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“I had no idea what online lessons were”: experiencing the lockdown as a student of a rural school

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Abstract

Although providing students with access to equal education is one of the priorities and challenges of schools in general, students in rural schools are more likely to have limited access to equal education in comparison with their peers in urban schools. When it comes to strategies to provide equal access to education, these strategies may not always be applied successfully and accessed equally. For instance, in cases of global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic the need for new strategies may emerge. However, in this case again, it is more difficult for rural schools to catch up with ‘new reality’ and ensure all students have access to education. This study investigates how the nationwide lockdown due to the global pandemic influences access to education from the perspectives of students of a rural school. Using qualitative data generated through individual interviews and photographs, the study provides valuable insights into how students of a rural school experience new realities of their life such as remote teaching and learning. The results of the research reveal the diverse reactions to ‘new normality’ among students, the challenges they face with access to online education and the promoting and discouraging conditions influencing them to pursue their education online.

Keywords: rural schools; access to education; students’ perspectives; case study

Introduction

It was the last day of 2019 when the following report was published in the official website of the World Health Organization (WHO):

“At the close of 2019, the WHO China Country Office was informed of a pneumonia of unknown cause, detected in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province, China. According to the authorities, some patients were operating dealers or vendors in the Huanan Seafood market. Staying in close contact with national authorities, WHO began monitoring the situation and requested further information on the laboratory tests performed and the different diagnoses considered.” (WHO, 2019)

However, the pneumonia of unknown cause was later declared as the novel coronavirus named COVID-19 and spread outside of China at a staggering speed. On the 11th of March, 2020, the WHO characterized the novel coronavirus as pandemic. As the reported cases increased globally, partial and later national lockdowns were announced in different countries. Despite the measures and lockdowns, the increasing trend in COVID-19 cases continued. As of August 2020, the number of people infected with the virus was over 30 million with about a million deaths around the world. The virus has already been detected in nearly every country (The New York Times, 2020). When it comes to the effects of the pandemic and lockdowns on education, according to UNESCO (2020) as of 1st May 2020, the country-wide school closures in 174 countries affected 1,220,138,247 learners that made up 69.7% of the total number of enrolled learners globally. However, from the beginning of the pandemic, the discussions within the media mostly focused on the direct impact of the pandemic on the global economy while less attention was paid to the effects of the pandemic on education, which has indirect but inevitably significant effects on the global economy too. The possible effects of a pandemic on education were also discussed in academic spheres: several publications and even special calls were made by several academic journals. Most studies discussed the effects of lockdowns from policy and theoretical aspects (Allais and Marock, 2020; Sayed and Singh, 2020). When the recent and currently ‘booming’ empirical literature on education and the effects of pandemic were analysed, it was clear that most studies were concerned with the effects on teaching (for example, Jandric, 2020; Yandel, 2020) and parents’ involvement in education during the pandemic lockdown (for example, Brom *et al.*, 2020). Besides, some studies examined the effects of lockdowns from the students’ perspectives, but here students were the ones who studied at universities at undergraduate and graduate levels (Elmer, Mephram and Stadtfeld, 2020; Odriozola-Gonzalez, 2020; Sokhulu, 2020; Suhail, Iqbal and Smith, 2020). For instance, the phenomenological study conducted by Suhail, Iqbal and Smith (2020) investigated the Indian youth’s experience of new normality in the time of COVID-19 and its impact on their mental health. The participants of the study were ten college students aged between 20 and 27. The majority of the participants reported significant disruptions in their daily routine and wellbeing.

It should be noted that, until now, empirical literature has either ignored the perspectives of primary and secondary school students on the effects of lockdown or tried to explore these effects through their parents or teachers such as the study conducted by Vallejo and Maron (2020) in Argentina. To find out the possible psychological and educational effects of lockdown on primary school students with learning

disorders, the authors interviewed their teachers and parents. The study concluded that children's reading comprehension worsened and teachers and parents had more difficulties supporting their children during the lockdown. However, exploring the effects of lockdown on education from the perspectives of young people can make a different contribution, because young people have significant insights on teaching and learning (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Therefore this study, conducted in a rural school in Azerbaijan, examines the effects of the nationwide lockdown on students' daily life, their access to education and the challenges they face. The study also provides insights into how students accept and understand 'new normality'.

