**REMOTE LEARNING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PERSPECTIVES OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL MEDIUM SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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# INTRODUCTION

After the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in early March 2020, around 107 countries took measures to close schools to maintain physical distancing among the students so as to mitigate the spread of the disease (Viner et al., 2020). However, by May 2020, the pandemic had severely affected the formal education of 1186 million students from 144 countries. Therefore, the Director General of UNESCO opined that the closure of schools could be a threat to the right to education (UNESCO, 2020). School, as a principal formal education institution, provides learning spaces for students under the guidance of teachers. Conventionally, teachers play the crucial role of facilitating student learning through face to face sessions. As a result of the pandemic, the traditional approach to teaching and learning in schools collapsed. Though many countries initially stumbled, they quickly realised the gravity of the situation and adopted alternative ways of teaching and learning with the help of educational technology. The World Bank (2020) and UNESCO (2020) have documented how various countries have used educational technology to reach out to students through remote learning. The term ‘remote learning’ refers to learning where the student and the teacher, or the information source, are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment (Top Hat, 2020). In meaning, it is similar to the term distance learning. With the sudden closure of schools in Sri Lanka, students who were preparing for the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination, the General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level (G.C.E. O/L) Examination and General Certificate in Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) Examination as well as their parents and teachers have been deeply concerned. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the National Institute of Education, have been taking gradual steps to address the concerns of students and their parents. Consequently, two educational programmes, namely *Gurugedera (Sinhala) and Gurukulam (Tamil)* were initiated with the partnership of Rupavahini, the state-owned television network. Accordingly, Channel Eye and Nethra TV, television channels of Rupavahini, initiated the broadcast of educational content during the time of school closure. Likewise, *E-thaksalava*, the national e- learning portal of the Ministry of Education, offers learning materials to facilitate the learning of grade one to twelve students in the safety of their homes (UNESCO, 2020). Similarly, state-owned radio and other local private TV channels also allocate considerable amounts of time to broadcast educational programmes which aim to cover school lessons, especially for Grade 5 and G.C.E. A/L students. In addition, other stakeholders, i.e. Education Zonal Offices, private schools, other educational institutions, and volunteers have initiated online teaching using social media (e.g. through Zoom meetings, Google and Microsoft meetings, Facebook live and WhatsApp groups). These remote learning activities mostly rely on internet and modern electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers. This has resulted in an abrupt upsurge of internet usage in the country, where 60% of households with school-age children have no access to internet (Education Forum, 2020). Against this backdrop, it is important to study Sri Lankan school students’ experience of remote learning. To achieve the main aim of the study, the following objectives were identified:

1. to assess the awareness among Sri Lankan school students about remote learning resources and activities available to them
2. to assess the facilities available to them at home to engage in remote learning
3. to find out student perceptions towards remote learning
4. to identify the challenges and issues faced by school students when engaging in remote learning

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted on children’s remote learning in the aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic. In their survey, Zainudeen and Amarasinghe (2020) revealed that 66% of Sri Lankan households with school-aged children had no access to internet, and 48% of households with school-aged children had a smart phone or computer. This means that dissemination of remote learning activities through the internet could reach only 34% of the households. Thus, access to internet at household level of school-aged children in Sri Lanka is higher than that of other South Asian countries: India 20%, Pakistan 8%, and Bangladesh 11%. However, according to Zainudeen & Amarasinghe (2020), affordability of data is a major obstacle to internet access among low income earners. Further, they revealed that majority (78%) of households have mobile phones while 12% households have a computer or laptop. Still, around 52% of households with children (age less than 18) do not have a smartphone or computer in their home. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (2019), one out of every five household owns either a desktop or a laptop computer in Sri Lanka. But due to the changing trends from computer to smartphones/tablets, the digital literacy is continuously increasing among Sri Lankans. In 2019, digital literacy among those between the ages 5 – 69 was about 44.3% while computer literacy was 30.1%. Top Hat, a private firm dealing with educational technology, conducted a survey among 3,000 Canadian students about their feelings towards online education during the COVID 19 crisis. It was found out that over 85% students still preferred learning with their peers as opposed to learning as stand-alone learners. Similarly, 84% students have expressed willingness to return to face to face sessions at school. Top Hat concludes that many students demand an improved online learning experience blended with more face-to-face sessions with other students as well as improved connections with and support from faculty and administration. Similarly, Allo (2020) investigated students’ perceptions on online learning in Indonesia. The qualitative study revealed that online learning has been beneficial during the COVID 19 pandemic period. However, students faced difficulties in terms of access to the internet, lack of necessary financial support and ways in which the teaching-learning activities were implemented. Therefore, they preferred online learning conditionally, i.e. if teachers would use freely available online learning services. They mentioned that many of their peers do not have access to the internet. In addition, they expressed that it was necessary to have clearer instructions on the materials that was provided for them. Gohiya and Gohiya (2020) also found that remote learning activities during the pandemic were highly beneficial to students. Internet based remote learning activities have their negative effects as well. This phenomenon would increase the usage of Smartphones/tablets among school children. According to Jung, Lee, Kang, Kim and Lee (2016), the use of smartphones for long hours had a negative effect on children’ posture and their respiratory system. Gervas and Mgaya (2015) also stated that prolonged use of smartphones negatively affects the academic performance of students.

