

Emerging stronger: policy directions for COVID-19 and beyond for public schools in the Maldives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore educational policy directions in the Maldives to continue learning in public schools during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and identify policy changes that could improve the preparedness of the schools for future pandemics.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study is descriptive in nature with an analytical methodology of document and interview data analysis. The purposively selected participants for the interviews included senior officials of the Ministry of Education, school leaders and teachers of public schools in the Maldives.

Findings – This study identified significant policy changes for public schools in the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were early response and timely policy directions to continue education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another finding was the effective change communication of the educational policies for its implementation. Following the policy changes, the teachers were trained for online teaching, hence increasing their competency in information and communications technology. As a result, this led to resilient teachers who were determined to provide education through the challenging times of the pandemic. Hence, it is evident that the school system of the Maldives will emerge stronger beyond COVID-19.

Originality/value – The education policy changes for public schools in the Maldives during the global COVID-19 pandemic have merits for education practices beyond the pandemic.

Keywords Education, Public schools, COVID-19, Policy directions, Maldives

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic brought schools in the Maldives to an abrupt halt. With the identification of the first few positive cases in the country, the Ministry of Education (MoE) enforced closure of all schools on March 7, 2020 (MoE, 2020d). As the Maldives is an archipelago of 1,190 islands, it has challenges in providing resources and facilities for education. Hence, learning continuity requires a well-formulated response plan for uniformity in continuing education. This study explored changes in educational policies in public schools in the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic and analyzed which of the policy changes can benefit the schools beyond the pandemic.

Several timely and comprehensive guidelines on education policy responses for the COVID-19 pandemic and the re-opening of schools were developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO), and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman, 2020). The Maldives Education Response



Plan for COVID-19 was developed in May 2020 by the MoE. However, even before that, in March 2020, the MoE issued Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/28 to ensure education continuity during the state of public health emergency, which served as an interim contingency plan. Following the issuance of this circular, the MoE outlined the education procedure for continued learning during the lockdown in Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/35, and published the policy for extracurricular activities and cocurricular activities during the new normal in Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/63. Furthermore, the health measures and learning arrangements for the reopening of schools were described in Circulars 22-E/CIR/2020/36 (making preparations to reopen schools), 22-E/CIR/2020/37 (learning arrangements for the reopening of schools), 22-E/CIR/2020/38 [standard operating policy (SOP) on the use of face masks in schools], 22-E/CIR/2020/39 (school cleaning and disinfecting policy) and 22-E/CIR/2020/64 (guidelines for school reopening in the second term). On July 01, 2020, schools reopened for all grades, except pre-school, in islands without COVID-19 transmission, and only for students in Grade 9 and above in Malé city and other islands with active COVID-19 cases. Although these measures were implemented, some schools were reopened and closed again as positive cases were reported. Currently, schools are operating following the new normal educational policy guidelines.

Investigating the policy directions taken during such challenging times can help the education sector to identify its success stories and identify gaps that can be filled for sustainable education. Additionally, the leadership approaches to responding to the pandemic and efficiently implementing and managing several changes at once are an interesting area for research. Thus, investigating the rapid changes in directions and their implementation and management during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic can contribute greatly to the education sector of the Maldives and to policymakers globally. Furthermore, the policies addressing the change that are suitable for the unique geography of the island nation of the Maldives, and the experiences of the stakeholders can become useful for other island nations also experiencing the pandemic.

Literature review

The education system of the Maldives

The MoE is the government body responsible for the provision of education in the Maldives. The first government school was opened in the capital island, Malé, in 1927 solely for the education of boys, and a school for educating girls and young women was opened in 1944. Instruction at these schools focused on subjects such as *Dhivehi* (the local language), Islam, Arabic and arithmetic (MoE, 2008). Since then, education has developed, and formal schooling has been extended from Malé to all other inhabited islands in the Maldives. The country's National Institute of Education (NIE) facilitates lifelong learning through collaborative research, innovation and educational empowerment (NIE, 2019). Its mandate includes developing, revising, improving and implementing pre-school, primary, secondary and higher-secondary national curricula, in addition to designing, creating and implementing training and professional development programs for schools. It has developed the National Curriculum Framework, which reflects contemporary skills for students, and is the most important policy outlined to support and facilitate quality education for the Maldives (NIE, 2019).

Today, Maldivian schools are coeducational schools. Some schools provide Grades 1–10 education, and some schools, up to Grade 12. Some private schools and colleges offer advanced-level (A-level) studies with other higher-education modules.

The medium of instruction for all school subjects is the English language, except for religious studies (Islam) and local language and literature studies (*Dhivehi*), which are taught in the mother tongue. The national curriculum is inclined to prepare students for international

exams such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) after completion of the tenth grade and the Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Levels Examinations (A level) by the end of the 12th grade. In the Maldives, primary and secondary schooling now go together, unlike several years ago.

Impact of COVID-19 on education in public schools in the Maldives

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the Maldives. The Maldives has a population of around 540,000 people (World Bank, 2021). According to the WHO, from January 3, 2020 to October 22, 2021, the country had 86,550 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (WHO, 2021). The number of COVID-19 deaths reported to WHO is 240. A total of 745,288 vaccine doses were administered as of October 22, 2021 (WHO, 2021).

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of all schools in the country. It was feared that prolonged school closure could impact students in terms of loss of confidence and self-esteem (David, Pellini, Jordan & Phillips, 2020), a drop in well-being and disengagement from learning, with increased risks for vulnerable children and children with special needs (MoE, 2020d).

Globally, many schools adapted to the situation by shifting to online learning (Ng, 2021; Osman, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In the Maldives, online learning was the most convenient way to prevent learning loss. As 74,806 students [36,271 girls (48.5%) and 38,535 boys (51.5%)] (MoE, 2020d) were enrolled in public schools, education programs to prevent learning loss were first telecasted before online learning began. However, the schools were unprepared for the shift to digital and distance learning (UNESCO, 2020).

