

Impact of Using Blended Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the impact of blended learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The study was designed and developed to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in the holistic development of EYFS students and to discover the level of competence of the Early Years students in adapting and coping with the online platform in the Early Years Foundation Stage after the Covid -19 lockdown. The participants were EYFS parents and teachers from grades Nursery, Foundations Stage 1 and Foundation Stage 2. Qualitative data was obtained through survey questionnaires by recording parents' and teachers' perceptions of the blended learning approach for young learners.

Keywords: Blended learning, Early Years Foundation Stage, holistic development

Introduction

Digital education is one of the foremost popular means of education. Thanks to the unprecedented days caused by the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. One of the tragedies of the epidemic, beneath the death circle and economic cost, is the human cost on our students and their education. As the virus was spreading across the country, more than 90% of enrolled students in Bangladesh were affected by some kind of limitation posed by educational institutions, more than a billion impacted across the globe.

In Bangladesh, the first Covid-19 patients were tracked on

8 March in the capital, and as a result, the country went into general lockdown from 26 March 2020. Since then, most industries and business centres have remained shut since all educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities.

DPS STS School Dhaka followed strict safety measures since the gradual spread of the virus by raising awareness among students, faculty and staff

members of the correct technique for handwashing, providing information about general hygienic measures and other additional measures for parents. Amidst the preventive measures taken, the school also prepared staff for online teaching. Thankfully, the teachers were ready to face the challenges awaiting them.

Blended learning is a planned and systematic approach to combining modes of learning in which technology and/or online resources are combined with face-to-face in-class teaching.

Teachers were continuously developing innovative strategies to gain their students' attention. Early Years teachers at DPS STS School and other Early childhood practitioners tried to implement new, research-based approaches and the best strategy to positively impact the Early Years learning environment. Compared to all other learning modes in education, blended learning is the trending approach to effective learning, which many schools worldwide are trying to incorporate into their education system.

Upon going into a complete lockdown, DPS STS School Dhaka ensured that lesson plans were designed to suit online learning with a blend of synchronous and asynchronous teaching materials. While conducting and developing further strategies to enhance the new teaching and learning platform, DPS STS School also gave prior thought to the psychological needs of the students. Whilst gradually putting together a routine with staggered timing across the school, which had less impact on families sharing laptops among siblings and their work hours.

Google Meet is a learning platform that DPS STS School Dhaka used to conduct online learning and share asynchronous activities for each pupil. All Early-Years parents were sent an activation e-mail to log in to this learning platform. For children in EYFS, blended learning was practised via Google Meet during the Covid -19 lockdown. The school provided support for teachers and parents on using Google Meet. The online teaching mode provided many resources that helped parents support their

child's learning journey. The new platform helped parents support their children's learning by providing a mix of real, hands-on, physical and online activities that can be readily performed at home. Using feedback from families, the Early Years teachers endeavoured to work with children's particular interests and needs whilst identifying the focus for the weeks ahead.

As assessment in the EYFS is ongoing, teachers followed the same strategy in the blended model. While conducting virtual classes, the second teacher assessed and recorded students' interests, development and learning in the Foundation Stage assessment tracking grid.

The early start to the programme positively impacts students' mental wellbeing. The three main areas of learning in the EYFS helped to provoke interest and curiosity in communication and language/ Emotional, personal and social development and physical development. That leads to acquiring the skills needed to progress in literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and Expressive arts and design in the blended model. Teachers have realised that technology usage in the EYFS classroom has immensely developed communication skills in the synchronous class (Umphrey, 2013). Students are learning to be independent and develop self-learning skills in the new approach, building positive peer relationships with classmates and teachers and understanding their freedom to speak freely.

Research on blended teaching and learning in the EYFS

Teaching has revolutionised the education system and adapted new innovative strategies to fit students' requirements. Different learning styles have been incorporated with unique teaching strategies into the contemporary education system. Many interactive strategies have been tested and agreed upon to teach in 21st-century classrooms. Blended learning is on the hike in classrooms around the world (Al Mosavi&Wali, 2015; Blended Learning in Action, 2015; Fleck, 2012; Fischer, Perenyi,&Birdthistle, 2018; Griffin, 2014; Henrie, Bodily, Manwaring,& Graham,2015; Imbriale, 2013; Jachin&Usagawa, 2017; Kazakoff, Macaruse, & Hook,2018; Nazarenko, 2015;

Saritepeci & Cakir, 2015) Schecter, Maracaruso, Kazakoff, & Brooke, 2015).

