

## Research Article

# A Local Alternative to Global Wholesale Online Schooling during COVID-19: A Phenomenological Single-Case Study of a Standalone School in Bangladesh

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Given the shutdown of the schools worldwide thanks to COVID-19 pandemic hit early in 2020, there had been, for a while, a mounting global concern over continuing education and averting children's learning loss. Paying heed to that concern, many nations across the world transitioned to online education as a wholesale alternative approach to emergency schooling. However, online schooling was no single panacea specially for those developing countries which are hardly able to meet the success conditions of online teaching and learning. This phenomenological case study describes a novel pandemic-time rural schooling activity as an alternative to the wholesale online education commonly adopted globally during the pandemic. We have theoretically based the study on the Activity Theories postulated by Vygotsky and Cole and extended by Engeström. We collected qualitative data by semistructured interviews and by gathering school documents. Following Williams and Moser's coding method and Miles et al.'s two-cycle coding process, we analyzed the collected data. The novel schooling activity that this study found is "clustered (sub-)schools" made up of the split-ups of the regular school. The findings in detail are discussed and recommendations are made.

## 1. Introduction

Unprecedentedly spread early in 2020, COVID-19 virus attack worldwide was declared a pandemic by WHO in March of the said year [1]. Clinical proofs confirmed that the virus was transmitting from person to person [2]. So, social distancing came up as an agreed-upon measure to curb the spreading of the virus ([3], April 21). As a result, some physical activities such as sports events, business operations, and educational activities were forced to shut down [4]. On the one hand, the return of students to schools and the reopening of institutions became uncertain [5]. On the other hand, with uncertainty looming large, the continuity of

education was naturally an international priority. Given this situation, a crisis-response approach started to be adopted worldwide [4]. Thus, crisis-specific alternative education systems were immediately sought everywhere. Shifting to online learning was found to be an immediate alternative to carry on with education. Much of the contemporary research attention was, therefore, directed to alternative educational arrangements, especially to online learning during COVID-19. Previous studies were carried out largely from a positivist paradigm to investigate learners', teachers', and parents' perspectives and attitudes to online education, particularly at the higher education level (e.g., [4, 6–8]). However, according to Dhawan [9], online teaching-learning was not a

“panacea” for every context. Practically, the diverse and unequal socioeconomic backgrounds of different countries are a big factor that, as Adedoyin and Soykan [4] state, created diverse realities and therefore there appeared varying response capacities across the world. That is, educators and other stakeholders involved in education sector went through multiple realities and subjective experiences with COVID-19 in varying local contexts, which legitimate the qualitative research paradigm to understand, explain, and interpret the phenomenon of education during COVID-19. Thus, the research attention also turned to interpretivist and constructivist perspective. So, alongside quantitative studies, qualitative studies on online education during COVID-19 also began to emerge (e.g., [10–13]). Nevertheless, a pre-occupation of the contemporary research with online/virtual learning as the only global wholesale alternative for the more capable, developed countries, especially for higher education (colleges and universities), is noticed.

Evidently, even the schools of the developed countries, namely Australia, UK, and USA, had tremendous hardship to transition to online learning [14]. Teachers were struggling to adapt to the “new normal” (ibid). Even though the schools of the developed nations (such as Spain) resorted to move to online spaces to continue education alternatively, studies find that the online schooling posed various problems including digital divide in students and teachers, ranges of responses from students given their maturity and autonomy, and teachers’ difficulty in self-regulating life, teaching, and communication with parents in new systems [15]. Besides, schools also varied in strategies as no school had priorly prepared online programs for pandemic emergency (ibid). The study by Fauzi and Sastra Khusuma [16] reports 80% teachers’ dissatisfaction over online learning in a developing country context, i.e., Indonesia. A study from Portugal reports that online learning of their children demanded more of their (parents’) involvement than before [17]. A further study from China comes up with concern over daily screening becoming a potential threat to students’ eyesight [18]. In fact, it was evident that “online learning is different from emergency (pandemic-time) remote teaching” ([4], p. 1), which posed dimensional implementation challenges for all the stakeholders of education in all countries irrespective of developed or developing status. Against this backdrop of less winning or failing aspects of the wholesale emergency online learning worldwide during COVID-19, there exists a gap of an investigation of the local “alternative educational activity” [19]. Especially the alternative schooling done by schools of developing countries such as Bangladesh (where shifting to online education specifically at school level is too challenging to overcome) is so far unexplored. This study bridges this gap by reporting the face-to-face clustered schooling as a local alternative delivery of school education during COVID-19, adopted by a private kindergarten school in rural Bangladesh. Scholars such as Cleland et al. [20] recommend sharing the stories of educational practices of the world during COVID-19 so that widely effective responses and alternative activities for education remain known and reserved for tackling emergency situations such as COVID-19 pandemic and similar types of future crises (if any). This phenomenological case study carries a high significance of

transferability of the local alternative schooling system to similar cases in Bangladesh and those in the cross-border contexts, perhaps.

## 2. Literature Review

*2.1. Online Education as a Wholesale Global Alternative.* Following the immediate closure of all institutions due to the sudden surge of COVID-19 infections, a wholesale transition of education to online platforms took place immediately. Actually, remote online learning was not new to the world. Besides, online education had already been advocated to be a viable, sustainable, and valuable method of teaching and learning [21]. However, Marshall et al. [22] argue that the planned, piloted, and project-based practice of online learning during pre-pandemic time and the emergency transition to online learning during pandemic are not the same. Although novice teachers normally face difficulties and challenges in coping with online instruction during ordinary times, these challenges are likely to be exacerbated when the novice teachers make an emergency shifting to online teaching (ibid). Similarly, mixed experiences—positive and negative—are also likely for the other stakeholders including students, parents, and school administrators when it comes to shifting to emergency remote learning during the pandemic-induced extraordinary circumstances.

