 million VHVs across the country (Fig. 29.1).
As mentioned above, the pandemic has caused the massive loss of lives which has tremendously impacted the health and economic sectors globally. Nevertheless, another greatly affected sector which seems to be inferior in comparison with the public health and economy but can lead to a huge variation and highly influence on the economic system and future of the world is education sector in which its disruption and discontinuity can result in a huge cessation of human resources development into labor markets (World Bank, 2020). COVID-19 has not only brought about new direct impacts, but also has aggravated the prolonged existing educational problems of inequitable quality education in which the whole world has been attempting to address according to Sustainable Development Goal 4. Similar to Thailand, COVID-19 has not caused only tangible direct impacts toward students, academic personals, schools, and educational institutes, but it has shockingly revealed numerous problems of disparities in the society. Moreover, COVID-19 seems to unexpectedly aggravate the preexisting situations more than anticipated.

2. COVID-19 impacts on education sector in global level

It is certain that “education” is an integral part and significant tool for building the world we have intended and expected according to the sustainable development goals. Education brings about social equity, rights and freedom, peace and justice, wellness, clean environment and plentiful natural resources, flourishing economies, and resilient societies through human capital development and investment. However, what the world has been facing now is, this ongoing and yet uncontrollable pandemic of COVID-19 that has been leading us into a global crisis of education. If the pandemic keeps prolonging, it is potentially that the world will truly step into a generational catastrophe of the education crisis in which its consequences probably remain over several decades to the next generation (UNESCO, 2020). According to a policy brief of education during COVID-19 and beyond from the United Nations, it was shockingly found that 94% of the world’s student population in more than 190 countries were affected in which 99% out of the total affected students were from low- and middle-income countries (Figs. 29.2 and 29.4). As a matter of fact, schools are not just a place for study of children, but they are a place of essential and basic resources and services of life whether knowledge, nutritious food, health care, temporary shelter from harms and dangers, playground, support hub for parents, security, and especially being their world; thus, closure of schools universally will result in a huge impact to the world of children, as well as their families, communities, and societies both directly and indirectly. In addition, it was projected that around 24 million of students from preschool to tertiary level had to unwillingly leave their education behind due to financial constraints alone. Moreover, a vital development period of human beings of over 40 million early childhood children would possibly be deprived due to nationwide school closures. Accordingly, this would substantially and potentially affect their physical, emotional, mental, social, and intelligent development and growth in a long-term period which would be difficult to retrieve. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that this is the greatest education disruption as ever occurred in which the most vulnerable group of people, namely, rural and poor people, women and girls, refugees, and internally displaced persons, are mostly susceptible to this catastrophe (United Nations, 2020b). Nevertheless, the closures did not solely bring about direct impacts to the children’s
learning, but also indirect impacts beyond education. As mentioned earlier, the schools are another world for children to raise and mold their lives. Due to the school closures, over 370 million children whose lives depend on school meals were at risk of hunger and malnutrition. In addition, around 42–66 million children would potentially be in a state of extreme poverty (United Nations, 2020a). According to the UN Women report, financial pressure, social isolation, and restricted movement and living conditions induced by lockdowns, lay-offs, etc., have intensified domestic violence (Fig. 29.3) among women and girls aged 15–49 in several countries when domestic violence reports and emergency calls were escalated to 25%; however, there were a number of cases still unveiled (UN Women, 2020). The increase of gender-based violence and exploitation may also lead to child marriage, early pregnancy, sexual and physical abuse, and child labor. These kinds of social impacts will eventually lead to a huge school dropout rate in the future.

3. COVID-19 impacts on education sector in Thailand

Thailand’s education sector was facing crisis due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to other countries. The protective measures implemented to control spreading of COVID-19 through social distancing and lockdown resulted in school closures and a new semester of the 2020 academic year being deferred from May to July. Although it was only a nearly 2-month delay of school reopening, over 13 million students, as well as their families, were affected in several dimensions (UNICEF, 2020b). In terms of parents, they partially lost their confined working time and earnings since they had to share their time to look after their kids at home which once belonged to the school’s responsibility. In addition, some families had to face financial constraint and redundancy as a side effect of business disruption. In

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FIGURE 29.3  Domestic violence situations before and during the lockdown measure. Reprinted from How COVID-19 impacts women and girls by UN Women. Retrieved from https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/covid19/en/index.html Copyright 2020 by UN Women.