Learning technology in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is emerging with interactive resources that enhance children's thinking. Besides, it also stimulates emotional, physical and cognitive development. The expected outcome of education in the Early Years is to achieve the Early Learning Goal (ELG) at the end of Foundation stage 2. Hence, the use of technology in the Early Years of classrooms is rapidly emerging due to the integration of various innovative technological tools used by Early Years practitioners to create an active environment to promote learning.

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) defines that, by the end of the Foundation Stage, most children should be able to: "Find out about and identify the uses of everyday technology and use information and communication technology and programmable toys to support their learning." (EYFS, 2008)

Play and exploration in the Early Years classroom generate an understanding of child development. The playful use of computers in the EYFS supports learning themes and developing communication skills easily and comfortably. The use of touch screen technology such as whiteboards and touch screen monitors enhances children's knowledge to use the acquired computer skills in future situations.

Several computer applications have built-in assessment opportunities that help facilitators identify differentiated learning abilities in students and support learning. Effective technology usage has helped practitioners observe students in a friendly approach using play-based tools.

Child-friendly technology device aids in learning the seven areas of the Early Years curriculum. Technology provides a gateway to learn through previous experiences. Children's engrossment in a specific area of learning in the EYFS provides a pleasurable learning environment with the integration and support of technology.

Advantages

Blended learning has one advantage: having personalised learning in the classroom during blended learning. Teachers can make playlists and design activities based on the student's needs. The students can also choose their ways at their own pace in whatever classroom they want (Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2017). Moreover, another benefit of this type of learning is that it offers students more involvement by exploring technology. In this present situation, teachers and students of all ages have some kind of technology device, whether a tablet of sorts, smartphone, a computer, google home etc. The students know how to function these devices and keep themselves engaged with what they are doing. Teachers should also understand that they make the digital learning space engaging, interesting topics, providing higher-order thinking questions, exciting curiosity, and allowing for creativity (Tucker as cited by Umphrey, 2013). Students' learning can partly take place on a device with blended learning. Teachers are allowed to form a common platform for learning in a digital space where students can freely discuss and answer questions in their own time; it reduces the nervousness and shyness of the students of answering the questions in front of the entire class (Umphrey, 2013; Vander Ark, Mejia, Woolley-Wilson, & Funk, 2012). To mention a few more advantages of a blended learning classroom, students will have more instructional time (online, one-on-one, small groups), students will take their learning into their own hands. Hence, they will be empowered and will get the scope to collaborate with others (even outside the classroom).

Disadvantages

Along with all the advantages of having a blended learning environment, there are some disadvantages. One of those disadvantages is the usage of technology. Often the device does not work properly (Fleck, 2012) if the device is not fully charged or the Wi-Fi connectivity is not working efficiently. If all these factors are considered together, blended learning lessons will not work out to their full potential. The cost of implementing blended learning in the classroom is one of the biggest disadvantages. It needs money to use technology. Teachers need to look for funds to arrange devices and use technology in the classrooms. Whether writing a grant or seeing if

the specific device or technology is budget-friendly, another drawback to blended learning is on the teacher's side of things. In a blended learning classroom, teachers would have to change their mentality and let go of control (Fleck, 2012; Imbriale, 2013; Linton, 2018; Tucker, 2013). Letting go of control refers to switching the classroom from a teacher-led classroom to a student-centred classroom. This will create an opportunity for the students to do what they want to do and free up what the teacher wants their students to do (Linton, 2018). It leads the students to get control of their learning and make decisions on what to move on next, how quickly they are progressing, and sorting things out on their own. Another disadvantage from the teachers' side is that blended learning requires time. It is impossible to change the classroom dynamic completely overnight (Tucker, 2013; Tucker et al., 2017).

Moreover, less work tendency from the students can be counted as one of the disadvantages of blended learning. The students also need to cope with the change like teachers. All students will not be ready to self-regulate their learning instantly.

Methodology

The case study employs a qualitative research method. The focus is to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in the holistic development of EYFS students and discover the level of competence of the Early Years students in adapting and coping with the online platform in the Early Years Foundation Stage after the Covid -19 lockdown.

