

## RESEARCH REPORTS

# Does context make a difference? School Leaders' Perceptions of School Closures across the Maldives during COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT** Contextual features are crucial elements to consider in any decision-making process regarding a school's teaching and learning processes. However, a lack of attention to specific contextual features is evident in educational policy decision-making. A qualitative case study across the Maldives revealed that school leaders' primary concerns were students' safety, completing the syllabus or curriculum, and the lack of consideration for a school's context. The participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging the contextual realities of individual schools and involving stakeholders to make effective decisions regarding school operations. These findings have implications for educational policy decision-making, particularly under unprecedented circumstances.

**Keywords:** Policy implementation, School context, Educational Leadership, School autonomy, Contextual Decision-making

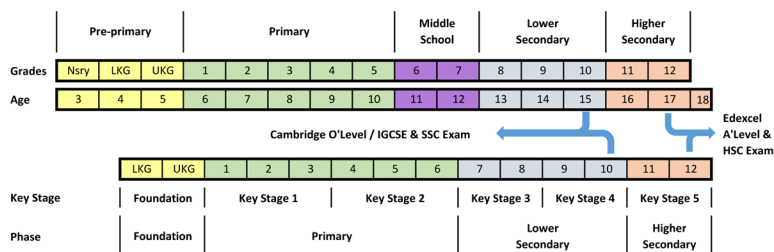
## Introduction

The Republic of Maldives is a small island nation located in the Indian Ocean, southwest of India and Sri Lanka. The Maldives comprises approximately 1,192 small coral islands, geographically dispersed. Of these, 187 islands are inhabited, and another 115 islands are developed as exclusive tourist resorts. The tourism industry has played a significant role in the development of the Maldives. The total land area of the Maldives is 300 square kilometres. The islands are naturally formed into 26 atolls, which are administratively divided into 20 atolls. Maldivian society is uniquely homogeneous, practicing Islamic and sharing the same language – Dhivehi. Nonetheless, English language is widely used in education, commerce and business.

The average school enrolment in the Maldives is approximately 290 students. However, schools in the capital city, Male', have an average enrolment of around 1,300 students. Due to this large number and the limited number of schools in Male' city, all public schools in city operate on two sessions. Schools in the Maldives cater to either grades 1-10 or 1-12, with no separate primary or secondary schools. Public schools follow a standard national curriculum and a common set of textbooks. From the foundation stage to Key Stage 3, schools adhere to the national curriculum, but at Key Stage 4 and 5, they follow an international curriculum. Figure 1 illustrates both the former and current school systems in the Maldives.



Figure 1. Former and current structures of the education system in the Maldives.



With the dispersed nature of the population across the islands, the Maldivian government faces numerous challenges in providing quality education (Ali, 2006). A particular challenge is the contextual differences between schools. As a result, when policies are formulated, they often fail to reflect the diverse circumstances of different islands. Hence, it becomes difficult to implement policies effectively across all schools in the country. This paper expound the implementation of policy decisions by the Ministry of Education (MoE) during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The Ministry of Health announced the first National Health Emergency on 12 March 2020. A week later, on 19 March, the capital city of Male' went into lockdown, and the MoE decided to close all schools across the country. As part of these restrictions, travel from resorts to other islands and the checking in of tourists to any local guesthouses were also restricted (Zahra, 2020). The first community-spread case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Male' city on 15 April 2020; the city was locked down within hours of the announcement, remaining so until the end of June. During this period, the Maldives MoE decided to close all schools across the country. They also prepared a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was published on their website on 10 March 2020.

The purpose of the SOP was to outline how schools should respond and communicate during the different public health risk levels for COVID-19, as defined by the Health Protection Agency (HPA). This SOP consisted of four alert levels. At alert levels 3 and 4, the action for schools regarding the teaching and learning process was to 'liaise with relevant sections/divisions/departments to make alternative learning arrangements for all the schools that had been closed down,' with both schools and the MoE responsible for this action (Ministry of Education, 2020b, p. 3). At alert level 3, the SOP required the closure of schools in affected islands and/or zones. This study explores school leaders' perceptions of closing schools across all the islands, regardless of the virus spread (from 19 March to 30 June 2020), the impact of this blanket policy, and the effectiveness of alternative arrangements made during this period in the case study schools.

