

The Sudden Shift to Distance Learning: Challenges Facing Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores challenges facing teachers in distance education programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in this study are teachers from 8 intermediate schools in Kuwait. A convergent parallel mixed methods research design was used to collect survey and interview data. The study generates survey data from 215 teachers and interview data from 8 teachers to determine teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face. The findings of the study suggest that teachers are willing to use technology but lacked technological and pedagogical knowledge and were not prepared for making the sudden shift to distance education. The study highlights the importance of teachers' professional development in distance education. This study has implications for schools and policy makers who are forced to suddenly revert to distance learning during a pandemic.

Keywords: challenges, remote teaching, distance learning, pandemic

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Problem

The coronavirus (COVID-19) which had ravaged the world appears to be dissipating as most nations are implementing mass vaccination campaigns. In schools and higher educational institutions, educators are finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel and are already considering online distance learning, blended learning and online flipped classrooms as the way forward after the pandemic (Hew et al., 2020). However, Kuwaiti educators, especially in public institutions, have been slow and are unable to keep pace with the needs, desires, and requirements of students because traditional teacher-centric approaches are still prevalent (Alenezi, 2018; Almodaires, Alayyar, Almsaud, & Almutairi, 2019). Moreover, the Kuwaiti education system, like most other systems in other developed nations, is heavily dependent on the presence of students and teachers in the same place at the same time (Alenezi, Woollard, Alenezi, & Alenezi, 2020).

The pandemic has renewed interest in distance learning (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020). However, distance education has brought along several challenges for teachers, such as lack of infrastructure and pedagogical as well as technological skills, and lack of teachers' physical and social presence (Alenezi et al., 2020; Hebebcı et al., 2020). In this emergent situation, most pupils needed the support of teachers but there is a paucity of research on challenges facing teachers when delivering distance learning during the outbreak of pandemics and when lockdowns are in place. In order to encounter similar situations in the future, teachers' views are valuable in order to guide and contribute to the process. Therefore, the current study attempts to provide greater understanding of teachers' challenges and how they are overcoming the barriers and attempting to change their approaches over time. The following sections synthesize the existing research on these challenges of distance learning. The following sections synthesize the existing research on these challenges of distance learning

1.2 Challenges Facing Teachers and the Sudden Shift to Distance Education

Traditional distance education, characterized by limited access to information resources, had confined students to their homes forcing them to learn without communication with teachers or peers (Bates, 2019; Guri-Rosenblit, 2014). This poses the question as to whether the distance learning of today is any different. Internet technologies that are used for online learning has blurred the distinction between distance and traditional learning by merging the two forms of learning, thus causing confusion in widely accepted definitions, terms, notions, and theories on distance learning. This blurring of boundaries between the two forms of education has created a predicament as to what constitutes distance education (Guri-Rosenblit, 2014). However, distance learning is also confused with other parallels, for instance online learning, remote instruction, e-learning and virtual learning which has further

blurred the issue (Traxler, 2018). In the current context, distance learning can be defined as a form of education that effectively utilizes a wide range of tools and technology to deliver instruction and materials, uses new online distance pedagogies to augment the student learning experience and facilitates student-teacher and student-student communication (both synchronous and asynchronous communication) as they are physically separate from each other during the instruction and learning process (Starkey et al., 2021; Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020; Traxler, 2018).

Recent research that has examined distance learning in different countries reveals how technology mediates the role of teachers and students in the process of instruction and learning (Starkey et al., 2021; Greenhow, Lewin, & Staudt Willet, 2020). Distance or online learning has not only paved the way for the emergence of constructivism but has also become a key contributing factor for the emergence of new pedagogies (Bates, 2019; Reid-Martinez & Grooms, 2018). Therefore, educational institutions world over are embracing new technologies and pedagogies with the belief that online learning has the potential to overcome the inadequacies of traditional distance education (Dhawan, 2020), for instance, by providing interaction between students and their teachers or peers, by providing easy access to unlimited information resources such as e-books, journal articles and other online information resources, and to adapt, share, and reprocess the learning materials. However, it has been observed that educators faced many challenges as they had to move everything online hastily (Ferri et al., 2020; Kraft & Simon, 2020).

1.2.1 The Challenge: Moving Everything Online at Lightning Speed

In the context of the health threat caused by the pandemic, educational institutions have turned to distance learning as the only way of ensuring the continuity of education. This unexpected and abrupt move to emergency distance instruction has created considerable challenges for teachers and reduced the extent to which students can engage in learning (Hew et al., 2020; Kraft & Simon, 2020). Teachers are finding it difficult to balance their work and personal life during the pandemic, for instance responding to students' academic, physical, and emotional needs, as well as rapidly planning instruction to embrace the constantly changing situation (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Time is crucial for planning, designing, implementing, and improving educational programmes. However, educators lack time as they have to move everything online rapidly. The pandemic has not allowed for a gradual and balanced approach to distance education. On the other hand, the nature of teachers' work has changed completely and moved into an unknown space where there are no guidelines and where much of what works in traditional classrooms settings may not work online (Winter et al., 2021). In other words, teachers have a narrow preparation window and are unable to meaningfully engage their students. Incidentally, this move is having a profound effect on student learning (Salmons, 2020). Furthermore, the logic of legitimacy appears to drive the stigma that online or distance learning is not a better option as it cannot provide quality education as compared to in-person face-to-face learning (Hodges et al., 2020). In a survey that was administered to over 40,000 students from 118 American universities by EDUCAUSE in 2019, 70% of the students reported that they preferred face-to-face learning environments (Gierdowski, 2019). However, it is hoped this stigma may end as the pandemic rages on (Kraft & Simon, 2020).

1.2.2 The Challenge: Passive Students

Research has demonstrated that online distance learning can only be effective if students are methodical and orderly, determined and autonomous (Brown, 2019). Recent research shows that students are passive and resist new experiences, have low self-confidence, are unable to interact appropriately with their peers, have problems interacting with teachers, have attentional difficulties, are easily distracted, and lack motivation and self-discipline (Winter et al., 2021). Such challenges are mainly related to the lack of human interaction between teachers and students and between students and their peers (Rudnick, 2020). Social isolation and lack of interactivity are major shortcomings of emergency remote teaching, as technology is the only channel that pupils use to interact with teachers and peers (Dong et al., 2020). The lack of interaction with peers, friends, classmates, and teachers can have a negative psychological effect (Brazendale et al., 2017). Interaction is crucial for acquiring the knowledge for navigating through various technological and pedagogical tools (Carmo & Franco, 2019). Students are less likely to engage in distance learning activities regularly because of lack of non-vocal elements of nonverbal communication or body language and psychological impacts such as longer durations of quarantine, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma (Brooks et al., 2020; Kraft & Simon, 2020; Carmo & Franco, 2019). Therefore, maintaining meaningful engagement or encouraging all students to participate in online activities at the same time can be a challenge. In order to address this social-level challenge, schools will have to focus not only on "delivering educational materials to children, but in offering an opportunity for students to interact with teachers and obtain psychological counselling" (Wang et al., 2020, p. 395). Teachers can play a vital role by connecting with students and providing psychological

support for students who are at a higher risk of depression due to isolation from their teachers and colleagues and by developing a sense of community (Scull et al., 2020; Berry, 2019).

1.2.3 The Challenge: Teacher Presence

The physical separation between students and instructors is claimed to result in a psychological-communication gap or lead to transactional distance creating a sense of danger, frustration, or students' misunderstandings about themselves and about the learning process (Moore, 1993 cited in Zilka, Cohen, & Rahimi, 2018). Teacher's social presence can encourage meaningful communication; create a climate of cooperation and public discourse through feedback (Zilka et al., 2018). According to Poth (2018) an individual's social presence within the learning environment may not only promote a more engaging and supportive educational experience but also motivate students. Thus, social presence is a "critical affective component" and "one of the more important constructs in determining the level of interaction and effectiveness of learning in an online environment" (Mykota, 2017, p. 137). Dialogue between students and teachers as well as support for the learners and their needs may increase students' sense of social presence. This requires teachers to actively partake in the discussion to encourage student participation (Zilka et al., 2018). However, establishing and maintaining a 'presence' online as depicted by Garrison (2017) is not easy when lockdowns are in place as much of the learning is completed asynchronously, for example pre-recorded lessons or lectures. Most importantly, students participating in asynchronous learning environments have to be extremely self-motivated and have a high level of self-discipline as teachers are not virtually present (Ferraro et al., 2020).

1.2.4 The Challenge: Lack of Preparedness of Teachers

In order to learn about teachers' experiences in the rapid transition to online teaching, it is essential to examine how prepared teachers are for online teaching. Social distancing and lockdowns have significantly disturbed traditional educational practices, but teachers are continuing to rely on traditional teaching pedagogies when delivering instruction in the distance learning environment (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020). Some of the challenges facing teachers are spending a considerable amount of time on familiarising with the online teaching environment, using new approaches, for example organising virtual teaching related activities, virtual meetings, and group discussions, to engage with students (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Scull et al., 2020). This suggests that teacher preparedness continues to be an issue across most contexts (Howard et al., 2020). One of the requirements for teachers in the situation they are in today is to adapt to the new teaching environment. Adaptability here refers to the potential of the teachers to adjust their psycho-behavioural mechanism to cope with the changes and uncertainties (Collie & Martin, 2017). It is claimed to comprise three dimensions, namely behaviour adjustment, emotional adaptation, and change in mindset (Collie et al., 2018). Adaptability is different from teachers' resilience or having the perseverance to deal with challenges.

The quick move to emergency remote teaching has frustrated teachers who were unable to decipher how to use digital tools, online resources, and apps for distance education. In other words, the educators were used to conventional teaching delivery and were obliged to embrace technology although they were not prepared for this sudden shift to teaching remotely (Barrot, Llenares, & del Rosario, 2021; Winter et al., 2021). Skills, knowledge, and competencies are required for online teaching and teachers must know how and when to use technology appropriately (Winter et al., 2021). Previous studies have highlighted that teachers must believe in the use of technology and be willing to use it in their daily practice (Ertmer, 2005; Tondeur et al., 2017). Overall, the technological challenges are mainly related to teacher digital competence (Ferri et al., 2020).

Teachers' pedagogical orientation is another challenge. Researchers have argued that shaping a teachers' pedagogical orientation involves fundamentally changing the role of the teacher from that of a sage-on-the-stage to that of a guide-on-the-side (Tarling & Ng'ambi, 2016). However, in distance learning environments, teachers' pedagogical orientation must align with their technological competence (Carmo & Franco, 2019). The pedagogical challenges are principally associated with teachers' lack of digital skills and lack of social and cognitive presence or the ability to construct meaning through sustained communication within a community of inquiry (Ferri et al., 2020).

Technology is increasingly being used not only to deliver instruction, but also to support and assist learners and to assess students in innovative ways, for example using analytics to assess the quality and practicality of online resources and track student involvement in online activities (Martin & Ndoeye, 2016). However, aligning pedagogy, content, assessment, and appropriate use of technologies, and online strategies is a challenge especially in distance education (Zhang et al., 2020). Assessing students during a pandemic is even more challenging. A recent study from Kuwait found that summative assessments are still being used to assess final examinations and also used as an evaluation tool for curriculum, teacher performance, and school performance

(Alhashem & Agha, 2020). Another study from the Middle East found that the main challenges of remote assessment were academic dishonesty, infrastructure, and commitment of students to submit assessments (Guangul et al., 2020). These results suggest that the recent return to distance education has exposed the lack of preparedness of teachers in Kuwait to formatively assess students.

