As COVID-19 unleashes its wrath across the country, a rising medical toll is being registered. In fact, while luckily no local mortalities have been registered to date (at the time of writing) at the hands of the pandemic, casualties are conspicuous in other sectors. On the economic front, sectors which immediately spring to mind include tourism and self-employed.

There are, however, other casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these constitute a corpulent body of unrepresented voices – disadvantaged students. I specifically refer to those fortunate enough to pool all students in a single, homogenous cohort, given that some students are taking the current emergency in their stride. It all depends on which side of the digital divide you fall.

Despite naysayers, the yawning gulf that is the digital divide has been further accentuated by the ongoing COVID-19 emergency, which has imposed a greater dependence on technology in the form of remote teaching platforms. Disadvantaged students are being locked out of an effective education, ending up lolling around at home all day as a result, due to a combination of lacunae, which I have crystallised through the LIPIA acronym, or rather Lacunae In Parenting, Infrastructure and Ambition.

Remote teaching places a far greater dose of responsibility on parents. This is good news for some, while it spells disaster for others who would normally delegate all matters pertaining to education to the ‘teacher’.

This spawns the first category of disadvantaged students – those with parents who are not proficient in IT matters or who cannot afford to stay home despite the current emergency. One of the few feasible respite for such students is online educational apps, some of which (including BrainPop) have commendably decided to waive payment for their online resources to schools during the current pandemic.

The infrastructure shortcomings are the most tangible to consider. Desktop computers, laptops or even tablets in some cases, are missing from some households (although gaming consoles might be present), such that the only avenue available to students within the same households to communicate with their educators is their parents’ smartphone. Internet penetration rates have surged on an national scale in recent years, such that most households are hooked up, although some still fall through such a ‘safety net’.

The array of online teaching platforms available to educators is mesmerising. What is sorely missed is effective training of the same educators to use such platforms. Frequent webinars are being organised to informally train educators on their use, although one cannot expect to come to speed with such innovative platforms through a mere conference call.

Rather than investing in more physical infrastructure, such as the famous ‘a school a year’ cliché, the education authorities should take the cue from the current COVID-19 emergency and invest thoroughly in remote teaching platform infrastructure and educator training, well in advance of the next public health emergency.

This brings me to the ‘Ambition’ pillar of the acronym. An unwritten perception has it that emergencies bring out the best and worst in individuals, and this holds water for the teaching profession as well, of course. While at one extreme, I personally know of individuals who are exploiting the current school lockdown to the full, by sticking to their beds and social media far beyond what one would aspire to during regular working days, others are sticking to their daily working schedule, by stretching every sinew to keep their pupils provided with the necessary tools and resources.

While for some educators, a lack of formal training on IT-based tools is a valid grievance to shun it all, to the detriment of their pupils, others are adopting a more dynamic and flexible approach.

In fact, there are numerous shining examples of educators who, fortunately, break the mould, both locally and away from our shores. Teachers in northern Italy at the ripe old age of 56 have resorted to uploading lessons for their pupils through YouTube, effectively converting to such a social media platform through necessity.

“I never thought I would become a YouTuber at the age of 56,” Carla Crosato, based in Treviso, exclaimed to The Economist. In conservative Italy, educators initially resisted the idea of migrating to online. Driven by necessity, the situation has drastically changed over time, with Italian educators’ fora currently awash with discussions on the merits of Zoom, Moodle and virtual classrooms.

Locally, in the absence of a harmonised approach (mainly since the COVID-19 emergency swept the carpet from under many feet), many educators have taken matters into their own hands, either by embarking on a steep learning curve when it comes to tools such as Edmodo or Microsoft Teams, or by consulting their own IT-proficient spouses or children. I was recently moved to witness my son’s teachers collaborating, through remote means, to put together an animated video clip of a story the students were asked to read at home. Well and truly, these educators set the bar high for others to hopefully follow!

It’s heart-wringing to see so many falling behind in their education as a result of the current digital divide. Many will be those who choose to turn a blind eye to the writing on the wall and to instead dismiss this article as a piece of kitching. There will be hopefully some who rise to the occasion so as to try to bridge such a divide and to ensure that all students, irrespective of their current background and circumstances, get a decent education.

Let COVID-19 not be an excuse to let students fall behind!

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The hidden casualties of COVID-19: disadvantaged students, who are falling further behind as a result of the digital divide. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM