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Customizing the Best Practices in Bridging the Educational Gap of Post Covid-19 Era in UNRWA West Bank Schools: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

UNDP (2020) ^[1] indicated that the disruption in education due to COVID-19 is historically unprecedented. Schools have closed in at least 147 countries, affecting more than 1.4 billion children and youth, comprising around 86% of the world's student population. According to Awad (2021) ^[2], the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) conducted a special survey to measure the effects of COVID-19 on the socio-economic conditions of Palestinian households during the pandemic. The shocking results reveal that only 51% of households with children in schools participated in online education despite all of those children

being enrolled in regular education before the lockdown due to internet bad connection, lack of devices and lack of plans on the school level. This research aims at exploring a qualitative view as a step forward to customize best practices in bridging the educational gap of post Covid-19 era in UNRWA schools. The sample of the study comprises (9) interviewees in UNRWA –West Bank Field. The study is Qualitative in design. The results showed that the best practice is caring for school students on the personal, interpersonal, communal, social and psychological levels to overcome post-COVID19 era.

Keywords: Best Practices, Post Covid-19, Educational Gap, West Bank Schools, UNRWA

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools in the host countries of UNRWA. Around 530,000 school students needed to continue their learning from home. UNRWA Education staff acted swiftly so as to respond to this era to make sure the access for all children, quality learning; psychosocial well-being of all students, safe and secure learning environment. An Agency-wide Parent Survey was carried out in May 2020, and interviews were conducted with UNRWA teachers in June 2020. Findings from these surveys suggest that key areas requiring further investigation included: access to learning during COVID-19-related school closures; quality of education, in terms of learning support as well as quality of learning materials; and, finally, students' well-being and health, in particular, their awareness and behaviors related to preventing the spread of COVID-19. In February-May 2021, an Agency-wide student survey was therefore undertaken in order to learn directly about their remote learning experiences and well-being over the months of pandemic-related school closure (UNRWA, 2020) ^[15].

This survey focused on how UNRWA students perceived their educational experiences since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the school closures in March 2020. Especially, the access to remote learning; quality of education during school closures; and students' health awareness and psychological well-being. Using a stratified sampling design, 10-15% of UNRWA schools were sampled and responses were received from 10,042 Grade 4 students and 11,150 Grade 8 students. This report presents the key findings of students' experiences during the Covid-19 related school closures in 2020/21. Results showed that accessing technology (whether a device or adequate electricity / internet) were the most common challenges, followed by challenges associated with the lessons themselves. The vast majority of Grade 4 and Grade 8 students reported that teachers and mothers had been their primary source of help during the remote learning process. Most communication between students/parents and teachers was through social media, with over half the Grade 8 students in daily contact when schools were closed (UNRWA, 2020) ^[15].

This study is qualitative in design that intends to explore the views of many stakeholders on three levels: top management, senior and junior employees in customizing the best practices in bridging the educational gap of post Covid-19 era in UNRWA West Bank schools, especially for basic education students from 1st grade till 9th grades.

2. Review of Literature

According to UNESCO (2020) [3], the Palestinian ministry of education released an e-learning portal to deliver distance education for children during school closures. Albeit being an encouraging initiative, many challenges were spotted like weak internet infrastructure, electricity cuts, and insufficient technology usage knowledge. Mahamid, Bdier, & Nour (2022) [4] found that exploring the challenges and obstacles related to implementing e-learning and its impact on Palestinians mental health during the COVID-19 epidemic will bring a better vision for the educational condition, therefore, specialists will be able to review, develop, enhance, and improve the sector of electronic learning, and to develop protective and healing programs to overcome the risk of negative mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, and despair) of applying e-learning in a time of crisis among Palestinian people.

Shraim and Crompton (2020) [5] qualitatively examined how decision-makers and teachers have responded to offer education for all Palestinian students at the immediate onset of the COVID-19 outburst and how technology is being used to continue education online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants from parents, teachers and decision-makers in Palestine. Interview transcripts were coded using a grounded theory design with a constant comparative method. The findings show that the subjects acknowledged that technologies such as mobile devices, social media and cloud computing have been useful for the design and delivery of educational materials as well as raising safety awareness, and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine. The findings also identified many challenges including the broadening of the education's digital divide and a progressively more negative attitude towards online education. The data also indicated that the first wave of the COVID-19 experience could be the roadmap for wave two and for the transition to maintainable online learning as a complement to the traditional learning methods and not as a replacement. This research also demonstrated that teachers who are early adopters had a significant role in influencing both students and other teachers to adopt the transformation to online learning. In addition, the national and international initiatives with a multi-stakeholder partnership provided sustained, long-term, real solutions for online learning.

Assaf (2020) [6] maintained that there are conditions that stimulate thinking and research in a scientific and practical way. These conditions fit into the reality under the COVID-19 pandemic. There were students who had not been accustomed to distance learning through online courses using social media, especially zoom. This unfamiliar situation provided an opportunity for the students to re-think about the methods that were typically used, especially those people with spinal cord injuries. The study wanted to answer how one can provide an occupational therapy service under quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic was the first experience of this kind for occupational therapy students and for everyone else in the world. Group members had to think outside the box because the experience was full of different challenges. For instance, it was hard for students to identify possible methods to collect information and analyze it within an occupational therapy framework, with quarantine restrictions imposed concurrently on students and patients. Moreover, there was no published evidence to help students make appropriate

and logical decisions in these circumstances. This lack of resources appropriate to the reality of the pandemic was overcome by referring to the fundamental basics of occupational therapy, and through collective thinking about problems and scenarios.

Daraghme (2021) [7] identified the Palestinian university students' perceptions of using distance education in light of the Coronavirus crisis from the students' point of view, depending on the differences attributed to gender and university. The descriptive approach which was used for the current research utilized a tool of 25-paragraph questionnaire distributed electronically through social media sites caused by the closure of universities. The sample of the study was (42) students of Palestine Technical University Khudouri, and (19) students of Al-Najah University and (12) students of Arab American University. The study found that Distance Education was problematic for students due to the constant need for Internet service, while Distance Education assisted them with many sources of information. Moreover, it was found that Distance Education did not make it easier to understand teaching subjects better, nor did it make education popular for learners. They preferred education that was more remote than Distance Education. It was found that there were no any differences in the perceptions of Palestinian university students to use distance education in light of the Coronavirus crisis attributed to the variable of gender or university. The most significant recommendations were to provide an appropriate educational structure for implementing e-learning in Palestinian universities and eliminating all human, material and technical difficulties. Moreover, there is a need to provide students with e-learning skills, devices and techniques to facilitate the process of communication.

Miqdadi's study (2020) [8] intended to categorize secondary school students' perceptions in public schools in Jordan on the use of Distance Education in light of the Coronavirus crisis and to determine the significance of the differences in the perceptions of secondary school students on the use of Distance Education in Jordan attributed to gender in the second semester of 2020. The descriptive survey method was used and the population consisted of high school students in public schools in Irbid, and the study sample consisted of (167) male and female students chosen by a simple random method. The study concluded that Distance Education enriches the learner's education and helped solve many student problems. The study also showed a positive effect of using Distance Education in light of the emerging Corona crisis in Irbid education schools.

Hamamra and Qabaha (2023) [9] analyzed Palestinian students' psychological discomfort with online education during Corona Pandemic. They found that online education throughout the pandemic has had deep psychological effects on students such as the lack of participation and their indifference to this mode of education. Students' silence or their insignificant yes/no responses to their instructors' questions further high pointed their boredom during online instruction where there is no dialogue or immediate interaction between students-instructors, students-students, and students-texts. Furthermore, many students testified that they used Facebook to indulge in virtual reality in order to escape the demands of their instructors. The study concluded that the birth of the weary, melancholic academic body is symptomatic of the online mode of education in Palestine.

