

Education Inequality Revisited Through the Lived Experiences of Parents During Virtual Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of parents who providing support for their children during virtual learning to better understand whether virtual learning was potentially exacerbating or soothing access of children of various socio-economic statuses to education. For this purpose, an online survey was passed into all e-channels of parents of children enrolled in primary schools accessible by the researchers. A total of 87 respondents constituted the research sample. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 21.0 for windows, while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Post to this, 3 e-focus group interviews were held with a total of 18 parents who volunteered to participate to better understand their view points. Findings show that parents are highly frustrated in relation to virtual schooling offered to their children. The underlying reasons for such exasperation have been attributed to the time that it requires them to put into their children learning; the money they needed to spend on technology; the lack of proficiency they suffered from using digital technologies; the preparedness of their children's teachers in terms of using technologies; the competency of their children using digital technologies; and the internet connectivity in the country. It can be therefore concluded that student access to education in light of Covid-19 is getting more linked to higher levels of socio-economic statuses thus advancing education inequality even more.

Key Words: virtual learning- online learning- distance learning – learning & teaching- learning during crisis

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Covid-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the globe in general and education in particular (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Suddenly, schools were closed and parents became increasingly involved in their children's education, as all learning was moved online or at a distance. Home schooling predominated, creating a gigantic shock to schools themselves at all levels, as well as parents and children (Soland, 2020). Suddenly, the model endorsed in education for decades was replaced by an educational prototype whose only certainty is uncertainty.

While home schooling took many forms, parental support became immensely a need so as to ensure children learn (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Some researchers have even raised questions as to the degree COVID-19 has exacerbated social injustice among kids, given the degree parents were both able and available to provide such support (Soland, 2020). Not only this, it is feared that poor and marginalized children whose parents could not afford technology or secure home space for learning at their homes are at greater risk of dropout.

As all opposing educators converge at the importance of parental involvement in their children's learning, this paper attempted to investigate the experiences and opinions of a sample of parents pertaining to virtual home schooling.

Purpose of the Study

This study took place 1 month right after schools were locked down in Lebanon. The aim was to understand the lived experiences of parents in relation to virtual learning focusing on their evaluation of the learning experience as a whole; their evaluation of the platforms made available for their children; the time allotted for their kids to learn via such platforms; and the level of effort they were required to exhibit to support their children. Findings were utilized to better understand whether virtual learning was potentially exacerbating or soothing access of children of various socio-economic statuses to education.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the learning opportunities available for children during virtual learning?
2. How do parents value the virtual learning opportunities made available for their children?
3. What are the main challenges confronting virtual learning through the lens of parents?
4. How does virtual learning impact student access to education in relation to their socio-economic backgrounds?

Significance of the Study

Covid-19 has struck the globe very recently and has wedged lives at all levels in various forms and shapes. This study constituted an early attempt to understand how Covid-19 has impacted primary education through the lived experiences of parents. As such the study attempted to provide initial and preliminary information on the status quo of student learning within this crisis, hoping it would

help education researcher start picturize it. That would be a starting point for other studies that can build on it or get inspired through it.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Impact of COVID-19 on Education

COVID-19 is one the greatest challenges that the education systems have ever faced during the last 50 years (Moorhouse, 2020). All education systems across the globe were urged to cease their face-to-face instructions to their students and to shift in an overnight to online teaching and virtual education (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Mundy & Harris, 2020). According to the UNESCO (2020):

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments (p.5).

Within this new and challenging situation, digital learning caused by the COVID-19 school lockdown became a must (World Bank, 2020). Though, some countries have had natural catastrophes (e.g. earthquakes or floods) that caused regional school lockdowns; such natural disasters did not lead to an uncertain number of weeks of virtual learning (Moorhouse, 2020). As many countries have not yet experienced a pandemic that caused a social crisis and a subsequent school lockdown, there is limited knowledge about how to deal with the current situation and the challenges that arise from digital learning in this context.

