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FROM CLASSROOM TO SCREEN: EXPLORING DIGITAL LEARNING ORIENTATION IN THE SHIFT TO DIGITAL TEACHING

Showket Nabi[1]
Habibullah Shah[2]

Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19 brought about a notable transformation in the role of teachers as change agents through their adoption of educational innovations. This study aimed to understand school teachers' experiences with digital orientation practices adopted in the virtual eco-system. The study employed a phenomenological design. The study recruited 10 teachers through criterion sampling from three government secondary schools in Kashmir. The focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were utilized. Three themes emerged from data including digital learning orientation, a transition from traditional to digital teaching, and teacher autonomy in digital learning. Results revealed that teachers adapted to new digital tools, enhancing lesson engagement through virtual collaboration and multimedia resources. Teacher-student interactions were found to be altered, with educators finding innovative ways to maintain engagement but also faced challenges in establishing strong relationships in a virtual ecosystem. The study also highlights the need for ongoing professional development, support in adapting digital tools, and strategies to foster effective teacher-student interactions, ensuring a balanced and engaging online learning environment.

Keywords: Digital Orientation, Digital Teaching, Teacher Autonomy, Secondary Teacher.

Introduction

In times of alteration, suddenly new needs emerge from unforeseen causes, like the Covid-19 pandemic, and educational processes face both unanticipated challenges and emergent areas of opportunity. Nevertheless, in crisis-like situations, educational innovation leads to the generation of new products and ideas (e.g., technology, instruments, pedagogy, transformation, models, systems, methods, or better solutions

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kashmir
[2] Associate Professor, Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir

(Ramírez-Montoya & Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2022). Educational innovations have occupied a central place in response to the disruption of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovative school education necessitates both innovative pedagogy and methods that improve the student experience and the educational influence on school practice. In this fast-growing and changing scenario, we must constantly ask, 'Is there a better way? (Mulgan et al., 2007). It is an innovation that always relies on introducing new and novel ways of doing things (Malloch & Porter-O'Grady, 2010). Innovations in education could act as a focal point for novel methods of teaching that provide both a lifelong learning subscription and an integrated educational experience (Aithal & Maiya, 2023).

The widespread closure of schools occurred amid the Covid-19 era, leading to rapid transformation in technological innovations and digitalization in educational contexts (Alshamsi et al., 2020). However, in India – as in other Asian countries, such as Nepal or China many schools lag concerning the expected information and communication technologies (ICT) transformation progress. Like other countries, India also issued directives for the lockdown, and the government advocated for continuing education through distance and online spaces (Babbar & Gupta, 2022; Shah et al., 2024; Tahir & Jan, 2024). Zoom, Google Classroom, and Google Meet platforms were used frequently (Alvi & Gupta, 2020; Lawrence & Preethi, 2021). Zoom has been hailed by the World Economic Forum (2020) as the most innovative videoconferencing tool, and faculties have just adopted it significantly. Despite the unpreparedness and challenges faced by educators, educational administrators, and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, they successfully sustained the education system with educational innovations (Bondar et al., 2021; Nabi et al., 2022). The big picture now shows a willingness to try new things and take advantage of new learning possibilities that were not as obvious in the past. In light of the general crisis, the pandemic brought about change, especially regarding the so-called Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Dar & Nabi, 2019; Xie & Rice, 2021). The research by Steindal et al. (2021) indicated that the utilization of Learning Management Systems (LMS) was found to significantly impact the ability of postgraduate students to prepare for various activities. In this modern age, information technology (IT) fosters the development of a society that relies on knowledge and information (Ullah et al., 2021). Educators from all grades and contexts encountered the need to rethink their roles and responsibilities, methods of supporting students' academic tasks, and the idea of students as self-organizing learners, active citizens, and independent social agents (Council of Europe 2016, 2018; Tahir, 2024). Not just pupils but teachers, in particular, must develop new skills to adapt to this change. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us

the significance of innovations. It has strongly reminded us that there is no alternative to innovative thinking for human survival. As flagged by Zakaria (2020) in his book *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, it asserts that if COVID-19 proved anything, it is resourcefulness and human inventiveness. We could not stymie the process of innovations in any field of life even during the pandemic-19, particularly in the education sector.

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

We employed a Qualitative approach with phenomenological design to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of secondary school teachers, this approach emphasizes the unique ways in which individuals experience a given phenomenon. This design was used to capture teachers' lived experiences of educational innovations in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision was supported and guided by (Tuffour, 2017; Van Manen, 2001, 2017), who proclaimed that the goal of phenomenology is to describe the experience from the perception of its experiencer. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather detailed information conversationally (Adams, 2015; Harrell & Bradley, 2009), while focus group discussions were also employed due to their advantages over other qualitative methods in obtaining information in large quantities (Busetto et al., 2020; Powell & Single, 1996).