The most positive outcome of the online instruction as an alternative activity during COVID-19 pandemic is the success of continuing education somehow. The continuity of education is more important than anything else, according to many scholars (e.g., [23–26]). Any deadlock in education due to disruption caused by a natural disaster or pandemic can have both short- and long-term harmful effects on nations. Therefore, continuing the education by adopting any alternative activity (e.g., online learning) is better than a total halt of education. This continuity of learning through whatever alternative instructional activities during a crisis time helps students keep up a routine life, according to many scholars (e.g., [27–29]).

Positive outcomes apart, previous studies have so far identified some success conditions of emergency online learning as an alternative activity. The conditions include teacher training on remote pedagogy [22]; teachers’, students’, and school leaders’ preparedness [30, 31]; adjusting and accommodating the syllabi, contents, and activities suitable for online learning [32]; reliable digital infrastructure development (ibid); development of reliable digital assessment system (ibid); teachers’ positive emotion and willingness to online instruction [33]; students’ confidence, anxiety, willingness to communicate, and their interpersonal aspects [34]; student support, access to online teaching materials, and guidance for working from home [35]; students’ settlement in online exams [36]; safeguarding academic integrity and strong e-proctoring and e-invigilation [37] in online exams; and assessments with an emphasis on “meaning-making, connecting to social realities, and engaging multimodality. . . (and) students’ humanity” ([38], p. 125). In fact, these success conditions are shortlisted by

previous studies as some of the challenges of emergency remote learning as the alternative educational activity during COVID-19. In addition, alternative activities of online learning also adopted alternative grading systems for ease of learning and prevention of students' dropouts from schools and from courses during COVID-19. Lenient grading policies, e.g., were adopted that gave students the options between grade and pass/fail, or pass/fail, and mandatory pass/fail [39–41]. In reality, “chief among what we have learned to date about COVID-19 is how it has really made visible the inequalities . . . a huge wealth gap, access to health care, and a lack of a safety net between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ and/or between the white collar and blue-collar workers around the world” ([42], p. 5). Given this reality, it is not pragmatically possible for a country of poor resources and low capacities to meet all the mentioned challenges and success conditions of online learning. The rural schools of Bangladesh, e.g., are far away from meeting those success conditions of online learning, which might easily push them to seek alternatives to the wholesale online learning during the pandemic. This study reports such an alternative schooling (unlike online schooling) invented and implemented by a rural kindergarten school of Bangladesh.

### 2.2. Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 in Bangladesh.

The worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 infections began to hit Bangladesh early in March 2020. As an immediate state measure, the country underwent a strict lockdown from 26 March 2020 [43] and the lockdown was extended seven times [44]. With an aim to curb the spreading of the COVID-19 virus, many nations shut down their educational institutions and Bangladesh followed suit from 17 March 2020. However, unlike many western and eastern capable counterparts, Bangladesh, a developing country, could not immediately transition its education to full-fledged online instruction mainly because of resource constraints and dearth of preparedness for a paradigm shift to online pedagogy ([45], June 13). Bangladesh, de facto, suffered damaging effects in education due to long closures of institutions and failure to resort to alternative online educational activities. Emon et al. [44] state that this debacle is accounted for by the poor socioeconomic background of the majority of the citizens who could barely afford online learning devices and dedicated internet facilities. Even the teachers there have low salary and were, therefore, unable to manage high-cost internet devices in short notice. Although private universities in Bangladesh made it quickest to shift to online teaching, public universities lagged far behind in doing so [43]. As a matter of fact, the primary schools of the country that impart education to the biggest student population of over 37 million experienced a total halt. Salary cut of the private sector employees, sudden lay-off in private sectors, lower-income people suddenly being jobless, the locked laborer-class' income suspension, etc., were major factors that harbingered the very slim prospect of online education in primary schools in Bangladesh (ibid).

As an alternative to wholesale online teaching, Bangladesh government took up televising of recorded classes

on Sangsad TV ([46], April 1). However, the success of this non-interactive TV telecast teaching was called in question as many families do not even have TV sets (ibid). According to the World Bank report [47] concerning Bangladeshi education measures during COVID-19, only 43% children watched those televised lessons. The report further comments that primary students were having a feeling of not growing as they had no schools, classes, and exams.

Homework-based alternative assessment was made applicable only to classes one through five in Bangladesh during COVID-19. The students would do a set of homework and were to submit them in schools once the institutions reopen ([46], April 1). The World Bank report [47] shows that by the telecast-based remote education only a small portion of population (10–21% households) benefited. Given this situation, a heavy learning loss was predicted as the worst consequence (ibid). Ahmed [48] predicts that a fear of generational threat is likely to be posed by the learning loss caused by the non-stop 543-days school closure in Bangladesh during COVID-19 pandemic. *The Daily Star* [49] cites a UNICEF report as saying that in the global context Bangladesh is among a few of the countries that kept schools closed for the longest period, which made millions of school children miss schools and in-person learning. Beyond the above-mentioned state arrangements (TV telecast of recorded classes and homework-based assessments) for alternative education, private-level local alternative school activities, if any, are still unexplored. This study comes up with a rural school's alternative instructional activity during COVID-19.