From 11 March until the end of June 2020, all schools across the Maldives were closed. However, in June 2020, as no COVID-19 cases were reported on many islands, the MoE decided to reopen schools in areas with no reported cases.



Meanwhile, schools in Male', the capital, resumed face-to-face classes only for higher grades (grade 9 and above). All face-to-face classes were conducted with precautionary measures in place, such as wearing face masks, frequent hand washing, and physical distancing. Additionally, some schools began checking the temperatures of students and staff before entering school premises.

## **Educational Policy**

Educational policies play a vital role in shaping and enhancing an education system. The term 'educational policy' is multidimensional and highly contested, with disagreements surrounding its definition (Raab, 1994). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) define education policy as "the authoritative allocation of values" (p. 7). However, Fimyar (2014) argued that the positivist perspective of policy as a product of governmental action lacks conceptual and methodological grounding. Further, Ball (1994) emphasised a dual conceptualisation of policy as text and policy as discourse. Whether seen as a text or as discourse, policy documents issued by authorities serve as a vehicle of communication between agents (Codd, 1988). Gordon et al. (1977) contended that policy analysis could focus on either policy documentation or policy implementation. In the current study, policy is defined as an authoritative decision made at the policy level (that is, MoE) and delivered to schools for implementation. This paper presents an analysis of the effectiveness of policy implemented during a specific period (19 March to 30 June 2020) in Maldivian island schools.

Education policies developed in the 1980s and 1990s were strongly hierarchical and included central government controls (Raab, 1994). This hierarchical nature of authority is evident in the educational policies of the Maldives, where policies are top-down, with the MoE formulating them and schools expected to comply. Sabatier (1986) describes top-down policymaking as beginning with policy decisions and focusing on the objectives to be achieved. Some current educational policies in the Maldives exhibit this strongly hierarchical, top-down approach. For example, the single-session school policy (Government of Maldives, 2009) and the policy mandating a 60 percent pass rate in five or more subjects (Ministry of Education, 2009) were implemented without taking the contextual realities of schools into consideration. As schools operate under different situational, professional, material, and external conditions, achieving a 60 percent pass rate simultaneously across all schools may not be feasible. To meet this target, some schools have encouraged students to opt for vocational pathways instead of academic ones (Shafeeu, 2019a).

From the perspective of many policymakers, schools may seem homogenous from the outside. However, individual schools' capacities to cope may vary according to their specific contexts. For example, the unequal inequitable distribution of resources across schools makes it difficult for some policies to be effectively implemented at the school level (Raab, 1994). Additionally, the success of policy implementation depends on both the policy itself and the resources available to schools. In the Maldives, this became evident when the MoE made the policy decision in 2008 to transition all schools to a single session. With this policy, most island schools were converted to single-sessions, but many lacked the infrastructure for its immediate implementation. Consequently, some schools converted libraries