Three districts from Kashmir Division, Srinagar, Baramulla, and Anantnag, constituted the field site for the current research. Nine teacher participants were chosen from three Government secondary schools in Kashmir. Participants were recruited and interviewed using criterion sampling. In criteria sampling, participants are selected based on the fulfilment of predetermined criteria. The level of familiarity the participant has with the phenomena being investigated is a prominent criterion (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Data Analysis

This study employed Inductive Thematic Analysis following (Braun and Clarke's 2006) six-step approach, which is particularly suitable for qualitative research characterized by an inductive approach or loosely defined themes arising from open data collection. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its capability to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data, thus enabling the organization and interpretation of various aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results of the Study

Digital Learning Orientation

School education has had to switch to remote learning to meet social distancing standards, making digital learning orientation essential. Teachers battled with online class transactions as they first started their professional careers with online classes. These obstacles were likely the virtual environment, technology, and a new teaching style. New to online education, participants had their first virtual learning encounter. In this scenario, digital learning orientation has become a crucial part of education as many educational institutions have had to shift to remote learning to comply with social distancing guidelines. The results show that the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) designed a virtual educational training series to teach teachers online instructing skills. Training related to how to use Zoom Cloud, Google Meet, and Google Classroom to foster a positive learning environment and carry out virtual teaching.

According to the study, teachers preferred Google Classroom and Zoom for education technology integration. This shows that innovative technologies can help make online education smooth and seamless. The digital learning orientation was a good illustration of how educational institutions dealt with the demand for teacher training in the face of a change in how students were taught. This is consistent with the more general idea of how crisis and outside influences might hasten innovation in education.

Meanwhile Participant 2 (secondary school teacher) put it:

> *"I started my professional life with online transaction of classes. In the very beginning I found online classes challenging. Nevertheless, DIETs played a vital role in training us, soon I got the grip and conducted classes smoothly. Covid-19 gave a big push to technological innovations and fast-tracked the transition to a hybrid model that would have otherwise taken decades to progress" (P 4)*

> Another participant shared his experience, stating that *it was my first time engaging in virtual learning, and we were unprepared for it. (P7)*

Teacher participants during FGD suggested timely need for, support and training for instructors to effectively use and integrate technology in platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom. Furthermore, teachers emphasized that even a basic video-making program like MS Movie Maker can encourage teachers and students to adopt innovative teaching approaches. (participant 4,5,6,7, 8)

> One more participant narrated that *DIETs have also played a significant role in giving training to teachers for their professional growth. We were given*

> *training regarding how to make innovative use of ZOOM classes, such as how to share screens with students and how to use an inbuilt whiteboard and like (P5).*

The above narratives reveal that participants initially struggled with online class transactions as they started their professional careers with online classes. These hurdles presumably involved adapting to the virtual environment, technology, and a new teaching style. Furthermore, some participants experienced their first virtual learning experience, as they were new to online education. The study found that teachers prioritized user-friendly platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom for technology integration in education system. This suggests that platforms with intuitive interfaces and features can be crucial in facilitating smooth and seamless online teaching experiences. Teachers saw the COVID-19 problem as an opportunity to bring about change, and they were ready for the innovation and improvement in teaching that educational innovations could provide. furthermore, they were satisfied with the administration, particularly DIETs at their capacity and capability to exploit the full potential of ICT owing to an individual and sufficient direct assistance from the administration.

The Transition from Traditional to Digital Teaching

The transition from traditional to digital teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was very sudden. Teachers had to adapt to new technologies, reimagine lesson plans, and find ways to engage students virtually. This transition required flexibility, innovation, creativity, and resilience to maintain effective learning environments online. The inexperienced in online teaching, high school history teacher, reflects on their transition from the classroom to digital learning. Initially, they felt overwhelmed by the new technology and the challenges of creating an engaging online environment.

> The participant narrated: *"I was used to reading my students' faces and adjusting my teaching based on their reactions" (P9).* Another participant narrated: *"But online, it is a different ballgame. I had no idea if they were absorbing the material or just zoning out in front of their screens." (P7)*

The results showed that many teachers struggle to adapt to digital teaching methods. In the participant's experience, the transition brought feelings of uncertainty. She mentions the difficulty of adjusting lesson plans to fit an online format and the challenges of using digital tools like video conferencing and interactive platforms. The participant narrated, *"I thought I could just transfer what I had been doing in the classroom to an online environment" (P4).* Nevertheless, quickly, I realized it was not

that simple. It was a lot more about learning how to engage my students virtually and not just teach the content.

However, participants also shared moments of growth. Through trial and error, teachers became more comfortable using digital tools creatively to foster student interaction. One more participant said, *"The first time I used a breakout room effectively, I felt like I had finally cracked the code"* (P3), she admits, demonstrating her evolving orientation toward digital teaching. Her experience reflects the theme of adaptation and the learning curve of teaching in a digital format. The transition, while challenging, also opened up new opportunities for creativity and innovation in her teaching methods.