Background and the research context

The consequences of the disruptions caused by school closures may be dramatic, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2020). These vulnerable and marginalized communities include communities in rural areas that are characterized by geographical, demographical and societal diversity (Monk, 2007) and exhibit several disadvantages such as the lack of infrastructure, necessary facilities and access to information technologies (UNESCO, 2008). Inevitably, rural schools are affected by all these disadvantages in several different ways. As a result, rural schools experience problems in having access to specialized services for students and teachers, teacher shortages and increasing dropout rates (Wallin and Reimar, 2008). When the existing disadvantages rural schools have and the consequences of nationwide lockdowns and school closures are considered together, rural schools are likely to experience greater challenges than their urban counterparts.

According to the UNESCO (2020), school closures in general lead to the following disruption:

- interrupted learning;
- poor nutrition;
- confusion and stress for teachers;
- parents unprepared for distance and home schooling;
- challenges creating, maintaining, and improving distance learning;
- gaps in childcare;
- high economic costs;
- unintended strain on health-care systems;
- increased pressure on schools and school systems that remain open;
- rise in dropout rates;
- increased exposure to violence and exploitation;
- social isolation;
- challenges measuring and validating learning.

Interestingly, the list above of educational consequences of school closures provided by the UNESCO (2020) focused on the effects of school closures on teachers and parents as two of the main stakeholders. What about students? Are the students not likely to experience confusion or stress? As

discussed earlier in the introduction, the same trend is observed in empirical research: examining teachers, parents' or more broadly adults' perspectives.

Considering the facts above, the current study focused on examining the effects of 'new normality' on daily life and access to education from the perspectives of the students of a rural school in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, with an area of 86,600 sq. km and a population of almost 10 million (United Nations, 2019), is situated in the South Caucasus and together with Armenia and Georgia forms the South Caucasus Region. Having access to the Caspian Sea in the East, Azerbaijan is bordered with Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Iran (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Azerbaijan. Source: www.worldatlas.com.

It was February 28, 2020 when the first COVID-19 case was reported in Azerbaijan (Reuters, 2020) and following the rising trend in the number of infections, all schools in the country were officially closed on March 3, 2020 (Ministry of Education, Azerbaijan, 2020). This decision was applied until the end of the academic year. As the crisis was very sudden, in the first step, to reach all students and provide them with the opportunity to continue their studies, starting from March 11, video lessons recorded by the Ministry of Education were broadcast on several TV channels such as 'Mədəniyyət TV' and 'ARB Günəş TV'. These 'TV lessons' were broadcast for 5-6 hours per day. To be able to watch the broadcast lessons later, the videos were uploaded on the official website of the Ministry of Education (www.video.edu.az). Later, on the 2nd of April, the new online platform called "Online School" was launched. The platform provided all students with an opportunity to watch different live or recorded lessons, download homework uploaded by their teachers and contact their classmates and teachers. Programs such as *Zoom* and *Microsoft Teams* were also used to support students and teachers.

Research Process

Research aim and questions

The study investigated the effects of the sudden crisis on access to education in the context of a rural school to reflect the extent to which rural school students are vulnerable with regard to access to equal education. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the students' reactions to 'new normality'?
2. How does 'new normality' influence students' daily life?
3. How does 'new normality' influence their access to education?
4. What are the promoting and discouraging conditions influencing students to pursue their education online?

The research questions were answered based on qualitative data generated through individual interviews and photographs. While the interview data provided insight into how students of a rural school made sense of 'new normality' and its effect on their access to education, the photographs helped understand and make sense of what they said by visualizing their life alongside interview data.