# METHODOLOGY

The present study was carried out as a survey. A questionnaire with 40 items was administered as a Google form among Tamil medium school students from different parts of Sri Lanka. Due to physical distancing and closure of schools, Google form was the most viable way of reaching the students via parent-teacher WhatsApp groups. Initially, a questionnaire with 35 items was drafted. It was revised and the number of items were increased after an expert reviewed the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to get an understanding of the students’ background information, details about their access to the internet, how they perceive self- learning during the period of physical distancing, awareness of the remote learning activities at their disposal, perceptions towards and level of satisfaction with remote learning activities besides the challenges of and problems in remote learning. The link to the Google Form was shared among twenty parent-teacher WhatsApp groups and respondents were selected through snowball sampling via WhatsApp. The questionnaire thus administered received 250 responses from all over the country. The data ware analysed using SPSS version 22 to calculate mean, standard deviation, and the percentages.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was collected from 250 respondents in which, 28.8% were from Puttalam, 26% from Colombo, 8.4% from Kurunegala, 8% from Ampara, and 5.2% from Kandy. Thirty-seven point two per cent (37.2%) were boys, and 62.8% were girls. Majority of students (91.2%) were aware about various remote learning activities (RLA) available for their benefit during the closure of schools in response to COVID 19 pandemic. They have been made aware of RLAs through social media (54.8%) as well as their teachers (39%) and peers (30%). They used a variety of sources to access the RLAs. These included television (31%), the radio (28%), Zoom/Google meetings (57%), and other social media (44%). It was revealed that many of the respondents engaged in remote learning through various online meetings and social media.

Analysis of data related to the nature of respondents’ current residence revealed that 86% were living in their own house. All the respondents have mentioned that they have electricity at their abode. In response to the occupational status of the main income earner of the family, it was revealed that, 25.2% of the parents were self-employed, 19.6% were in the teaching profession, and 20% were daily paid labourers. It is also noteworthy that 5.6% of the parents were unemployed. In terms of internet services used at home, 12% have Sri Lanka Telecom fixed lines and others (88%) use broadband services from other networks. It is interesting to note that 72% of the respondents’ access internet using pre-paid services. In addition, there were items in the questionnaire on the availability of devices for learning purposes with the option of choosing more than one of the given answers. Ninety-one point seven percent (91.7%) students use smartphones and around 40% have televisions and radio at home. Computers, laptops, and tablets were available to 8%, 12%, and 9% of the respondents, respectively. It is noteworthy that 78.4% of the respondents have their own smartphones, 11.4% their own laptops, 7.2% their own computers, and 6.8% their own tabs which are used for learning purposes. Students’ perceptions towards RLA in terms of self-learning, usefulness of remote learning, satisfaction of engaging in RLA and problems they faced in engaging in RLA were assessed using five-point Likert scale items with responses ranging from “not totally agreed” (1) to “totally agreed” (5).

Table 1: Students’ Perception towards Remote Learning Activities

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Mean(M) | Standard Deviation (SD) |
| Self-Learning | 250 | 3.55 | .77 |
| Usefulness of RL | 250 | 3.50 | .93 |
| Satisfaction | 250 | 3.45 | 1.03 |
| Problems | 250 | 3.47 | .82 |

Table 1 shows the mean, and standard deviation of the students’ perception towards RLAs which were at their disposal during closure of schools in response to COVID 19 pandemic. The mean values in all the four aspects were almost the same: self-learning (M=3.55, SD = 0.77), usefulness (M = 3.5, SD = .93) satisfaction (M = 3.45, SD = 1.03) and problems (M = 3.47, SD

= .82). It was found that all respondents agreed with all aspects of students’ perception towards remote learning activities. In addition, majority of the respondents (63%) were confident that they can continue self-learning with success during the physical distancing of COVID-19 period. Majority of the students (61%) stated that they benefited from various RLAs. Gohiya and Gohiya (2020) also report on similar findings regarding student perceptions on the benefit of RLA.