1.2.5 The Challenge: Lack of Support/Adequate Professional Development

Teachers' frustration and the reliance on conventional pedagogies indicates that there is the need for thoughtfully planning distance education and engaging teachers in online professional development programmes (Richter & Idleman, 2017). Professional development opportunities are required so that teachers can adapt to distance education more easily (Hebebcı et al., 2020). Workshops or training for teachers can improve their technological and pedagogical competencies in online learning, for example to develop interactive learning approaches, improve communication, and mitigate challenges associated with student motivation and engagement (Cardullo et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020). This suggests that a lack of support from policy makers may result in poor participation in distance education.

The overarching research question that guided this research is:

What are the teachers' views on the challenges presented by distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research question is answered based on two constructs discussed in the literature review: technological and pedagogical challenges.

In the next section, we will use an appropriate research methodology that would permit exploration of teachers' perspectives, practices, and challenges.

2. Research Methodology

Given the centrality of teachers in this study, their experiences and perspectives need to be captured to explore the challenges facing them when schools in Kuwait are making the transition to distance learning. Therefore, a convergent parallel mixed methodology consisting of both qualitative and quantitative methods was used for this study. This research design allowed the researchers to conduct the quantitative and qualitative phases simultaneously, collect and analyse the survey and interviews independently, and interpret the results together (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Quantitative data were collected and analysed followed by interviews. Although the researcher in this study has adopted a pragmatist stance the current study focuses on giving priority to qualitative methodology. Methodological triangulation was used to directly compare the quantitative and qualitative results. This enabled corroboration and validation.

2.1 Sample

The study targeted 305 intermediate teachers from schools in Kuwait but only 215 participants were surveyed. The response rate was 70%. The participating teachers gave written informed consent. The demographic characteristics of the participants are tabulated below.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency
Gender	Male	93
	Female	122
Experience (in years)	1–5	87
	6–10	16
	Over 11	112
Education level	Postgraduate	177
	Undergraduate	38

All the participants shared a defining characteristic typically teaching at intermediate schools in Kuwait. The participants were chosen from 6 different schools. They had varied experience (see Table 1). As seen in the table, most participants were female (N = 122) as more Kuwaiti women choose teaching as a profession. Data were collected from August 2021 to September 2021.

2.2 Research Instrument

A questionnaire and interview schedule was used to collect data.

2.2.1 Quantitative Phase: Survey

Teachers' perceptions of the challenges of distance education programmes were investigated using the Inverness Institute survey (2021). The questionnaire consisted of five broad hypothesized strands: (i) barriers to effective teaching and learning; (ii) teachers' experiences with distance learning; (iii) teachers' teaching arrangement during the pandemic; (iv) support for teachers when adjusting to the transition to distance learning; and (v) responding to challenges. The questionnaire items were modified and adapted for use with Kuwaiti teachers. The Likert scale statements used the choices 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree', and 'Strongly Agree'. The reliability of each of the 26 items in the survey was evaluated. The alpha coefficient for the 26 items is 0.86 suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The survey instrument was administered using SurveyMonkey and the participants used the hyperlink sent via e-mail and WhatsApp to access the online survey. Consent was obtained prior to participation in the research.

2.2.2 Qualitative Phase: Interviews

Interviews were used to explain, better understand, and explore the teachers' opinions and experiences by further exploring the issues arising from the survey (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019). The open-ended interview questions developed from literature and the study objectives (e.g., teachers' perceptions of the challenges presented by distance learning and the strategies used to overcome the challenges). A semi-structured interview guide was used with questions pertaining to teachers' opinions about the transition to distance learning, the pedagogical strategies adopted by them, the challenges they experienced when providing instruction to their students, as well as the difficulties they believed their students experienced, the support they received from schools and policy makers, and how they coped with the situation.

Interviews were conducted online during using WhatsApp an instant messaging app. Eight teachers who completed the survey agreed to be interviewed. The unique communication and multimedia features offered by WhatsApp (smart phone and laptop version) were exploited. The researcher was able to effectively communicate with the teachers because of the ease of use of the laptop keyboard compared to the small smartphone touchscreen. The interviews, which were recorded, were transcribed by the researcher using Microsoft Word. The use of a laptop allowed for easily copying and pasting the transcripts into the word-processing programme. Thematic analysis was carried out using the framework suggested by Braun and Clark (2013).

