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Topic: Ensuring Proper System for Online Education to Students in Rural Areas

As students across the world got ready for their first day back after holidays, they could not have known that they would be spending almost all of the last trimester at home, communicating virtually with their teachers and deprived of the enjoyable social elements of campus life such as recess or after-school activities. To ensure at least some continuity of education, and following a period of adjustment, many schools worldwide set up distance learning programs due to the immense impact of the global pandemic COVID-19. This was achieved through several channels, from elaborate interactive online classes to broadcasting lessons on national TV stations, depending on what was achievable, in terms of access to technology, for each country. The success of this worldwide spread intent depends on many factors such as educational institutions' readiness for online learning, the infrastructure, accessibility, delivery methods, instructors' and students' willingness, social, economical and so many others factors. Many schools in Lebanon as of March 2020 were already familiar with distance learning, with students having spent an average of at least fifteen school days at home pre-COVID-19 lockdown due to the closures during the thawra (revolution) at the end of 2020. Many schools in Lebanon were pioneers in distance learning and experienced it early in the academic year because of the hirak (movement). However, thawra-related closures were not nationwide (schools situated away from the protests operated as usual) or continuous (like the COVID-19 school closures) and so some schools did not have distance learning programs already in place when coronavirus hit.

Realizing that schools would not continue as usual in the year of 2020, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) announced a national distance learning strategy on March 17, two days after national lockdown was announced (but almost two weeks after education institutes had closed). According to the MoEHE's May 15 report on the findings of its distance learning initiative, this strategy was guided and supported by "multilateral agencies such as UNESCO, UNDP, WHO, bilateral donor partners, and external partnerships with the global education community." The strategy had three recommended pathways or channels for distance learning. The first channel was through television broadcasting whereby lessons for students with a schedule of which was communicated to the parents by the schools. The second channel was online through interactive e-learning platforms that public school students could access through the CRDP's dedicated digital learning website. The website features on-demand interactive resources for the Lebanese curriculum that could be

browsed by topic as well as an “international libraries” page that features lessons from a variety of international educational technology (edtech) platforms such as Rosetta Stone, a language app, or Britannica Digital Learning. Zoom and the Microsoft teams were relied on to replace teaching inside the class. Sessions were recorded and uploaded for students to download and watch as well as live sessions being provided as much as possible. The third was a low tech option, referred to as “communication via traditional means” in the report, where parents arranged to pick up hard copies of assignments from the school. The random sampling technique was adopted to select the students, teachers and schools principals from different Lebanese regions to form the sample of the study. Therefore, through its quantitative approach, this research has aimed at finding out if the online learning was a success or a failure in Lebanon, despite being used for the first time with the lack of technical requirements and the knowledge background. Additionally, it has aimed at revealing reasons that led some to consider online learning a success and reasons that led others to consider it as a failure. The online survey remained open for filling for two weeks through a link sent by the WhatsApp platform to schools principals, teachers and students. The survey was filled by 1476 participants out of which 56 were school principals, 665 teachers and 764 students. According to the results of the poll, 322 participants believed that online learning was successful in Lebanon during the Coronavirus crisis, while 1153 participants believed it was a failure. Additionally, the researchers have concluded that a slow internet connection, the electricity outages, students’ lack of participation and not having more than one phone or laptop at home were the main reasons that led to considering online learning a failure by others.

MoEHE’s report states that “it is clear that, if distance learning is to continue, work will need to be done to support monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance of materials.” The report also mentions that teacher training and support of families and teachers in “adjusting to new ways of education” are priorities to tackle if distance learning ought to continue. Further training would be required for all involved in online education. This includes proper instructions for use of technology, appropriate usage of e-learning platforms and also informing parents on how they could motivate their child to pursue online education. Also, a vastly important factor that shouldn’t be ignored is the students’ mentality during online education. Students should be mentally prepared and equally equipped with technology needed for online education no matter the financial or social status.

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