FIGURE 29.4  School closures worldwide (as of April 2020). Reprinted from Policy brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. April 2020 by the United Nations. Retrieved from https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf. Copyright 2020 by United Nations Sustainable Development Group.

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combination with the preexisting problems of debts, unemployment, and unaffordability of daily life basic needs (for example, food, clean drinking water, and medicines), it aggravated mental health effects such as anxiety, stress, or even suicide rate which put much pressure on the families as ever happened during the Tom Yum Kung crisis in 1998. In addition to the students and parents, the closure caused a big change of teaching patterns and roles of teachers which increased multiple workloads for them. Some teachers, apart from teaching, become a food deliverer to needy children as a result of food inaccessibility; while some become a social worker visiting each house for following up situations and providing counseling during the crisis (Yuvabadhana Foundation, 2020).

3.1 Unpreparedness for distance and online learning

Since the prolonged closure of schools can potentially result in a huge learning loss and regression of human capital, especially in a critical stage of early education which will directly impact their learning experiences and holistic development. Moreover it will indirectly provoke countless socioeconomic problems to the country. Therefore, all the governmental and nongovernmental agencies have been seriously attempting to keep the...
education system consistently functioning by reopening the schools back to a normal or nearly normal stage as soon as possible (Bangkokbiznews, 2020a; United Nations, 2020b; New America, n.d.). Thus, distance and online learning has been designated as the most suitable countermeasure for sustaining education continuity during the closure. However, the distance and online learning seems not to be feasible and affordable for everyone in the society.

Although the distance learning is not a new learning method for over 15,000 small-sized schools and around 6000 childcare centers in remote areas in Thailand where equal access to quality education is provided through Distance Learning Television (DLTV) by Distance Learning Foundation Under the Royal Patronage since 1994 (Distance Learning Foundation Under the Royal Patronage, n.d.). In the midst of the widespread infection, this is absolutely new for the rest of the country where they are unfamiliar with a full form of distance and online learning. Additionally, while the distance and online learning is very convenient for keeping everyone connected anytime and anywhere in the world, and also keeping education continuing, it becomes a big burden to those who are not well prepared for this rapid and entire change from face-to-face environment to isolated digital setting, especially vulnerable students in the society. Furthermore, according to the statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) as of 2018, households with computers in Thailand was only 21% which was 49% lower than the world average which means the online learning may not be the most suitable and practicable means for Thailand (Photos 29.1 and 29.2).

3.1.1 Students

According to the survey from the Faculty of Education and Development Sciences, Kaset-sart University, with students from a school affiliated with the university, it was found that 66% of the students did not have computers, 57% no internet available at homes, 36% no

PHOTO 29.1 Children in the Khlong Toei Slum, studying Thai language together under the supervision of 53-year-old Boonsong Tubtim. [Online image from Thai News Pix]. (2020). https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-52766138.
smartphones, and only 45% of the students were able to study through online system (Bangkokbiznews, 2020b). However, this group of the students is not the poorest group of people in the country. If we consider the limitations and conditions of over 700,000 of extremely impoverished primary and lower secondary students in the country, they are probably unaffordable for necessary devices with adequate space required for supporting their online learning, whether computers, laptops, Wi-Fi routers, internet, mobile signal, or even televisions. And these limitations for accessing distance and online learning put them at high risk of dropout this year (The Standard, 2020). Apart from the digital devices accessibility, lack of digital literacy skill is also another crucial factor that restricts a chance of equal and quality education. This can easily happen to young children whose learning requires support from adults as their cognitive development is still limited; and if the parents cannot nurture their learning while the teachers are far away to reach, isolated learning setting without close and effective support is likely to eventually hamper their learning progress (Yuvabadhana Foundation, 2020; BBC News Thai, 2020; Sektrakul, 2020). Besides the device’s accessibility and digital literacy skill, living conditions of the poor children in Thailand also cannot facilitate distance and online learning. According to a survey from OECD as cited in Tongliemnak (2020), it was found that over 30% of students aged 15 did not have private spaces for studying at homes, and a little half of all Thai students possessed computers; and only 17% out of that were extremely poor students.