Health and safety during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

The health measures, awareness strategies and health and safety guidelines during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in the Maldives are specified by the country's Health Protection Agency (HPA). During the initial lockdown, doctors shared health information from the WHO with the public daily through live-telecast press conferences. To reach out to the entire society, these press conferences also had a sign language interpreter, and the information was shared via media in other languages to reach out to the foreign labor force. To allow schools to reopen under the new normal, the general safety measures prescribed by the WHO were communicated via mass media and phone messages. Such measures were thoroughly washing one's hands with soap and water; sanitizing one's hands with 70% alcohol; avoiding touching one's eyes, nose and mouth; covering one's mouth and nose with the elbow bent when sneezing; keeping one's distance; and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces (WHO, 2020).

Psychosocial support

Concerns have been raised about the mental health and well-being of school children not only due to the disruption of their school routine but also due to the restrictions on their movements during the lockdown. They have lost access to play, physical contact and socialization, which are critical to their development and psychosocial well-being and could lead to anxiety and frustration, and their prolonged confinement indoors could overexpose them to mass media and social media (UNICEF, 2020). In April 2020, the MoE's Educational Supervision and Quality Improvement Division (ESQID) Division, which identifies and monitors vulnerable children and children at risk in the Maldives, identified 75 children in the high-risk category and started reaching out to them despite their lack of counselors to provide psychosocial support during the lockdown (MoE, 2020d). However, countries were guided by organizations such as UNICEF, which published the manual "Psychosocial Support for Children during COVID-19" that outlined activities for parents and caregivers.

Change communication

According to [Frahm and Brown \(2007\)](#), stakeholders' receptivity to changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic can be highly influenced by change communication. Indeed, in the Maldives, amidst the uncertainty among the school stakeholders due to the pandemic, communication was the key to successfully managing the entire education sector. [Goodman, Holihan and Willis \(1996\)](#) found that effective communication of change to schools or individuals in the school enables them to understand the cycle of change at various levels. The cycle of change communication can be reflected with the four Cs of change implementation: communication, committee, collaboration and consensus ([Sheninger, 2017](#)). "Top-down" communication developed by senior staff and shared with middle managers, who were then asked to share the message with their staff, is the most frequently used change communication approach in the public sector ([Graaf, Hengeveld-Bidmon, Carnochan, Salomone & Austin, 2019](#)). This approach is frequently used in centralized education systems such as in the Maldives, where policy directions are formulated and decided by the MoE policymakers and shared with school principals, who are then asked to share them with teachers. Although the top-down approach is the most commonly used approach to communication, responsibility for communication has become a two-way process and has spread out across organizations ([Barrett, 2002](#)). Therefore, frequent and transparent internal communication can be exceptionally helpful in managing organizations (schools) during the pandemic and can encourage staff members to cope with the necessary policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Li, Sun, Tao & Lee, 2021](#)).

Continuity of education in the new normal

It has been said that after the pandemic, the world can no longer return to normal ([Sneader and Singhal, 2020](#); [UNESCO, 2020](#)). Thus, the term "new normal" has become a global buzzword. In the education sector, the school closures due to COVID-19 have posed many challenges, including to education continuity, that have created the pressure to rethink and reimagine education for and beyond COVID-19. This process has made education goals significantly better ([Fullan, 2020](#)) than before the pandemic. One concern that will have to be addressed in the long term are the negative impacts of the pandemic on students, especially vulnerable students. Around 40 million young children worldwide missed out on a stimulating environment during their early childhood education ([UN, 2020](#)). In addition, in the Maldives, the pandemic has added to the category of vulnerable children [which includes children from low-income and disadvantaged families; children who spend more time on the street due to volatile home issues such as abuse, domestic violence and substance abuse; and children facing harm and neglect ([MoE, 2020](#))] children without access to the internet, devices and skills for online learning ([UN, 2020](#)), and students who require psychosocial support. Although anxiety and stress rose for all groups of learners during the pandemic ([Fullan, 2020](#)), students with mental health issues such as suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression and who have been highly dependent on their school counsellors ([MoE, 2020d](#)) for psychiatric support (in the absence of such service in many islands in the Maldives) were thus unable to access such support during the lockdown and school closures.

Assessment of policy changes

In the online learning phase, efforts have still been made to monitor students' progress. In the USA, however, concerns about formal assessments have been raised, and petitions to waive them during the pandemic were made. However, it was decided that annual assessments would not be waived, and instead, the state must create a responsive plan to adapt to the new reality by scaling back assessments rather than eliminating them ([Jimenez, 2020](#)). Similarly, in the new normal education policy of the Maldives, it is specified that regardless of the

modality of the content, students' achievement of the learning outcomes stipulated in the national curriculum should be measured (MoE, 2020a). The policy states that in the foundation stage, formative assessments will be conducted in Key Stages 1 and 2, and both formative and summative assessments should be conducted in Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 (MoE, 2020a).

Extracurricular activities in the new normal

The policy for extracurricular activities in the new normal (22-E/CIR/2020/63) allows specific activities to be conducted based on the health status in the island. The specified activities are morning exercises, school sports, sports practices with support from a third party and activities conducted by national organizations with the consent of the parents (MoE, 2020b). The intellectual and social activities stated in the policy in accordance with the HPA guidelines are Quran activities, uniform activities, art and design, literary activities and school club activities (MoE, 2020b). Extracurricular activities during the pandemic can have many benefits. For example, they can provide students opportunities to excel in areas other than academics for well-rounded development, can boost their confidence and socialization skills and can help lessen their anxiety (Snoke, 2021).

Digital education

Changes in education are inevitable in a globalized world. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatic changes occurred suddenly and unexpectedly. In the Maldives, as already mentioned, the initial lockdown opened a window of opportunity for policymakers and educators to rethink education. The geographic dispersion and the inequality of resources in terms of technological devices and access to the internet are the main concerns in the shift to online and remote teaching. Such vulnerabilities were also addressed by UNESCO (2020), specifically the accentuation of inequality, risks from the privatization of education and unpreparedness for a massive shift to distance and digital learning. Furthermore, the disparate internet and mobile network access in low-income countries will lead to the exclusion of large groups of disadvantaged learners (David *et al.*, 2020). To address this digital divide, the MoE implemented a dual mode of continuing education that began with lessons aired on television nationwide through a program locally named "Telikilaas," followed by online teaching (MoE, 2020d). A blended approach can help students to develop their capacity for independent learning, unlike when classroom teaching is merely replicated in a virtual medium (Ng, 2021). The blended and collaborative work of the teachers is building a resilient workforce that is proving to be effective for education continuity. This has highlighted that a more powerful way of using technology is not merely as a system of delivery but a vehicle of collaboration, discovery, understanding and action (Fullan, 2020). However, using online tools should not be a second-rate replacement for the traditional method of teaching face to face, but should instead ensure that students will learn better (Ng, 2021). Furthermore, a handbook for parents on cybersafety was launched on the first week of the online sessions to create a safe environment for online learning (MoE, 2020d).

