Original Paper

COVID-19 as the Catalyst of E-leadership and ICT Implementation in Israeli Arab Sector Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The article discusses the vicissitudes of practical implementation of distance learning by the use of ICT technologies in the elementary schools of Israel's Arab sector, following the lock-down induced by COVID-19 pandemic. The author describes his own experience of distance learning as a pedagogical coordinator, while addressing various aspects of collaborative practices, parental cooperation, and leadership in the context of emergency management policies and methods. The experience is certainly both unprecedented and informed by lessons learned from previous emergencies: the author seeks to integrate the existing scholarly and practical frameworks of knowledge and the conclusions that can already be drawn from the experience that is entirely new, ongoing, and open-ended. The article discusses strengths and weaknesses of distant learning experience in the elementary school and provides tentative recommendations for the unknown and uncertain future.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, distant learning, e-leadership, collaborative decision-making, uncertainty

1. Introduction

The current pandemic of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has been causing far-reaching and irreversible changes in all the world systems. One of the most serious impacts of COVID-19 has been in the field of education worldwide, as recognized by UNESCO (2020). More than 300 million students around the globe had to interrupt their schooling, thereby threatening their future education rights (Handoyo, 2020). In an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, schools and universities closed their doors, and learning activities were postponed until further notice, that is, to an indefinite time (Shira, 2020). Such countries as China, Italy, Japan, to name but a few, closed their schools (Palu, 2020). Thousands of universities, among them Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford have moved to online teaching (Yan, 2020). Israel has not been an exception, as on March 16 the Ministry of Health decided on moving into

quarantine and cancelling schools and universities, thereby moving to the modality of distance learning.

The idea of distant learning due to social distancing is not new, as "the end of the world is apparently no excuse to miss class" (Hamaniuk, Semerikov, & Shramko, 2020, p. 2) (Note 1). The pandemic planning worldwide has included emergency response plans to assure the continuity of learning, in case of schools closures. For instance, in 2009, in response to possible closure due to the H1N1 virus, the Department of Public Instruction in Wisconsin encouraged schools to develop alternative ways of instruction, such as web-based distance instruction, mailed lessons, teaching through local radio or television stations (Evers, 2009). Yet, the current shift caused by the implementation of social distancing measures is unprecedented, as most types of human social interactions, including learning, have moved from the offline to the online world: as Zheng Yang put it, we might be witnessing the "*largest online education practice in the human history*" (Yan, 2020, p. 2, italics added).

It is true that online courses have been developing worldwide at exponential speed, however, there was still a combination of online instruction with face-to-face teaching, so-called hybrid or blended courses (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011; Allen & Seamna, 2013). The online education has been entering the mainstream, yet before the COVID-19 it was rather a recommendation and aspiration, than a necessity, that is to say, it was a matter of choice and a question of reform and innovation. Nowadays, it has turned into a matter of inevitable fact, imposed by the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemics.

In order to carry out the project of distant learning, the educators worldwide and in Israel, in particular, have been required to adapt the content, pedagogy, and assessment to fit the new modality of teaching. They have been required to use the Learning Management Systems such as Moodle and Blackboard to communicate with students about the course, by sharing course content such as PowerPoint slides, assignments and other materials that can be uploaded to the course site. In addition, the extensive use of Zoom application has been required to either stream or record classes. The advantage of Zoom consists in the ability to choose to schedule a Zoom class meeting during the normally scheduled lessons, as well the possibility to record those meetings in order to be viewed later.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has yet again challenged the traditional management tools in times of emergencies, featured by hierarchic and centralized methods and policies, emphasizing the need for collaboration and de-centralization (Kapucu & Garaev, 2011). It has been shown that those policies were not feasible in such cases as September, 11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina disasters and resulted in failures, defined as "bureaucratic nightmare" (Bier, 2006; Ward & Wamsley, 2007). The effective decision-making in emergencies demands a non-traditional approach and urges employing tools that have characteristics of non-hierarchical structure and utter flexibility (Kapucu & Garaev, 2011).

On the other hand, as far as education is concerned, there has been a worldwide trend toward decentralization of school governance (Addi-Raccah, 2015; Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2016). According to the decentralization approach, sharing school governance with teachers

and parents is the most effective strategy for improving the educational system (Ingersoll, 2003). Therefore, the management policy during emergencies suits quite well the conceptual framework of what constitutes effective educational policies, especially regarding the ICT implementation in teaching and learning.

The following section describes the process of decision-making following the Ministry of Health orders to close schools throughout the country and move to distant learning in Israel Arab Sector Elementary Schools, while addressing the stages of the learning process and difficulties encountered by the stakeholders at its implementation.

2. E-learning in Corona Times

On Friday, March 13, the school staff was notified about the urgent meeting scheduled between the school principal, the ICT coordinators and professional pedagogical coordinators, following the Ministry of Health decision to close schools and move to a distant learning modality. The meeting took place on Sunday, 15. During the meeting, the participants were assigned different responsibilities involving various fields of action. The principal was in charge of building a schedule for distance learning in terms of hours. The ICT coordinators assumed upon his shoulders everything that concerned effective communication between teachers and learners, including providing guidance, counselling, and solutions if necessary; in addition, he took responsibility for preparing the performance report for teaching units and tasks. The pedagogical coordinators, together with their teaching staff, prepared learning materials and teaching units, making use of content providers from the Ministry of Education on the core subjects: Arabic, Hebrew, English, Sciences and Math.