Thus, countries had to think immediately of short-term plans as well as long-term plans (Mundy & Harris, 2020). Short-term plans were highly a pressing need as they meant success or failure in educational regimes across the globe (World Bank, 2020). Responses focused mainly on temporary remote, alternative or distance learning programs (UNESCO, 2020). They also include the development of guidelines, support programs, materials and tools for parents, teachers and leaders (Mundy & Harris, 2020). The aim was to: (1) maintain access to learning; (2) ensure that learners retain knowledge and skills; (3) support learners who have fallen behind; and (4) support education professionals and parents with online teaching and learning (World Bank, 2020). On the other hand, long-term plans focused on improving capacity building of the educational regimes to mitigate and manage risks in the future (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

In the same vein, Lebanese schools were fully closed as of March 2020. In Lebanon, the challenges in the current academic year were double. Prior to COVID-19 the Lebanese educational school system was struck by the October 19 revolution which locked down schools for several months. The revolution was due to the harsh economic crisis overwhelming the country that was linked to corruption of the politicians in authority. In February 21 the first positive case of COVID-19 was officially reported in Lebanon. Consequently, The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education officially announced the closure of schools and universities as of February 28.

The K-12 Lebanese education sector had no other option but to adopt some virtual schooling initiatives to save the academic year and assure minimum learning to students. Some Lebanese privileged private schools were ready and dealt proactively as virtual learning was already an

integral part of their education system. For other private and public schools, it was a great challenge.

But does virtual learning save schools?

In almost all countries virtual learning was viewed as the saviour approach for saving schooling during crisis (Soland, 2020). Though the gap was huge between developed and underdeveloped economies, challenges remained the same and stemmed from the technology readiness of the education sector, the internet access, the preparedness of the teaching and administrative bodies at schools, the social and mental effects of confinement to the students and parents and the curricula (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). While schools have used several terminologies to describe their offerings to children, it is important to draw the line between those terms so as to make clear grasp of the differences among them even though they are being used interchangeably in some contexts as shown in figure 1. Table 1 attempts to clarify the differences amongst those terms.

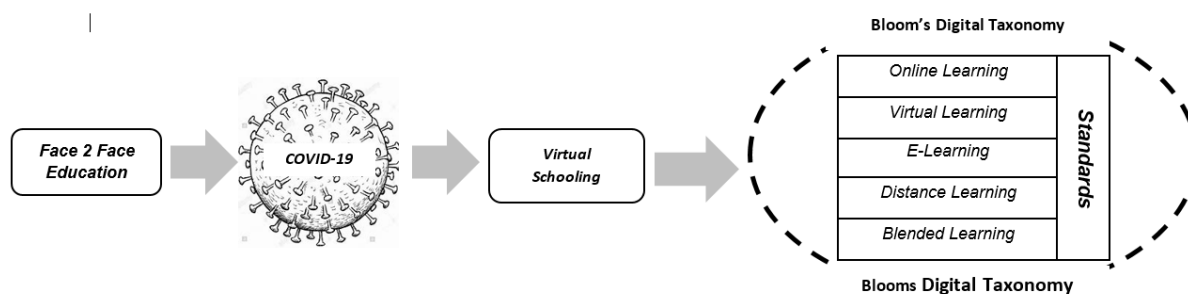


Figure 1: How COVID-19 impacted and shaped traditional learning

Table 1. Forms of virtual schooling

Name	Description				
	<i>Mandatory Features</i>				
	Technology	Real Time	Internet	Classroom	Anywhere
Online Learning	X	X	X		X
Virtual Learning	X		X		X
E-Learning	X		X		X
Distance Learning	X		X		X
Blended Learning	X		X	X	X

Table 1 explains why people often use the terms online, virtual, distance, blended and e-learning interchangeably. This is related to the fact that those terms share common features making them look similar.

Characteristics of High Quality e- Learning

Research suggests that there are 107 quality standards for e- learning. These are compiled into 12 categories and presented in table 2.

