**Research Article**

# The ``New Normal'' in Education and the Future of Schooling

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the catchphrase of the new decade — the 'new normal' in education. The paper offers some analyses of its emergence. Guided by a literature review, mostly about UNICEF, UNESCO, and the OECD and their critics, this paper specifically explores the question – what does the 'new normal' mean? In asking this question, this paper problematises the assumed meaning of 'new normal', offers two possible meanings, and explains why teachers and school leaders must be cautious in using the term. Furthermore, this paper hopes for academics, teachers, and school leaders to reflect on why the term 'new normal' may be problematic in the future of schooling, post-pandemic.

**Keywords:** new normal, COVID-19 education, online learning

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The historic long-haul closure of schools in over 200 countries and territories due to COVID-19 virus has erupted conversations of what it seems to be the catchphrase of the new decade – the 'new normal' in education. Texts regarding 'new normal' in education appears to be in an accelerating pace and familiar themes seem to be pointing into the direction of technology-mediated teaching and learning i.e. (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Kachra & Brown, 2020; Pacheco, 2021; Tria, 2020; Xie et al., 2020; Žižek, 2020[1,2,3,4,5,6,7]. Although, several scholars and educators such as Daniel (2020) and Pacheco (2021) interestingly argue that this 'new normal' appears to be a reiteration of the old, pre-pandemic normal [8,4]. Although, both contend that the outbreak of COVID-19 has forced school leaders to fast-track their plans of integrating technology into teaching and learning from a supposed years of planning to just few days.

While this paper is in the similar vein of Daniel (2020) and Pacheco (2021), it argues that the emergence of the term 'new normal' specifically in countries in the global south, may have a slightly different impetus. It has been noted that several schools in countries in the global south are not prepared for remote learning and thus school-aged children

in these regions have higher risk of falling behind in education [9]. Data from UNICEF indicates that there are many countries in these regions with long-duration school closures that also have low rates of internet connectivity at home and therefore, many students in these countries have missed out on both in-person classroom instruction and learning opportunities that used internet-based technologies as compared to countries in the global north.

While the term 'new normal' may seem to be straight forward, this paper further explores this catchphrase term and offers some analyses of its emergence. Guided by literature reviews, mostly from UNICEF, UNESCO, and OECD, and their critics, this paper will specifically explore the question – what does new normal mean? In asking this question, this paper will attempt to problematise the assumed meaning of 'new normal'. Furthermore, this paper hopes for academics, teachers, and school leaders to reflect on why the term 'new normal' may be problematic in the future of schooling, post-pandemic.

## 1.1. What do we know so far since COVID-19 broke out?

In the last twenty months since World Health Organisation officially announced COVID-19 as a worldwide pandemic, governments have implemented several strategies to curb the spread of the novel corona virus. One of the very first strategies done by governments is the closure of schools. UNICEF (2021) notes that in March 2020, about 150 countries had decided to fully close their schools, while about 10 countries partially closed and another 10 have decided to continuously operate [9]. Schools are considered hubs of our social network and closing them seem to be a viable decision to help flatten the curve. However, the closure of schools affected more students in the countries in the global south. For instance, in a period of 1 year from March 2020 to February 2021, the global average of days of school closure is about 96 days. In comparison, countries in Latin America, South, and East Asia, the average number of days that schools are fully closed is 120 days as compared to countries in North America and Western Europe that it is just 26 days on average.

An unprecedented remote teaching and learning experiment looms large over the first five months since the announcement of indefinite school closure in the first quarter of 2020. In recent surveys conducted separately by UNICEF (2021), UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank (2020), about 90 per cent of departments of education globally have implemented varied flexible, remote learning [9,10]. However, countries in South Asia, Latin America, and some countries in East Asia who has longer days of full closure, only

about half of the school children are with access to internet at home [9]. Conversely, most countries in North America and Western Europe who has lower average number of days of school closure, about 85 per cent of school children are with access to internet at home. The difference in data may seem to be unsurprising, but how we expect the 'new normal' across countries despite the significant difference stated may pose a valid question of equity, to say the least.

Institutions of learning in the countries in the global south appear to be not prepared for long haul disruptions of classes, not only infrastructure, but also academic policies [11]. This unprecedented remote teaching experiment looms large over the first week of shut down to offer flexibility of teaching and learning anywhere. But this effort has been met with several criticisms from students and student-activists alike. These criticisms can be summarized in the global trending hashtags #NoStudentLeftBehind and #SuspendOnlineClassesNow across social media platforms. These global trending hashtags show students and student activists' crying foul on decisions of schools to continue learning through online platforms. Several issues that range from limited to no internet connectivity, mental health, priority of family health and welfare over continuation of learning have been raised. But the most raised issues of the remote-online learning is the stigma of poor quality of education despite several studies disagreeing with this, for example, Cheng, et.al. (2019), Furió, et.al. (2015), Herrador-Alcaide, et.al (2019, 2020) [12,13,14,15]. However, despite deluge of literature about online learning is not lower quality as compared to traditional in-person classes, some students and other stakeholders are seemingly unenthusiastic. Consequently, a barrage of recommendation to immediately end school year, universal pass to all enrolled students, and a refund of tuition fees (for private schools) became the current themes in various social media platforms.

Because of this, a great divide between students and academic community has aroused over the first year of school closures in various countries. In sum, for students, a call for immediate end of classes during the first five months of school closure, a request for universal pass/mass promotion, and lastly, a demand for academic freeze for all levels of schooling. However, for majority in the academic community, teachers, education leaders, a continuation of learning despite school closure is needed as the situation is already the 'new normal'.