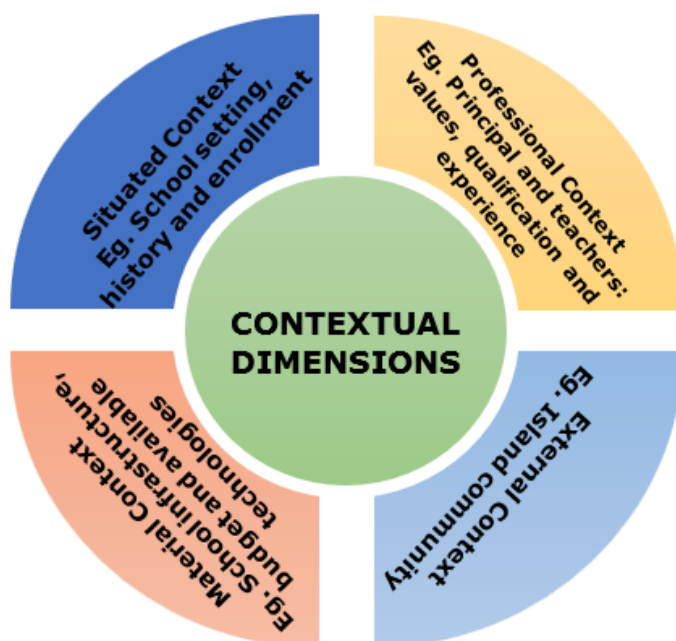


and other essential facilities to classrooms (Shafeeu, 2019b). This policy was later reversed due to limited infrastructure. Such policy decisions and changes can affect student learning, both directly and indirectly. While a single-session school provides holistic education by integrating curricular and co-curricular activities during school hours, the conversion of libraries and other essential facilities into classrooms may indirectly impair student learning.

### **School Context and Policy Enactment**

The school context consists of many complex layers, involving both internal and external stakeholders. Braun et al. (2011) identified four interrelated contexts relevant to policy enactment in schools: situated contexts, professional contexts, material contexts, and external contexts. These four contexts are interconnected interrelated and crucial for effective policy implementation in schools. Policies implemented in such a complex, multi-context environment need to be analysed through these contextual lenses to ensure continuous improvement in the quality of education. Thus, educational policy analysis should not be viewed merely as a collection of impartial facts, but as an ongoing process of reassessing how education is shaped within the broader context (Berkhout & Wielemans, 1999), while taking local contexts into account. The specific realities of a school's context are essential for the successful analysis and implementation of educational policy.

*Figure 2. School contextual dimensions*





### **Situated context**

Situated context includes historically and locally connected aspects of a school, such as its student population and setting (Braun et al., 2011). Although Maldivian school students share a homogeneous background in terms of religion, ethnicity, and language, significant differences exist between schools on the islands and in Male'; these differences relate to factors such as school size, setting, history, achievement, and educational opportunities and resources (Ali, 2006; Ministry of Education & Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). These differences are evident in schools even within the same atoll. The average size of a Maldivian school is 290 students, but some schools have fewer than 100 students, while schools in the capital, Male' city, enrol an average of over 1,300 students. To accommodate this high enrolment with limited facilities, schools in Male' are run in two sessions (Shafeeu, 2019b).

Similar variations can be seen in the history of the schools. Some atoll schools were established to serve the entire atoll and have more facilities, while others, initially community-run, were converted into public schools due to public pressure. In the 1980s, primary school education was extended to atolls by establishing a community school for each atoll. These community schools were later renamed as Atoll Education Centres (AEC), and another school was established in each atoll and called the Atoll School (AS). In 2005, all the community schools were changed to government schools (Shaougee & Shareef, 2022). This historical background significantly shapes the context of each school. In the situated context, the location and the intake of students are linked. For instance, while schools in the capital admit students from various islands, atoll education centres (AECs) and atoll schools (ASs) primarily serve students from within the atoll. The differences in school settings between small island schools and larger schools in Male', as well as AECs and ASs, create unique challenges when implementing a uniform policy. During 2009, the Maldives' MoE introduced multigrade teaching to cater to the situation of lower enrolments in smaller schools. Such situated contexts of schools further complicate the implementation of a blanket policy. The policies applicable to larger schools, such as those in Male' city, may not be suitable to small school practicing multigrade teaching.

### **Professional context**

Professional contexts encompass values, teacher commitment, experience, and policy management in schools (Braun et al., 2011). Teachers' and school leaders' attitudes towards a policy play a crucial role in its implementation. The commitment and dedication of a teacher to enacting policy enhance the professional context of a school. This context is also shaped by the individual and collective experiences of teachers. For instance, experienced teachers may interpret a policy differently from novice teachers. Additionally, schools with committed leadership and experienced teachers are better equipped to enhance their professional context. However, the professional context varies across schools, making it challenging for some schools to adopt policies effectively.



