Barriers to Employing E-Learning for Primary School Students in the COVID19 Pandemic from The Teachers' Perspectives, And Ways To Treat Them

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges of teachers of primary schools when using E-learning to teach students in Gaza Strip. The study examined 64 primary school teachers from 22 primary schools in 3 different educational areas in Gaza Governorate in Palestine to investigate their challenges that they faced while teaching students electronically during the lockdown due to COVID 19 crisis. Data were collected from an electronic questionnaire that was given to the teachers who were engaged in the electronic teaching during the second semester of the school year 2019-2020. The results indicated that teaching in Gaza Strip using E-learning had a variety of challenges including lack of technological competence, lack of Internet facilities, lack of technical support, lack of power supplies and lack of the community e-learning awareness. Consequently, relevant stakeholders in Gaza Strip such as the Ministry of Education, United Nations' education department and other private sectors, and the language teachers themselves can consider concrete mitigating steps to overcome those challenges.

Key words: E-learning – covid-19 – Primary schools

Introduction:

Covid-19 was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). This crisis has affected all the aspects of our life; the way we work, the way we teach and learn, the way we shop, the way we spend our times with families, friends and even when we are alone and the way we greet each other. All the ways that we have been used to do were and still are totally to be changed. Social distancing and lockdown mode forced nearly all countries to totally close schools, kindergartens, universities and other educational centres. (WHO,2021; CAF 2021; UNICEF; 2020)

Consequently, e-distance learning was declared to be the alternative way of learning instead of the physical learning in most of the countries. Much effort was made to incorporate e-learning into the curriculum in Palestine. The ministry of education system has a vision of using on the traditional rote learning approach with very limited scope for the application of concepts, and least of which is the problem of access to modern technology platforms to keep pace with learning and teaching in the 21st century. Uganda's education system continues to confront three key challenges at all education levels: access to, quality of, and relevance of education. And COVID-19 demands that we rethink the trajectories to diffuse e-learning or any other means to augment or replace our traditional classroom- centric educational delivery systems. This affected negatively the inclusive practices that the whole educational systems were heading forward based on the global SDGs giving a new face to educational inequality. This change, some say will accelerate the education reform that was crawling for decades towards a more innovative system that focuses on resilience, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, self-regulation and digital literacy (Burg, 2020; Burns, 2011 and KUB 2021).

As an organization mandated to support Palestinian refugees, UNRWA-Gaza Field Office had to take steps responding to the crisis and assuming its responsibility in sustaining education delivery to 280000 Palestinian refugees in that critical time. Luckily, it had already had an education in emergency program in place as it is serving Palestinian refugees in conflict areas. The pandemic was a different situation, but with the EiE in place, there was something to start with and add on to continue providing quality education agency wide. With the experience gained in remote teaching although not mature, the UNRWA is hopefully facing the first strong wave with more confidence (UNRWA, 2021).

The study problem:

E-learning has been used for several years in education particularly in light of the technological era where many electronic items are used like smart phones. Covid-19 forced almost all the educators to find an alternative method of teaching young learners in primary schools.

We have nearly 250 million students in primary schools in Gaza strip. These students were exposed to being away from education and expanding the gap of non-learning. Thus, stakeholders in Gaza strip took a step forward to getting these students study in a remote learning , distance

International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Applied Science (IJSEAS) – Volume-7, Issue-11, November 2021
ISSN: 2395-3470
www.ijseas.com

learning or study self learning materials. Yet, a lot of obstacles were there to hinder some aspects of the e-learning process.

The current study aims at investigating the barriers to employing e-learning for primary school students in the COVID19 pandemic, and ways to treat them.

The study questions:

1- How sustainable is e-learning from the teachers' perspectives?

2- What are the barriers that teachers face in the distance e-learning process?

3- What are the ways that could help treating the barriers that the teachers face in the e-learning process during covid-19?

Method:

The study followed the descriptive analytical approach. The study examined a representative sample in 64 primary school teachers who were chosen randomly from 22 primary schools in 3 different educational areas in Gaza Governorate. The educational areas were (East, West, South); the East has 8 primary schools, the West has 7 primary schools and the South has 7 as well. This was to investigate the teachers' challenges that they faced while teaching students electronically during the lockdown due to COVID 19 crisis. Data were collected from an electronic questionnaire that was given to the teachers who were engaged in the electronic teaching during the second semester of the school year 2019-2020.

Results and Discussion:

Each community had to find its own solutions and respond immediately to the unprecedented crises as there was no point waiting for copying successful remote teaching modalities. Each educational system was held responsible and accountable to serve its citizens. Some say that it ended the long debate about the effectiveness of screens in education because screens won apparently! Here came the time when blue screens were the world's only window! Covid 19 has accelerated the shift to e-learning at a huge speed. Some of the changes it has caused may stay forever. In a matter of weeks, coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed how students are educated around the world.

