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FEATURE

Is it still free Education?
A reflection on high school teachers' experiences in Western Iran from digital teaching during the Covid -19 pandemic

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Is it still free Education?
A reflection on high school teachers' experiences in Western Iran from digital teaching during the Covid -19 pandemic.

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Abstract

This article reflects five high school teachers' experiences in Western Iran from digital teaching when the schools were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020. Eight semi-structured interviews with teachers, analysed by grounded theory, were conducted. Interviewees were recruited through a snowball method, and the recruiting continued until the saturation point was reached. The analysed data suggest that digital teaching has not been equally accessible for all students as the less privileged students were left alone to resolve their difficulties in accessing suitable devices and the cost of the internet. The fact is that the existing/structural problems such as poor internet coverage or lack of access to necessary devices or low-speed internet, blockage of applications such as Telegram and the cost of the internet are the main problems teachers face to deliver teaching. Teachers' solutions to overcome these difficulties ranged from off-line classes, where students download the lessons when they can, using various channels for different levels of internet access, being very flexible with timing and finally a limited number of in-person lessons for those students who had no access to the internet. More central measures taken by the central government are necessary for making digital learning available for less privileged students. Measures such as lifting the cyber ban, reducing the cost of internet, providing devices and better internet coverage for students in rural areas.

Keywords: Covid-19, digital teaching, Iranian teachers, educational justice, education and accessibility, Shad, internet ban.

Introduction

2020 was not a usual year for most of the teachers and students around the world. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers and students had to turn to digital teaching or develop alternative methods to continue education. Given the fact that Iranian schools had very little experience of distance teaching prior to the pandemic, the question of accessibility to digital/distance teaching becomes bold. How has transferring to digital/distance teaching impacted education accessibility in Iran? How had the teachers experienced this quick transformation to digital/distance teaching? This article focuses on the experiences of a group of high school teachers in Iran teaching during the pandemic. By using semi-structured interviews, this paper identifies the problems and difficulties teachers faced with delivering teaching and then the initiatives and solutions they came up with to make education accessible and possible for their students.

Background

Iran was among the very first countries that was hit by the Covid-19 virus. On 19 February 2020, Iran reported its first confirmed infections in Qom, 145 km south of Tehran. In a couple of weeks, the virus has spread rapidly in different cities across the country, and already, by 22 February, the schools were closed to slow down the spread of the virus (Iran Human Rights, 2020a). This was only the beginning of a long period of distance or digital learning for students.

After two weeks of school closure, some teachers and rectors initiated online teaching using existing messengers such as WhatsApp or Telegram. However, in April 2020, an online schooling network called Shad ('Joy'), created by the Education Ministry was introduced when it became apparent that students were not returning to school at any near time (Iran Human Rights, 2020b). Shad initially had some technical problems, which have been partially addressed in its updates; however, at the time of writing, Shad still has some technical issues which, according to the teachers, hindered smooth teaching. Installing the application is free of charge and using this application is also supposed to use only free internet – as according to the Iranian Constitution, Education should be free. However, at the time of writing, to avoid paying for Shad, students need to have an Android smartphone plus one using a specific SIM card, 'Hamrah-e-aval'. Students with other smartphones or SIM cards had to pay for the internet while using the Shad application (Iran Human Rights, 2020b).

Due to Shad's technical issues, students and teachers continued to use other channels, namely WhatsApp and Telegram. However, these applications have their own limitations. WhatsApp has a limited capacity for loading files, 60 megabytes, and authorities have blocked Telegram since the protest in December 2017. In early 2017 Telegram was believed to have about 40 million users and consumed half of the country's internet traffic (Erdbrink, 2018). In 2020, when digital teaching replaced classroom teaching, both students and teachers turned again to Telegram; however, they had to use a virtual private network (VPN) to access Telegram. An act which made their access very slow and expensive as they had to pay both for a VPN and also extra traffic. By the time of writing, one year after digital teaching, Telegram is still blocked in Iran, and still, students and teachers use Telegram next to Shad to be able to upload and download lessons and teaching materials.

Research methods and research design:

Research questions:

The paper presented here aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of teachers from teaching digitally during the pandemic?
2. What are the difficulties that these teachers faced teaching during the pandemic?
3. How did teachers overcome the difficulties and obstacles they faced in their new ways of teaching?

To answer the above questions, eight semi-structured interviews (Langdridge, 2007) with five teachers in Iran were conducted. All of the teachers have been teaching social science at high school for at least

12 years. All teachers lived and worked in the same area - Western Iran - teaching in many schools located in rural and urban areas.

Sample and recruitment

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008), and each interviewee suggested another possible interviewee (Langdridge, 2007). The interviews continued till the point of saturation (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020; Braun, Virginia and Clarke, 2021) when conducting more interviews seemed to add very little to the information or construction of data.