## **Material context**

Material context refers to physical resources such as staffing, budget, technology, and infrastructure (Braun et al., 2011). In the Maldives, these resources are often tied to a school's size. Larger schools typically have more autonomy over their budgets, while smaller schools rely on the Ministry of Education (MoE) for funding approval and release. This dependency may lead to inefficiencies and lack of control of school funds, and demotivation among leaders of small schools to initiate activities. While resources are generally allocated based on enrolment, schools in politically influential islands may receive additional resources (Shafeeu, 2019b). Furthermore, most schools in the Maldives have access to technology, disparities in internet accessibility and affordability, particularly between Male' and the atolls, present challenges. This disparity was evident during school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, where some island schools struggled to deliver effective online teaching due to these material limitations.

## **External context**

External context includes the quality and extent of local support, as well as pressures and expectations from the local board and national policies (Braun et al., 2011). Community factors such as educational attainment and economic well-being play a significant role in determining the level of support a school receives. The community support enriches school facilities where it impacts student achievement. According to Shafeeu (2019a), the most influential secondary student achievement factors are student-related factors, and the school zone's income. For example, economically prosperous communities may support their local schools by providing resources such as Smart TVs, books, or laptops. The availability of such facilities encourages teachers to use pedagogies that enhance student learning.

The four school contexts, illustrated in Figure 2, are interrelated and are evident in every school. The effectiveness of policy implementation depends on how well it aligns with the school's specific context. Thus, policy implementation practice in one context may not be effective in another context. As highlighted in this section educational policy planning in the Maldives has often overlooked the contextual realities of schools, making effective implementation challenging. Successful school improvement efforts should involve stakeholders spending time understanding the specific contexts of each school and aligning leadership accordingly (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). However, there is limited research on the role of school-level contexts in the implementation of education policies. Thus, there is also a need for researchers to consider the school context in greater depth to support the contextualisation of school leadership policy and practice (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).



Method and Procedure

Design

The current study used qualitative case study approach, utilising purposive sampling with maximum variation to gather diverse perspectives. The data collection method comprised an open-ended questionnaire followed by a follow-up interview. The questionnaire was divided into three broad categories: general information regarding school closures on the islands during the lockdown in the capital city of Male’, preparedness for alternative arrangements, and awareness and understanding of the policy decision. An inductive process was used to analyse the data through a content analysis where the central themes were identified. The case study approach allowed for an exploration of the real-world context, which is critical for understanding and investigating policy imperatives, including their causes and effects. The open-ended questionnaire enabled participants to express their views and thoughts at their convenience, focusing on their subjective experiences and perceptions.

A purposive sample of seven school principals from different regions of the Maldives was selected. Schools were chosen from across three regions: North, Central, and South. Table 1 provides details about these schools. Schools from the capital city of Male’ were excluded, as Male’ was under strict lockdown due to COVID-19 cases in the capital, necessitating school closures. Hence, the decision to close schools in Male’ was valid, but may not have applied to schools on other islands. Data collection took place in was 2020, with the open-ended questionnaire being sent to seven principals.

Table 1. Participating Schools

School	Region	School enrolment	School level	No. Teachers
A	North	400-500	Grades 1-12 school	60
B	Central	150-200	Grades 1-10 school	23
C	Central	300-400	Grades 1-12 school	34
D	Central	100-200	Grades 1-10 school	27
E	South	800-900	Grades 1-12 school	60
F	South	300-400	Grades 1-10 school	38
G	South	100-200	Grades 1- 10 school	21

Characteristics of Schools

The seven sample schools from across the Maldives, representing regions from the North, Central, and South, consisted of four schools offering education up to lower secondary and three schools offering higher secondary education—the context for each of these schools. School E was the largest in the sample, though School A shared similar characteristics. Both Schools A and E provided science, business, and vocational streams for secondary students and were well-



equipped with science laboratories, computer rooms, and libraries. Additionally, all classrooms in these two schools were equipped with multimedia facilities and Wi-Fi connections. While these resources were government-provided, both schools also received donations from external organisations and philanthropists. School A used these donations to install Smart TVs in all their classrooms, while school E used them to install projectors reflecting strong material and external contexts.

