

International Education as a Response to COVID-19: an Indian Perspective.

Arundhati Sharma

International Educator (Cambridge International AS and A level Psychology)
Ulink College, Guagzhou, China.
Arundhatisharma@gmail.com

The International Education sector has created multiple job opportunities for teachers from around the world. ISC Research, a market research company that collects data on international schools, places the privately-owned international schools in China at about 850 (Atack, 2019). China's relaxed policies towards international education and its attempts at refurbishing its reputation in Education to become the international education destination has seen an increase in the number of foreign nationals taking up teaching positions in several international schools and universities (Huang, 2003). An increasing number of wealthy Chinese nationals are driven by the need for their children to pursue higher education in universities abroad and are vigorously seeking international education. This coupled with the need for higher exposure to English, have been the reasons for the increase in international schools in China. Returning Chinese, whose children now hold international passports, want the same level of education as abroad, and therefore seek to enroll them in international schools. Thus, the number of students in private international schools have increased around 64% in the past 5 years to about 2,45,000 (Atack, 2019). Such schools offer Cambridge International AS and A levels and the International Baccalaureate curriculums. Most of these international schools pride themselves in hiring native English-speaking nationals from countries such as UK, Canada, America, and New Zealand. Apart from those hired for teaching curriculum subjects, international teachers take up positions for teaching English to Chinese students. As per 2017 statistics, there were an

estimated 400,000 foreign teachers in China (Cadell, 2019), with higher numbers until 2020.

In majority of such schools, Covid-19 presented a unique situation for the internationally employed teaching staff. The first news of the Covid-19 outbreak was published in China on 31st December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed cases of the Covid-19 on 5th January 2020 in a published news article. Having confirmed the first few deaths from the novel Coronavirus in China around 19th January, its impact on international teachers was still unanticipated. China was preoccupied with its New Year Celebrations in the latter part of January 2020, where all schools and educational institutions closed for a period of two weeks. Majority of foreign teachers employed in China often travel to parts of south-east Asia during this time, while others travel to their home countries in the United States and Europe. Thus, when Covid-19 was at its peak in China lots of teachers were outside of China. In the fear of catching the coronavirus, many teachers extended their stay in places where they were stationed during the holidays. Teachers stranded abroad experienced tremendous anxiety and stress due to the uncertainty of returning home to China, since many have married Chinese locals and now call China their homeland.

International Teachers, Covid-19 and Online Learning

Schools set to open in the first week of February, saw a transformation of learning overnight. Teaching changed from face-to-face instruction to online learning. However, teaching students who have very little English language capabilities, along with teachers who have little Chinese language capabilities add an interesting set of challenges in an online environment. Students in China follow the 'Confucian value system' in education. Kennedy (2002) describes the very nature of Confucian educational value system which includes respect for the teacher's authority, with an utmost reluctance to question the teacher. The teacher is always the 'one with the right answer' (Carless, 2011) and any individual opinion regarding any matter are discouraged and considered selfish. In order to

save 'face' or *mei-tzu* – which translates to maintaining status in front of others, student interaction is minimalistic, and student responses to teachers' questions are often met with silence and blank stares (Carless, 2011 Kennedy, 2002). The perception of teachers is compared in relation to how well the teacher prepares students for the test, and thus, the teaching and learning methodologies should be test focused. Hence, international schools that cater to the pure Chinese population of students, often struggle with incorporating an engagement-based student learning culture. However, despite lack of engagement, a face-to-face class provided physical cues to the teacher about a student's level of learning, but the use of online learning methods during Covid-19 eliminated the input of these physical cues. Therefore, along with the limited English level capabilities of students, cultural perspectives, lack of physical cues and no class engagement created multiple challenges in effective lesson delivery, classroom management including student attendance, feedback, assessments and student learning. Along with these, the limited online teaching experience of many teachers, as well as their limitations in using online teaching technology effectively, such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc. led to stressful days for many teachers.

Along with classroom preparation, using new technological tools and preparing for a completely new way of teaching and learning overnight, teachers outside of the country also taught online classes at odd hours in the night due to the time differences of up to 12 hours. Additionally, education bureaus in different provinces in China provided different directives to educational institutions regarding next steps and this additionally, created panic and confusion, along with misinformation to foreign staff in China. However, despite challenges, teachers were able to adapt to this methodology. Restrictions in the effective use of online teaching and learning were for a few specific subjects. Physical education lost its meaning of being physical, as students could not indulge in any activities outside of their house. Many schools focused on the theory of physical education, as physical education in its truest sense was impossible. Other subjects such as art and chemistry, that required the use of on school facilities were limited in their learning, as facilities were inaccessible, and students had no access to these at home. Although the first few months of online education were riddled with confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety, it has paved a new way of learning.

Educational Leadership During Covid-19

Covid-19 was at its peak in China during the latter part of February 2020 and there were no signs of schools opening any time soon. Schools changed dates frequently for re-opening, and there was uncertainty about the next course of action, especially for those teachers stranded in other parts of world not necessarily their home countries. They faced huge monetary losses to sustain in another country. If leadership was important, then this was its time. Arnold Glasgow, an American businessman's quote summarizes educational leadership faced during the Covid-19 pandemic "One of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency" (Daskal, 2015). If one thing was certain, it was the fact that nothing was certain. Decision making was divided in terms of those who valued their employees and those who saw this as an opportunity to cut staff. Some leading international schools in Beijing and Shanghai realized the emergency and provided clarity, informing teachers about their possible return dates. Other schools provided an opportunity for teachers to decide their own course of action, whilst others were quick to make staff redundant. Provinces in the southern part of China were not as prompt in evaluating the situation to be an emergency as schools in Beijing and Shanghai, as they depended on the education departments in these provinces to provide a directive. Therefore, many teachers in these parts found themselves stranded within China during the peak of its outbreak.