Teacher Autonomy in the Digital Learning

Teacher autonomy in digital learning during COVID-19 became both a challenge and an opportunity. With the sudden shift to online mode and adapting to new technologies and learning platforms, often with little time for training. Despite administrative guidelines and curriculum mandates, many educators found ways to exercise autonomy by designing personalized lessons, incorporating innovative digital tools, and fostering student engagement in unique ways. While the lack of in-person interaction posed challenges, teachers embraced the flexibility of online teaching, lowing for creative approaches and a more tailored educational experience that aligned with their teaching philosophies.one of the participants, a secondary school math teacher, shared his experience of autonomy in the digital classroom. When schools shifted to online learning, he found that many established structures and support systems he relied on were no longer in place.

> Participant narrated, *"At first, I felt like I had no control. The administration gave directives about the platforms we needed to use, but there was little room for input or choice. (P1)*

The shared experience was found for many teachers, who often felt constrained by the imposed shift to digital platforms. However, at some moments, they could reclaim their agency. One participant responded, *"I had control over how I engaged my students. I started developing my online quizzes, using tools like Kahoot and Padlet to make the lessons more interactive" (P5).* Through this process, he gradually realized that his ability to choose tools, develop content, and experiment with teaching methods allowed him to reclaim a sense of autonomy in the digital classroom. The

other participant said, *"I could design lessons how I wanted, giving me a sense of purpose" (P6).*

Digital teaching was found to be a balancing act between following administrative guidelines and exercising personal creativity. However, the lack of immediate feedback and interaction with students can be challenging, but empowered by the opportunities digital platforms provide to personalize this approach. This theme highlights the importance of teacher agency and the satisfaction of creating a learning experience that reflects individual teaching philosophies. The secondary school teacher also described the shifting landscape of their professional identity in the wake of the digital learning shift amid COVID-19. One participant narrated that

> *"At first, I felt disconnected from my role as a teacher, however with time I improved my online teaching skills" (P2). One* more participant added that. *"I had built my career on personal connections, building relationships with my students, and those seemed so much harder to do online. (P3)*

The struggle was about learning new digital tools and redefining their purpose and role as educators. As a secondary school teacher, the bond they form with their students is a cornerstone of teaching pedagogy, and digital platforms seem to diminish that connection. One participant (P7) shared the experience emotionally:

> *"I missed those little moments, the smile on a child's face when they understand something for the first time. It was hard to replicate that in a virtual environment."*

Discussion

This study found that digital learning orientation has become a crucial part of education as many schools and universities have had to shift to remote learning to comply with social distancing guidelines. However, DIETs promote digital orientation programmes to enhance teachers' professional skills. Kinder Mann et al. (2021) conclude that digital orientation enables the organization to grow strategically. The DIETs have played a crucial role in guiding teachers' personal and professional growth, specifically in training them on the creative utilization of Zoom classes. This training includes teaching teachers how to effectively share their screens with students and utilize Zoom, Google Meet, and more built-in whiteboard features. The finding was supported by the study of Rupeika-Apoga et al. (2022), which stated that having a digital mindset and being digitally capable positively impacts digital transformation. These results may help practitioners and policymakers better

understand how the effects of digital transformation on teachers' and students' outcomes are influenced by digital orientation and capacity; however, we need to provide more training to teachers to enhance their digital literacy. Also envisaged by Bailey et al. (2022), using video conferencing to instruct intercultural communication skills pupils yielded noteworthy outcomes for subsequent investigations. Numerous investigations have shown the educational benefits of video conferencing and web-based learning as virtual learning environments for educating students. and teachers (Hobbs & Coiro, 2019; Jayaraman & Jothiswaran, 2020; Wani & Nabi, 2022). Amidst lockdowns and crises, academics must have ongoing chances to enhance their professional growth (Hobbs & Coiro, 2016; Nabi & Shah, 2024; Tahir & Jan).

Teachers expressed challenges adjusting to online teaching, notably missing the ability to read students' faces. The results are in line with Turnbull (2021), who found that teachers face multiple challenges during virtual teaching. The challenge was determining whether students were absorbing the content or disengaging, emphasizing the gap between in-person and digital interactions. This finding aligns with Richards (2023), who highlighted the issue of student disengagement in the online learning ecosystem. Teachers initially believed they could replicate traditional classroom methods online but soon realized the need for adaptation. The results also highlighted the success of using breakout rooms, feeling a sense of accomplishment and growth in navigating the new digital teaching environment. The finding is consistent with Bashir et al. (2021), who found similar results. Teachers initially felt restricted by administrative directives on platforms but found autonomy in engaging students. Teachers regained control over lesson design by utilizing tools like Kahoot and Padlet, which sparked creativity and a renewed sense of purpose in digital teaching. Similarly, (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021; Shah et al., 2022) noted that while teachers initially faced challenges with the online environment, they eventually gained mastery over various digital tools. Teachers initially felt a loss of control due to platform administrative directives, with limited input allowed. The participant felt disconnected from their role, missing the personal connections and moments of understanding in the classroom. The challenge of replicating these experiences online created feelings of professional disconnection. (Oliveira et al. 2021; O'Leary 2025).

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