School C also offered higher secondary education but was not as well-equipped as Schools A and E. While Schools A and E offered secondary education in three streams including science, School C offered only a 'combined stream'. A combined stream means these schools offered subjects from both the science and business streams. Schools D and F also offered combined stream subjects. However, School D had a library but no computer room, whereas School F used the same for both as library and computer room. School D had digitised all its classrooms with Smart TV installed, while only six of classrooms at School F had such facilities. Similarly, School B used a shared room for both a library and computer room (Table 2) and had four fully digitalised classrooms. In all three of these schools, classroom digitalisation was a community-driven initiative.

Except for Schools B, F, and G, all other schools were single session. Despite Schools D and G having low enrolments, there was a lack of infrastructure, particularly concerning library facilities. Some schools, although they had libraries, they were not well-resourced. For instance, there were not enough books, and those that were available were outdated. The principal in these schools experienced a different school context level.

In terms of leadership, the principals of Schools A, B, C, E, and F were former students of these schools, with some of them having advanced through the ranks from teacher to lead teacher and eventually to principal. Experience in the role of principal varied. While the principals of Schools B and F had served for 18 and 8 years respectively, the principals of Schools A and C had been in the position for five years, and all other principals had held their roles for less than three years.

*Table 2 Facilities Available in Participating Schools*

School	Stream offered	Facilities available					
		school			classroom		
		Laboratory	Computer room	Library	Wi-Fi	Smart TV-installed	Projector installed
A	3 streams	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
B	Business stream		✓*	✓*		✓	
C	Combined stream			✓		✓	
D	Combined stream	✓		✓		✓	
E	3 streams	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
F	Combined stream		✓*	✓*		✓	
G	Combined stream		✓			✓	

Note: 3 streams are Science, Business, and Vocational stream

\*Uses the same room as the library and computer laboratory.



## Findings

This study aimed to explore school leaders' perceptions of the closure of schools across the Maldives under a blanket policy. It also examined the effectiveness of the alternative arrangements made during this period. One of the questions in this study was: in the opinion of the school leaders, did they think it was necessary to close the schools on individual islands where there had been no probable or confirmed cases of the disease? From the responses, three themes emerged: safety, school context, and curriculum and syllabus. The findings in relation to this question are described below.

### Safety of Students

It is not surprising that the safety and security of individuals were prioritised during a pandemic. Some principals were concerned about the safety of their students and school staff. In such situations, it is common for principals to think beyond the immediate context. Although there was no community spread on any of the islands, two participants considered worst-case scenarios, highlighting the lack of resources, particularly the in adequate medical facilities. One participant stated: 'We depend on Male' for resources. As there is a lack of medical facilities, we need to be cautious.' This demonstrates their concern about the inadequate health facilities available on their island and their focus on ensuring students safety.

### School Context

The Maldives islands are geographically separated by sea, a context conducive to controlling a pandemic, as the dispersion of islands limits travel. Most of the islands have small populations, often less than 1,000 people. Once lockdown occurred in the capital city, the situation was controlled and contained there, with no contact with the rest of the islands. Most principals believed there was no reason to close schools on the islands, given this context. One participant stated: *'No need to close schools when we can easily track movement in and out of the island easily.'* While some participants focused on tracking people's movements, others highlighted the low risk of community spread: *'It's not necessary; the chances of spreading the disease are low.'*

### Curriculum and Syllabus

Some participants were more concerned that all schools should be at the same level in the curriculum. Public schools in the Maldives follow the same curriculum and textbooks across all grades. A few participants felt that all schools should progress through the curriculum at the same pace. This was evident from responses such as: *'We cannot have some schools open while others are closed because all schools follow the same syllabus, curriculum, and examinations.'*



### **Alternative arrangement**

An alternative arrangement to substitute face-to-face teaching with online instruction was implemented in all schools in accordance with MoE guidelines. However, data revealed that schools' preparedness and access to resources varied, and many participants expressed concerns about the alternative arrangements. Participants were generally dissatisfied with the alternative arrangements as most of the contextual realities for the island schools were not fully considered in this decision.