Table 2: Standards for E- Learning

<i>Standards</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Accessibility</i>	Standards that facilitate access to virtual educational resource to any person, with or without disabilities, and those who are defined to adapt the user interface.
<i>Architecture</i>	Standards that defining software or hardware architectures for e-learning systems, and useful and effective protocols for such systems
<i>Collaboration</i>	Standards that facilitate the exchange of information in run-time e-learning systems, and those standards whose goal is to resolve hardware or software incompatibilities that this exchange of information can present.
<i>Competencies</i>	Standards dedicated to creating a useful model of student competence, and the standards that deal to distribute the information about competences among different systems. A "competence" is defined as that measurable characteristic, skill or expertise that can be required to perform a specific job or task.
<i>Content and Assessment</i>	Standards set for learning content management, including aggregation models and content exchange and packaging. Also the standards about knowledge assessment.
<i>Digital Repositories</i>	Standards describing the content and development of digital repositories, and those that provide information models and protocols to enable interoperability between different repositories, both for search operations and for publication and storage through the Web.
<i>Digital Rights</i>	Standards related to the expression, management and delivery, or authorization of content considering digital rights.
<i>Learner Information</i>	Standards that address the storage and management of information about a student or a group of them, in an e-learning environment.
<i>Learning process</i>	Standards that help to define pedagogical theories or sequencing of content, in order to adapt the learning process to each student according to his or her interaction with a learning management system.
<i>Metadata</i>	Standards relating to the identification or management of metadata sets applicable to virtual learning.
<i>Quality</i>	Standards developed in order to ensure quality in e-learning, including those that help in the creation of quality approaches for the development of e-learning products, and those based on a series of well-defined criteria and indicators for the evaluation of any platform or content related to virtual learning.
<i>Vocabulary and languages</i>	Standards to define vocabularies or languages that promote understanding and exchange of information throughout the virtual learning process, and those who try to minimize the impact that the implementation of a language or vocabulary may have in different geographic areas due to linguistic or cultural differences.

From: Hilera, J.R., Hoya, R., & Vilar, E.T. (2012)

While the aforementioned categorical standards describe various aspects of e-learning; researchers warn that to avoid delivering at the lowest levels of the cognitive domain, it is important to expand Bloom's Taxonomy of the cognitive domain to encompass e-learning and its tools (Haddad, 2007). As such Digital Bloom's Taxonomy has emerged focusing on directing e-learning on how to address higher order thinking skills. Figure 2 presents Bloom's Digital Taxonomy.

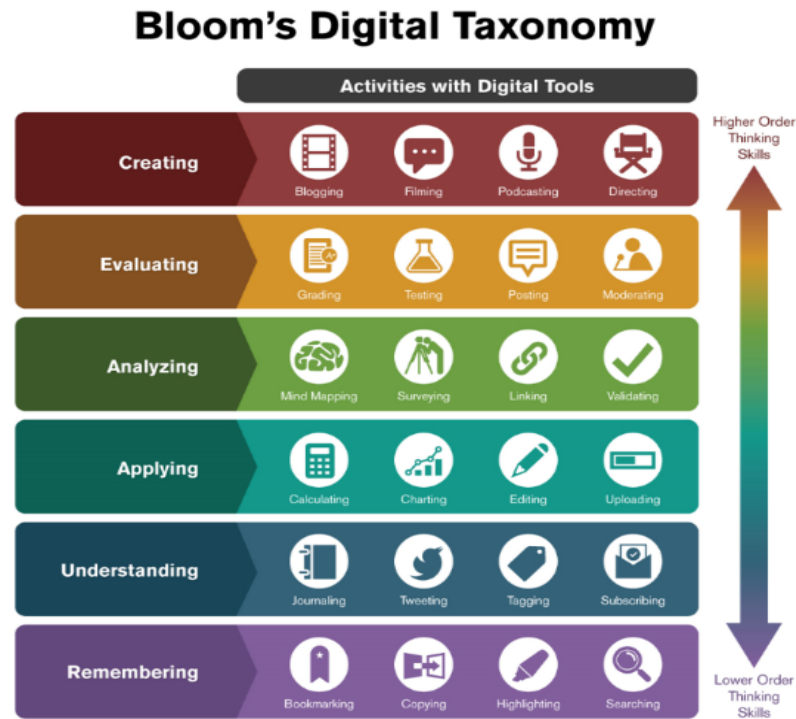


Figure 2. Digital Blooms Taxonomy

(From: <https://www.common sense media.org/videos/blooms-digital-taxonomy>)

“Bloom’s Digital Taxonomy helps us navigate through the myriad digital tools and make choices based on the kinds of learning experiences we want students to engage in” (Lightle, K. 2011). Selecting the most appropriate digital activity depends on the activity’s level of difficulty tied to the cognitive levels stated within Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy.