Leadership in international schools was stuck in a catch 22 position, effectively engaging their stakeholders - with immense pressure from parents and students to provide quality teaching, and at the same time, to support its teachers who had little to no training or experience with online teaching. Along with these, new policies and procedures were crucial to be developed, those that were never thought of before the Covid-19 era. Technological support in terms of improved internet connection were provided to the teachers, new platforms such as 'Zoom' were tested for online delivery. Student protection in the wake of student online learning, nature of online classroom discipline, and assessments were just some of the crucial points to be considered by educational leadership. This time also saw parents being involved in their children's learning, as taking assessments online required supervision, and it was up to the parents to monitor their child's

learning and assessment environments. Teachers were directed to discuss topics about sincerity, discipline and truthfulness in work and action as part of learning online.

Authorities tried to support their foreign teachers by providing the necessities, such as food and masks. They worked on changing schedules, and reducing class time to range from 30 min to 45 min. However, the biggest challenges faced by authorities was to ensure continuous quality learning despite Covid-19, convincing parents of the value of education online in comparison to the cost of international education, and ensuring that online schools would provide the necessary preparation for the upcoming exams in the month of May and June 2020.

In response to catering to the parent population, schools had to let the Chinese authorities medically test their foreign teaching staff for the virus. During the peak time of Covid-19 majority of teaching staff were asked by their schools to cater to health checks by the local authorities. Foreigners during this time were monitored closely as fear of contamination from foreign nationals was high, due to the increasing number of infected cases being reported from other parts of the world. Although the schools had to support the government directives for testing of its foreign teachers, these were also questioned by the schools as many foreign teachers were tested multiple times despite results being negative. However, majority of schools supported their teachers, ensuring that any stress caused due to the testing was reduced. Necessities such as transportation to and from the hospital, or ensuring food was delivered to the teachers, were taken care of.

Students And Learning During Covid-19

Student experiences of online learning was driven by anxiety in terms of exam preparation and subsequent performance. The overall time frame that students went through online learning was from February to May 2020, after which majority of schools in China went back to face-to face teaching. Many younger students

faced linguistic and technological challenges in understanding instructions and following learning. China's internet restrictions further raised concerns with accessing online content on YouTube and other websites, unless a virtual private network (VPN) is used. Most schools access the VPN through their internet provider; however, since students were in their own homes, many parents did not have access to a VPN and hence student learning on many occasions was limited. Learning experience was overwhelming to say the least, as students were forced to engage with it during a rising sense of panic, chaos and anxiety due to the virus and the uncertainty of performance in the exams. Further, university placements added to their woes. Along with these, fulfilling parent's expectations and to 'save face' added to the feeling of grief and doom for many students. The breakdown of internet services due to the overwhelming use of internet consumption also limited access to learning resources. Students therefore suffered mentally and emotionally.

However, students' resilience was also observed during this time as they did cope well with the change in the styles of content delivery. Thus, students were able to cope with the overall anxiety and adapt to the changes quickly.

Teaching And Learning Post The Closing Of International Borders In China

China took a directive to close its borders to international visitors by the end of March 2020. This has continued till date as of 23rd August 2020. This was done largely in order to curb a second wave of infection from individuals landing in from countries such as the US or the UK. The closing of the borders has created a massive shortage of teachers available to take face-to-face classes in China. Those schools whose teachers were directed to return by mid-March, before the closing of the borders and who failed to do so, lost their jobs. Other schools asked their teachers not to return. The current scarcity of teachers caused by the closing of borders has created many job opportunities for foreign teachers within China who are willing to relocate. Amidst this chaos, the rampant racism within the international education industry came to light and international

teacher recruitment practice was questioned. Governing bodies such as Council of International Schools (CIS) and leading international teacher recruitment firms have pledged to fight structural racism in the international education sector. Therefore, Covid-19 has challenged the very fabric of what international education stands for – Global citizenship, perhaps the unbiased and un-prejudiced recruiting of its teaching faculty across international schools, based simply on merit.

Most schools in China have resumed face-to-face teaching since May 2020, however teacher workloads have extended beyond normal, as schools are struggling with hiring teachers who are subject specialists. The closing of borders has made it difficult for teachers to come back to China, thus putting pressure on existing staff to deliver the same quality of teaching despite shortages. This has called into question existing policies and practices of teaching and learning and flexi work time possibilities. Many schools have decided to hire local staff to cover classes, thereby raising doubts about the capabilities of local staff to bring in the same diversity most crucial for an international experience of learning. To counter this shortage, many teachers stranded abroad continue to take classes online to support their students in every way possible.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has demonstrated that humans are resilient beings and will evolve and adapt to circumstances that were completely unfathomable before the pandemic. Education, therefore, is in the phase of evolution, as it seeks to question 'Does the current education system develop people for a new world?'

Covid-19 has brought some additional questions into focus for the education industry,

1. How must the nature of education and assessment evolve for the future?
2. How can leadership evolve to support high quality learning remotely?

3. How can policies evolve to support higher work life balance within education? It remains to be seen how individuals will direct teaching and learning post Covid-19. Until then, all teachers across the globe continue adapting, and innovating to develop a new generation of well-informed, learned men and women to guide the world to better future.

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