### 2.3. Theoretical Framing of the Study.

Theoretically, we have framed the study of the alternative schooling in the light of Vygotsky's [50] “Activity Theories” (AT). Beyond applied psychology, an extended use of ATs is also noticed in education [51]. More specifically, this theory helps understand the strategic practices, continuation, and changes in education [52].

Vygotsky's [50] simple mediational model of three nodes is linked to the basic of Activity Theories (ATs): the human *subject* uses *tools* to achieve an *object*. According to McAvinia [53], the essence of ATs is that the human subject uses tools to achieve an object. Wiske and Spicer [54] explain that the “subjects” are humans: individuals and groups, organizations/institutions, etc. In that sense, the private school (the principal, teachers, and students) in our study is the corresponding human subject. Wertsch et al. [55] further explain that the subject adopts a tool-mediated activity in context toward an object that acts as the motivation behind the activity. In ATs, the “object” refers to a goal to achieve, which, as Engeström [56] maintains, may be a material thing or intangible things such as learning or mastery of skills in any complex changing context. Wiske and Spicer [54] add that the object may also be exemplified by the mastery of teaching and students' deep and flexible understanding. In addition, Smelser and Baltes [57] point out that the object and the activity are not always strictly planned; sometimes it is opportunistically organized. In that sense, the alternative

school activity during COVID-19 pandemic could be an instance of an opportunistically organized activity. This study takes the continuation of school children's education and averting their learning loss as the object explained in the ATs. McAvinia [53] further explains about the object of ATs that it is not impossible for the outcome of an activity to be unintended and even undesired; and it may be qualitatively different from the intended object. As for the "tools" of ATs, Wiske and Spicer [54] explain that tools may be material objects (such as hammers, pictures, gestures, vocal sounds, technology, and websites), corresponding ideal objects (such as meanings and values), and concepts such as the components of a specific educational framework.

In education, tools are used in the educational settings of different types such as teacher education (ibid). In this study, we consider the concept of alternative clustered schooling during COVID-19 as the tool mediating the new schooling activity. Engeström et al. [58] add more points about tools and say that tools can be both enabling and restricting for the subjects. Tools often empower the human actors in the transformation process, with historically processed experience and skills crystalized to the tool, while the tool itself may restrict the subjects from its own perspective. The school teachers and the principal of this study had traditional, experientially enriched pedagogical and administrative history. That is, the principal and the assistant teachers were all in-service teachers who, according to Reynolds et al. [59], experientially differ from the pre-service teachers in terms of beliefs and practices. Their in-service experiential background encouraged them to venture into alternative schooling during COVID-19 school closure across the country. Nevertheless, it is not again any accident for the experienced subjects to face any restriction while using the newly devised alternative schooling as a new tool during the pandemic emergency.

As set out in the ATs, for an effective access to the new tool, the subjects have to take on new roles and to forge robust ways to work within existing constraints (ibid). Thus, the new system comes in notice and the activity as a whole evolves (ibid). The existence of a tool-mediated new activity depends on actualization of the transformation of the object into targeted outcome (ibid). This theoretical point leaves room for a research question for this study about the outcomes and continuity duration of the alternative school tool. According to the explanation of Engeström [56], the concept of expansive learning from the new tool-mediated activity at organization level is examined as being guided by four questions: (i) Who are the subjects of learning? (ii) Why do they learn? (iii) What do they learn? (iv) How do they learn?

Further, three of the five (relevant for the current study) central principles of activity theory are (i) activity system as unit of analysis, (ii) multi-voicedness of activity, and (iii) contradictions as driving force of change in activity. Drawn on the above principles, this study determines a phenomenological inquiry into the case school's subjects' (the principal, the teachers, the parents, and the students) experiences of the tool they used, the objects they aimed, the outcomes resulted in, and the contradictions and restrictions

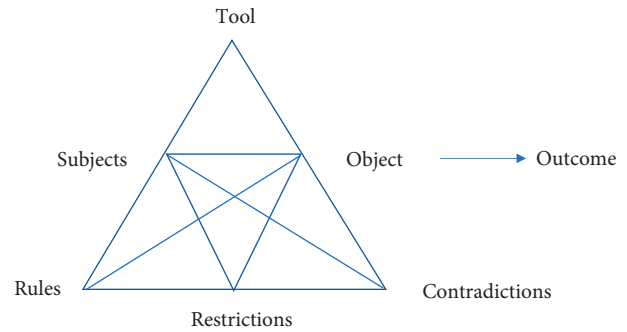


FIGURE 1: Model of activity system adapted from Engeström [60].

involved in the alternative schooling activity. To sum up, the local alternative schooling activity of this study was fit as in Figure 1.

Drawn on the ATs detailed above, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What was the alternative schooling activity tool during COVID-19 lockdown?
- (2) What were the objectives of the use of the tool of alternative schooling?
- (3) What were the experiences of the activity community about the use of the tool of alternative schooling?
- (4) What were the restrictions and contradictions of the activity of alternative schooling?