Parental Involvement in Student Learning

A large body of research heralds the importance of the role played by parents in supporting their children succeed at school (Schueler, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2017). There is a strong empirical correlation between parental involvement and student academic achievement (Ross, 2016). Moreover, studies suggest that student self-esteem and confidence are enhanced in the case of parental involvement (Wilder, 2014).

While the body of research that addresses parental involvement in contexts where primary school students are enrolled in face-to-face learning, there are few studies that discuss the impact of parental support in online or virtual learning. This is justifiable since the current context of virtual schooling has been unprecedented. However, the small body of research on parental involvement in home schooling could be the closest to what might be anticipated as an expected role.

According to Jeynes (2016) a high level of parental involvement is virtually a prerequisite for the success of any homeschooling. West (2012) explains that parents who homeschool should be able to secure internet and technology for their children. Both Jeynes (2016) and West (2012) suggested that optimum conditions for the success of homeschooling entails that one of the parents remain at home and devote him/herself to the learning of his child.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted mixed methods approach bridging positivist and interpretive approaches to research. It has utilized quantitative surveying as well as qualitative focus group interviews to arrive at the findings and conclusions.

The Sample

The sample consisted of $N_1 = 87$ parents who completed an online survey about virtual learning offered to their children in primary schools. In addition, $N_2 = 18$ parents were interviewed over 3 e-focus group interviews. The sample was chosen *randomly* starting with the development of an online survey that was passed into all e-channels of parents of children enrolled in primary schools accessible by the researchers in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. As such, all the 87 respondents (i.e. 87 families with a total of 250 children enrolled in schools in Beirut) constituted the research sample. Post to this, 3 e-focus group interviews were held with a total of 18 parents (out of those 87 respondents) who volunteered to participate to better understand their view points. The 18 participant parents in e-focus interviews represent the total number of parents who expressed readiness to take part in the study.

Research Instrument

The instrument consisted of three parts: the first part collected background data about participant parents and their children. The second part included items requesting parents to describe their lived experiences in terms of virtual learning offered to their children alongside their evaluation and opinion pertaining to it. The research instrument was constructed by the team of researchers, and was initially subjected to a critical friend review before it was piloted on 10 parents who were friends to the researchers. Such parents closely resembled the targeted sample in terms of having children enrolled in primary schools and were receiving their learning virtually. Minor feedback was received from the pilot sample who considered the items were quite clear but suggested re-ordering of some items or pointed out to some typos mistakes. Reliability checks using the Cronbach alpha statistics were conducted for the internal consistency and was determined to be $\alpha = 0.81$ which according to Creswell, 2013, cited in Shal, 2016) was considered to be a good indicator of internal reliability.

The survey was carried out online and the online link was sent to all WhatsApp groups accessible to the researchers involving parents of children in primary schools in Beirut. As described earlier, 87 parents responded (with a total of 250 children enrolled in primary schools in Beirut).

The e-focus group interview consisted of one question: How can virtual learning opportunities be improved? It was administered to parents who volunteered (18 parents out of the 87) to take part in such interviews. Zoom application was used for this purpose. Each e-meeting took 15 minutes and involved 6 parents at one time.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 21.0 for windows. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the mass of data collected from the respondents. Means scores, standard deviations and percentages were calculated per each item of the survey instruments. On the other hand, theme-based analysis was utilized in order to synthesize parents' views on how virtual learning opportunities may be improved.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

Background Data

The sample consisted of 87 parents whose kids were involved in primary schools. The majority of those children were enrolled in cycle 2 (Grades 4,5,6- aged 9-11 years) as shown in figure 3.

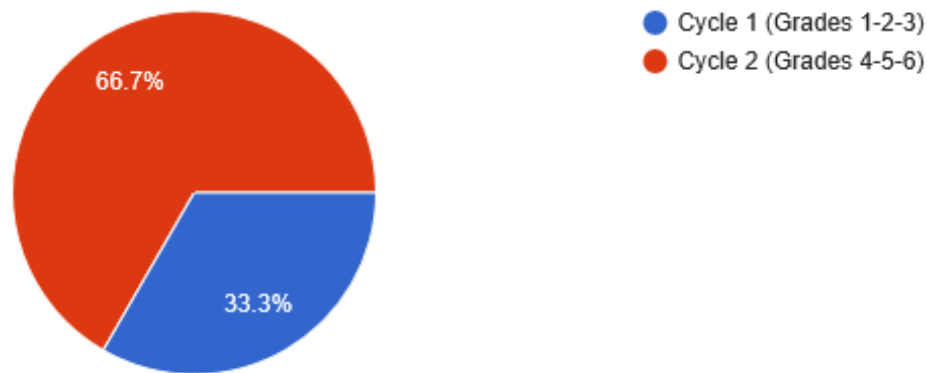


Figure 3: Classification of the Sample in relation to children enrollment per cycle

Findings suggest that 64.4% of students whose parents participated in the study were involved in some form of e-learning prior to Covid-19 crisis as figure 4 shows.