Research Design

Qualitative case study design was used in the study to answer the research questions (Yin, 2013). Paltridge and Phakiti (2010) define case study as "an approach which examines the single case, whether it be a single person, group, institution or community, either at one point in time or over a period of time" (p.350). According to Stake (1994), three types of case study can be distinguished: *intrinsic*, *instrumental* and *collective*. Based on this classification, the case study design used in the study is an *instrumental* case study where a case is examined to provide insight into an issue or phenomenon under investigation.

Case Description

The case study design used in this study can be defined as a "typical descriptive case study ... chosen by virtue of representing features that are common within a larger population" (Gerring, 2017, p.56). In this study, the case was a rural school in the South of Azerbaijan, more precisely a group of students from this rural school. The school was chosen based on the features of a rural area identified by UNESCO (2008). The participants of the study were the 9th grade students studying in the rural school where the overall number of students was around 87. The number of participants was 16 (11 male and 5 female) and their ages were 14-15. Secondary education in Azerbaijan is 11 years, but in some rural schools students can only study until the ninth grade and then if they want to continue their education they need to go to another school. Therefore, the ninth graders were the final year students in this school. The authors' decision to recruit only the ninth graders of the school as participants was based on the fact that this was the most vulnerable group within the school. The ninth graders were the only group that were expected to take the official state exam at the end of the academic year however there was no idea whether they could study for this exam under the current conditions. At the same time, the

authors believed that because of their ages they would be the most suitable participants who could express themselves in the interviews and explain their life under the lockdown.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews (Bryman, 2016). Before conducting the interviews, the principal of the school and the parents of the students were contacted and an informed consent form was sent to them. The interview guide was developed by both authors referring to existing literature and one of the author's own experience as a member of the same rural community where the participants were recruited. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors of this study in Azerbaijani language. The students were informed about the voluntary nature of the research and their participation. Some interviews took place at the participants' houses while some were online. It should be noted that although the national lockdown was announced in Azerbaijan, it never included restrictions on visiting each other in their homes. Therefore, it allowed the interviewer to visit some participants and conduct the interviews with them. The interviews took 20-45 minutes.

The collected qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2012) were applied in the data analysis process:

- familiarizing yourself with data;
- generating initial codes;
- searching for themes;
- reviewing potential themes;
- defining and naming themes;
- producing the report.

When it comes to making a choice between inductive and theoretical thematic analysis, we preferred using inductive analysis, that is "a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.83). The final themes that are presented in the result section as sub-headings were developed through initial codes and themes identified during the analysis. For instance, the table below shows the initial sub-themes that helped to develop one of the final themes that was used as sub-headings to present the results.

Table 1. The development of the final theme: 'New normality': Surprise, disruptions and gendered influences.

	Initial themes identified			
	Reaction to new normality	New routine	Negative effects of new normality	Positive effect of new normality
Codes forming the themes	surprise	having more time outside	locked at home	more time outside
	lots of 'firsts'	locked at home	lack of social contacts	more time with friends
		lack of social contacts	disruptions with eating and sleep	
		more time with friends		

The codes and sub-themes forming the other three final themes are briefly presented in the next table below.

Table 2. An overview of the emergence of the final themes.

	Final themes		
	Living room as a new classroom for the all households	Online lessons with 'very mobile' phones	Traditional vs. distance learning
Codes and sub-themes forming the final themes	online lessons	no internet connection	traditional learning
	TV lessons	no laptop/smart phones	distance learning
	keeping silence while studying	online lessons	opportunity to ask
	studying with family members	parents' smart phones	lack of internet connection
	distractions	no credit for internet	lack of social contact
		a common smart phone	concentration
			avoiding violence / feeling safe
			need for social contact

Alongside the interviews, the study used images to reflect students' daily life under the lockdown. All participants were asked to take photos during their participation in on-line/TV lessons and their free time. The permission to take photos was obtained from the parents first and then the participants. The voluntary nature of this part was also explained. As can be seen in the results section, some parents were against showing the faces of their children and therefore, some of the pictures taken do not show their faces. Most participants and their parents were happy to have photos in the article, some parents even stated that they would be "proud to have their photos in an international journal". The parents of one participant and one participant did not agree to their photos being taken. The participants were especially asked to take as many photos as possible to document what their daily routines looked like.