Anonymity and confidentiality

According to the ethical procedures this research follows, all measures have been taken to protect the anonymity of the research participants. All the names that appear in the study presented here are changed into pseudonyms, and all information that could potentially lead to identifying the research participants, their school of study/teaching or their place of living have been anonymised or deleted. (Baez, 2002; Wiles, Crow et al., 2008; Surmiak, 2018)

Data Analysis

In this paper, I used grounded theory (Glaser, 1987; Corbyn and Strauss, 1990) as a data analysis method to identify the recurring themes and discover the data's shape and character. Using this method allows the researcher to extract different themes emerged within different interviews and shape a picture of the commonalities across different teachers' experience. By immersing in data and extracting recurring themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), grounded theory allows the researcher to discover the data's character which in the most advanced levels can lead to developing new theories (Glaser, 1987, p.72).

Findings

In order to elicit the recurring themes in the data, I immersed myself in the raw data several times, read the data and gained an initial interpretation of what was going on (Cohen, Kahn et al., 2000), and based on that interpretation; the following reoccurring themes were identified, displayed in three categories.

1. Issues related to the internet, applications and software:
    a. Blockage of the most popular messenger in Iran (Telegram)
    b. Limitations of the other existing messenger (WhatsApp)
    c. Technical issues of ‘Shad’, the software designed by the Ministry of Education.
    d. Low speed of internet in Iran.
    e. Relatively high cost of internet in Iran.
    f. Poor or no internet coverage in rural areas
2. Issues related to access to devices and hardware.
    a. Students who do not have access to personal devices can borrow a device (often their parent's device).
    b. Students who live in households where nobody owns/has access to smartphones or devices which can be used for digital teaching.

   c. Students who were not allowed to have smartphones due to the family's restrictions or beliefs.
3. Issues related to situations of students at home.
   a. Students who had to go to work after the classroom-based teaching transferred to digital teaching (mainly boys)
   b. Students who had to take on greater household responsibility after the classroom-based teaching transferred to digital teaching (mainly girls)
   c. Positive aspects of digital teaching
   d. One to one and private chat with students who would not speak in a group.
   e. Possibilities for students to express emotions and feelings through private messages or emojis.

Parallel, multiple channels

All teachers in this paper had referred to difficulties in digital teaching caused by technical issues and failures of the newly introduced software Shad. One of the teachers could not log into the application in the first three months and had to use other channels to deliver lessons to her students. Another teacher stated that "it is not uncommon that students unwantedly log out and cannot join in the lessons anymore". Other teachers, though, think despite the disruptions and technical issues, with some "patience and good humour", one can teach the entire lesson on Shad. Other teachers, though, do not hold on to that view. Instead, they express the necessity for using other applications next to Shad to be able to upload the entire lesson: "for the larger files, like video files, you have to use Telegram. It is bad that it is blocked in Iran. Our students and we have to use VPN to access Telegram. That consumes lots of internet traffic which results in higher cost but lower speed internet". While using Telegram is more costly and time-consuming, teachers and students use parallel apps such as WhatsApp for students who could not access Telegram or Shad. As it was said, accessing Telegram after its blockage is more challenging in rural areas with poor internet speed.

No live lessons

Difficulties in accessing the internet made it problematic for almost all teachers to have a live classroom; instead, they had to upload the files of the lessons on multiple channels, and students would access them once they managed to secure a stable internet. Other students had to use their parents' phones to get online. As a result, many students had to wait for their parents to return home from work so children/students could use the smartphone. One of the teachers says, "There is no possibility for having all the students in the digital classroom simultaneously. In each lesson, at least 5 out of 25 students cannot get online at the specific time". She continues:

> “Our students could not commit to being online at a certain time. Those in the rural area have a very unstable internet and, those in the urban parts of the region and have better internet coverage might lack a personal device. In this way, they had to wait for their parents to return home to borrow/ use their smartphones. We cannot demand them to be online at a certain time. Not all families can afford smartphones or tablets for their children.”

Costly and slow internet in Iran

Due to the infrastructural issues, Iran does not have very high-speed internet. According to the international speed test websites, in January 2021, Iran ranked 85th in the world for mobile speeds and 131st for fixed broadband speeds (Speed Test, 2021). The cost of the internet is also another problem for less wealthy families. Uploading, downloading, paying and using a VPN added to the costs of many low-income families. One of the teachers who teaches mainly in a deprived area says:

> "it is an extra cost for the families. You know many families don't have fixed broadband, and using mobile data is costly, at least for them. I try to reduce the size of lessons; I try to remove the pictures and heavy files to make it easier for my students to download the lessons. But you know, you lose some quality of teaching by that."