2.2.3 Phases of Analysis

To establish trustworthiness, the data was analysed in several phases. Initially, the survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequency statistics were used with the variables. In the next phase, the interview data was thematically analysed, and the 6 steps used were reading the text and familiarizing with the data, coding, exploring themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and producing or finalizing the report (Braun & Clark, 2013). Finally, the data was triangulated. Methodological triangulation was used to triangulate data from the interviews and the survey questionnaire.

3. Results

3.1 Survey Results

The descriptive data are presented here in a narrative style under five thematic headings. Table 2 (Barriers to effective teaching and learning; items 1–9) shows that a vast majority of the teachers did face challenges when using distance education for teaching and learning. However, most teachers did not agree or disagree to the statements as they were not sure whether distance posed challenges.

Table 2. Barriers to effective teaching and learning

Barriers to teaching and learning Items		SD		D		N		A		SA	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Students do not understand content	8	3.7	1	0.5	103	47.9	10	4.6	93	43.3
2	I spend too much time communicating with students	1	0.5	0	0	87	40.5	12	5.6	115	53.5
3	I spend too much time checking assignments	6	2.8	1	0.5	84	39.1	12	5.6	112	52.1
4	I spend too much time on preparing lessons	3	1.4	0	0	74	34.4	13	6.0	125	58.1
5	Student absence and lack of motivation to learn is a challenge	4	1.9	1	0.5	57	26.5	14	6.5	139	64.6
6	Limited access to digital devices (e.g., computer, laptop, tablets)	4	1.9	0	0	86	40.0	12	5.6	113	52.6
7	Limited access to reliable internet connection	6	2.8	1	0.5	70	32.6	14	6.5	124	57.6
8	Not familiar with digital learning tools	35	16.3	5	2.3	75	34.9	11	5.1	89	41.4
9	Not satisfied with the quality of digital learning materials and programs	11	5.1	5	2.3	82	38.1	11	5.1	106	49.3

Table 3 (Teachers' experiences with distance learning; items 10–15) shows that a vast majority of the teachers did experience challenges when making the shift from traditional or blended learning to distance education. However, most teachers did not agree or remained neutral to the statement that transitioning to distance education is very difficult.

Table 3. Teachers' experiences with distance learning

Teachers' experiences Items		SD		D		N		A		SA	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
10	The current conditions of teaching are very challenging	35	16.3	5	2.3	76	35.3	11	5.1	88	40.9
11	The public do not understand what teachers are going through and how difficult it is to adjust to these new circumstances	7	3.3	0	0	65	30.2	14	6.5	129	60.0
12	Transitioning to distance learning/remote instruction has been very difficult	53	24.6	5	2.3	88	40.9	5	2.3	64	29.7
13	With a lot of effort, I have found out how to make distance learning/remote instruction work	18	8.4	1	0.6	76	35.3	14	6.5	106	49.3
14	I am still trying to figure out how to make distance learning work	29	13.5	5	2.3	87	40.5	5	2.3	89	41.4
15	I am trying hard, but I am still struggling although I have used blended learning	10	4.6	0	0	66	30.7	13	6.0	126	58.6

Table 4 (Teachers' teaching arrangement; items 16–18) shows that most teachers were using distance learning (Agree 7.4%; Strongly Agree 33.95%), individualized learning (Agree 6.98%; Strongly Agree 33.49%) and blended or hybrid learning (Agree 6%; Strongly Agree 32.21%). However, a vast majority neither agreed nor disagreed to these statements.

Table 4. Teachers' teaching arrangement

Teaching arrangement Items		SD		D		N		A		SA	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
16	Distance learning with all students	34	15.8	0	0	92	42.8	16	7.4	73	33.9
17	In-person with all students	34	15.8	0	0	94	43.7	15	6.9	72	33.5
18	A hybrid of distance learning and in-person learning	32	14.9	0	0	90	41.9	13	6.0	80	37.2

With regard to support for teachers (Table 5; items 19–21) many felt that they were well supported by the school and policy makers (Disagree 3.26%; Strongly Disagree 29.3%). Once again, most teachers remained neutral in their responses.