As the authors, we believed that telling the stories of these students with photos would help readers, especially 'western' or 'international' readers to make sense of what they were saying. We also aimed to see what aspects of their daily life the students would prefer to photograph and used it in our data analysis. The photos were taken during a period of one month and the number of photos taken was about three hundred.

Results

'New normality': Surprise, disruptions and gendered influences

For all the students, having online lessons, even the possibility of this as an idea, was very surprising. This is how a 14 year-old male student expressed his first time experience with online learning with great surprise and excitement:

"Before I had no idea what online lessons were. I did not know... What kind of lessons?"
(Student 10)

The other comment made by a 15 year-old female student showed the extent to which the surprise was common among the students:

"I could never imagine that you could have lessons through a computer or mobile phone." (Student 2)

However, for some students the lockdown was somehow beneficial in that they learnt and tried something new such as online learning:

"Of course, it was first time. Before this [lockdown] I had no information about online lessons. I was informed because of the pandemic... Actually, we learnt lot." (Student 13)

When it comes to the influences of lockdown and school closure, as most of the students stated, it significantly affected their daily routine by causing disruptions. The following comment made by a 14 year-old male student described these disruptions:

"For example, during the lockdown I sometimes do not eat at all... Sometimes I do not go out for 2-3 days. I do not want to go out... I sleep very late. I am awoken during the night and sleep during the day... For example, I have not slept today. Last night I slept at 10 pm and got up at 2 am and... I am still awake." (Student 12)

This was another comment made by the other student that showed the negative effect of the passive life style the most students experienced during the lockdown,

"Sitting at home... It was not what we were used to. We became fat by sitting at home. I ate in time during school time. Sitting at home is making us fat." (Student 1)

The analysis of the data showed that the influences of lockdown and school closure had totally different effects on male and female students' daily life and routine. Having no lessons at school provided most

male students with more opportunities to socialize with their male peers, most living in close neighbourhoods, while the same situation worked differently for girls by 'shutting' them inside. The two comments below show these differences for male and female students respectively,

"Before the school closure it was impossible to go somewhere, because we had lots of lessons. We had no time when we had school. Then the lockdown started and the school was closed... Before we could not play football enough, but during the lockdown we play football much." (Student 8)

"Sitting at home is boring. We played... We had a good time at school... Now we even do not see the faces of each other's [Classmates]." (Student 5).

The photos below visualize and somehow help understand how male and female students' daily life looked like under lockdown:



This is how another female student explained the freedom going to school gave her and complained of sitting at home,

"Before the lockdown, I went to school... I went to the excursions with my classmates. I participated in events, activities... After the lockdown I am inside the house all day." (Student 11)

Furthermore, most female students stated that they did more household work during the lockdown while this was the case for only a small minority of the male participants. The following comment below made by a female student is an example of what most female students talked about,

“When I went to school... I mean before the lockdown, I was not interested in the household work. However, now I do household work myself... I cook... for example.”
(Student 16)

Living room as a new classroom for the all households

The participants were asked whether they participated in online lessons offered on platforms such as Zoom and watched the lessons on TV. All students stated that they watched the lessons on TV as is illustrated in the comment below made by a 14 year-old male student,

“The lessons of our grade start on ‘Mədəniyyət TV’ at 11:00AM and continue until 12:00AM... I watched the lessons on TV... I always watch.” (Student 9)

The following photo by a family member is one of the photos showing a student studying while watching the lesson on TV.