Affordability of data is a major concern in accessing RLAs. Nearly half of the respondents stated they cannot afford the expenditure on internet access to engage in RLA. Statement such as “We *are having a hard time buying a net card, “More money is needed for data cards, “Online data costs are not affordable,”* and *“A large amount of data is spent”* shed light on different nuances of the difficulties they faced during the period of lockdown and physical distancing. Zainudeen and Amarasinghe (2020) and Allo (2020) also report on similar findings. In relation to time of engagement, majority of the respondents (71%) spent 1-5 hours per day engaging in RLAs while 13% spent 5-8 hours per day. It is apparent that spending 1-5 hours per day on remote learning consumes a considerable amount of data, which is difficult for many families to afford. It is also noteworthy that school students’ prolonged use of smartphones has serious repercussions on their health and academic performance in the long run (Jung et al., 2016; Gervas & Mgaya, 2015). Nonetheless, the respondents agreed that they had problems with RLAs. Sixty percent of the respondents felt that they were missing the company of their peers when engaging in learning activities. Majority of the respondents (60%) stated that they receive an excess of exercises from RLA, which lead to high expenditure on printing. Likewise, about 42% of the respondents felt that the educational programmes in the televisions were broadcasting inappropriate time. Open-ended items on the survey also revealed other problems and challenges in RLAs. Some of the respondents stated, “*Multiple zoom meetings are held for several subjects simultaneously”. “I am not clear about lessons taught online”, “The internet coverage is poor”, “Only one device is available at home to share with siblings who are all school age.”* A female student mentioned, *“Boys are getting phone numbers while participating online learning and they gave missed calls and it's a lot of disturbing”.*

# CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the closure of Sri Lankan schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school children could not continue face to face instruction. Especially, the students of G.C.E O/L and A/L classes were deeply concerned about it as they prepare for significant examinations in their life. There are remote learning activities which consisted of non-internet and internet-based activities initiated by state and non-state sector with the aim of engaging students in their learning process. The present study found that majority of the respondents were aware of various remote learning activities and they were informed by schoolteachers and peers as well as social media. Majority of the respondents believed that they had plenty of time for self-learning at home while they were maintaining physical distancing in the safety of their home in response to COVID-19. Generally, they were satisfied with the remote learning activities that they participated in. According to the present study, about 40% of students engaged in learning through educational programmes broadcast via television and radio. About 91.7% of respondents were using smartphones to access RLA which were carried out through Zoom/Microsoft meetings, webinars, and some live social media programmes conducted by various interest groups. However, it was found that half of the respondents cannot afford the cost of data to engage in remote learning. Therefore, in order to ensure equity, it is recommended that access to the internet be provided to students at a concessionary rate. Moreover, service providers need to ensure that high speed internet access is available island-wide. In addition, it is also recommended that parents be made aware of how to facilitate their children’s engagement in remote learning. Educational programmes which are broadcast on television should be improved in quality; this could be realised by developing suitable protocols to ensure their quality. School students should be provided with devices free of charge to access RLAs and all internet based educational programmes should be given free of charge. At the same time, students, teachers, and parents should be made aware of the negative impact of prolonged usage of smartphones and tablets on academic achievement and health. As the present study focused on a sample of Tamil medium students, it is recommended that future studies should focus on students learning in other media to gain deeper insights on school students’ experiences with RLA in the Sri Lankan setting. Further studies focusing on the experiences of teachers and parents on school children’s remote learning would also be beneficial.

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to assess school student’s perspectives of their experiences of participating in remote learning activities available to them. For achieving the main purpose of the study, the following objectives have been set up: to assess the awareness among Sri Lankan school students about remote learning resources and activities available to them; to assess the facilities available to them at home to engage in remote learning; to find out student attitudes towards remote learning; and to identify the challenges and issues faced by school students when engaging in remote learning. This study was conducted as a survey. Using the snowball sampling technique, data were collected from 250 Tamil medium school students through a questionnaire administered as a Google Form. Collected data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, and percentage. Analysis of data revealed that majority of respondents (91.2%) were aware of the various remote learning activities (RLAs). Majority of the respondents (88%) used mobile internet and 72% used prepaid services. A high percentage of the respondents (91.7%) used smartphones to access RLAs. Only 40% of them used TV and radio for learning purposes. Further, it was found that half of the respondents found it difficult to afford internet. Around 71% of respondents spent 1-5 hours every day involved in RLAs. In addition, students’ perception towards RLAs in terms of self- learning (M=3.55, SD = 0.77), usefulness of RLAs (M = 3.5, SD = .93) satisfaction of RLAs (M = 3.45, SD = 1.03) were almost positive. It is also noteworthy that they felt positively with challenges and problems of engaging in RLA (M = 3.47, SD = .82). The main challenges they faced were related to affordability, content of RLAs, and cyber security when engaging with RLAs. It is recommended that mobile data be made available to students at low costs and all educational programmes should be made available free of charge to school children. In addition, devices such as tablets should be provided to all students in order to ensure equality of access to education among all children. Further, studies on parents’ and teachers’ experiences towards - RLAs would complement the findings of this study.

**Keywords**: COVID-19, Perceptions, Remote Learning Activities (RLA), School students