The benefits stated in the given questionnaires showed that 59% of the teachers who participated in the study find the online learning beneficial and fruitful for them, their students and their families.

Taking Classes from home is more enjoyable.
Facing people online is easier than facing them at school.
Keeping up to date with digital technology is great.

International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Applied Science (IJSEAS) – Volume-7, Issue-11, November 2021
ISSN: 2395-3470
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Online class save time, thus I can do lots of other chores.
Taking classes from home makes us closer to our family.
Online classes save money as we don't travel to the school.
Online classes save our lives as we are not vulnerable to accidents.
Online classes make teachers closer to the students and their families.

While 51% of the participant teachers find several challenges facing them and their students regarding online learning.

Having internet connection is a hard job in Gaza.
Electricity Problems disturb teaching and learning in Gaza.
Poor internet connection disturb the online classes in Gaza.
Online education needs much training on online programs.
Online classes take much time than the physical presence at school.
Online classes need gadgets like wifi- computer or laptop in our homes.
When students join or leave online classes, this disturbs teaching and learning.
Students participate effectively in the online classes
Taking the attendance online is a hard job.
Answering all the questions of the students online is easy.
The objectives of the online class are fulfilled completely.
Providing students with alternative notes is a must when they can't join the online classes.
Giving daily online assignments is an easy task.
Providing feedback to students of their assignment is easy.
Giving online classes gets us suffer from body problems.

Most of the challenges were related to the internet and the facilitated devices infra-structure. This may be resulted to that more than 2,000,000 people living in a narrow coastal plain not more than 360,000 kilometers, Gaza Strip is ranked as one of the most densely-populated areas on Earth. The entire region is characterized by growth in youth population which will lead to significant demographic change over the coming years a consequent increased demand for education.

Discussion

Gaza is considered as a vulnerable and complicatedly unstable area which is subject to repeated conflict. On top of all this, Gaza has been under blockade for over 11 years, going in or out is very restricted.

Power shortage is a problem people are still trying to live with. They have to adapt themselves to 18-hour power cut a day and sometimes less or even more and this adds more limitations on people's lives

Most Students at Gazan schools are Palestinian refugees and many of them have traumatic experiences that lead to many class problems like violence, withdrawal, lack of concentration or

International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Applied Science (IJSEAS) – Volume-7, Issue-11, November 2021
ISSN: 2395-3470
www.ijseas.com

excessive hyperactivity. Their Parents might be emotionally affected in a way that makes it hard for them to provide the support their children' needs.

Although the covid 19 has swept many parts of the world by March 2020. However, Gaza was kept away from the virus till late August. The tight closure imposed on Gaza kept the strip safe for 7 months. Despite being free from active cases, schools were closed on 8 March 2020. There were no clear instructions to shift on remote teaching. However, EIE plans were activated and instructions on using the self-learning material were circulated. The school year ended in late May and students were assessed based on the face to face learning that year.

In 4th August 2020, schools were reopened and the first month was designed to bridge the gap of the learning the students have missed before starting the new year. All teachers got training on how to run virtual classes to shift to scenario C when obliged. Special material was designed for this phase. In Gaza Strip, about 1200 English language teachers teach about 285000 students studying in about 276 UNRWA schools. UNRWA schools in Gaza have large classes that accommodate more than 45 students per class and most of these schools work as double shifts. In scenario A for starting the school year was normal classes with 40- 50 students in the class studying for just three hours and at the same time familiarizing the students with online format. Some homework assignments were giving via google classrooms. Students were urged to register and log in. Schools updated the students' details, documenting those who might be marginalized because of economic and social issues.

Conclusion

In its attempt to respond to the unstable situation in Gaza and in some other fields where UNRWA operates, UNRWA has launched an education in emergency program to provide education for Palestinians in times of emergencies when students do not have access to regular schooling.

The first actual COVID19 hit Gaza in late August 2020. On 24th August curfew was imposed all over the strip looking more than 2 million people at home. The locked down in Gaza is very different. With more than 20 hours power cut, heat waves of August, lack of water and a new wave of escalation and regular air-raids, the situation was very critical.

Suggestions to treat the faced problems:

Training teachers on how to teach remotely.

Finding out ways of how to deal with students with additional needs.

Finding ways to change the teachers' attitudes towards e-learning.

Raising the parents' awareness of how to deal with the e-learning process.

Increasing the teachers' ability to use the e-learning applications.

Providing a clear plan about the use of e-learning syllabi.

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