As it was stated by all participants and can be seen in the photos taken, the TVs were in the living rooms and they had to watch the lessons in the living rooms. The students were also asked how it was organized: questions such as, what did the other members of the household do while you watched TV in the living room? Most students reported that the other members of the household were also often in the living room and tried to keep silent while they watched the lessons on TV. This is how a 15 year-old male student described the situation:

“My parents and the others at home try to be silent when I watch lessons... They try not to enter the living room, but it is not a problem... When they are in the living room, they are silent. They do not disturb me.” (Student 7)

Here are some photos visualizing such situations:



According to the reports by some students, the other family members also watched the lessons or observed the students while they watched the lessons on TV and it was a kind of entertainment for the others. This is how one of these students described the ritual,

“My parents do not leave the living room. They also watch my lessons... No... Actually, they watch me while I watch the lessons... I think it is fun for them. Even they prepare their tea before the lessons start. Funny, huh?” (Student 11)

In contrast, some students reported that the other households left the living room while they watched the lessons on TV and it helped them concentrate on watching,

“I am alone in the living room and watch the lesson... I stay alone in the room. It should be like this. I need silence... It is a lesson... When I watch the lessons, they [householders] go out. They understand me. I can increase the sound on TV as loud as I want.” (Student 5)

Some students especially stated the support they got from their parents,

“My parents always try to be helpful... When I watch online lessons with loud volume, they say nothing. They do not interfere.” (Student 15)

Online lessons with 'very mobile' phones

When it comes to online lessons, although the online lessons were available on different online platforms for more than 3 months, only 4 out of 16 participants confirmed their participation in these lessons. However, the data revealed that the students' non-participation in online lessons was not a choice or preference. The vast majority of students (13 out of 16) had no internet connections at home and 11 students out of 16 reported that there was no computer or laptop available for them. The conversation between the interviewer and the participant below shows the reaction of the participant to the question on internet access,

Interviewer: "Do you have internet connection at home?"

Student 15: "Internet? Like internet café?... No of course. We have no internet connection at home. I use mobile internet."

Nearly half of the participants who had no internet connection at home explained the issue with the financial situation of their families,

"We have no internet connection at home... It is money. Sometimes I use the neighbour's. Sure, I ask in advance." (Student 9)

Although most students did not register on online platforms and participate in online lessons, they used different social networks or programs such as *WhatsApp* to contact their classmates and teachers. However, they did not use such programs on their own smartphones (most students had one), but their parent's, mostly father's. It was because they needed to have credit/money on their mobile phones to get internet and they rarely had it. The following comment made by one the students who used their father's mobile phone when they needed,

"I ask my father... He never refuses. He tops up credit and internet and then gives [the mobile phone] to me." (Student 11)

In the following photos, two students are seen while they use their father's smartphones to be informed about the homework the teacher announced in the *WhatsApp* group (left) and to join the online lesson (right).