**2.4. The Case.** The name of the case school is Rose Valley School. Established in 2015 by a neoliberal entrepreneur cum principal, Mr. B. M. Jahangir Alam, the school is located in a rural bazar in the outskirts of the city of Jhenaidah in Bangladesh. There is one government primary school across the road only 200 feet away from the case school. Not so far away is also one private kindergarten school of similar type and is older than the case school. The case school competes with the mentioned school counterparts in its neighborhood. When the countrywide shutdown of the educational institutions came in effect in Bangladesh, the case school had over 200 students taught by 9 assistant teachers and one assistant head teacher. The school has seven classes from play group to class five, with students of ages between 4 and 10. The medium of instruction of the school is L1, i.e., Bangla. However, the school duly insists on English language education too. The school did not receive any government bailout during the pandemic shutdown. While all the institutions closed as per the government order, the two said competitors of the case school also followed suit. However, the case school in question resorted to an alternative schooling activity as a standalone example. The case school innovated an exceptional schooling during COVID-19-induced lockdown and the long school closure. The new schooling activity adopted by the case school is an obvious local alternative to the wholesale online education adopted worldwide. The experiences of all the stakeholders of the school regarding the innovative

schooling activity were positive as it produced some good outcomes.

### 3. Methods

*3.1. The Study.* This study is philosophically rooted in the ontological and epistemological assumptions that the school realities are multiple and school stakeholders' knowledge is socially constructed by their subjective, lived experiences in varying school contexts across the world. The reality of the pandemic-time alternative schooling in Bangladesh, for instance, is not the same as in the USA. The principal, teachers, guardians, and students of the case school gained their subjective experiences of the new schooling during COVID-19 lockdown and school shutdown, and they have, as Merriam and Grenier [61] maintain, their ways of interpreting that experience. This study, therefore, aimed at exploring the essence of the shared experiences of the lived senses of the principal, teachers, students, and guardians of the adopted alternative schooling activity, which may be an option to be reserved for a crisis time such as COVID-19. A focus on experience and how it turns into consciousness, according to Merriam [62], is a phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenological research explores people's real-life experiences of their social actions [63]. Creswell [64] views that "a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). This study considers alternative schooling activity as a social action. The said alternative schooling system is bounded by only one unique school. No other school to our knowledge adopted this alternative schooling activity during COVID-19 elsewhere in the district of Jhenaidah (the principal author contacted the president of the Jhenaidah Kindergarten School Association and was informed of no such case). That is, no other school had similar experiences of "clustered schooling" and thus was not considered to be participants in the study. Therefore, it was not possible to integrate other schools in the study to make it a multiple-case study. Instead, we conducted a single-case study to showcase the one school-case specific phenomenology of a novel schooling that was adopted as an alternative to the wholesale online learning during COVID-19. The alternative schooling activity in question is again a contemporary phenomenon. According to Yin [65], a case study methodology is prioritized when the research questions are focused on explaining a contemporary event or phenomenon. Therefore, we designed a qualitative research type of a phenomenological single-case study that is informed by social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm [62]. Gustafsson [66] argues that "a single case study also makes the writer to have a deeper understanding of the exploring subject" (p. 11). Thus, this single-case study is expected to offer a deep understanding of clustered schooling as a crisis-time schooling, which is an alternative to the commonly used online learning during the pandemic. This understanding may carry a high transferability prospect for other crowds of similar types of local kindergarten schools situated in the corresponding context.

*3.2. Data.* As we collected the data of this study after the case school had already closed the alternative schooling activity and had reopened and returned to regular schooling, it was not possible to go for data collection by the observation method. Therefore, the data decision was limited to interview transcripts and school documents, which were exploited to answer our research questions.

*3.3. Data Collection.* We conducted several semistructured interviews guided by the research questions to gather the raw data. With an aim to strengthen the internal validity of the study, we attempted to do a triangulation of data by interviewing the school principal, 9 teachers, 8 guardians, and 10 students. We stopped taking in data as the data started to saturate at the mentioned participants number. The interviews were conducted for a stint of almost four months starting from 24 November 2021 until 20 March 2022. The interviews were accomplished consecutively with the principal, teachers, students, and guardians because they were all involved in the community of the new type of schooling activity. The in-person interviews constituted a total of 6 hours and 10 minutes. As the participants were not fluent in English, all the interviews took place in the participants' first language, i.e., Bangla. To achieve external validity, we tried to bring divergence in data sources. For this aim in mind, we included the teachers of mathematics, English, Bangla, social sciences, science, and religious studies as participants. We included the guardians of the well-off class, the lower-income class, the middle-income class, the highly educated class, the literate class, and the illiterate class. We also included the employed and self-employed male and female parents. We further integrated the students of class one through five, inclusive of boys and girls. For another level of internal validity, a method triangulation was attempted by collecting further type of qualitative data, which are school documents such as the grade sheets, the assessment materials, the syllabi, the lesson plans, and the attendance statistics that were kept by the case-school during the operation of the alternative schooling through COVID-19 school closure.