Methodology

This qualitative study is descriptive in nature and uses the analytical methodology of document and interview data analysis. The qualitative approach was chosen for its inductive design that would generate meaningful and product-rich, descriptive data (Leavy, 2016). To capture the participants' unique perspectives and experiences, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted, as interviews are a good means of obtaining firsthand, first-person accounts of the participants (McQuerry, 2017).

Participants

The purposively selected interviewees comprised five MoE education planners and five principals and ten teachers of public schools in the Maldives. The education planners were senior-level staff who had more than six years of experience in developing the national curriculum and training in-service teachers for educational changes. Additionally, the education planners worked tirelessly during the pandemic to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) with school heads (principals) to develop the Emergency Response Plan and policy changes for continuing education during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This study selectively included participants who were actively involved in the planning of policies during the pandemic, school leaders who communicated and implemented changes in public schools in COVID-19-affected islands and teachers of those schools. The school leaders (principals) were selected based on the following criteria: leader of a public school in an island where COVID-19 cases had been found and leader of a school that had been closed. The teachers, who had to be teaching in both the primary and secondary grades, were also selected from the same public schools from where the school leaders were selected, following the same criteria as those for the leaders.

Data sources

The documents collected as primary data sources were MoE circulars and policy documents on maintaining health hygiene and HPA preventative measures for continuing education throughout the pandemic as well as guidelines for school reopening when the pandemic eases. The secondary data sources were the transcripts of the focus group interviews.

Data analysis

The documents and interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following the framework of [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), which is based on three main questions: (1) What were the educational changes for post-COVID-19?; (2) How will schools have a safe environment for learning in the new normal?; and (3) How were teachers prepared and supported for digital technology use for online teaching and assessments? The emergent themes are presented below.

Findings

The emergent themes from the data analysis in this study are early response and timely policy directions, effective change communication, increased competency in information and communications technology (ICT), resilient teachers and emerging stronger beyond COVID-19.

Early response and timely policy directions

From the policies, it was evident that several early measures were taken to ensure the safety of the school environment. Even before the first local COVID-19 case was identified in the country, the MoE had released two main circulars that instructed schools to be vigilant and to ensure that safety measures were being taken. In particular, Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/16 recommended precautionary measures such as teaching students handwashing and installing handwashing facilities, and Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/20 ordered the cessation of all activities in the school academic calendar.

With the initial lockdown, several policies were created to continue education in the Maldives. The first documented plan that was formulated through close discussions between the HPA and the MoE in May 2020 was the Emergency Response Plan. Another main policy that navigated the continuity of education was the Learning Arrangement to Reopen Schools

(2020). From the documents that were developed to continue education during the pandemic, on March 16, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/28 on ensuring education continuity during the state of public health emergency to all public schools, and on May 14, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/35 that gave detailed instructions on the arrangements for teaching and learning during the lockdown period and instructed the schools to continue teaching during the lockdown. These policies led to the development of guidelines for the new learning environment, safe schools, alternative assessments and conduct of extracurricular activities.

The new learning environment

The participants of this study were aware of the policies pertaining to teaching and learning. When questioned about the policies, the three groups of participants – the teacher group, the school principal group and the education managers group – were able to describe the main principles. It was found that the teachers were made aware of the changes before the changes were implemented. Although some were not directly engaged with the circular outlining the changes, the school leaders had effectively communicated the changes to them. Here are some quotes from the teachers.

We teachers are aware of the new normal policy.

There were several changes to teaching and learning policies, including the new normal policy.

I am a teacher. I have not read the policy; our leader just shared the information with us.

We [had] changes [in] time allocations, periods, and timetables according to the new normal policy.

The teachers were informed of the changes by their school leaders and of the policies by their school management, and were instructed to follow the guidelines with the support of the school management and the MoE. As the school principals were directly involved in the policy development process through several meetings with the MoE, they explained the changes to continuing education. Some of the changes included a change in the curriculum content. Due to the pandemic, the NIE condensed the curriculum. Additionally, due to the health and safety risks, the session timings were adjusted, and the HPA guidelines were followed. Here are some quotes from the principals.

The curriculum was condensed; [its] core parts were [already] taught in [2020], [and as it had] overlaps, [the] NIE selected [which] portions [will still] be taught.

The session times were adjusted two or three times based on the [COVID-19 situation]. For example, a single session [became] a double session. We required social [distancing for classes with] 15 to 18 students [whereas] before, [each of our classes had] 25 to 30 students.

The education planners, who had several FGDs with the school principals and teachers before they developed the new policies, described how meticulously the details were considered. For example, the contact hours and session timings for the functioning of the schools were calculated to develop feasible and practical policies. One planner said: “There are several policies. The main policies with guidelines were on keeping schools safe, cleaning schools, receiving students and timings, and managing the learning.” Another planner said:

We calculated the number of hours of online contact, the number of episodes of *Telikilaas*, the number of days of compulsory attendance of physical classes, and how the students’ attendance for the sessions will be maintained. For physical class arrangements, measures were taken to have social distance and have 14 to 15 students accommodated per class. Also, class markings were made on the floor to indicate [the] teacher area and student areas and how far apart they can sit.

However, after the vaccinations, some of the guidelines ceased with the changes in the status of the pandemic in the Maldives.