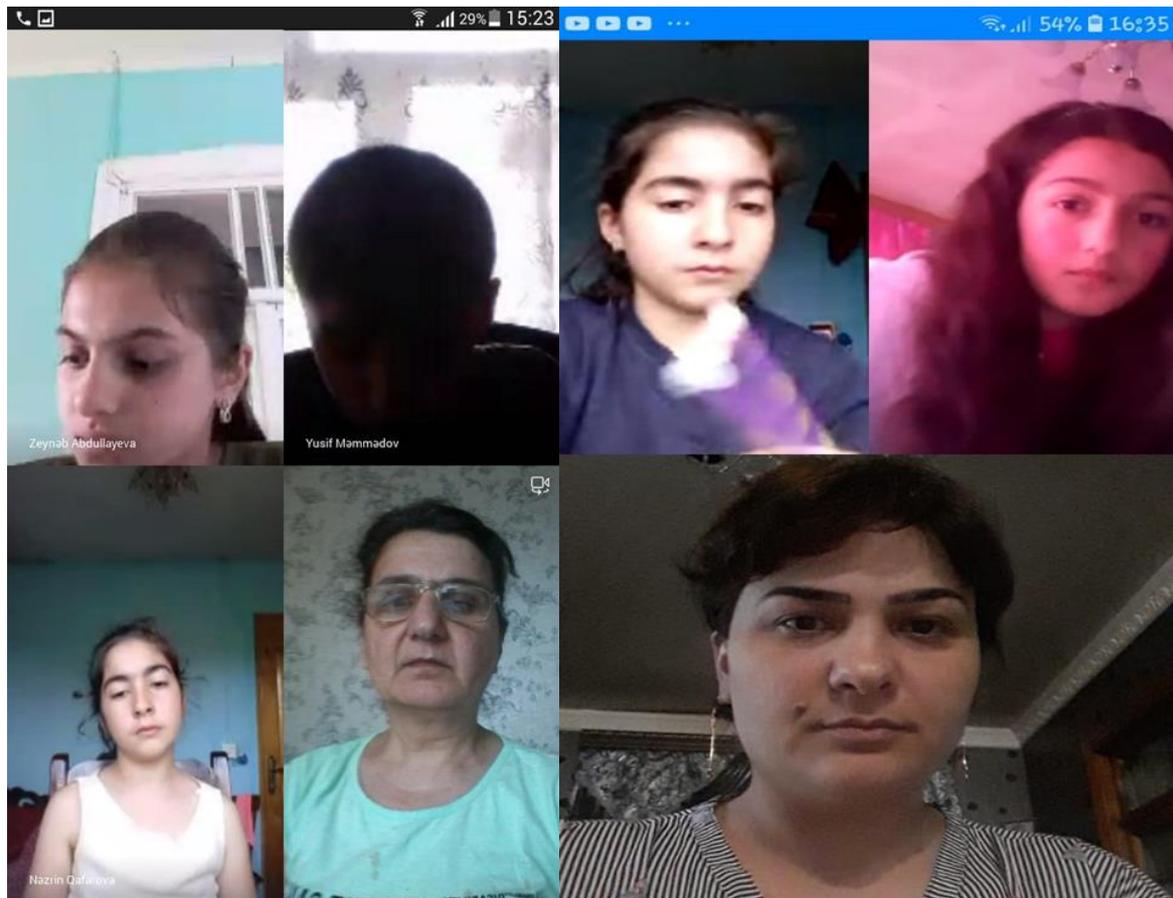
The next photo captures the moment when the student listens to the voice messages in *WhatsApp* group and is then followed by his elder brother to use the phone when he finishes listening to his voice messages (this is according the student and his description of the photo taken),



Even a small minority of the participants reported that they had only one smartphone that was commonly used by the households,

“My father has a phone. It has internet. My mother’s phone does not have [internet]. It is just an old phone... We all use the phone. It is not only my father’s phone. It is common. It is always at home.” (Student 14).

The following photos show the usage of mobile phones by different students to pursue their studying,



Traditional vs. distance learning

When it comes to whether students preferred traditional or distance learning, most students favoured traditional learning. The students had several reasons and explanations for this. For most students the main advantage of traditional learning was that studying at school provided them with the opportunity to ask their questions when they needed explanations. The comment below is an example,

“You watch TV lessons. The teacher explains... You cannot ask any questions. Just watch... I have not seen anything good with it [TV lessons].” (Student 3)

At the same time, having problems with internet connections such as very low speed and interruptions also made online learning and interactions less attractive for most students,

“It is better to go to school and study there. I understand better [at school], because during the online lessons either the internet connection is slow or the mobile internet megabit finishes.” (Student 15).

The students who preferred traditional learning had some common reasons for their choices, but the few students who preferred online teaching had different explanations for their choices. For the student who preferred distance learning it was all about concentration and this is how he explained his preference,

“I am alone when I watch online lessons. There is nobody disrupting the lesson... and I like it. However, in reality [at school] the students who do not study may disrupt the lesson.” (Student 4)

Another student had a totally different reason for having a positive attitude to distant learning,

“During online lessons and TV lessons teachers cannot beat students, cannot hit... cannot say something [negative or insulting] to students. And I like it.” (Student 10)

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the study helped answer the research questions by presenting students' perspectives. The results revealed that rural students were not well prepared for the sudden switch to online learning and therefore, it created several challenges not only for them but also their parents and other family members.