*3.4. Data Analysis.* The data were analyzed by transcribing the interview records first in Bangla, which were then translated into English by an expert academic translator of Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Keeping the first research question in mind, we revisited the data chunks—quotes and statements—to obtain a description of the alternative schooling activity. We followed this procedure according to Merleau-Ponty et al.'s [67] phenomenological description. Given the subsequent research questions, we continued the data analysis following Williams and Moser's [68] coding method, which employs the processes that bring up the core themes and the essence of meanings of experiences embedded in data. We fitted the procedure into Miles et al.'s [69] two-cycle coding process. In the first cycle, we (the third and fourth authors and the first author) divided the total interview transcripts into two halves. Then, we did initial coding and afterwards we

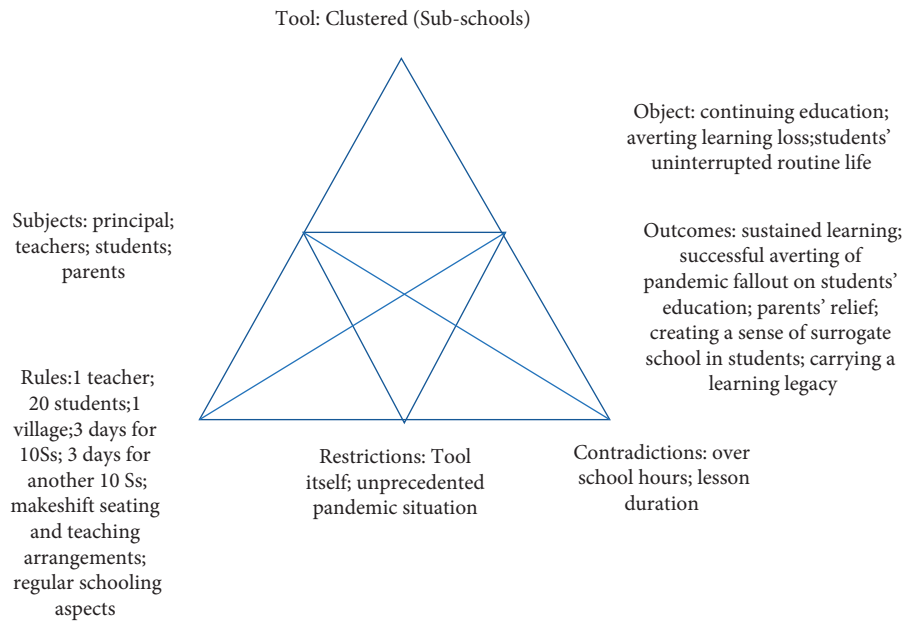


FIGURE 2: Alternative schooling activity adopted by the case school adapted from Engeström [60].

swapped the initially coded transcripts to cross-check. In the second cycle, we met to do the axial coding and selected coding collaboratively. Afterwards, we negotiated, organized, and finalized some themes that reflected the essence of the participants' experiences of the alternative schooling activities, which were primarily aimed at by the research questions 2, 3, and 4. We also navigated the research questions through the collected school documents to consolidate the themes that emerged from the interview data. Finally, the themes were presented in the sequences of the research questions.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Our research question (1) asked: "What was the alternative schooling activity tool during COVID-19 lockdown?" Our data findings gather the following phenomenological descriptions and graphical representations of the alternative schooling activity (system) adopted by the case school.

After the official announcement of school shutdown countrywide sine die, the case school ventured into an alternative schooling activity. The principal termed this alternative schooling as "clustered schools," meaning "sub-grouped schools." The main school activities in the regular school site were all closed. The demography of the school students was divided into nine villages. Each village was considered as one "clustered school" or "sub-school." Every school constituted one teacher and 20 students coming from the same village and another village nearby. The weekdays were divided into two slots: 10 students would come three days in-person and another 10 would come the alternate three days. The seating was arranged on rolled-out gunny mats spread on some selected suitable and comfortable space in the village. The students sat maintaining safe distance. Hand sanitizers were in place nearby. The school hours were cut short to three from the regular four hours. However,

students and guardians opposed long hours and lengthy lessons. So, the school hours were further cut down to two hours. The lessons were as usual but the duration of the lesson was cut short to 40 minutes instead of one hour. One teacher would teach three subjects per day. A makeshift blackboard was set up on a stand. Teachers would as always check homework and give activities and some new input in each lesson. Assessments included class tests, weekly tests, and monthly tests but the tests were scaled back compared to those of regular schooling preceding COVID-19 shutdown. The guardians were advised against accompanying students to school and collecting them after school. The teachers submitted reports to the principal through emails or Facebook messengers and by conversing over phones every day. The principal visited each clustered (sub-)schools once in a week and closely monitored the activities regularly. The alternative schooling lasted 5 months and then was closed down to return to regular schooling gradually. Over 70% students attended the clustered (sub-)schools. The activity is shown in Figure 2.

The "clustered (sub-)schools" adopted by the case school were a promptly invented localized "short-termism" to respond alternatively to shutdown of schools sine die due to the pandemic. This is a committed school entrepreneur's schooling innovation without needing any extra investment that online learning would require. Posited in ATs, this alternative school activity during COVID-19 pandemic was what McAvinia [53] calls an activity tool. It was further an instance of what Smelser and Baltes [57] consider an opportunistically organized activity. The school principal is one of the "subjects" of the ATs [53, 54] and the one in the top of the labor division of the alternative activity. The principal as the subject of the alternative schooling activity is highly contextually conscious. He was one of those who see the world digitally divided. He foresaw that he would not be able to meet the success conditions of online instruction as



shortlisted by many studies (e.g., [22, 31, 34, 36, 38]). Hence, he thought out a novel schooling activity which is encounter-specific, e.g., pandemic-specific. The principal's new version of schooling suggests that schooling is not a fixed conception but is open to innovations. When students' learning without pause is the number one priority in all conditions, local innovations of some sort are bound to emerge out of available resources and by the stakeholders who can think both globally and locally. It also suggests that a trial-and-error approach may result in an unprecedented brainchild in local education systems during emergency. Precisely, innovations in schooling are not something that should flow top-down. It is also most likely to emerge bottom-up and to bear bigger fruits.