Table 5. Support for teachers when adjusting to the transition to distance learning

Support for teachers Items		SD		D		N		A		SA	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
19	Not supported at all	34	15.8	0	0	110	51.2	9	4.2	62	28.8
20	Somewhat supported	31	14.4	5	2.3	120	55.8	8	3.7	51	23.7
21	Very much supported	63	29.3	7	3.3	99	46.0	8	3.7	38	17.7

With regard to the statements (items 22–26) on how the teachers were responding to the challenges (Table 6), many teachers were trying to find new approaches (Agree 5.58%; Strongly Agree 46.05%) and supporting their colleagues (Agree 10.7%; Strongly Agree 46.98%). However, a vast majority remained neutral to creating new lesson plans/materials (52.6%) and for trying new pedagogical strategies (51.2%).

Table 6. Responding to challenges

Responding to challenges		SD		D		N		A		SA	
Items		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
22	I have found new ways to teach under these circumstances	12	5.6	2	0.9	90	41.9	12	5.6	99	46.0
23	I have created new lesson plans and materials	15	6.9	3	1.4	113	52.6	14	6.5	70	32.5
24	I have supported colleagues as they struggle to adapt	4	1.9	0	0	87	40.5	23	10.7	101	46.9
25	I have tried new pedagogical strategies	15	6.9	3	1.4	110	51.2	17	7.9	70	32.6
26	Using new curricula/materials developed by curriculum designers/colleagues	13	6.0	3	1.4	100	46.5	19	8.8	80	37.2

3.2 Interview Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed key issues related to teachers' experiences and perceptions of the challenges of distance education. These findings are organised into the following five thematic clusters and the findings are presented with supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Confusion over making the shift

Responses to the question on teachers' transition to distance learning revealed a nuanced view of teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about the transition to distance learning. Two teachers indicated that distance learning was the only choice under the current situation:

Making the transition to distance learning is a must, due to the health conditions and the pandemic. It is very essential to teach students and not to interrupt their studies. (T2)

The transition had been difficult, but we are making it work. This model is appropriate for the situation we are in. (T4)

However, others disagreed:

I do not agree that we must continue teaching in this way after the pandemic has receded. How are we to really engage students? (T1)

Distance learning is not ideal. Although it's not necessarily anyone's fault but the situation has forced us to deliver instruction online. (T3)

This sudden shift... I do not know how students can become more active and independent learners. (T5)

As one teacher explained:

We were trained to teach using flipped classrooms, blended learning etc., so we can combine traditional face-to-face instruction with technology enabled learning. Therefore, we are struggling. (T2)

The respondents also reported challenges related to teachers struggling with remote instruction and with the use of technology:

I think many teachers lack confidence in using technology and in adjusting to a new instructional approach

Only some teachers are familiar with these things... the rest are using the old way of teaching with new technology. (T4)

The above quotes indicate that the challenges are teacher related. It suggests barriers to effective technology integration including teachers' lack of confidence and pedagogical knowledge for technology use.

Theme 2: Inability to bridge distance for learners

In response to the question about the challenges the teachers faced when supporting their students who were struggling with distance learning the most common response from teachers was that they lacked the ability to hold students accountable.

It is not easy. Most teachers are finding it difficult to engage or motivate students and to hold them accountable. (T4)

Students need us. However, the problem is having them participate in online activities. I am still trying to figure out how distance learning is going to get more students engaged. (T2)

Students are confused about how we are going to assess them. I cannot meet with students via video conferencing unless they request it. (T1)

I know that most students are logging into Zoom meetings, but some are passive. They do not take part in discussions or ask questions. They also do not complete their assignments. So, I am unable to ascertain whether they are learning or not. (T3)

They are not focused. They need direct supervision. (T5)

Some students are showing interest, but parents informed me that they are using it for non-academic purposes.