Safe schools

Several documents were released in a timely manner to address the need for health and hygiene procedures for schools guided by the HPA protocols. This study found five main circulars that were integral in establishing and sustaining a safe learning environment. On March 16, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/27 to all the schools, tuition and subject classes, and island/atoll/city councils, which gave the advice to not send children to tuition and Quran classes to minimize their exposure to crowded places and social gatherings. This circular was followed by the MoE Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/36 released on June 9, 2020 that informed the schools to prepare for their reopening following the HPA's approval. The circular highlighted clear guidelines for safe school operations. In addition, on June 16, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/38 to all the schools with a detailed SOP on using face masks in schools to ensure the health safety of students and staff. This made it mandatory for everyone to wear a face mask when in the school compound. On June 27, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/39 on the School Cleaning and Disinfecting Policy. On December 27, 2020, the Cybersecurity Policy was introduced in Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/72 to ensure safety while using digital platforms for teaching and learning in the schools.

The MoE, the school management and teachers, the parents and the island community ensured that the schools were safe places where COVID-19 would not spread. The teachers stated some of the changes made in the normal school setting to follow the HPA guidelines.

Our school ensured [that the] HPA guidelines were met. For example, for each class, 15 students were allowed at a time. For the new normal, we had two sessions in the school. Before, it was a single-session school.

We followed [the] HPA guidelines for parents, students, and teachers. We strictly adhered to the HPA policy in our school.

We follow the safety guidelines provided to us. For example, during the new normal, the cleanliness procedure, social distancing, and hygiene to be maintained. When entering the school, we check [the] temperature of [the] students.

To this day, the schools in the Maldives follow the health and safety measures to prevent and stop the spread of COVID-19. All the students and staff have their temperature checked at the school entrance. Classes are smaller to ensure physical distancing, so instead of single sessions, double sessions are held. Masks are worn at all times, and handwashing stations are installed in schools. These changes are those emphasized by the MoE for continuity of education. The school principals also highlighted these practices.

Now, in most of the schools, it is very different from what it was at the beginning of the pandemic. Currently, this island is under monitoring, so we are following the guidelines. We are bringing Key Stage 4 students to school, and other students are at home.

We had to divide the classes into two at the beginning as we had to maintain social distancing. Later, we can accommodate all students. Usually, we have 20 students, but [in] the beginning, we had 2 groups for each class.

For these changes to be implemented, information sharing was integral. For any change to be successful, the stakeholders had to be informed of it and why it was necessary. Hence, the school principals conducted awareness and information sessions to brief the staff and parents about the safety and hygiene protocols, as described by the education planners below:

We had a meeting with ESQID and HPA and followed health and safety guidelines and duplicated their guidelines in [the] school context. We discussed with school principals and made the policy very quickly because of the situation, and verbally also, they were guided and then [the policy was] disseminated.

HPA guidelines and cleaning and hygiene guidelines were included in the new normal policy. Trainings were conducted online on even how to clean, how to add chemicals, and how long to clean; all [the] details were given in the policy and the staff were trained to do [them].

All school principals conducted an information session for parents to brief them about the procedures.

To continue education during and beyond the pandemic, the priority was to maintain the schools as safe learning environments. As found in this study, all the schools were following the safety and hygiene guidelines that were duplicated in the new normal policy. Furthermore, the guidelines were communicated via awareness sessions that prepared the stakeholders for the changes. The school leaders also shared that learning continued because the island communities accepted the changes and collaboratively worked with the schools.

Alternative assessments

One of the main concerns of the educators and parents was how the students would be assessed. With the learning loss during the school closure and the subsequent learning through telecast programs followed by online classes, student assessments were also determined by an assessment policy and guidelines by the MoE. On September 6, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/43 to all schools together with the new Assessment Policy During COVID-19. Following this policy, some changes were made in how assessments were conducted according to key stages. Later, on May 18, 2021, the MoE issued Circular 22-E/CIR/2021/15 on the final exams for the academic year 2020–2021. The teachers described the changes to the school assessments as follows:

Changes to [the] syllabus [were made], we cut out some [parts of the] syllabus in Key Stage 1, we had Google Meet oral assessments, and sometimes, we assessed through online discussions.

We minimized assessment marks for online assessments. We did not provide full papers to students. So, 50 marks papers were made for assessments as an adjustment during the pandemic.

All instructions for assessments were communicated by the leading teachers to the teachers. We used Google Forms to conduct assessments.

The use of technology in conducting assessments was evident. As students were learning via online classes, the teachers' use of technology, namely, G-Suite, to conduct oral and written assessments was impressive. Some assessments included student presentations in real time, at times synchronous and at other times, asynchronous. While teachers were adapting to alternative ways of assessment, changes were also made in how students with Special Education Needs (SEN) were assessed.

We selected curriculum goals but had difficulty [assessing] online. Students had better work completion but with parents' help for assessments. Hence, [we] cannot measure actual progress. We did oral online and live video discussions, which were considered assessments.

However, the online assessment methods posed several challenges for the teachers. One of the main concerns of the teachers was the interference of parents while the online assessment was happening. Parents were contributing to their children's work and providing some answers instead of letting the child attempt to answer at his or her pace. The teachers concluded that due to such difficulties, they prefer face-to-face assessments for students who had educational needs.

Face-to-face assessments [are] more effective for SEN students. In online assessments, sometimes, they refuse to attend the session and [are] absent, and parents also give excuses. But if face-to-face, when students come, we can continue and manage the student.

Parental involvement in online assessments is frequent. We cannot actually measure the student's progress.

We couldn't measure senior-grade students' actual level of progress. For example, [since] they [a]re very tech-savvy, they [a]re able to find answers online, [so we] couldn't measure their actual progress.

The concerns of the teachers were about how the students' assessments might not have actually represented the academic progress of the students due to factors such as the parents' interference and involvement in their children's online assessments. As technology was used for the assessments, it was easy for the parents to submit the work themselves that might not have been the actual work of the student. The concern about this was also evident in the school principals' interviews, such as the following:

In [the] primary grades, [the assessments were] in oral form and [we also gave] work for home—the [students] completed [the] work at home and uploaded [it] on Google Forms with the help of their parents. That's why in terms of validity and reliability, [the assessments are] questionable. In [the] upper grades, we assessed [students] by using Google Forms. We [gave multiple-choice] quizzes and even project work [that the students] completed and submitted online.

