SHIFTING TO ONLINE EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS IN PALESTINE

"CHALLENGES BECOME OPPORTUNITIES"

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19, the global pandemic first reported in December 2019, has caused many drastic shifts in the world. A significant number of these unexpected changes were in the field of education. Educators were forced to shift to online teaching without any preparation, and with minimal guidance or support. Many of the challenges which occurred during the move to virtual teaching have the potential to improve educational processes. Policymakers and educational leaders must reflect on the past year-and-a-half of online learning in order to plan and develop learning strategies. In Palestine, a land under occupation and with limited resources, education has been interrupted in the past mainly for political reasons. Thus, interruptions to education and the possibility of shifting to online teaching may occur anytime for any reason. This reflective essay, based on my lived experience and observation as an educator in Palestine for the past decade, will shed light on the hardships that school educators in Palestine faced due to Covid-19 and consider how they may become opportunities in the long term for learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 4th 2020, the closure of schools was declared due to Covid-19 disrupting the education of about 1.5 billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020a). In Palestine, 1.3 million students were out of school (UNESCO, 2020a). By March 10th, the Ministry of Education (MoE) declared a move to online education (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). The shift to online teaching took place in 186 countries around the world, regardless of their educational systems or teachers' readiness (Li & Lalani, 2020).

The change in delivery of education from classroom-based to online learning occurred under a pandemic where feelings of fear, anxiety and isolation were present in teachers, administrators, and learners. Online teaching has advantages such as flexibility, efficiency, convenience, and the ability to include visual materials. Nonetheless, educators faced numerous hardships and transformations during their transition to virtual teaching (Gautam, 2020).

In Palestine, the MoE tried to alleviate the impact of online education by keeping its educational website accessible and broadcasting lessons through YouTube,

radio and television (World Bank, 2021). It also activated an education portal at schools to keep parents and students connected with teachers and administrators (UNESCO, 2020). However, there were many obstacles to online learning, such as weak infrastructure, weak internet network, limited training to teachers, and lack of accessibility to online resources (Shraim & Crompton, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This paper sheds light on the possibilities for transforming these challenges into successes.

II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Palestinians assumed ownership of their educational system in 1994, right after the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was established (Jabareen, 2003). Historically, Palestine was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for around 400 years. The British Mandate took over in 1917, continuing until the Israeli occupation started in 1948 (History, 2021). The MoE was formed in 1996 with a mission to provide education for all (MoEHE, 2021), however it could not operate to full capacity due to the occupation and its restrictions (European Training Foundation, 2018). Therefore, forming educational policies in Palestine has been critical due to political, economic, social, and cultural factors.

As of the academic year 2019-2020, there were approximately 3074 schools in Palestine, with about 1,309,165 students and 58,470 teachers (PCBS, 2021). Of these schools, around 400 are private schools and 374 are United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) schools, which makes the public school sector in Palestine the largest provider, accounting for about 75% of schools (PCBS, 2021). The MoE supervises all schools, however private and UNRWA ones have their own regulations.

III. CHALLENGES

Research demonstrates that online learning has given teachers the chance to teach in creative and innovative ways (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). However, many challenges persisted during online teaching through the pandemic. Having faced many hardships first-hand as an educator in Palestine during Covid-19, while also working with other educators in the field through the Palestinian English Language Teachers Association (PELTA), has inspired me to further research challenges to online teaching during Covid-19.

A. *Integrating technology*

Due to the changes necessitated by Covid-19, educators promptly started a new phase in education which relies heavily on technology. Integrating technology in education can make teaching livelier (School of Education, 2020). Integrating technology in teaching can include using a computer or an interactive whiteboard, video conferencing, creating resources, encouraging research, using Google Docs, blogging, managing course contents, using polls, and much more (Edutopia, 2007). Using the discussion boards, group chats, and other features is crucial (Lewis & Hesson, 2021). The MoE in Palestine has established a plan to invest in integrating technology in education. In 2013, classrooms were gradually prepared with the internet, interactive LCDs, and teachers' basic training, which resulted in a rapid increase in technology usage in education (Qaddumi, Bartram, & Qashmar, 2021). The advancement in technology of mobile companies has put pressure on shaping the role of educators to adjust in line with the growing popularity of the digital world (Traxler, 2018).

For many teachers in Palestine, integrating technology in education means utilising mobile phones, social media and cloud computing in delivering the lessons (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Teachers made use of the social media they use in their daily life, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to create groups with their students (World Bank, 2021). However, a number of educators were still at a mediocre level in using technology and needed guidance and training to catch up with the tech savvy educators, and thus they were not prepared to teach online (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Additionally, many educators, students, and families did not see the value of online learning (Hew, Jia, Gonda & Bai, 2020; Shraim & Crompton, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The rapid learning by the younger generation of how to use new technologies has created a gap, and different perspectives, between their generation and older ones (Lisenbee, 2016; Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Teachers were not equally equipped with the needed knowledge and skills to adapt their learning online, which has created a digital gap both among teachers and with learners.

B. *Learners' interaction and motivation*

Learners' engagement is fundamental to ensure that learning is taking place. During online teaching, teachers were not able to form relationships with the students in the same way as before, nor could students interact with each other. Teachers were less able to intervene in misunderstandings, therefore learning had to be driven by tasks that required a high level of self-direction. This lack of engagement and feelings of isolation by the students might be a drawback to online teaching (Gilbert, B. 2015). According to UNICEF (2020), social interaction and students staying in contact with their peers were psychologically essential during the Covid-19 crisis. In order to ensure engagement and motivation of students, teachers should establish a positive environment, keep projects simple and less time consuming (Lewis & Hesson, 2021).

Dividing students into pairs or groups productively during online lessons has been a challenge for many teachers in Palestine (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Supervising the learners while in groups is also demanding. Some research demonstrates that many students still did the work individually behind the screen (Lewis & Hesson, 2021). One way of overcoming this obstacle may be for educators and administrators to plan on mixing synchronous with asynchronous learning (Dorn, Probst, Saraktasannis, 2020). Specifying certain criteria for assigning students into groups might need refining from the teachers. According to Brame & Biel (2015), it is recommended that groups have between two and six members, are heterogeneous, and should have a role for each member so as to avoid conflict.

Some research indicated that online lessons from 15 to 30 minutes are most effective and thus call for learning that does not involve much screen time (Ning & Corcoran, 2020). In this case, students could work in groups ahead of time, asynchronously, and come to class with the outcome.

C. *Collaboration with colleagues*

Another challenge educators have faced in Palestine has been collaborating with their team workers (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Collaboration includes lesson designing and planning, which is crucial to delivering successful lessons. Collaborative planning can have many benefits, such as allowing the teachers to brainstorm creative ideas, helping them see things from new perspectives and fostering student learning outcomes (Gates, 2018). Many studies have demonstrated an increase in the effectiveness of teachers due to collaborative planning (Gutierez, 2021). Collaborative planning is about sharing resources and exchanging ideas, potential learning engagements, appropriate assessment tools, ways of providing feedback, and creative ideas to approach the lessons. It also includes team planning, printing out the worksheets, making copies, organising the lessons, customising certain parts of the plan, accommodating various needs, and including differentiation - all of which require intensive cognitive, pedagogical, research and time management skills. Due to Covid-19, teachers were suddenly expected to plan together from afar, which they had not commonly done before. Although collaborative work was still taking place online, the quality of lessons might not have been as efficient as it would have been in person. This is due to the lack of practice, training and knowledge of appropriate strategies and tools (Shraim & Crompton, 2020).