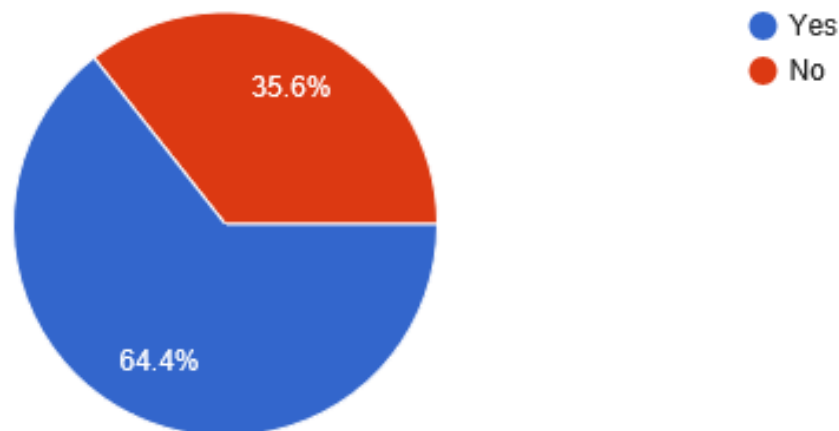


Figure 4: Classification of the Sample in relation to children's involvement in e-learning prior to Covid-19

The above finding indicates that the sample that participated in the study belonged to a group of privileged schools who afforded e-learning for their students prior to the crisis.

Moreover, as figure 5 shows, only 11.5% of parents who participated in this study suggested that they were not involved in the learning of their children.

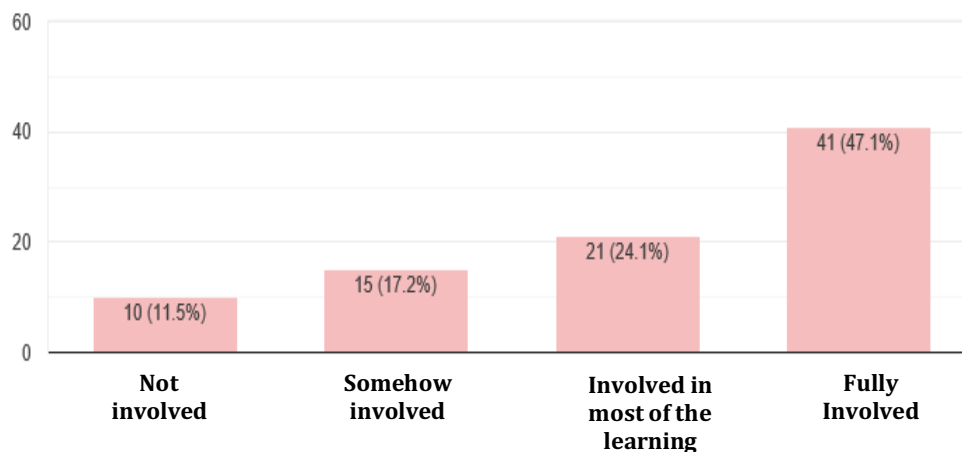


Figure 5: Classification of the sample in relation to the parental involvement in their children's learning

Figure 6 represents the type of learning that was offered to children by schools. The majority of children whose parents participated in the study were involved in distance learning that is not real-time on-line learning (49.4%). These kids were sent print material and videos by the school using WhatsApp or emails and were asked to complete and return back to school during an assigned period of time. 31.8% were involved in on-line learning meeting their teachers and class mates in real-time. 10.6% were being sent print material only and were asked to complete tasks and send back to their teachers after a certain given time allotment. The rest of the sample suggested that they were using a combinations of that has preceded.