3. Methodology and Results

This research aims at exploring a qualitative view as a step forward to customize best practices in bridging the educational gap of post Covid-19 era in UNRWA schools. The sample of the study comprises (9) stakeholders in UNRWA –West Bank Field. Black (2010)^[10] indicated that the purposive sampling or judgment, selective or subjective sampling is a sampling technique in which researcher depends on his or her own judgment when choosing members of population to participate in the study. It is a non-probability sampling method in which researchers often believe that they can obtain a representative sample by using a sound judgment, which will result in saving time and money. The purposeful sample of this study was chosen from different levels: 3 junior employees, 3 senior employees and 3 high managerial level employees. The study is Qualitative in design through using 9 interviews. The study lasted for three months between January-March, 2023. The tool was qualitative in design since pre-established questions of the interviews were used in order to obtain the needed data. Husain, Bais, Hussain & Samad (2012)^[11] maintained that open-ended questions are free-form survey questions that allow respondents to answer in an open-text format to answer based on their complete knowledge, feeling, and understanding. Their response to the questions is not limited to a set of options. Therefore, unlike closed-ended questions that leaves survey responses limited and narrow to the given options, open-ended questions allow us to probe deep into the respondents' answers, attaining valuable information about the subject. The answers to these qualitative research questions can be used to attain detailed and descriptive information on a topic. This research technique depends heavily on open and subjective questions and answers on a given topic of discussion, with room for further probing by the researcher based on the answer given by respondents.

The questions of the interviews were open ended and the major discussion was the challenges of post-Covid-19 era and how one can have a step forward to customize the best practices in bridging the educational gap in UNRWA schools.

The results of the study on the level of the top management are as follows. Stakeholder No. 1 thinks that decisions made today in the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic will have very long-term consequences for the future of education in Palestine, especially in UNRWA due to the very complicated conditions and structure of the refugee setting in camps, villages and even cities. Navigating through the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, schools must build on core principles and known strengths as we face unparalleled disruption to economies, societies and education systems. In the renewal and reimagining of education, human interaction and well-being must be given priority. This must also be escorted by a commitment to universal solidarity that does not accept the levels of inequality that have been permitted to arise in the contemporary world. This will be in harmony with core UN principles of humanity, integrity, neutrality and professionalism.

Stakeholder No. 2 thinks that COVID-19 pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities; it has also surfaced extraordinary human resourcefulness and potential. She thinks there is a need to protect the social spaces provided by schools as we transform education. This space is multi-disciplinary, specific and different from which must be preserved. This

entails free and open-source technologies available to teachers and students. In the field of the West Bank, and through UNRWA, hundreds of tablets and laptops were distributed to students and teachers in order to have open educational resources and open access digital tools. Stakeholder No. 2 also thinks that education cannot flourish with ready-made context built outside of the instructional space and outside of human relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, the digital platforms provided and activated by UNRWA will help bridge the educational gap happened due to COVID-19 era.

Stakeholder No. 3 thinks that he prefers to see students having their own personal learning programs and also behaving as fully effective members of the whole school community, taking part in essential decisions regarding the curriculum, methods of teaching and the all-inclusive environment. Besides, with pervasive access to online resources, students do not necessarily need teachers to repetitively and directly teach them. When students own their learning and have access to resources, the role of the teacher changes. Teachers no longer have to serve as the tutors as the sole commander of information to teach the students content and skills. As an alternative, the teachers serve other more significant roles such as organizing learning, curating learning resources, counselling students, community organizers, motivators and project managers of students' learning. The teacher's chief responsibility is no longer merely instruction since teacher education needs to focus more on preparing teachers to be human educators who care more about the individual students and function as consultants and resource curators instead of teaching machines This idea is in harmony of Zhao (2018)^[12].

On the level of UNRWA seniors, Interviewee No. 1 thinks that due to the pandemic of Covid 19, students had to face a huge learning loss and an educational gap which affected their writing, speaking and mathematical skills. As a result of that gap, the education system in Palestine had to do some interventions in order to identify the prerequisite and mastery skills students need for any coming classes especially in the four main topics: Arabic, English, Science and Math. Teachers and educators had to create treatment plans for each grade which identifies areas of focus in order to mitigate learning loss. Students were to leave direct study (face to face) and move to online lessons which affected their communication skills hugely and caused a major academic delay, especially with low level students. It also caused a decline in physical activity of students. To overcome that, teachers were encouraged to engage students in more extra curriculum activities which concentrates on the mastery skills through active learning strategies. Remote learning was used effectively through some online lessons to be conducted after school time. This needed more awareness campaigns to ensure parents and local community cooperation. Assessment and evaluation also had to transfer into new methods like rubrics and projects.