3.1.2 Families

For letting their kids have educational opportunities as much as they could, families have to bear a burden of extra expenses and debts from buying new devices and internet packages to keep their kids’ learning continually and consistently (Kenan Foundation Asia, 2020). However, not every family can afford these extra financial constraints no matter how hard
they try, especially in the poor families that have many kids which depend on dead-end jobs, and live from hand to mouth. In addition, it needs to be accepted that this group of parents has less digital literacy skills to assist and support their kids. Under this restricted condition, it is very difficult for the parents to support their children’s learning closely and efficiently while studying at home (Bangkokbiznews, 2020b, BBC News Thai, 2020).

3.1.3 Teachers

Distance and online learning is not solely a new normal method for the students, but also teachers. Teachers are another group of people who are directly impacted by the consequences of school closure and a sudden shift of teaching pattern from in-class to digital platforms. Number of teachers struggled with almost the same consequences as the students due to their unpreparedness in terms of digital devices availability and digital literacy. Although using digital technology and platforms has already become a part of teaching nowadays, lesson delivery, examination, or even student evaluation is still following a traditional way of in-person and in-class teaching and learning. The change without an explicit guideline from the schools afflicted teachers’ psychological stress and a load of burdens. Apart from the digital devices and literacy skills, unprepared and improper home setting for online teaching, inadequate teaching materials for promoting and stimulating online learning, and even creativeness and boldness in front of a screen, monitor or camera are also some of the important issues teachers have been facing in coping up with the new normal of education system (Kenan Foundation Asia, 2020).

3.2 School closures and wellness of impoverished children

3.2.1 Psychological impacts

According to the survey of UNICEF, The Children and Youth Council of Thailand, and United Nations Population Fund, it was found that parental hardships also psychologically affected their children. The most concerning issue in children 8 out of 10 from 6771 children and youths was the financial status of their parents due to the lay-off and business closures. Most of the children and youths also faced several psychological challenges whether anxiety, emotional stress, hopelessness, discouragement, boredom, fear of violence, or abuse due to the prolonged school closure. In addition, over half of them felt worried about their vague future due to the uncertainties of their study, examination, and further education. Furthermore, staying at home caused a huge pressure on LGBTIQ youths since they could not express their identities openly with their families (UNICEF, 2020a,c).

3.2.2 Food and nutrition insufficiency

Education disruption does not only result in the direct impacts of loss of learning hours, decline of learning outcomes, high dropout rate, class cancellation, or increase of workloads of the teachers, but it also exacerbates social disparities specifically in terms of adequate food accessibility which has been waiting to be addressed for a long time. In Thailand, schools are an important food and nutrition provider for impoverished children in all public schools nationwide. Huge numbers of children mainly rely on school lunch programmes each day. In addition, the programmes also help in bearing a burden of family expenses to
provide sufficient food and nutrition for their kids. Therefore, even just 45 more days of the school closure extended, it tremendously impacted on the underprivileged children’s lives. It was found that over 720,000 extremely poor children were unavoidably in a crisis of food insufficiency; and out of that, almost 30,000 were experiencing malnourishment. Therefore, this issue now becomes a top priority that needs to be addressed urgently. Lack of adequate amounts of nutritious food will also directly impact physical and cognitive development of the students in the long term (Ammaranunthasak, 2020; Bangkokbiznews, 2020c).

3.2.3 Increase of domestic violence and exploitation

In addition to the problem of malnutrition, another top urgent issue was children’s safety. When a house was not a safe place for everyone and staying at home was a suffering, many children were at high risk of domestic violence, abuse, and exploitation due to the prolonged lockdown, and parents or caregiver stress. Although, there were no exact numbers of domestic violence cases reported, based on the previous statistics and lessons learned of the cases during past disasters such as the Mega Flood in 2011, it had high potential that a number of children especially girls and women would experience the violence at home during the pandemic (Ammaranunthasak, 2020; Bangkokbiznews, 2020c). Additionally, divorce rate also increased.