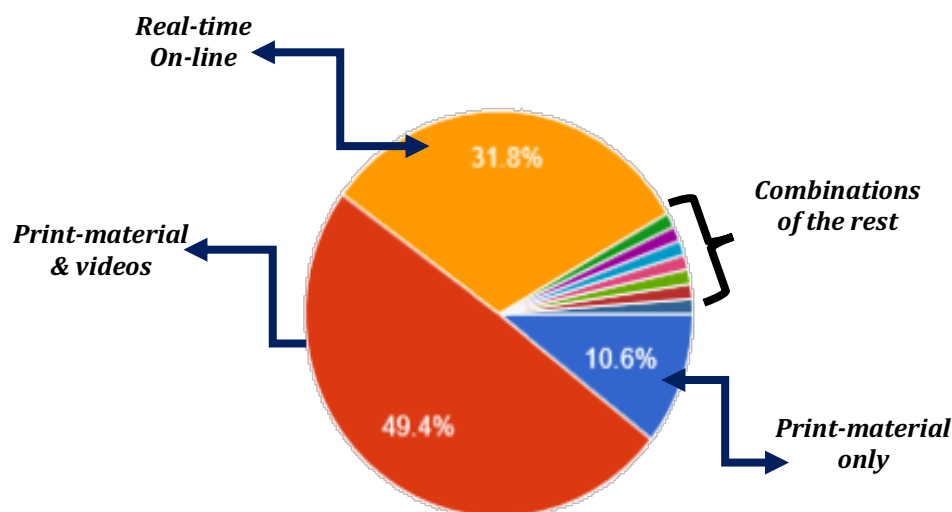


Figure 6: Classification of the sample in relation to the type of learning opportunities offered to children

Lived Experiences & Opinion of Parents

According to figure 7, parents overall satisfaction with virtual schooling was polarized positively (55.2%) and negatively (44.8%). Their justification of their choice is presented in figures 8-9-10 that describe the effectiveness of the platform used, the time allotment and the quality of learning opportunities respectively.