Interviewee No. 2 thinks that in order to bridge the education gap we could join and mix grades' curricula together, students learn curricula of the last two years beside the curriculum of their grades. Teachers' guides and students' books can be prepared to cover the basic information in the last two years for every grade. An action plan will help teachers and parents to cover the curricula and the basic material; motivate teachers by more pay or thank-you certificates will help as well.

Interviewee No. 3 thinks that there were many challenges that faced schools during the time of COVID-19. First, schools' had to stop and learners had to study online. So, teachers try to help pupils to achieve better results after the pandemic through focusing on learners' needs, reviewing their basic needs in reading and writing, and mobilizing hard efforts to use different styles and methods in teaching. The best thing is caring for the students on the personal, interpersonal, communal, social and psychological levels. He thinks that as a result to Covid-19 pandemic, schools were resorted to various procedures in order to lessen the negative effects of the educational gap. Schools followed some steps, such as online learning through which a planned timetable by UNRWA was provided for school subjects. Moreover, students attended schools three days a week and were divided into two groups, and each group attended the school three times a week. Furthermore, schools were provided by printed materials that students could use on their own as self-learning. Lastly, teachers concentrated on the most important aspects, skills and attitudes of the curricula.

On the level of junior employees, Interviewee No. 1 thinks that leveraging technology is a key approach to bridge the educational gap caused by COVID-19. With widespread access to devices like cell phones, laptops, and iPads, teachers can create platforms to share valuable materials and interactive content with students. Online educational games can also be used to engage students. The role of the teacher shifts to that of an observer, mentor and facilitator, guide and assessor. Also, it was worthwhile to focus on essential content and give it sufficient time that help students acquire foundational knowledge. By combining these strategies with teacher training, and community involvement, one can effectively confront the educational gap and support students' learning post-pandemic.

Interviewee No. 2 thinks that the pressure of catching up with learning loss can be harmful for learners and teachers. Therefore, the first 15 days of the new academic year were set with UNRWA plans through the Assessment Unit to provide Entry Behaviour Booklet to deal with the learning gaps before a strategy could be effectually put in place. It was preferable that normal teaching-learning processes be suspended to focus on bridging the learning gaps. This included socio-emotional connect with peers and teachers with what it was called psychosocial support. Teachers are being empowered by UNRWA to take up the challenge of teaching in post-COVID-19 times by organising training programmes and quality sessions to support teachers pedagogically and emotionally through school counselling. UNRWA was aware of what students missed most about school during the pandemic lockdowns such as sports and playgrounds. With students progressively spending more time on their digital devices for learning and entertainment, physical fitness had little focus. With children back in school, UNRWA hired extra P.E. teachers to provide larger number of sports periods in the time-table to enable them to enjoy the outdoors with peers. This had added incentive for students to attend school and getting back into the trench.

Interviewee No. 3 thinks that Learning gaps lead to low knowledge attainment, insufficient opportunities for critical and inspired thinking, skill inadequacies, diminishing social awareness, lower emotional intelligence, reduced accomplishment needs, lack of initiative and many other. Schools and educational support systems would do well to

work on bridging the learning gaps through articulate formal and informal support systems so that these negative gaps could be bridged on the levels of individuals and the society. The responsibility of bridging the learning gaps through designing Unified Exams by UNRWA has been the exclusive responsibility of the educational specialists, Curricula Unit, and Assessment Unit. UNRWA adopts a community approach for social health and for nurturing the learners as being the core citizens for the future. It is worthwhile to say that the co-scholastic activities in schools always provide a platform for much informal learning. This helps support art, artistic sense, theatrical talents, and cultural inputs to boost and empower holistic learning among the students. In the absence of these activities, the space of informal learning has been hindered. Moreover, the chances available for prolonged learning, relating the official learning inputs to outside informal learning opportunities has been abridged. UNRWA was aware that the missed opportunities are likely to have long term effects on the learning psyche and the learning contour if they are not adequately compensated earlier than later. So UNRWA education department started training students and teachers on different platforms providing Microsoft Teams Accounts, providing laptops for each teacher in the field of the West Bank and most importantly initiating a digitalization plan in the near future.