For those few who are fully involved, I am able to offer support. For those who are not engaged, I can do nothing. (T3)

When the teachers were prompted and queried about the challenges their students are facing that made their tasks more difficult most teachers believed that distance learning environments did not provide the best setting for learning:

It is not that the students are against distance learning. It's just that they were not comfortable. (T1)

When I use Microsoft Forms for quizzes or tests, they find it difficult. (T1)

There were many students who had contracted COVID-19 or have family members who have the virus. On top of it they had to also learn from home. My problem is dealing with distressed students. (T2)

They are struggling to focus and engage although I am only covering much lesser content or lessons online than I what I used to cover in classrooms. It is more challenging to give one-on-one support. (T5)

Two respondents expressed that they missed their students, and that they were unable to see or interact with them face to face. They opined that in a virtual setting they were unable to overcome communication barriers.

Some students are feeling deprived of social contact, they appeared to be miserable and were also less motivated. (T2)

They feel disconnected as they are unable to meet with teachers and classmates. (T4)

These responses indicate that the teachers had concerns for students.

Theme 3: Lack of adequate support

When asked if the institution or ministry is supporting them, the teachers retorted:

I had to teach myself a lot. There was some support though. (T1)

We have been provided with a satisfactory amount of training but need ongoing support. We need intensive training and orientation sessions. (T2)

I think they are receptive of our struggles but there is not much support on how to do things the right way. (T4)

I felt very supported on the technological front for instance various technological strategies, tools, platforms. However, I need pedagogical support for lesson planning. (T3)

We need more professional development to adapt curriculum to distance learning. (T7)

This suggests inadequate provision of professional development. While the teachers were appreciative of the professional development opportunities, they claimed that they needed more expertise to impart distance learning.

Theme 4: Pedagogical challenges

In response to the question about new pedagogical strategies are you using?

I used pre-prepared PowerPoint presentations and educational videos to deliver the scientific material. But I am unable to establish my presence right away or welcome students to the learning community. (T8)

I record my lectures and send links to the students. (T3)

The teachers were not facilitating learning by being innovative or creative. In short, their online presence was not impactful. When prompted whether they were able to collaborate with their students successfully many teachers

claimed that the lack of real-time communication made it difficult to connect with students.

Yes. [we] use technology to communicate. We use email. But some online activities do not allow us to communicate in real time. (T3)

Yes. By using technology. However, it is difficult to collaborate with students when we have no classroom time with them. (T5)

I encourage students to videoconference with peers. (T4)

It is evident from these responses that collaborative learning was not purposeful. The teachers were not able to establish why they had failed to collaborate with students or provide corrective feedback regularly.

Theme 5: Overcoming challenges

On their strengths and what helped make them successful, teachers claimed:

I had been using technology regularly in the classroom prior to the pandemic. However, when we switched to distance learning, I used screencasts and digital copies of assignments and pre-recorded lectures to deliver instruction. (T5)

I used Google Classroom and Google Suite (Docs, Slides, etc.) in order to make the transition fairly smooth. (T6)

These teachers wanted to be successful at distance education as they believed in themselves. Two teachers mentioned that they wanted to reduce the stress of the situation by “*keeping abreast of technologies and constantly familiarizing*” with technology and by “*being adaptable, engaging and showing empathy*”. From these responses it is apparent that the teachers had grit, persistence, and determination. They talked about being resourceful and creative.

4. Discussion

The key findings are technological and pedagogical challenges, lack of professional development and overcoming challenges. Frequency analysis indicated that teachers were not happy with making the transition to distance learning. Although, they felt that they received support to implement or make the shift to distance learning there were a sizeable number of neutral responses which negated their perceptions. One of the key findings was that distance learning impacted their instruction and student engagement. However, it is evident from the surveys that most teachers had selected the neutral option than report their actual opinion. The researchers in this study argue that the participants may have chosen a neutral option as they may not be satisfied with distance learning or because they wanted to avoid negative feeling or were reluctant to voice a socially undesirable opinion (Edwards & Smith, 2016). Since there were many neutral responses, more probes were used during the interviews that followed the survey.