## 1.2. What is `new normal' in teaching and learning?

Currently, the term 'new normal' that refers to online-remote learning is quickly becoming a buzz word. But what does 'new normal' mean? While the term has no definitive meaning, it has been assumed by many to be a more technology-driven teaching and learning in a post-COVID context. It has been anticipated that education in the 'new normal' will never be the same as pre-pandemic times. As what Žizek (2020, p. 3) strongly argues "there is no return to normal, the new 'normal' will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible"[7]. While this may seem to be a viable and logical assumption, there seem to be some issues that surround this assumption. As mentioned on the onset, this paper problematises the term 'new normal.' In so doing, it offers two possible meanings and what problems and issues it will bring moving forward.

## 1.3. The `new normal' is tech solution companies' agenda

For some, using the term 'new normal' creates a case to cut-down the traditional brick and mortar schools in favour of investing to online learning. This idea is a welcoming agenda for tech-solution companies. The global EdTech industry in 2020 is valued around USD 89 Billion and is expected to increase by 19.9% in the next five years. This is one of the fastest growing industries that has exponential growth yearly. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic crisis, EdTech companies have promoted online education to the next level. Now more than ever, the pandemic presents new opportunities to EdTech companies to expand their businesses to uncharted areas. This seems to be a good opportunity (or forced opportunity) for schools and institutions of learning to transition to a more technology-induced teaching and learning. Afterall, as what Pacheco (2021, p. 4) observes that...

[t]hese new subjectivities will exhibit increased capacities for voluntary obedience and programmable functioning abilities, leading to a "new normal" benefiting those who are savvy in software-structured social relationships [4].

As education moves to its current direction, schools that transitions are seen as advanced, efficient, and relevant. This transitioning to a more technology-induced teaching and learning is seen to be an innovation. However, innovation using technology is expensive and a big investment. Sometimes, school leaders and decision-makers overlook learning principles just to acquire technologies that does not address learning issues in the class. As what Richardson (2016) succinctly argues that "innovation today

is a guise of vendors selling gadgets and codes" [16]. It is important for school leaders and decision-makers to see how these products will be able to address teaching and learning challenges in the classroom and should be able to see evidence that the product can live to its promise of innovation [17].

These technological innovations are in a form investment. Whether a school uses a free or subscription-based learning management system (LMS) there is still costs (i.e. teacher training, policy changes). Investment costs in technology may not necessarily increase in learning effectiveness, or the absence of investments does not necessarily impede learning from transpiring. Although the initial thought of any investor is if the technology is acquired precisely for improving learning, it is deemed necessary to determine whether indeed it supports learning, if not, we can only conclude that the investment is not well spent. In addressing this issue, a Learning and Technology Framework (LTF) created by Culala (2016, 2017) is being recommended. LTF is defined as...

...effectiveness of a particular technology in student learning. In an acquisition of a technology, its performance should be measured through a Technology Performance Questionnaire (TPQ) and can be gauged through the framework to check if the technology has the ability to direct a change [16,17]

The change in the direction in the LTF may inform decision makers of five possible outcomes The four outcomes can engage the students and affect learning effectiveness regardless of whether the technology has low or high performance. In this case, it can be described that a technology, whether it has low performance, it can still affect change in learning, thus, may mean less investment cost. If the TPQ shows high performance that affects high engagement in learning, then, the investment is successful, however, may mean high costing. The fifth outcome, which is the least, is the technology has high performance, but learning remains low and passive. This is obviously the area where investors see the investments as counterproductive. If technology is not used to enhance engaged learning, there is no reason to pay for higher cost of greater functionality.

## 1.4. The `new normal' makes brick-and- mortar schools obsolete

McFarlane (2011) defines brick-and-mortar schools as "traditional schools with established physical location where the essential factors of time and place are vital in determining contact between teachers and students, and where students and teachers meet face-to-face in social communication to facilitate exchange in the teaching and

learning process"[21]. This physical location has always been equated with the term "school" and considered by Tyack and Cuban (1995) part of the "grammar of schooling" which means, if chairs, teacher's table, blackboard, library, cafeteria are taken out, then it can no longer be felt as real school [19].

As the 'new normal' suggests that learning can be anywhere, the existence of brick-and-mortar schools are being questioned. Although, this has been a debate since the technology emerges in the schools in the 1990s, brick-and-mortar schools seem to still get many supporters from different stakeholders. For instance, in the recent survey of National Child Protection Commission (KPAI) in Jakarta, around 78% of students want to return to physical classrooms. In a similar survey by UNICEF, 84% of Filipino parents despite spending more time guiding their children in online classes, thy observed that they are learning less in distance learning than in traditional in-person learning. Several research suggest that students still learn, socially and academically in physical brick-and-mortar classroom [20,21].

While there are literature suggest that during COVID-19 online learning shows more learning that the traditional brick-and-mortar schools, physical schools are still important to develop more than academic learnings [22,23,21,24].

## 2. SOME CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

The term 'new normal' has several meanings depending on the argument someone wants to advance. As the term has no definitive meaning, it seems that the narratives that surround it focus on a technology-induced teaching and learning. However, teachers and school leaders should be cautious in using this term without understanding its underlying meanings. Transitioning to online learning because of fear of future pandemics and other disruptions of classes is not the 'new normal', it is important to understand that technology in the classrooms should address learning issues and align itself to learning principles. The future pandemics are inevitable, one should not just use technology to hide everyone out of fear.

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