4. Discussion and Implications

A community's resilience lies in its capacity to care for its most vulnerable members, effectively allocating resources to where they are most needed (Ungar, 2011) ^[13]. Therefore, the disruption to education systems during the COVID-19 pandemic has excessively affected the most vulnerable learners such as UNRWA refugee students, aggravating pre-existing inequalities with possibly dramatic and long-lasting consequences. On the side of UNRWA, this requires urgent action to address learning gaps and ensure smooth and continued educational paths for all learners. UNRWA system, due to Post-COVID19 consequences, needed to strengthen the learners' resilience, nurturing environments in which every student had the competences that were required to reach their full potential. Therefore, policy makers designed and implemented policy efforts that address these urgent and important consequences through huge efforts done by UNRWA Curricula, Quality and Assessment Units through effectively implementing remedial measures now while building students' resilience for future. Resilient education systems had the ability to respond to different learners' needs, including the most vulnerable ones. UNRWA response entailed timely and operative personalized interventions, additional instruction or resources, or a more targeted allocation of resources especially the increased budgets for school attendants, P.E. teachers and school counselors. This has supported the students' well-being, capacity building, and assessment components. This helped UNRWA learners navigate the more unpredictable conditions they face today. Effective educational policy involvements during the crisis show that UNRWA interventions has benefited from the synergies between these policy components for responsiveness and devices for resilience, particularly when initiatives concentrate on adaptation to the local dilemma and meaningful capacity building. More recent related policy efforts introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

show that UNRWA education program in the field of West Bank had a willingness among stakeholders to devote additional resources to students and teachers in greater support. On the other hand, UNRWA paid much effort to capitalize on parental support and to guarantee a longer-term obligation to intervention programs; this has been present by Parent-Teacher Associations in UNRWA schools. The findings of this study aimed to guide policy makers in addressing learning gaps effectively while also strengthening learner resilience. The findings of this study shed light on bridging the educational gap of post COVID-19 era by addressing the view of stakeholders on three levels: junior employees, senior employees and top management employees.

The key student groups targeted for remedial measures included those transitioning from one education phase to another, those unable to access online learning and disadvantaged students (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020) [14]. Based on this, UNRWA was able to reach all vulnerable students in refugee camps and far away Bedouin areas by distributing self-learning material due to the lack of devices, electricity outages, and internet issues. This means that both collaborative and autonomous learning chances had responded to the needs of each learner, under the guidance of learning goals defined by the education department in UNRWA schools. In contexts of disruption like COVID19, it is fundamental to ensure that school pupils, the broader education community and the system has the ability to monitor the learning evolution in a well-timed manner and adjust pedagogical processes consequently. Before introducing remedial measures, diagnostic assessments, represented in UNRWA entry behavior assessments, are indispensable in ensuring that students' needs are entirely met. While the students receive different and essential support, the ongoing formative assessment, represented in the Unifies Exams, provides opportunities for powerful feedback for both students and stake holders that will help perfect the method to optimize impact.

5. Conclusion

This research aims at exploring a qualitative view as a step forward to customize best practices in bridging the educational gap of post Covid-19 era in UNRWA schools. The sample of the study comprises (9) stakeholders in UNRWA –West Bank Field. The purposeful sample of this study was chosen from different levels: 3 junior employees, 3 senior employees and 3 high managerial level employees. The results of the study showed that in the renewal and reimagining of education, human interaction and well-being must be given priority. Moreover, results showed that there is a need to protect the social spaces provided by schools while transforming education. Moreover, the digital platforms provided and activated by UNRWA will help bridge the educational gap happened due to COVID-19 era. Furthermore, the teachers serve other more significant roles such as organizing learning, curating learning resources, counselling students, community organizers, motivators and project managers of students' learning. Teachers were encouraged to engage students in more extra curriculum activities which concentrates on the mastery skills through active learning approaches. The best thing is caring for the students on the personal, interpersonal, communal, social and psychological levels. Also, it was worthwhile to focus on essential content and give it sufficient time that help

students acquire foundational knowledge in order to bridge the educational gap. So UNRWA represented in its Education Department started training students and teachers on different platforms providing Microsoft Teams Accounts, providing laptops for each teacher in the field of the West Bank, providing Tablets for each student and most importantly initiating a digitalization plan in the near future.

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