While the state's arranged TV telecast instruction was seen by only 43% school children [47], the clustered (sub-)schools attracted over 70% attendees who are identified as part of the "subjects" of the alternative activities and labor group as explained by McAvinia [53] and Wiske and Spicer [54]. This success of the new version of emergency-time schooling innovated by the local subjects implies that when ideas are more than opportunities and resources, local innovations can outperform a state system. The principal is an example of a frightened optimist. He was frightened by the students' potential learning loss but he was at the same time optimistic of his scholarship and power of innovativeness. His synchronization of the pandemic encounter by exploiting his available resources to innovate his on-site clustered (sub-)schooling epitomizes the success of a better alternative to global online schooling and his state's TV telecasting of recorded lessons, in order to address his students' sudden vulnerability to potential learning loss due to the COVID-19-caused school closures. It was possible to set up the clustered (sub-)schools and run them without the prerequisites of online teaching and learning such as teacher training on remote pedagogy [22]; teachers', students', and school leaders' preparedness [30, 31]; adjusting and accommodating the syllabus, contents, and activities suitable for online learning [32]; reliable digital infrastructure development (ibid); reliable digital assessment system development (ibid); access to online teaching materials [35]; students' settlement in online exams [36]; safeguarding academic integrity and strong e-proctoring and e-invigilation [37] of online exams and assessments; and so on. This suggests that the activity of "clustered (sub-)schooling" is not the wholesale imitation of online learning, but an innovation of a rural kindergarten school principal. The clustered schools were basically the split-up, mini-sized emergency (sub-)schools clustered in students' and teacher's native villages, which partly constitute what ATs recognize as the "rules" [60]. The clustered schools are made out of a typical regular school with all regular aspects, practices, and arrangements. Therefore, everything starting from setting up the clustered (sub-)schools to running them was rather easy and feasible to materialize, maintaining health protocols provisioned to protect people from the pandemic. In other words, innovative thinking can revitalize the new potentials underlying the indigenous resources. Thus, the "clustered (sub-)schools" imply that solutions do not always have to

essentially come from outdoors, from the top, and from the state. They are also possible to emerge from indoor, from the bottom, and from the individual.

Our research question (2) asked, "What were the objectives of the use of the tool of alternative schooling?" The principal commented that the main objectives of the alternative schooling included continuation of education, prevention of learning loss, and students' well-being which are reported to have been impacted by COVID-19 [70].

*"... I was very much concerned about the prospect of the adverse effects of discontinuation of education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. ... I was feeling burdened by the thought of students' learning loss during the inaction in educational activities. I was also concerned by the prospect of the bad effects on the students' mental and physical wellbeing thanks to being cowered within the four walls of home" (Principal).*

The clustered (sub-)schooling as a local new alternative activity was initiated by being convinced by the global and local concern over the continuity of education amid COVID-19-induced shutdown of the educational institutions. This supreme concern of the principal aligns with the point that "continuity of education" is more important than anything else [23–26]. In that sense, the principal thought globally but acted locally to set the goals of his alternative schooling activity. The newly versioned schooling was a local means to achieve a globally shared objective of continuity of education during the pandemic. This globally significant "object" is underpinned (as something centering which the actors feel motivated to initiate a new activity) in the Activity Theories of Vygotsky [50] which was extended by Engeström et al. [58]. The actors of the alternative schooling took into account the "undisrupted routine life" of students, which is viewed as something that helps students keep up a routine life [27–29]. A heavy learning loss was predicted as the worst consequence of the school closures sine die. This learning loss of the Bangladeshi primary school children over the pandemic period was also reported by *The Financial Express* ([46]; April 1) to have practically played out. The clustered (sub-)schooling took it as one of the major objectives to fight the students' learning loss because of schooling inaction during the lingering COVID-19 shutdown. In short, the objectives of the clustered (sub-)schooling were broadly consequentially aware. The retention of the fundamentally defined student life was a driving goal of the schooling system. Retention of student life is a physically, socially, psychologically, and emotionally important thing for a school to put on top of everything. The new type of schooling also prioritized on averting the ramification of academic loss, which takes longer to make up. That is, the (sub-)schooling was new but it initiated to achieve the old, prototypical school goals.

Our research question (3) asked, "What were the experiences of the activity community about the use of the tool of alternative schooling?" The following themes representing the experiences of activity community emerged from our data findings.

**4.1. Sustained Learning.** The key experience of the clustered (sub-)schooling activity was that it met with a substantial success of sustained learning.

“... we are not hit as we anticipated, Alhamdulillah (all praise is to Allah) (parent C).” “... some children in our neighborhood who go to other schools had no classes, exams, and schools” (student A, B, F, and G).

The alternative schooling motivated the school’s learners to keep up with the regular pace of studies during the emergency time, which ATs identify as an outcome of an activity [58]. So, it saved the school’s students from the “predicted learning loss” [46] from the 543-day nonstop school closure in Bangladesh due to COVID-19 [48] and also from a fear of generational threat posed by the assumed learning loss (ibid). Over 70% students participated in the clustered (sub-)schools and they were performing persistently better in the post-pandemic school exams than those 30% who missed out on the clustered (sub-)schooling. This was a massive success of the clustered (sub-)schooling in keeping a consistent pace of students’ learning across the trajectory of pre-pandemic regular learning, during-pandemic continuation of it, and unaffected post-pandemic school performance. In terms of learning, clustered schooling made a clear difference between who (70%) went to clustered (sub-)schools and who (30%) did not.