The dissatisfaction may have stemmed from slow internet connections on most islands, as schools generally did not have reliable internet access. Dissatisfaction was clear from the responses to a question about internet speed, where no participant expressed satisfaction with their connection. Of the seven schools, only two had Wi-Fi available in all classrooms; however, the same facility may not necessarily be available to teachers at home. The participants' discontentment regarding the alternative arrangements also stemmed from slow internet speeds on the islands, and some teachers lacked the necessary devices to teach online. Furthermore, most participants voiced concerns about the lack of devices for students. Overall, participants highlighted internet speed as the most critical resource for online teaching, and this was where dissatisfaction was more evident.

The alternative teaching arrangement to replace face-to-face instruction required approval from the MoE. Some participants raised concerns about the lack of autonomy in developing alternative teaching arrangements. In some cases, the MoE set all the arrangements, while in others, schools negotiated with the MoE for more flexibility. One school, however, had full autonomy in implementing its own arrangements.

### **Standard Operation Procedure**

Some participants stated that they were unaware of any policy or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) regarding teaching during the lockdown in the capital city, Male'. Although many participants were unaware of the SOP, most were not involved in its discussion or preparation.

All participants unanimously agreed that policy implementation should be based on the contextual realities of schools. They felt that the decision to close schools should consider the individual school's context. A blanket policy to close all schools could negatively affect some, and they believed that before making such decisions, individual schools should have been consulted by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Participants expressed concern about the lack of consideration for school context in the policy decision to deliver lessons online. Regarding this blanket policy decision, most participants were concerned about the general school context, and some noted that:

*"Context differs, it should be taken based on context."*

*"Each and every island is unique in its way of life."*

*"Policies could be made based on geographical nature."*

*Some participants also highlighted the unequal distribution of resources among island*



*schools.*

*“It should be based on context, because the availability of resources varies in different islands.”*

Other participants pointed out the inconsistency of context and the different population densities of the islands and Malé, making it easier to monitor and control COVID-19 risk in the islands:

*“A blanket policy is not suitable because island life is very different from Male’, and it is easy to manage and monitor things at island level.”*

### **Impact of School Closure**

Given the low spread of the disease in the islands, participants felt that the closure of schools led to a significant loss of instructional time and a learning. As face-to-face classes were closed on 15 March, teachers were required to deliver their lessons through alternative means. However, online teaching was new for most teachers, students, and parents, and there was a lack of readiness for these arrangements across all stakeholders. Teachers found it challenging to adapt to online lesson delivery. On top of their existing concern about a worldwide pandemic, a sudden shift from face-to-face classes to online classes with insufficient planning caused a high level of stress and anxiety for teachers. Parents, unfamiliar with online teaching and learning methods, found it frustrating as they struggled to support their children properly. This situation had a detrimental impact on the health and well-being of teachers, parents, and students:

*“Even though teachers are conducting classes online, it is difficult for them to collaborate with students.”*

*“Teachers are not capable of coping with the new teaching style, and this leads to frustrations.”*

The impact of school closure was more severe for students who required special attention in the classroom. Parents of these students struggled to adapt to the new teaching strategies. The loss of classroom time, the lack of student engagement peers, and the absence of individual study plans created a void in these children’s routines. Hence, it led to behavioural issues, and parents found it challenging to manage, as expressed in this response:

*“Lack of engagement in lessons demotivated students and led to mental issues.”*

More than three months of school closure affected the timely completion of the timely completion of syllabus, which is critical secondary and higher secondary students. Inability to complete the syllabuses could negatively impact students’ final examinations, which are set by international examination boards. Furthermore, the impact of school closures varied according to the socio-economic status (SES) of students. Children from high SES backgrounds may not have experienced a significant negative impact from school closures as they likely had the necessary



resources for online learning, and could spend quality time with their families. However, students from low SES backgrounds, with limited resources and poor living conditions, were more likely to experience a greater learning loss, potentially leading to increased cases of mental ill-health within this group.