Although the online assessments might not have represented the actual progress of the students, it was still noteworthy that the students were taught and assessed during the challenging times of the pandemic. Much thought was given to the development of the assessments and the preparation of the teachers to conduct the assessments. The education planners described how teachers were prepared for the online assessments. The teachers were provided training on how different Google Suite tools can be used for assessments:

The teachers had the policy, and we gave a training for all schools on changes made to the policy. When the policy was circulated, the teachers took the responsibility. The teachers came up with ideas like students record[ing their] action and upload[ing it] on the portal, and [the] teachers assessed these videos. They used tools like Kahoot, and all [the] teachers were trained to use Google tools for assessments.

Another education planner said:

The changes in the assessment policy were very much [discussed with different stakeholders]. We had meetings with different levels of stakeholders: teachers, principals, parents, and [the] NIE. We explored changes and took suggestions, and we made broader guidelines and [gave schools] autonomy. One of the most [discussed] policies was the assessment policy.

It was evident that the assessment policy changes were made with careful planning after the most suitable avenues for all the schools were explored based on the challenges of the Maldives as a geographically dispersed country. As online assessments seemed most appropriate at the time and in the particular situation, the teachers were trained and prepared to use online tools such as Google Forms.

Conducting extracurricular activities

Apart from teaching and learning activities, the schools also tried to conduct extracurricular activities. On March 1, 2020, the MoE instructed all schools and sports associations to cease all activities for students and parents from that day until May 20, 2020. Such activities included field trips, sports tournaments and practices, community work or volunteer activities, uniform activities outside the school, overnight camps, school fairs and concerts, and all other activities scheduled in the months of March, April and May in the school activity calendar for 2020. Furthermore, on December 10, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/63 together with the policy on conducting extracurricular and cocurricular activities in the new normal.

The teachers explained how they managed to carry on with the extracurricular activities in their schools.

One teacher said: “We were informed of the circular and guidelines for extracurricular activities. Accordingly, we [allowed only the] students [involved in those] activit[ies] to enter the] school. However, when COVID-19 spread further, we were not given approval to conduct activities face to face so we opted for online.”

Another teacher said:

We had a calendar for face-to-face [activities] as there were no COVID-19 cases in this island, but last year, we conducted activities online. We held *Dhivehi* clubs, dramas, and other activities. The students did some activities online in real time, [and] some activities were recorded at home and uploaded. [A] panel assessed [them] and [awarded] winners.

Even though schools in islands that did not have a reported COVID-19 case were able to hold classes and extracurricular activities normally, the high number of cases in the capital city of Malé prevented physical activities. A principal shared:

In Malé schools, some literary activities were held, such as English Week, Dhivehi Week, and competitions. Students submitted online forms. Some uniform bodies and enrolment ceremonies were also held online.

The principals further disclosed that extracurricular activities were conducted depending on the COVID-19 situation. If any island reported a case of COVID-19, the island was put into the monitoring phase and subjected to several safety measures. Hence, at certain times, extracurricular activities were conducted, and if the situation changed, the activities were called off. One principal said:

We [did] not conduct any activities [in] 2020, but after that, as the condition [improved], we [started] conduct[ing face-to-face] events this year. Now, 90% [of] people [have been] vaccinated in this island, [including] 100% of students 12 years [old] and above. So we can conduct activities normally, but now that this island is under monitoring, we are conducting only academic activities.

Another principal said:

We have stopped [our] previous extracurricular activities. Once students above 12 years old are given vaccines, we can go back to our normal policy. The policy we will follow [is that which] the MoE had shared. We may [also] have to follow [the council] and HPA. If the island is under monitoring, we cannot have any activities.

It was challenging for the schools to conduct the activities, as some activities, such as sports activities, could not be held online and required the physical presence of the students. Yet, the principals explained how they were able to conduct some extracurricular activities online, such as the celebration of Children’s Day and literary activities.

In the islands, until recently, they had the opportunity to conduct activities. But in Malé, with a full lockdown, we were not able to bring the students to the school. But what we have done is we have actually conducted almost all activities online. For example, to celebrate Children’s Day, students prepared certain messages with guidance from their school, and they took photos and sent them to us and we created videos. For the activity, all the students got online. We conducted Quran competitions and literary activities; some uniform body activities were also done.

What stood out from the principals’ experiences were the creative ways that were used to conduct the activities, regardless of a lockdown. Hence, it is evident that throughout the pandemic, students were never left idle. Learning and activities were continued by a resilient workforce. The experiences shared by the education planners were similar, denoting that all the stakeholders followed the guidelines, and hence, all schools were progressing depending on the degree of the spread of the pandemic in their area.

One education planner said: “[In] the beginning, most of the extracurricular activities were not conducted to prevent the spread of [the] virus. But [the] Physical Education period was conducted with safety measures. Now, the [schools] can conduct all extracurricular activities following [the] HPA guidelines.”

Another education planner said:

The teachers were very creative. They got students to create things at home and share [those] online. Even scout meetings and girl guide events were held online. Sometimes, students wore their uniform and had video activities in real time. In islands with no COVID-19 cases, they were able to do [these activities] outside; but in Malé, [they were all done] at home.

It is evident from the excerpts that the teachers and school principals were flexible in adjusting to whichever situation they were facing with regard to COVID-19. They continued to conduct their pre-COVID-19 planned activities to the best of their ability by being innovative and by using technology. One of the more interesting findings of this study is how the restrictions were lifted with the COVID-19 vaccinations to allow more holistic learning to occur. This was found to be a relief for the island communities, and students were excited and looking forward to going back to school.

Effective change communication

This study found that the changes made at the policy level were communicated to the school leaders and staff very effectively. While the MoE had several consultations with the stakeholders, the school leaders were given autonomy after the release of the changes via circulars. The teachers were not directly involved at the policy level, and most of the changes were communicated to them by their school leaders. Thus, from the beginning, it was evident that a hierarchy of change communication was followed. Following are some quotes from teachers:

We were not given the documents or policies, but we had several meetings with the school management to be informed.

Every week, we had SMT [Senior Management Team] and grade coordination [meetings], so all the information following the circular were shared with us. We had to change the classroom timetables several times, as changes were frequent with the changing status of infections.

The teachers described how the change was communicated to them through several meetings. These meetings were held online in islands with COVID-19 cases, and face to face for islands that did not have reported cases. The school principals were the change managers and shared how change was communicated to them.