**4.2. Pandemic Fallout Averted.** Disruption of children’s education due to the pandemic was successfully averted by the clustered (sub-)schooling.

“... The school (Rose Valley School) has saved our children’s life (parent D). We feel less demanding as the students have made easy transition from clustered schools to regular schooling” (Teacher A, B, E, F, and I).

The local alternative approach to school education during the emergency time of the COVID-19 pandemic served its most challenging objective of the continuation of education, which was the global concern and priority [23–26]. The pandemic fallout was made into an academic turnaround by the case school’s innovative (sub-)schooling while other schools countrywide reached almost a deadlock for 543 days [48]. This is a remarkable achievement of the internationally shared goal of continuation of education, which extremely matters, by the locally re-versioned school model, i.e., clustered (sub-)schools. The clustered (sub-)schooling reassured a sense of continuity in the subjects including the principal, teachers, students, and guardians. This made the effects of COVID-19 less obvious, and students missed out the least on their academic life.

**4.3. Parents’ Relief by Regular Resources.** Parents’ concern over their children’s education hardly abounded as the cluster (sub-)schooling brought much relief.

“... I had no capacity to buy laptop or an Android phone. Buying internet data was also impossible for me (parent A).” “... I do not understand stuff like internet, data, online learning” (Parent B). “... I do not know how to operate mobile phones” (grade one student A).

The clustered (sub-)schooling put no pressure on the parents’ purchase capacity because the new schooling system did not require them to cut short on their family budget for investing any extra amount in the clustered (sub-)schooling.

Unlike the online instruction during COVID-19 time that demanded parents’ extra time and surveillance [17], the clustered schooling did not require more burden on parental duties. Rather, clustered (sub-)schooling saved the convenience costs to and from the school and home that the parents would spend before COVID-19. Although the poor socioeconomic background of the guardians and their shrinking income caused by the pandemic lockdown [44] meant a big barrier to online learning and Sangsad TV telecast education [44] in Bangladesh, clustered (sub-)schooling enabled the parents irrespective of financial abilities to break through the said barriers. Precisely, clustered (sub-)schools are more parent-friendly schooling than online schooling. Although pandemic-time schooling and education matter a lot for the financially affected population, the clustered (sub-)schools are a more cost-effective school version compared to the traditional pre-pandemic schooling and online schooling. It gave the parents some relief from the financial and educational threats caused by COVID-19.

**4.4. Sense of Surrogate School.** The clustered (sub-)schools created a sense of surrogate school in the students.

“... I feel I am in a mini version of our school” (student A). “... I was happy I was meeting my ma’am and my classmates” (student D). “... but I was missing my whole school” (student D).

Although it is reported that millions of school children badly missed their school and in-person learning [71] during lockdown, the clustered (sub-)schools lowered this feeling in its students. Although they were missing the whole school, they were meeting their small group of classmates and a single teacher in the clustered school, which gave them a sense of surrogate school. As previously stated, the clustered schools were devised with maximum regular school aspects; it turned out to be a surrogate model of school with surrogate markers such as known peers, familiar teachers, and the same texts and assessments, which made it so easy for the students to fit into the new schooling system. It suggests that the sudden transition to a surrogate schooling is much easier and more feasible than the transition to a strange instructional mode or platform like online learning during an emergency encounter.

**4.5. Learning Legacy.** The clustered (sub-)school pushed forward a learning legacy for the students after their return to their post-pandemic school education.

“... the students who did not attend clustered schooling and were off from learning for the whole pandemic time shutdown were struggling coping up in the new class” (teachers A, B, C, and D). “... The clustered school attendees were easily coping up” (teachers B and C).

Over 70% students who took clustered (sub-)schooling were carrying a comfortable learning legacy as they easily coped up with the post-pandemic school learning in the promoted class. The clustered (sub-)schools conducted regular type of teaching, learning, and assessments. As these were opposed to online teaching, learning, and assessment aspects and conditions [22, 35, 37], the clustered (sub-)



school attendees (70%) made an easy, comfortable learning transition to post-pandemic school while their absentee peers (30%) were carrying a COVID-19 legacy of messy learning habit and were suffering a marked learning loss. The 30% non-clustered schoolers seemed to be cut off from a rhythmic learning legacy that they had before COVID-19. That is, the legacy of learning and continuity of education built on by the clustered (sub-)schools had a leveraging effect on students' educational transitions and shifts back and forth, which is integral to life encounters.

Our research question (4) asked, "What were the restrictions and contradictions of the activity of alternative schooling?" The findings unfold that the alternative schooling tool used by the case school faced theoretical encounters and contradictions.