After reviewing all interview data, several themes emerged within challenges which are not very identical to the survey results. The interviewees listed many challenges from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives. The technological challenges were primarily related to a lack of technological knowledge and skills to teach and learn in a distance learning environment. A key fact from the findings of the study was the lack of preparedness of the teachers and their sense of adaptability. This is in line with a previous study (Collie & Martin, 2018) which emphasizes that teachers with better adaptability were more likely to feel better about distance education. Overall, it is apparent that the teachers were not aware of the significance of technology and teacher presence which are crucial in creating a community of inquiry (Garrison, 2017).

Another finding was that the pedagogies required for the effective implementation of distance education were not yet in evidence amongst most teachers. The teachers positioned this issue under several umbrellas. The sudden shift to distance learning was said to represent a good opportunity to acquire better pedagogical practices that promote student-centred learning. However, this study found that one of the main limitations was the loss of interaction between teachers and students. The absence of face-to-face interaction with their students in distance education proved to be a factor of instability for the teachers in this study. This confirms the claims of Carmo and Franco (2019) who reported that pedagogical mediation in a distance learning environment is a challenge because of the lack of non-vocal elements of nonverbal communication or body language elements in interaction mediated by technology.

Another pedagogical aspect was the lack of innovations in teaching methods which are needed to engage students. This finding suggests that changing the pedagogical practices of teachers from a sage-on-the-stage (transmission) to that of a guide-on-the-side by fully integrating new technologies is a complex issue (Tarling & Ng’ambi, 2016). The teachers also did not have constructivist-oriented pedagogical beliefs. The results confirm

previous studies conducted (Alenezi et al., 2020).

The centrality of teachers' professional development in distance learning is highlighted both in the literature reviewed for this study (for example Hebebcı et al., 2020; Richter & Idleman, 2017) and in the interview findings. The teachers claimed that they had never taught online before the transition, and very few had received any meaningful professional development. Survey and interview data indicates that some teachers saw the challenges as opportunities to be solved. What they listed as strengths are characteristics that need to be shared.

In conclusion, many challenges impacted the sudden shift to distance education. They discussed the challenges of technology and the worry they had for social interaction. However, most teachers who positioned this endeavour as a challenge were concerned about their students. They feared that students' motivation and engagement would be more challenging. A major strength of these findings is that of being one of the few studies conducted in the context of distance education during a pandemic.

5. Limitations

This study was conducted only in selected public intermediate schools in Kuwait. While this is a relatively small study, it offers useful information about the challenges facing teachers' when making the sudden transition to distance education. The findings can contribute to informing a rapid response to support teachers in crisis and emergency situations. The participating teachers had used interviews and surveys to self-report their views. There are limitations associated with the use of self-report measures and can be subject to bias. It is claimed that self-report is under respondents' control (Haefel & Howard, 2010). A sample with broader representation of teachers from public and private intermediate schools would strengthen the transferability of the results. Furthermore, the results in the study were based on teachers' self-reports. Future research should involve teachers from secondary schools and cover private schools.

6. Implications

The findings have implications for the practice of distance education as well as for policy makers and suggest that teacher professional development needs to address school closures during lockdowns. Teachers must be trained to not only deliver instruction online but impart instruction using innovative pedagogical approaches when students and teachers are socially isolated. Teacher professional development can help identify specific pedagogical approaches for encouraging and promoting learning communities online. These programmes can guide teachers to be reflective, not only on how to approach distance education, but also how to influence the way their pupils approach learning. The findings can help teachers to mitigate challenges, and support resilience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the researchers.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All research participants were teachers and all procedures performed in this study were in accordance with universal ethical standards. It adheres to the 1964 Helsinki declaration. The authors declare that data compiled for this study and its analysis met those ethical requirements.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all research participants prior to their participation. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the freedom to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost.

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