## **Discussion**

This study revealed that the school leaders' main concerns were the students' safety, the timely completion of the syllabus or curriculum, and the lack of consideration of the schools' contextual features in implementing the pandemic-related school closure policy. While some school leaders were concerned about students' and teachers' safety, risk of disease spread in the islands was, in fact, low. With border restrictions in place, tourists were not permitted on the islands, guesthouses were closed, and the capital city of Malé was under lockdown, making the islands safer places to live and maintain daily routines. The Maldivian government enforced a 14-day quarantine for anyone traveling from abroad in a government-maintained facility. In addition, during the lockdown, access to Male' was restricted, except for the delivery of essential goods to the islands. These measures, supported by the islands' natural geographical isolation, provided significant safety and security. Hence, participants in this study felt that schools on the islands were safe to continue face-to-face teaching.

The "Maldives Education Response Plan for COVID-19" (written shortly after the start of the pandemic) highlighted the immense loss caused by school closures, particularly in terms of interrupted learning and unequal access to continued learning. This report further raised concerns about an increase in school dropouts due to prolonged school closures, the discontinuation of learning, and ineffective teaching methods (Ministry of Education, 2020a). School closures disrupt both students' and teachers' daily routines, leading to increased psychological and mental issues (Yaameen, 2020). School is not only a place for delivering the formal curriculum but also essential for students' social and mental well-being, making their physical presence in classrooms crucial.

Only a research participant believed schools should have been closed, as they follow the same curriculum and prepare for the same examinations. A common national curriculum in public schools can be beneficial for students, as it promotes the development of lifelong learners who are confident and competent (National Institute of Education, 2014). However, a lack of autonomy in curriculum delivery makes it challenging for teachers to teach effectively (Di Biase, 2019). Due to the centralisation of the education system and the use of a standard set of textbooks across schools, some school leaders felt that all schools should progress at the same pace in the curriculum. Nonetheless, even under normal circumstances, this may not be the case, as curriculum coverage can vary depending on factors such as teacher competence and the resources available to each school.

Beyond safety and curriculum, school context should be a key factor in determining whether a school should remain open or closed. Before policy enactment, the contextual realities of individual schools must be considered. School



context encompasses of situated, material, professional, and external factors (Braun et al., 2011). Different schools operate at varying levels within these four contexts, meaning that each school is unique. School closures could disproportionately affect schools lacking strong material and professional resources. The schools in this study exhibited varying levels of these four contexts (see Table 2). While some schools had facilities akin to well-established school, others lacked adequate libraries and internet access. This unequal distribution of resources is evident across most island schools (Di Biase, 2018; Shafeeu, 2019b). Hence, the contextual realities of island schools made it difficult to establish effective alternative teaching arrangements. From the participants' perspective, continuing face-to-face classes in island schools free of COVID-19, where resources like internet access were insufficient, would have been more advantageous.

After more than three months of school closures, the Maldives MoE reinstated face-to-face classes, with precautionary measures, for all grades in island schools with no recorded cases of COVID-19. In Male', face-to-face classes resumed only for grades nine and above, despite the daily average of more than 50 COVID-19 cases in the capital. While school in Male' remained closed for face-to-face teaching, the reopening of island schools indicated that the initial closure of these schools, despite no cases of COVID-19, overlooked the contextual realities of the island schools. Decisions should be made with a thorough analysis of the pros and cons within each school's context to ensure effective policy implementation. Given that island schools are geographically separated by sea, and access was restricted, closing schools for three months may have caused more harm than allowing regular face-to-face teaching. Attending school is vital for students' physical and mental well-being. In a press statement, the Minister of Education emphasised the importance of reopening schools, stating that school is not only for academic study but also for teaching essential social skills (Yaameen, 2020). The Minister also acknowledged that the closure had compromised students' learning, in addition to their psychological and social well-being, during these three months.