Compared to earlier, this time, the policies were developed with lots of discussion via Google Meet and Zoom. Actually, [the] Ministry [holds] lots of meetings online with large groups. Sometimes, they use three or four rooms [when] meeting with all the principals throughout the country.

Another principal said:

Based on my experiences, whatever policy change is brought [about] by the government, a significant role is played by the school leader, the principal. If the principal is a very pessimistic person, the teachers may take it negatively; but if the principal or manager is an optimistic person, they take it very positively.

As the school leaders are very experienced and aware of leadership techniques, they were able to communicate the changes positively, which led to the successful implementation of the policies. Nevertheless, the way that the MoE education planners gave power and authority to the principals contributed to the successful implementation of the policy changes.

One education planner said: “To communicate the changes, we conducted several meetings with Ministry staff and the principals; and later, [our Policy] section disseminated the policy via email.”

Another education planner said: “We arranged a way forward to continue learning, but we didn’t dictate what they [school principals] must do; we gave them autonomy. The principals then decide. We ensure that teaching and learning continue.”

With the principals kept in the loop of discussions for all the quick changes and given autonomy in how to implement the changes, it is evident that the school principals knew how to structure the changes to suit their communities. Furthermore, the change communication with the stakeholders contributed to the continuity of learning.

Increased information and communications technology competency

One of the interesting findings of this study was how the teachers were prepared to adapt to remote teaching and become competent to use technology for teaching and learning during the pandemic. On April 1, 2020, the MoE sent Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/30 on G-Suite Training for teachers and school heads. All teachers were instructed to complete the Google Certified Educator Level 1 training. In the first round of the training, the MoE aimed to train 2,000 teachers and to provide technical support through a technical team. The purpose was for the MoE to train the teachers to prepare them for the distance learning mode. This training covered the theory and delivery of content, and the creation, editing and posting of content on various media outlets.

The teachers underwent several trainings to familiarize them with the platforms and tools that can be used for distance education, such as Google Suite applications. The NIE conducted these trainings and ensured that all teachers in the public schools had the competence to use technology for online teaching. The study found that these trainings contributed greatly to enhancing the capacity of the teachers and preparing a skilled workforce for online learning.

A school principal said: “[The] NIE [held training] sessions separately for school groups, including [on] tools and techniques, Google Classroom, and Google Sheets. [T]he school management also arranged sessions to prepare [the] teachers.”

Another said: “[Our school’s] senior management gave instructions on online teaching. Teachers completed the Google training and [were] prepared to teach online when online classes were implemented.”

The school principals described how the process of training teachers took place. One principal said the trainers initially aimed to train the teachers to reach Certificate Level 1. The trained teachers then conducted trainings for other teachers and hence, exceeded the targeted level.

[In] the beginning, there were very few people who were familiar with Google Classroom. So, MoE divided the schools into groups and assigned a specific person as trainer of that particular group. So, all the teachers in the Maldives were trained back-to-back so [that] in each school, there were so many trainers. Those who learned started training other staff. Within [a] few months, some schools had achieved 100% Certificate Level 1 [training of teachers,] and in some schools, a lot of staff completed Level 2, and even [the] Trainer level.

The training of all the teachers gave them confidence in using technology in teaching and is thus a milestone reached. Before the pandemic, the MoE had envisioned the training of teachers to use technology in teaching by 2024, but the pandemic forced such training earlier on the sector. Amazingly, within the year, the MoE’s expected outcomes were met. It is noted that this was made possible by the teachers who were motivated and determined to reach the certificate levels.

An education planner explained:

I am very proud of our teachers. Overnight, our teachers showed so much courage to train themselves. There is no teacher in the education system who cannot deliver an online class now;

100% of teachers can deliver online lessons. [The] NIE should not take the credit [for] this; we facilitated [the training,] but it was the teachers' courage [and] motivation, and [the] compulsion and pressure from [the] parents to increase the quality of the lessons, [that made this happen.] Of course, there [is] still room for improvement.

Another education planner said: "Teacher training for minimum requirements with rigorous trainings were provided, [but the teachers took] a lot of online sessions and training themselves and certifi[ed] themselves for Google Classroom."

A third education planner stated:

Actually, nobody was ready for this situation. Online teaching is nobody's piece of cake; but with the training, the teachers made very good progress, and I have witnessed as a parent how much they work for a lesson. Actually, we pressure the principal, and we provide support from [the] NIE and other parties also.

With the rigorous trainings provided by the MoE and NIE and the support of the school management, the fact that all the teachers, regardless of their subject expertise or teaching grade level, achieved competence in the use of ICT and new online platforms is a remarkable achievement. Especially in a small island nation such as the Maldives with geographic challenges and limitations in internet access, having all teachers trained during a pandemic is praiseworthy. This is a remarkable finding that the great digital divide became minimized as teachers and policymakers were connected and able to discuss, train and implement learning activities and assessments regardless of the Maldives' geographical separation by sea and the restricted transport during the pandemic.

Resilient teachers

Another remarkable phenomenon observed during this study is the resilience of the teachers in continuing teaching during the pandemic. One of the most interesting strategies used by the MoE was the *Telikilaas*, wherein the lessons were recorded by teachers and telecast following a schedule. At the time of the initial lockdown, many students in the islands did not have access to devices or the internet. As plans were made with the service providers in dialogues to provide data packages, the MoE utilized this time to create and locally telecast lessons, as every household has television.

One teacher said: "I think face-to-face [classes] motivat[e] students [more because the] teacher is [physically] present. In *Telikilaas*, students are mostly alone in front of a TV and lose concentration and get easily distracted."

At the beginning, students were interested in *Telikilaas*; but once online classes started, very few students were in *Telikilaas*.

Telikilaas was the initial step to continuity of education in the Maldives, and a lot of hard work of teachers went into creating the telecast lessons. Teachers from different schools collaborated to create content and edit and present it on TV. As it was during a pandemic, the collaboration occurred online and led to the breaking of the invisible boundaries between different island schools. Furthermore, teachers in the same content area worked together, thus bringing their experiences and expertise together. The school principals explained the work that went on behind the scenes. One principal said:

Telikilaas is a lot of work. We know how film directors make films, the same way teachers have made their lessons. And I can say that [the] teachers enjoyed it. Now, in school, we don't need people for editing videos, we don't need people for dubbing. We take the video [from] an island and send [it] to another school [that] will edit and compile it. Another thing is teachers got opportunities to mingle with expert teachers all over the country.