*"... the guardians first reacted negatively. But, when we explained the school systems, 70% guardians got convinced and sent their children to schools" (principal). "... when 70% parents turned positive, we went ahead" (principal). "... first coming to know the idea, I disagreed but when I knew the details, I liked the idea" (guardians C, D, and E). "... The covid-situation itself was the unprecedented restriction to the schooling activity" (principal, teacher B).*

The tool itself, which is clustered (sub-)schools, harbingered a restriction as primarily many parents disapproved the tool. In line with the explanation of ATs by Engeström et al. [58], this was a theoretical episode of the ATs when the tool itself fails to notch up a hopeful situation. However, the tool achieved a "go-ahead" as the contradictions between the subjects (the principal and parents) over the tool were not strong to de-facilitate the tool use because the new schooling was patterned with most of the regular school aspects and characteristics. However, the unprecedented COVID-19 context and provisions of health safety measures acted like some restrictions which ATs sort out as "contextual restrictions" [58]. Moreover, a contradiction with almost 98% students and guardians over the length of the school hours turned into a driving force that led to a change in the activity. The change was made by cutting short on schooling hours to 2 from 4 hours, which took place in line with Engeström's [56] explanation of ATs. The subjects (the principal and teachers) took an embracing approach to the arisen contradictions with other subjects (students and guardians) to tolerate and accommodate the subjective and collective opinions to actualize the activity. Precisely, a democratized access and accommodation of parents' and students' voices can convert the transition to emergency-time alternative schooling into a success.

## 5. Conclusion

Given the sudden shutdown of educational institutions due to COVID-19 pandemic, 214 million school children remained in homes, missing schools (UNICEF cited in [49]). How to continue education became a global concern [23–26]. Globally, a quick crisis-response approach to the education halt caused by the pandemic, therefore, started [4]. Thus, alternative education systems were immediately sought everywhere. Shifting to online learning was found to

be an immediate alternative to carry on [4, 6–8]. However, online teaching-learning was not a "panacea," according to Dhawan [9], for every context. Unequal socioeconomic background of countries is a big factor for this. This inequality created diverse realities and unparalleled response affordability to COVID-19 across the world [4].

This phenomenological case study describes an alternative schooling activity done by a private kindergarten primary school in rural Bangladesh during the COVID-19-caused school shutdown. The study is theoretically framed on the Activity Theories (ATs) of Vygotsky [50] and Engeström [56]. Specifically the third-generation versions of ATs are particularly fitting and useful for qualitative methodologies such as ethnography and case studies [72]. Beyond applied psychology, an extended use of ATs is also noticed in education [51]. The essence of ATs is that the human subject uses tools to achieve an object [53]. Tools may be some concepts such as the components of a specific educational framework [54]. The subject adopts a tool-mediated activity in context toward an object as the motivation behind the activity [55]. Smelser and Baltes [57] explain that the object and activity are not always strictly planned. Sometimes it is opportunistically organized. For the effective access to the new tool, the subjects have to take on new roles and forge robust ways to work within existing constraints. Thus, the new system comes in notice and the activity as a whole evolves (ibid). Drawn on the above principles laid by the Activity Theories, this study determines a phenomenological case inquiry into a novel COVID-19-time school activity tool used by a private kindergarten primary school in rural Bangladesh, the objectives of the tool use, the outcomes of the tool use, and the restrictions and contradictions involved in the activity.

During the COVID-19-induced school closure, *clustered (sub-)schools* were an opportunistically set new *tool/activity*, which was used/done by the case school as a local novel alternative to the wholesale global online instruction. The principal and the 9 assistant teachers of the case school were the most involved *human subjects* who engaged in the alternative schooling activity. Further subjects included the school's students of all grades and the guardians. The human subjects involved in the activity with their regular schooling experiential history. The *rules* of the activities were that (i) each clustered (sub-)school was to be set up in a native village from where the assigned teacher and students come; (ii) each clustered (sub-)school was to consist of 20 students and 1 teacher; (iii) 10 students were to attend the school 3 days and the other 10 the alternate 3 days; (iv) hand sanitizers were to be placed nearby; (v) health protocol was to be maintained; (vi) regular teaching-learning and assessments were to be followed; and (vii) makeshift arrangements were to be made for seating and teaching.

The "objects" of the novel schooling activity were to (i) "continue education" amid global concern created by COVID-19, (ii) "avert learning loss," and (iii) ensure an "uninterrupted routine life."

The "outcomes" of the alternative schooling activity done by the activity community of the principal, 9 teachers, 70% students, and the parents of the student attendees included

(i) “sustained learning,” (ii) successful averting of “pandemic fallout” on students’ education, (iii) “parents’ relief,” (iv) creating a “sense of surrogate school” in students, and (v) carrying a “learning legacy.” The tool itself, i.e., clustered (sub-)schools, as a new activity posed a restriction but it faded away and got a “go-ahead” from the parents very soon. Contradictions over school hours and lesson lengths resulted in a change in the activity, i.e., “cut-short” of the (sub-)school hours and lesson duration.

**5.1. Recommendations.** Clustered (sub-)schools can be reserved as the alternative schooling activity for schools that share the corresponding context and realities of the case school, in case another pandemic revisits the globe in future. More specifically, the government may take a note of this creative idea of clustered schooling against its TV telecast schooling and consider it as an easy, inexpensive crisis-time alternative instructional approach for the vast number of rural schools. Kindergarten school principals of the rural areas may take this schooling skill as an available alternative to cope with an intense emergency situation such as an identical pandemic for the future. Large-scale piloting of this clustered model of schooling may be done to make an advanced preparation for tailoring this new alternative as a viable option for education continuity strategy and as a contextual match. Other rural countries in the Indian subcontinent and beyond may adopt the clustered schooling approach for pandemic situations where online or any other hybrid learning is not possible for many pragmatic reasons.

**5.2. Limitations.** The study is limited to a single case of a rural school in Bangladesh. Although the study carries some transferability prospect, the findings are not generalizable. A multicase study is, therefore, recommended.

## Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

## Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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