Due to the low speed of the internet and also the high cost of that, teachers try to send mainly low sized files to the student in rural areas. However, as some teachers stated, removing photos and videos from the teaching material reduces the teaching quality.

Students at home

Since the closure of the classroom-based teaching in Iran in February 2020, the situation changed for many students. According to the teachers, in some of the low-income families students were sent to work. While boys were expected to work outside the home, girls were expected to work at home or the family farm. One of the teachers said, "Some families do not see digital teaching as real education. They think schools are closed, and thus kids should be at work, like summertime". This teacher, who followed up his absent students and talked to both them and their families, stated, "parents say they do not send the students to work, but when I talked to the students, they say they were expected to work as parents thought they do 'nothing' at home". In the case of female students, they also were expected to take more responsibility in the household or the family farm. One of the teachers said, "I can hear many background noises in voice messages my female students send me, either they are cooking, cleaning or taking care of the younger siblings". Referring to the newly introduced state loan for marriage to increase the low rate of marriage in Iran (Iran Human Rights, 2020a) and the high potentiality of child marriage in rural areas, she expresses concerns about child marriage among her students. "I genuinely hope all my students return to school once the schools reopen again".

Lessons on TV

Soon after the outbreak of digital teaching, it became evident a large number of Iranian students did not have the possibilities to use digital teaching. On 24 October 2020, a Member of Parliament and a member of the Education and Research Committee, Mohammad Vahidi, stated that 3.5 million Iranian students could not access Shad (Alef Journal, 2020). Difficulties such as technical issues with the software, apps, internet coverage and lack of devices in families with lower income stopped at least 3.5 million students from accessing Shad.

The Ministry of Education, however, started delivering lessons on TV. The schedule of all lessons for grades have been announced, and students could watch lessons on TV (France 24, 2020). An initiative which, according to one of the teachers, is far from being ideal. "What can my students learn from a

total stranger who appears on TV and reads aloud the lessons? It is not teaching. They can't learn much from a person on TV. They need their teachers".

Other Positive and negative aspects of digital teaching

While the teachers had to be flexible and innovative in teaching to adjust to the difficulties that themselves and their students face, digital teaching was not an entirely negative experience. All the teachers stated some positive aspects of digital teaching, such as creating a safe space for students who would not speak or express themselves in the classrooms and creating a digital bank of teaching materials that students can use in their spare time. One of the teachers concludes her experience from digital teaching:

> "In the beginning, we all were confused. We had no experience with digital teachings. Nobody knew how things would work out... However, working and being available almost all the time was exhausting. But at the same time, I could see that some of my most quiet and shy students started asking questions or stating their ideas in the chats. The digital space somehow made it easier for them to express themselves. I am so glad for them."

Summary and Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the teaching and learning experiences of many students and teachers around the world, including Iranian students and teachers. This paper reflects on the experiences of a group of high school teachers in the West of Iran from digital teaching. The paper focuses on the difficulties that teachers faced in digital teaching, how they overcome these difficulties and identifying any positive aspects of digital teaching. While the teachers face a whole range of difficulties, they could still see the possible potential of digital teaching in creating a safe space for more reserved students to participate in the classes.

Teachers who participated in this study referred to the following issues as difficulties and problems they had to overcome to deliver lessons digitally: technical issues such as problems with software, the blockage of the largest messenger in Iran by the authorities, the low speed and high cost of internet in the country, the shortcomings of Shad the software designed by the Ministry of Education, the poor coverage of internet in rural areas, and finally issues about poorer families in which students had to work or did not have mobile phones or other devices to connect to the internet.

The solutions and innovations that teachers used to deliver teaching in the absence of classroom-based schools included multiple and parallel software, being very flexible in their time for receiving student's homework and answering their questions. These solutions created extra workload and extended teachers' working hours, and all the interviewed teachers expressed their dissatisfaction about the overall situation and the lack of responsibility that the Ministry of Education took to ease the situation.

To conclude, digital teaching in Iran reflected the existing inequalities in society. While millions of Iranian students from low-income families or residents in the rural areas did not have access to connecting devices or internet coverage, students from wealthier families, mainly in cities, had more possibilities to enjoy the lessons due to their access to devices to connect to the internet.

The central government and the Ministry of Education's response to assisting the more disadvantaged students in enjoying digital teaching was limited to offering lessons on TV, which does not offer the same education. At the same time, the government did not agree to lift the ban from the most popular messenger in the country, Telegram; this possibly would make digital teaching easier and cheaper for teachers and their students. And finally, digital teaching and the closure of school buildings also created worries among teachers about those students who had to work or those at risk of not returning to school.

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