Another principal said:

Our school also contributed even [to] *Telikilaas*. When we view the lesson on TV, it's like professional people had done it. But the teachers who had prepared it has never done something like that before. That was their first try. But they have the skills, and they discovered their skills, and they are using those skills in their regular teaching.

It is evident from the excerpts that the teachers developed their skills and were creative. It was also noticed that a very collaborative teacher network was established across the country, and they were working together in compiling the videos to be telecast regardless of the geographical barriers. Hence, the great divide became non-existent with the use of technology. This was also highlighted by the education planners during their interviews.

One education planner said: "We had experience with *Telikilaas* recording, [and] we had a studio set up in a classroom. We were amazed by the courage of [the] teachers."

Another stated: "Previously, the biggest barrier was the geographic barrier. But with the [ir] work [for] *Telikilaas*, teachers developed collegiality with teachers in other schools as they took turns to make the video lessons and [communicated]. They worked collaboratively."

This collaborative network that was surprisingly developed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and by looking for ways to continue education can be sustained. It is interesting to discover that resilient teachers emerged at the time of a crisis that the whole world is facing.

Emerging stronger beyond COVID-19

One of the questions that all the participants in this study were asked was whether they believed that they are emerging stronger beyond COVID-19. All of them reflected on their experiences during the pandemic, especially in continuing education.

One teacher said: "Yes, I believe so. There were positive changes that happened during the pandemic. I was not very aware about teaching online like using Google Classroom. We had to take part in a workshop and learn. As a teacher, I have improved."

Another teacher stated: "Yes, definitely. I have learned so much during the trainings and [while] preparing and teaching online. I never knew this before. We have all improved."

The excerpts shed light on how teachers become empowered by gaining new skills and knowledge. Their experiences in preparing for online learning and teaching have increased their confidence and readiness to face any challenges in the future. The school principals also believed that their teachers are prepared to tackle similar situations in the future. One principal said:

With the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel that the importance previously given to academic performance [has decreased]. More importance was given to other perspectives [of] teaching and learning. From the technological perspective, [we are now giving more importance to] using new platforms and tools [that] we have developed in this area. I think we are ready and prepared to adapt if a crisis occurs because whatever the situation [may be], I think the teachers will have the mindset of adjusting. Just [like] people from [the] health sector, teachers were equally busy, and we did not take a break.

Another principal said:

There are very good policies that can strengthen our education system. The staff in the school are more confident and comfortable with working with technological resources now, and some of the skills they have [were] also discovered and they can work better. So, I can say there are opportunities to have a better school system after the pandemic.

The school principals believed that with the pandemic, several changes had occurred, several opportunities were discovered and several skills were developed. What was most evident to them is that the policies for the continuity of learning had created avenues for skills development. Furthermore, they found that trainings can be effectively conducted online.

Before the pandemic, for any in-service teacher training in island schools, the trainers had to travel to those locations via sea or air. This is quite costly. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic had shown that technology can connect people, empower people and make people emerge stronger. Hence, with a more capable workforce, the principals expect the school system in the Maldives to become much better in the future.

The education planners also believed that an enhanced and stronger school infrastructure has been developed. Some of the services that could not be provided in the past due to the geographic distance and challenges have been established online. Hence, the education planners expect the entire education system to emerge much stronger beyond COVID-19.

An education planner said: “Yes, in terms of ICT competencies, we have achieved so much during the past one and a half years. [A] lot of teacher competency [has been] developed, so I believe the system will be stronger.”

Another one stated: “Schools are and will be more ready and stronger. Teachers are ready, schools are ready, and the Ministry is ready to adapt to sudden changes.”

A third said: “All the stakeholders [became better at acting] in emergencies. Soft skills-wise, schools will be stronger in teaching and learning. Before, [our classes were] limited [to] physical classes. Now, even teachers are not satisfied without using ICT.”

It is evident that the capacity of the entire education system of the Maldives to respond to a situation such as the pandemic have improved. Moreover, even psychosocial support was established via a hotline. Hence, with such systems established, all the stakeholders in the education sector in the Maldives expect it to emerge stronger beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

Exploring educational policy directions in the Maldives to continue learning in public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to identify policy changes that could improve the preparedness of the schools for future pandemics. The main findings of this study are discussed below.

The most significant policy changes

One of the significant policies was Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/16, which was released two months before the first identified local COVID-19 case in the Maldives. This circular advised the schools to ensure the installation of handwashing facilities in their premises and the teaching of students on proper handwashing. Additionally, any staff or child with flu symptoms or any symptom of COVID-19 was not allowed to enter the school. Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/20 instructed schools and sports associations to cease all activities for students and parents that were included in the school activity calendar. These early response measures of the MoE were significant in keeping the schools safe learning environments.

Another significant policy change found was on the guidelines for learning arrangements for the reopening of schools, which were outlined in Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/37 that was published on June 13, 2020. The circular directed the schools on the reopening process and explained the learning arrangements that should be followed. The carefully developed policy addressed student vulnerabilities and listed measures for reducing them to achieve continued learning for all children. The policy outlined the phases of reopening, session duration, roles and responsibilities of the SMT and the teachers, learning arrangements for students with special needs and training and support (MoE, 2020c). The policy emphasized that the school reopening would strictly depend on the public health situation in each island. The following specific instructions were given: Category 1 schools, which were on islands that were still under full lockdown, would remain fully closed; Category 2 schools, which were on islands under monitoring, would be opened for Key Stages 4 and 5 only; and Category 3 schools, which were on islands with no identified positive cases, would be opened for Key Stage 1 to

Key Stage 5 (MoE, 2020c). The duration of each learning session was specified as four subject periods of 45 min each. Thus, this policy prepared the stakeholders for continuity of learning during the pandemic. Although the schools on safe islands were already opened, online learning was not ceased completely. This study also showed the huge impact of online learning on learning. It is convenient, flexible and cost-effective. Hence, in the Maldives, it is foreseen that online learning will be part of the continuity of education during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective change communication

Another important finding of this study was how effectively the changes were communicated to the schools. To develop the policies, the policymakers had close discussions with the school principals. Once the policies were released, the school principals were given the autonomy to implement them in a way that was most suitable for their school based on the COVID-19 status of their island. The principals communicated the policy changes and guided their staff in complying with such changes. As all the policies were implemented without fail, the change communication strategies were found to be effective. It was further found that before the policy changes were implemented, awareness programs were held for parents. Sheninger (2017) identified four “Cs” of successful change implementation, and the first “C” is “Change communication,” whereby leaders bring all key stakeholders into the decision-making process.