The results showed the extent to which rural students were uninformed about modern day technology. All participants acknowledged that having online lessons was very new to them, even as an idea. The results also revealed huge disruptions in the students' daily life caused by 'new normality'. This is consistent with the results of other recent studies (Suhail, Iqbal and Smith, 2020; Vallejo and Maron, 2020). Most students reported negative changes in their diet and sleep, which were very important and could have negative influences on their health, quality of life and inevitably on their education. The interesting and important issue revealed by the results of the study was the gendered influence of 'new normality'. It affected male and female students in totally different ways. This is consistent with the recent report from UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020). The lockdown and school closure meant more opportunities for male students to socialize with their peers, while female students' freedom provided by school attendance was limited during 'new normality'. All female participants stated that they spent the whole day at home and for this their attitudes toward online learning were very negative. School attendance for the female students was the only chance to go out from their limited space (home) and socialize. The important point here was that the interviewer did not ask the female students a follow up question about why they were mostly at home. This was not because the interviewer was unprofessional, it was because the interviewer was also a local and knew the social norms within the village.

The participants reported the effects of school closure on their access to education differently. The small minority of students who had regular internet connection and a computer/laptop could continue

their studies with much less interruption in comparison with their peers who had no internet connection at home. Therefore, most students had only one option to continue their studies: TV lessons. However, as all participants reported and can be seen in the photos, the TVs were in the living rooms that are a common room for all members of the household. Interestingly, although most students did not talk about the distractions while others were in the same room with them, the photos showing their participation in TV lessons has a common feature: most students sat very close to the TV. Sure, the reason for this can be different such as it was because they wanted to see the screen well, but it also raised the question of whether it was difficult for students to concentrate on studying while others were in the living room.

Most students had no computer or laptop and so they needed to use their parents' smart phones. Even then, in some cases, there was only one smartphone for the whole household to share. It certainly caused a challenge for students to pursue their studies. As a result, all these factors stated above shaped the students' attitudes to distance or online learning. Most students preferred traditional teaching by stating the need for them to have clarification on the points they needed during the online and TV lessons. It is not surprising that the other common reason why students preferred traditional learning was the lack of internet connection. The small minority of the participants who had positive attitudes to distant learning were those who had either regular internet connection at home or a computer/laptop or both. The results clearly demonstrated that socio-economically disadvantaged communities faced challenges because of the lack of necessities that may not always be the case in urban and socio-economically advantaged areas.

The results of the study contributed to empirical research to better understand the effects of 'new normality' on access to education in one of the most vulnerable contexts such as a rural school from the perspectives of one of the most vulnerable groups of young people. Therefore, the results have several implications. Firstly, the results of the study showed that although there were several online platforms available for students to pursue their education, no systematic strategy was adopted to make sure all students had access and could participate on those platforms. Whilst it may be understood that the situation was very sudden, there is a general gap in policy making where the conditions and realities of rural schools and communities are overlooked (Plessis, 2014). The results of the study have implications for policy makers to reconsider the conditions existing in rural communities and schools. The findings also showed that assessing the attitudes to online or distance learning without understanding the factors shaping these attitudes may lead to a superficial understanding of the phenomenon and inappropriate policymaking. Therefore, scholars need to include different perspectives within empirical research and at the same time, policymakers need to rethink not only the conditions of a rural school but also the conditions existing in the rural community.

Although the study contributes to empirical research and knowledge, it is a small-scale qualitative study. Considering this, further research is recommended. We believe that further comparative research including different educational tracks can contribute to a better understanding of the effects of 'new normality' in rural contexts and general.

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