D. *Under pressure*

Teachers worldwide were under pressure due to the overload of work during the pandemic (Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2021). Getting a handful of emails and notifications from administrators, parents or students daily during virtual teaching was overwhelming. Teachers in Palestine received enquiries, remarks, clarifications and other concerns on and off their work hours. On top of that, assignments were mainly submitted online, as per the MoE's announcement (World Bank, 2021). Teachers felt burdened and stressed from the increasing job demands (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). Many teachers were unsure how to grade assignments virtually. Are teachers familiar with annotations? Do they know how to use them? Are they familiar with other tools they could use to check and provide prompt feedback on the assignments? Checking, grading, and providing proper feedback online needs adequate training, guidance and following up on the administration's behalf. Teachers in Palestine called for a focus on pedagogy and teaching content, rather than assigning grades on assignments, during the pandemic (Shraim & Crompton, 2020).

E. *Are assessments necessary?*

No matter how hard teachers in Palestine try to be creative in holding assessments, many often regress to the traditional ways of performing tests (Bsharat & Ramahi, 2016). This originally stems from the way many teachers were taught in the past. This could also be due to their lack of knowledge, pedagogical skills, or related tools, but that is a different issue that will not be addressed in this article. Designing assessments and having the proper tools, rubrics, and criteria have been challenging and confusing for teachers during online teaching (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In April 2020, the MoE announced that there would be no online assessments except for the examination of 12th grade (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). In private schools this was still optional, and most schools chose to hold online assessments.

To ensure assessments are practical, there has to be curriculum modification to suit different student needs during online learning. Approaches to learning and intended learning outcomes need to be aligned with teaching methods (Biggs, 2003). The focus should be on the **HOW**, not the **WHAT**. How do teachers deliver instructions so that students fully understand them, grasp the concepts, are able to apply them and thus learn for life? How do teachers ensure that students are connecting their learning and knowledge to real-life examples? The **'WHAT'** is already there (the book, the content, the resources, etc.) It is the **'HOW'** that educators need to focus on. Why reinvent the wheel when teachers can adapt and customise what is already out there? There are plenty of resources. The ultimate goal is providing quality education and equipping students with the skills needed to achieve anything they desire

in life. Therefore, teachers have to ensure assessment is adequately measuring and providing insight into learners' strengths and thus allowing teachers to work with learners on what they need to get better at.

F. *"You cannot pour from an empty cup."*

Among all the hardships that educators faced during online teaching due to the pandemic, the most challenging was maintaining their wellbeing and keeping sane in a situation which was highly demanding, unstable, and unsafe. Many educators were under pressure to plan, organise, care and teach under ambiguous situations while at the same time taking care of their own families. Staying sane, enthusiastic and motivated about teaching is a key factor in fostering quality learning outcomes. Research shows a positive correlation between teachers' enthusiasm and learners' positive development (OECD, 2020). In order to achieve and maintain a positive learning environment, educators should proactively seek help when needed and try to stay positive.

Moreover, teachers needed nourishment, support, encouragement, and lots of appraisal and appreciation for what they were going through. Teachers' stress might occur when they feel demands are exceeding their workload and when they feel undervalued or not listened to (Collie, 2021). This is where the prominent role of policymakers, administration and leadership management team comes in (Shraim & Crompton, 2020). They need to proactively reach out to teachers to empower and support them holistically (Adair, 2020). Teacher satisfaction is key to having a productive and robust work environment, which boosts learner outcomes.

G. *An advantage!*

A favourable change that resulted from the unforeseen shift to online teaching was the flexibility in teachers' daily schedules, the minimal direct intervention of administration, and not having to do yard supervision.

Playground supervision is a serious responsibility which no amount of training can prepare teachers for; thus, many teachers would prefer not to perform it, if they were given the option (Dabel, 2017). Most teachers in Palestine are expected to supervise students during the breaks and be well trained in first aid (EducationClusterStrategy, 2020-2021). A perceived benefit during online teaching was that teachers did not have to worry about students falling in the breaks, getting injured or getting into fights.