It emerged from this study that several policy discussions were held in focus groups. First, the education planners formed a committee of experts to develop the policies. This committee held several FGDs with school heads and teachers to inform their development of the policies; and once the policies were developed, the school leaders were briefed on the way forward. It was also revealed that the education planners team monitored the entire process. Sheninger (2017) identified the second “C” for successful change implementation as “Committee,” in which, is forming a committee to ensure diverse voices and personalities are represented.

The success of *Telikilaas* was also notable in this study. The teachers in different schools were able to work together in the subject expertise areas and develop content and videos, as well as edit the videos to be telecast. Teachers who had never met before worked collaboratively, hence bringing school teams together regardless of the geographic divide. Furthermore, the school principal teams were able to collaborate and contribute to FGDs on decision-making and possible adjustments to allow learning to occur without interruption. Sheninger (2017) identified the third “C” for successful change implementation as “Collaboration,” which refers to having real, transparent conversations with everyone affected by the change and working together toward a common goal.

Furthermore, this study was able to identify the important roles of the MoE and NIE in monitoring the learning process. The MoE looked into the learning challenges and other sudden challenges, and instructed that the records of assessments and students’ progress be maintained. The NIE was able to train the teachers in necessary skills, which enabled the teachers to maintain their teaching progress. The trainings were decided and continued after several discussions with the school heads, NIE team and the policy developers of the MoE. This is the fourth “C” identified by Sheninger (2017) for successful change implementation: “Consensus,” in which all the key stakeholders come to an agreement of what is the best way to go ahead with the change.

Bridging the digital divide

The policy analysis for this study revealed that the education shifted to online learning. Yet, some disadvantaged students may not have access to the internet. This inequality was also addressed by UNESCO (2020). To address this challenge, the MoE initially developed the *Telikilaas* TV program. This program was feasible, as every household had a TV set and the

program was available to all because it was aired on the public media service channel. The public depended heavily on the telecasts of the COVID-19 situation in the Maldives, which included daily live press conferences. Hence, the *Telikilaas* was very timely and feasible. While the *Telikilaas* episodes were being developed, the MoE held several discussions with internet service providers in the Maldives and provided data packages freely to parents. Then, learning was continued via Google Classrooms, which provided a blended approach to learning that helped develop students' capacity for independent learning rather than merely replicating classroom teaching in a virtual medium (Ng, 2021). The blended and collaborative work of the teachers bred a resilient workforce that proved critical to education continuity.

As the status of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Maldives was already strongly controlled during the conduct of this study, some policies (such as on the reopening of schools) that addressed the new normal situation are no longer in use, and schools are now conducting sessions according to their pre-COVID-19 practices but following the HPA health and safety guidelines.

Successful use of technology

This study found that *Telikilaas* created a network of teachers across the country connected by the internet. In addition to *Telikilaas*, school staff were encouraged to undergo training in using ICT for online learning platforms. The *Telikilaas* program was so successful that it received a UNESCO Wenhui Award for Educational Innovation in the Asia Pacific Region. While the teachers were given Google Suite Certificate Level 1 training, they exceeded this level. This shows that teachers, when given full support, will cooperate in enhancing their skills. In Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/25, the schools were advised to revise the ICT learning materials and practices for their conduct of virtual classrooms using Google Classrooms, Google Meet, etc. Additionally, all the staff and students were given access to G-Suite, and the teachers were asked to upload materials to the platform. Such teacher training and support in using ICT were found to have been integral to the online student assessments, which were guided by Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/43. The teachers conducted the assessments via video, the video-recorded work of the students and adapted assessments provided online, sometimes via Google Forms. Hence, when using online tools, better student learning should be ensured through suitable assessments (Ng, 2021). As Fullan (2020) stated, technology becomes powerful when it is used not merely as a system of delivery but as a tool for collaboration, discovery, understanding and action.

Implications

The findings of this study showed that the developed policies, especially the policy for the reopening of schools, were crucial for the continuity of learning during the pandemic. Thus, the lessons from this experience can be important for future policy changes. Moreover, the communication of the policy changes was very successful. It showed that when implementing any change, the development of the change must be discussed first with the different stakeholders. Furthermore, the teachers were able to collaboratively work in projects such as *Telikilaas*. Such collaborations across schools should be maintained to create diverse teacher teams. Finally, after the teachers completed their training on online teaching and experienced online teaching, they felt empowered. Therefore, the NIE and MoE should carry on with their Continued Professional Development program for a stronger and more resilient workforce.

Limitation

The authors expected to have senior education officials of the MoE recount their experiences in conducting policy development meetings and committees. Unfortunately, they had official engagements. Thus, only a few of the MoE senior education planners could be invited. However, they were able to contribute rich data to this study.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify changes in education policies in public schools in the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic and to investigate how these changes were implemented. This study was able to identify the changes in the main policies. The developed policies and circulars to continue education during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new normal were Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/28 to all the schools to ensure education continuity during the state of public health emergency, Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/35 with detailed instructions on the teaching and learning arrangements for the lockdown period and informing the schools to continue learning during the lockdown, Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/37 to all the schools on learning arrangements for the school reopening, Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/38 to all the schools with a detailed SOP on using face masks in schools to ensure the health safety of students and staff, and Circular 22-E/CIR/2020/43 that outlined the assessment guidelines. This study found that the timely directions in these policies and the effective change communication led to the successful implementation of these policies and to the continuity of education. Additionally, the training provided by the NIE and the MoE to enhance the teachers' ICT skills was successfully achieved and led to a resilient teacher force. As a result, this study found that the education sector of the Maldives is likely to emerge stronger during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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