The researcher reached parents and teachers of Early Years Foundation Stage at DPS STS SCHOOL DHAKA to examine their perception of the impact of blended learning in a play-based curriculum. The questions were: How does the effectiveness of blended learning impact the holistic development of EYFS students?

How do students achieve a level of competence in the Early Years Foundation Stage by adapting and coping with the online platform after the Covid -19 lockdown?

The researcher has developed 15 questionnaires for parents and 11 questionnaires for teachers with the

approval of the School Management. The names of participants were not highlighted to maintain ethical issues.

Data collection methods involved

Out of all parents and teachers of the Early Years Foundation Stage at DPS STS School Dhaka, 103 parents were selected as they are the first group of parents to experience blended learning. Eighteen teachers were also selected across the department from Nursery, FS1 and FS2. The researcher has selected the population of both parents and teachers to obtain their feedback and acceptance of blended learning. The questions given will elicit parents' and teachers' opinions on the impact of the blended learning programme. In this research, data collection will be obtained through opportunity sampling from 103 parents and 18 teachers in the EYFS at DPS STS SCHOOL DHAKA.

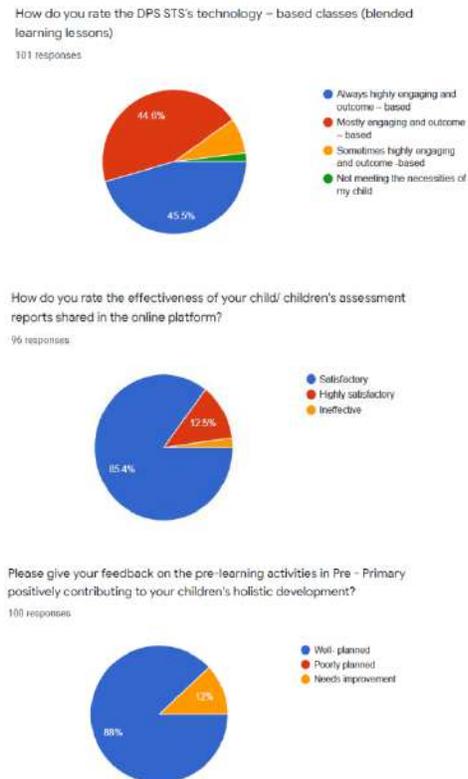
The EYFS parents and teachers were asked to answer questions generated via Google form. The survey was conducted over two weeks.

Key Findings

- The students enhanced their ICT skills by independently discovering innovative tools to help with their activities. The parents, too, were able to develop their ICT skills by listening to teachers' instructions and assisting their children using interactive tools.
- The new approach encouraged active learning by motivating students to develop independent learning skills based on their ability to grasp rapidly, available support and confidence.
- The plethora of knowledge provided in online learning provoked curiosity and allowed children to learn independently
- The students were provided with a flexible opportunity to learn as they could work at their own pace beyond school hours.
- Blended learning empowered children's confidence and aided in play exploration and critical thinking.
- Teachers have witnessed enriched usage of vocabulary and clear articulation of words during engagement sessions and classroom interactions.
- Parent attendance during parent conferences has largely increased in the virtual mode compared to on-campus attendance.
- Parents took more interest in their child's daily activities as the parent-teacher communication escalated.
- Blended learning prepares students for 21st-century education. Digital videos, recordings and e-books made lessons easy to learn.
- Provided innovative learning tools that underpinned the seven areas of learning in the EYFS
- Flipped blended learning enhanced comprehension and student engagement.
- The students share several videos on AMADS (Art, Music and Dances) lessons that have highlighted their competence in the lesson, thus enabling the teacher to assess them timely and efficiently.
- The blended platform helped students experience hands-on activities, enhance problem-solving skills and improve life skills.
- Online learning made the lessons fun and interactive by incorporating approaches such as gamified learning.
- On introducing blended learning, the students became technology savvy.
- Using the letters and phonics scheme, the students learned to segment and blended words faster with online learning materials.
- Maintaining and annotating students' videos and sharing them with parents boosted their confidence as they were able to receive prompt feedback on their child's performance
- Students' physical and mental health remained consistent during the Covid -19 lockdown. Posting videos on yoga exercises helped students to remain healthy.
- The teachers received positive feedback from parents on the online assessment reports.
- Blended learning helped children to develop holistically.
- The new learning approach helped students reflect on prior activities that built confidence in participating actively in the virtual class.
- The asynchronous lessons were accessible at any time.
- Blended learning helped build team spirit, work collaboratively and enhance socio-emotional skills.