Additionally, there were minimal weekly face to face meetings of new regulations, instructions or updates at many schools, which could have always been sent by email. Minero (2020) stated that the pandemic has interrupted the staff meetings and allowed the teachers and administrators to rethink and improve the process of the meetings. Teachers seemed to enjoy receiving necessary information by watching a pre-recorded video at their own pace, or by reading the information without having to attend a meeting that would consume time from their lesson planning and preparation (Minero, 2020). Further, teachers had the flexibility to plan and grade at their own pace at home, which was an advantage.

IV. TRANSFORMATION

The previously mentioned challenges can lead the way to continue adopting online learning while frequently enhancing it. In order to transform all hardships into opportunities, the following recommendations shed light on what could be done to move forward:

1. Educators can design courses which maximise student learning by integrating technology into education, keeping in mind that many students will be using their mobile phones to access the lessons instead of laptops or tablets. Teachers can also use technology that is accessible to students; mix online and offline technologies; and plan for both synchronous and asynchronous learning. On the other hand, telecommunication companies can support providing internet to families, increasing bandwidth to teachers and allowing students to browse educational websites for free. In addition, the MoE can provide laptops, headsets, phones, and tablets for teachers and students in need.

2. Educators need support to supervise and support students working in pairs or groups to boost learners' interaction. The administration can use the experience of more skilled teachers or train assistants to support groups of students online. To keep learners motivated, it is important to allow time for conversations and to socialise during the online lessons. Most importantly, teachers need to maintain a good relationship and focus on the emotional wellbeing of the students. Planning warmups, building a connection and a comfortable, trust-based environment is essential to igniting learning and establishing routine and structure. It is also imperative that teachers keep the students updated on their progress. Teachers can create a digital classroom that students can access for updates and information and to communicate. Including elements of student choice in designing the tasks and creating opportunities for them to discuss what they are learning would build students' interest and engagement.

3. The challenge of collaborating with colleagues presents an opportunity for administrators to observe and analyse what has worked well to plan

accordingly. The administration team needs to support and provide the needed training for teachers to employ their pedagogical, methodological, and research skills in virtual collaborative lesson planning.

4. Teachers need to focus on organisation and time management skills to deal with the vast number of notifications and pressure. Prioritising tasks, allocating time wisely, setting limits, and sticking to the schedule is essential. Educators need to stop lesson planning and start unit planning and be flexible. It is also better that teachers focus on what the students need to **get to** instead of what teachers need to **get through**. This challenge would prompt administrators to improve the way assignments are received, managed, and stored online, so they can be smoothly accessed and reviewed by students.

5. Are Assessments necessary? Administrators need more insight and outsourcing to provide ample supply of methods, tools and ideas of assessments. Teachers need to be flexible enough to adapt and customise their assessment resources. It is pivotal to ensure that learning is happening and connected to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the students, and not only for the sake of grades as learning outcomes.

6. To ensure educators stay sane, administration and educational leaders need to play a proactive role in providing emotional support to teachers. They can encourage, listen to and value teachers' opinions and provide them with constant feedback. They need to be patient with them and understand their needs, different backgrounds and perceptions. They can provide resources for teachers to use and recognise the professional burden placed on them during a personally stressful time.

V. CONCLUSION

According to the CEO of Coursera, "as universities develop their digital competencies, what has started as a short-term response to a crisis will likely become an enduring digital transformation of higher education" (Maggioncalda, 2020). This applies to schools as well. The education sector must be flexible and use this crisis to learn to be ready for future uncertainties. Learning how to make the best out of online learning is imperative to ensure learning is moving forward. The previous year and a half of online teaching in Palestine has alerted administrators and education leaders to teachers' needs for more care, attention, guidance and appreciation. When teachers are invested in and empowered, they give their best and thus raise learners' outcomes that will positively reflect learning quality and, consequently, society. Online education might be inevitable in the future due to many factors. All the previously mentioned hardships can become learning opportunities, diversifying skills, developing, and moving forward. This can be done by constantly evaluating and assessing the virtual learning process while investing in educators and supporting them.

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