The communication between homeroom teachers, professional teachers, learners, and parents occurred via the school website, Classroom, Google meet, Whatsapp, and Zoom: the applications were also used for transferring the learning materials, addressing questions and arising problems. For any problem that might arise regarding the use of ICT, the teacher would refer to the ICT coordinator. In addition, the principal requested that every day in the morning the homeroom teacher perform an opening conversation with learners, to discuss their feelings and reduce their stress and anxieties.

The stages of the learning process were determined as follows:

Stage 1. In the morning, before the beginning of classes, the learner fills in the attendance and participation form with personal details.

Stage 2. The learner performs the task and submits it via one of the e-means mentioned before

Stage 3. In the end of the schooling day, the learner fills in the form regarding the task performed, including the title, the subject, and the means of communication

In the meantime, the teacher fills in the form regarding the teaching unit studied. The forms of both learners and teachers are concentrated in the hands of the ICT coordinator who, in turns, sends the results to the principal on a daily basis, for the sake of assessing the work of both teachers and learners. The principal sends her remarks or comments to the teachers, if needed.

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The lack of ICT proficiency has been one of the most salient difficulties, encountered in the process, by teachers. The emergency of COVID-19 – induced distant learning has exposed all those problems that were earlier addressed by many a research regarding the obstacles to the successful ICT implementation in schools. Those teachers who were previously negligent about integrating the ICT in teaching methods found it particularly hard to use the web-based platforms for distant learning, and therefore preferred using Whatsapp, which they found more familiar and therefore friendlier.

Others, who were more digitally literate at the first place and more willing to use ICT in their teaching, encountered less difficulties and felt on a more safe ground, yet in the beginning, there was a lot of pressure and the sense of uncertainty mixed with helplessness.

An additional major difficulty consisted of effectively communicating with parents and elementary school learners, aged 6-7, which constituted a novel and unfamiliar experience for most. In particular, teachers found it especially overwhelming and stressful to deal with the flood of messages from both parents and learners, which included endless inquiries and complaints. There were also technical difficulties, such as the absence of computers at home or no internet connection. The teachers felt especially stressed by the double overflow of messages, arriving from administration and colleagues, which, unfortunately, increased the sense of pressure and unease.

As the time went by, the teachers became gradually accustomed to the new situation, as all the stakeholders continued to act under the circumstance of no other choice left. In addition, the Ministry of Education came to help, providing useful and effective guidance for online teaching. Yet, the time pressure and overload, combined with other pressures and uncertainties are still there to stay, posing a serious challenge to the effective performance for teachers, learners, and parents alike.

3. Conclusions

In essence, the novel coronavirus created the "Moment of Truth" for the ICT reform and its implementation, constituting a climax point for the tremendous pressure on educational institutions worldwide to adopt the technology and assimilate ICT as a growth engine in the education system (Clegg, Hudson, & Steel, 2003). The demand to shift to the online learning modality mobilized the process of innovation with all its demands to cooperate between principals, teachers, learners and parents in order to assure its success.

Before the COVID-19 forced us to act in a new world, it was known that one of the most significant factors in introducing changes to school and in their assimilation is the school principal. Those projects and programs that are encouraged and supported by the principal had the greatest chances of success (Al Harbi, 2014; Ghamrawi, 2013). In the new context, the situation has changed dramatically, and the major responsibility for success has become transferred to teachers, learners, and parents, while the figure of the principal somewhere lost its significance in leading the process. Yet, that still confirms the recent pre-COVID-19 research that has been consistently emphasizing the importance of distributed leadership (e.g., Barber et al., 2010).

The research has long emphasized the importance of parental involvement and its contribution to the successful implementation of ICT reform (Beycioglu, Ozer, & Sahin, 2013; Dor, 2013). The parental involvement has been viewed as a part of the decentralized approach to school leadership by sharing school governance with both teachers and parents (Ingersoll, 2003). In the present context, the question of parental involvement has become particularly crucial, as the major pressure has been on the parents' shoulders. Nowadays, along with teachers, they had to share the full responsibility for their children's schooling and learning process, while forced to stay home under the circumstances of the quarantine and coping with their other duties and pressures.

A certain sense of ambiguity, or, rather, twofold meaning emerges, as COVID-19 continues to dictate the global reality and routine, as far as the online learning is concerned, just as it happens in other fields of human activities. On the one hand, the distant learning opened a wide range of opportunities and increased the possibilities and immediate access to multiple knowledge databases; it added much fun to learning activities and painted them with flexibility and creativity. On the other hand, the emergency settings uncovered and intensified the existing problems such as alarming lack of resources in Israel's Arab sector. The sad fact of kids not having a computer at home and having to share one computer with several brothers brought to light what had been labelled "Digital Divide" and made the Ministry of Education pay attention to the needs of such underprivileged population as Arab and Jewish- Orthodox sector, in terms of digital development.

Furthermore, the distant learning imposed by the pandemic has raised the old new question: whether the most advanced, yet remote resources of online learning can ever replace the face-to-face communication with a Teacher. An additional question concerns the hierarchical structures of school organization, including the issues of decision-making, collaborations, and distributed leadership, in the "post-corona" world, reality, and education.

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Note

Note 1. When Cambridge University closed its doors following an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1665, Isaac Newton had to return home and continue his scientific work without his professors to guide him. Remarkably, it was precisely during the times of social isolation when he produced his famous theories, including the theory of gravitation (Conduitt, 2004).