- Assessing and recording students' performance in the blended platform was unchallenging.
- Teachers developed a variety of teaching strategies in the blended approach.
- Students were able to overcome shyness in the virtual class

Figure 1: Response to parent's survey questionnaire



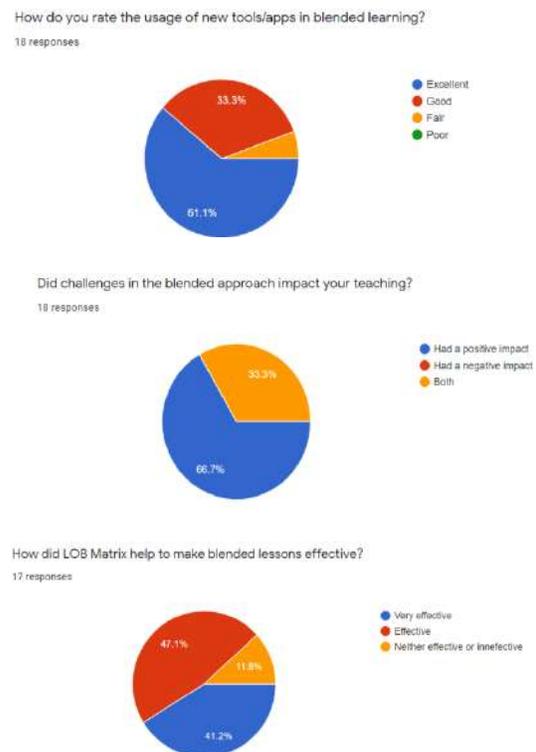
Conclusion

This research contributed to an in-depth knowledge of EYFS parents' and teachers' perceptions and experiences on blended learning. The data obtained by this study highlighted strong evidence, the positive impact of introducing blended learning to young students in the early phase of childhood. On the other hand, a few parents expressed concerns over the reliability of blended learning.

Concerning parents' and teachers' perceptions towards blended learning, the analysis of the questionnaire disclosed that most of the parents

- Teachers and students were able to use a variety of resources
- The LOB (Lesson observation matrix) increased teacher performance in the blended teaching mode.

Figure 2: Response to teachers' survey questionnaire



and teachers found online instruction more effective. This could be described by parents' and teachers' positive feedback on the blended approach to learning. For EYFS parents and teachers having had only a traditional face – to face teaching and learning experience in convention school, it has been a great opportunity for them to witness a plethora of teaching and learning material in the blended model. For better results, a new model of teaching and learning should have been experimented with when physical school reopens for Early Years students. The following recommendations need to be noted cautiously.

Recommendation

The classroom

It is vital to have an effective association among the parents, teachers, and students in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Though blended learning encourages the students to choose their ways and learn independently, it is essential for EYFS that teachers and parents provide constant support and encouragement to the young learners. Otherwise, low work tendency will be the major challenge for blended learning in EYFS. The young learners can use technology in the blended learning classroom, but at the same time, the students should be informed about their learning goals and objectives by the teachers. Sometimes, the students can contribute to setting the learning goals.

Moreover, this will help the teachers measure the learning opportunities and learning outcomes. In addition, parents' involvement and thoughts can have a huge impact on blended teaching and learning. Besides, by sharing the teaching-learning materials and plans with the parents, parents can increase their involvement in their learning and provide adequate support to the teachers and students.

The School

In terms of making relationships work among teachers, students, and parents, encouraging a culture in the school is needed. Adopting new changes, working extra time, adjusting to new aspects of blended teaching were the few challenges for the teachers. Not all teachers are willing to experiment with new approaches such as blended teaching. However, support from the colleagues like sharing ideas and experiences and the professional development courses arranged by the schools can boost up the confidence of the teachers to accept the new challenges. Moreover, the school needs to ensure that the teachers and students access adequate resources online and in a physical school. Furthermore, opportunities for out-of-school professional development, affordable and user-friendly tools, financial support, and visionary policies contribute to teachers' capacity-

building and the growth of blended learning in the school.

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