While schools tried to maximise academic learning during the closure, the Minister noted that it was more difficult to teach effectively through online classes compared to face-to-face sessions (Yaameen, 2020). The decline in the quality of online teaching was particularly noticeable in island schools, where there were insufficient resources, such as internet access. Hence, students in remote islands were likely more disadvantaged by online classes than those in more urbanised areas.

Involving all stakeholders in decision-making is crucial for ensuring effective outcomes. However, the SOP sent to schools regarding school closures and alternative teaching arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic was not discussed with all school leaders. There was limited autonomy for school leaders in making alternative arrangements to replace face-to-face teaching. Recent studies on education in the Maldives highlight that the school system is highly centralised, with few decision-making powers delegated to principals (Di Biase, 2019; Shafeeu, 2019b). This centralisation limits the implementation of creative ideas for different programmes. Furthermore, a lack of autonomy in making alternative arrangements



may demotivate school leaders and teachers from fully implementing such alternatives. The absence of school leaders' involvement in the preparation of the SOP may result in reduced understanding and ownership of the plan, making it more challenging for individual schools to follow or accept it, given their differing contextual realities. If all school leaders had been involved in the SOP preparation or consulted before its implementation, the island schools' contextual realities might have been better reflected, leading to more effective decisions.

Before implementing alternative arrangements for face-to-face teaching, the feasibility of these arrangements should have been assessed. Resource availability and school contexts varied, yet, decisions were made without the necessary preparations. About two months into the school closures, the MoE stated in a press briefing that of 70,000 students, 51,000 students responded to a survey and of these respondents, 70 percent said that they had access to the internet, while the remaining 30 percent did not have internet access (Nizaaru, 2020). It was likely that most of the remaining 19000 did not have access to the internet. The students in the island schools most likely did not have effective internet connections. The small island schools are separated from more urbanised islands and have fewer economic activities and resources (Di Biase, 2018). The average income in Male' is significantly higher than in the atolls, at MVR 58 per day compared to MVR 27 per day, respectively (Asian Development Bank, 2005). Additionally, there is a wide income disparity between Male' residents and those in other regions of the Maldives (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Consequently, online teaching arrangements were likely more disadvantageous for students in island schools due to a lack of effective internet access.

School context plays a crucial role in policy enactment. Schools in the same area may vary in their situated, material, professional, and external contexts (Braun et al., 2011). These four contexts are interrelated and exist in every school, but they differ between schools in Male' and those on the islands. In terms of material context, there is a clear disparity between schools in Male' and most island schools, particularly in terms of technology and internet resources. Therefore, without prior arrangements to address these gaps, online teaching in island schools is not feasible.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of this study is that, as a qualitative study with a small sample of only seven principals, the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population. The purposive sampling method used may have introduced selection bias, as participants were chosen based on specific criteria, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. While the open-ended questionnaire was effective for gathering detailed responses, it may have led to inconsistent interpretations and varying depth in the responses, introducing subjectivity into the analysis. Additionally, the follow-up interviews, though useful for clarification, could result in interviewer bias, where the researcher's presence influences the responses. The reliance on self-reported data also raises the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants



may provide answers, they believe are more acceptable rather than fully accurate.

### Conclusions

This study explored the importance of the school context in implementing policy decisions. The school's contextual reality – such as situated, professional, material, and external contexts – plays a crucial role in policy implementation. The Maldives government's decision to close all schools for more than three months due to the risk of COVID-19 spread overlooked the contextual realities of island schools. A blanket policy is not effective when the different contexts of schools are not considered. The resources available in most schools were inadequate for the effective implementation of online teaching.

The lack of autonomy in deciding on alternative teaching arrangements demotivated school leaders. Depending on a school's professional and material context, it may choose the most suitable alternative teaching arrangement during such times. When decisions about schools are made without involving school leaders, implementation becomes challenging. Thus, participatory decision-making, involving school leaders who understand their school context, will likely result in more effective outcomes than when decisions are made centrally. Participants in the study believed that school closures in the islands were unnecessary during the three-month lockdown in the capital city. This decision had more detrimental effects than benefits, as the lack of interaction may have negatively affected students' social and psychological well-being.

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