3.3 Summary of direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on education sector at a community level in Thailand

Direct impacts

| Exposure         | Direct impact                                                                 |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Education        | **School Administration**                                                    |
|                  | • 10,841,616 students affected (Kindergarten to Bachelor’s degree)           |
|                  | • 41,073 schools closed (excl. HEIs)                                        |
|                  | • Loss of learning days—7 days missing for Semester 1/2020, and 12 missing for Semester 2/2020 |
|                  | • Academic schedule shifted from May to July in the 1st semester and November to December in the 2nd semester |
|                  |   • 1/2020: July 1—November 13                                               |
|                  |   • 2/2020: December 1—April 9                                               |
|                  | • Delayed reopening of Thai public schools and kindergartens                |
|                  | • Inadequate capacity of schools to handling distance learning caused learning loss and gaps |
| School Attendance| • Decrease in number of school attendance after reopening                    |
|                  | • School/university dismissals                                              |
|                  | • High risk of dropout among the extremely poor students                   |
| Class Management | • A sudden shift of teaching from in-class to digital platforms              |
|                  | • Increase of workload on teachers, as well as stress and pressure of a new way of teaching |
Indirect impact

| Exposure   | Indirect impact                                                                 |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Education  | Physical wellness                                                               |
|            | • Cutting access to school meals, resulting in poor nutrition for some group of students |
|            |   ◦ > 700,000 extremely poor children unavoidably in a crisis of food insufficiency |
|            |   ◦ > 30,000 extremely poor children were experiencing malnourishment             |
|            | • Probability of domestic violence and exploitation increase                      |
| Mental and emotional wellness | • Increase of psychological problems whether anxiety, emotional stress, hopelessness, discouragement, boredom, fear of violence, or abuses due to the prolonged school closure among the children and youths |
|            | • Increase of parents’ stress and financial constraints                           |
| Intellectual and development wellness | • Probability of huge learning loss and regression of human capital |
|            | • Deprivation of physical and cognitive development among young learners          |
|            | • Learning process loss due to a lack of schooling participation                 |
|            | • High possibility for parents to drop off on the education investment for their children |
|            | • Unequal educational service and learning materials accessibility from extended schools’ closure among students after pandemic |
|            |   ◦ > 700,000 of extremely impoverished students unaffordable for necessary devices with adequate specs for supporting their online learning |

4. Conclusion

In brief, although the pandemic seems to be a major cause of the emerged problems we have been facing indifferently worldwide, it also helps to expose the unsolved problems which have been hidden for a long time such as the rights and equity of vulnerable groups of people who have been forgotten and ignored by their government in receiving and accessing sufficient assistance, facilities, and services. For example, despite the fact that the new normal living scheme under the COVID-19 situation is likely to be advantageous and effective in controlling the spreading incidents that every country has been adopting, it is found to be a hardship for marginalized people. Some of them, such as migrant workers, have unexpectedly lost their jobs due to the lay-offs while they still have to be struggling to make a living in the high cost of living city. In addition, many women and children become victims of domestic violence during the lockdown period by their spouses and parents. Furthermore, the surveillance group (PUI – people having a record of being close to infected patients), at some points, is offended and stigmatized by their neighbors and community during the time that empathy and unity is essential. Significantly, the pandemic has reflected a huge gap of social equity through a lens of education as mentioned above.
As a matter of fact, education is a bedrock for building a better world we have dreamed of, but without quality and equity to access for all; it may be hard to achieve what we have desired. Moreover, it will exacerbate the prolonged social disparities rather than alleviate it. The COVID-19 pandemic has well reflected the results of unwell-planned and low quality education which seems to be unable to protect even basic child’s rights of receiving healthy development for future well-being through education. On the other hand, it is likely that the education itself has worsened the child’s rights violation situations especially the rights of survival and development, equally and fairly treat, useful information accessibility, protection from violence, exploitation, harmful works, and sexual abuse, and receiving best health care, healthy food, and safe home and environment to live according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.). Questions that should come into our mind are: How can we successfully overcome inequity and poor quality education? How can we build the best holistic and inclusive education system so that no one is left behind? So that the education will be a real powerful tool to transform the world as it should be. Since this kind of pandemic crisis or similar may occur in the future, how much we do learn from it, and how much we do improve to avoid or mitigate the same consequences to our next generation is the most important.

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