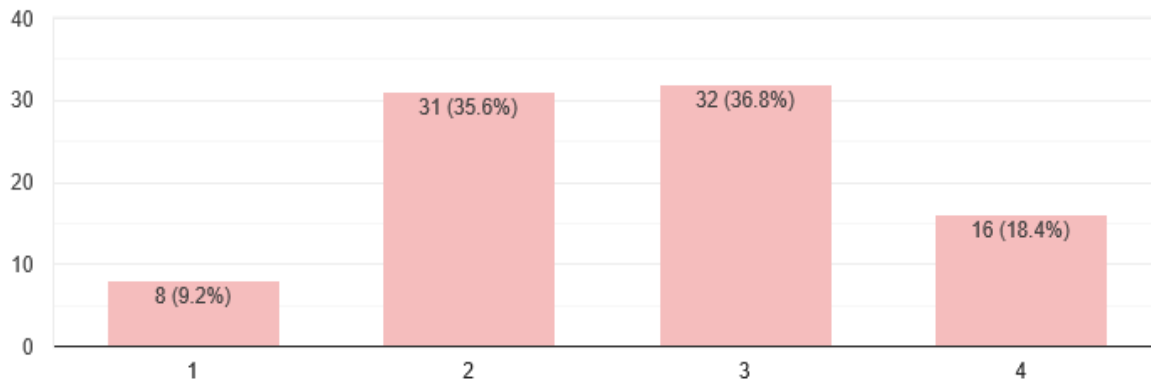


Figure 7: Overall satisfaction of parents with virtual learning opportunities

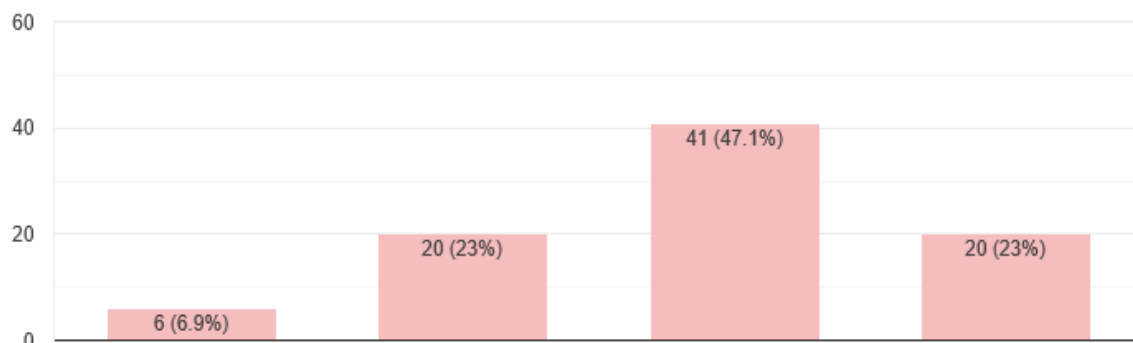


Figure 8: Overall satisfaction of parents with the learning platforms

Figure 9 shows that 70.1% of parents believed that the platforms utilized for the purpose of their children learning were useful, user friendly and accessible with no sophistication.

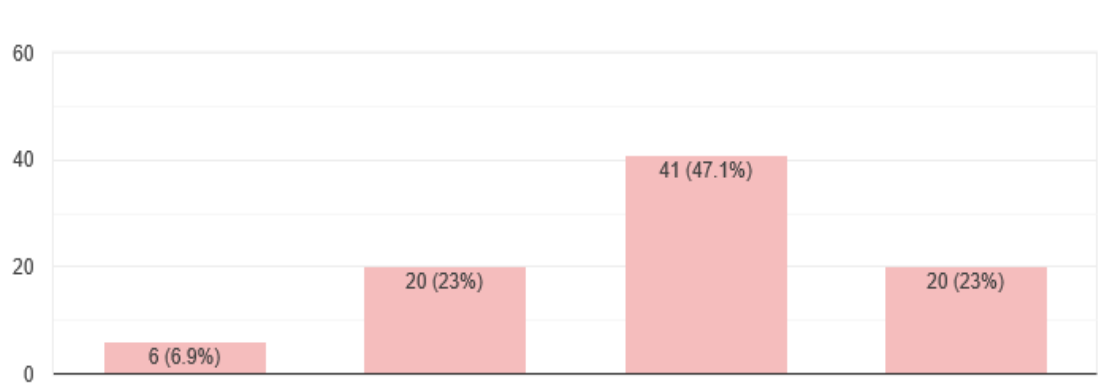


Figure 9: Overall satisfaction of parents with the time allotment for virtual learning

In the same vein, the majority of participant parents (70.1%) believed that the time allotted for virtual learning was appropriate.

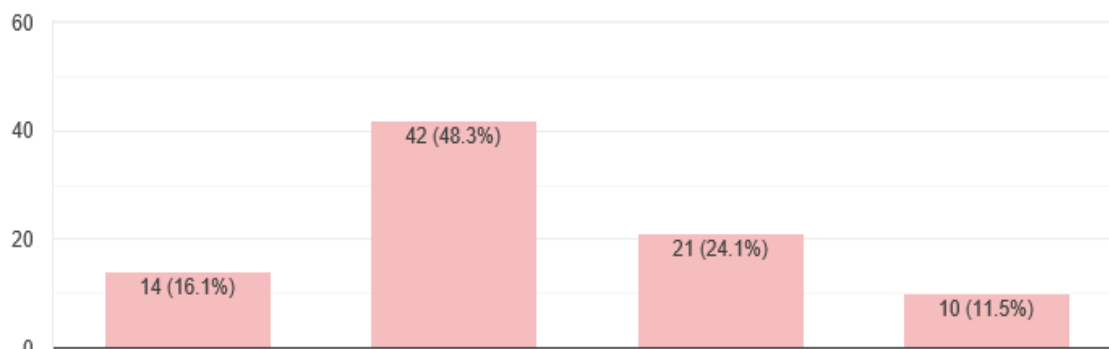


Figure 10: Overall satisfaction of parents with the quality of learning materials

While the selection of platforms and time allotment by schools for virtual learning were positively rated by the majority of parents (70.1% figures 8 & 9); this was not the case of their viewpoints when it came to the utilized learning material. In fact, 64.4% of parents rated the quality of learning material negatively.

Obstacles & Opportunities

Internet connectivity which is evidently a real threat confronting all forms of digital learning in low income countries has been depicted by the sample as being number 1 threat confronting their children learning as figure 11 shows.

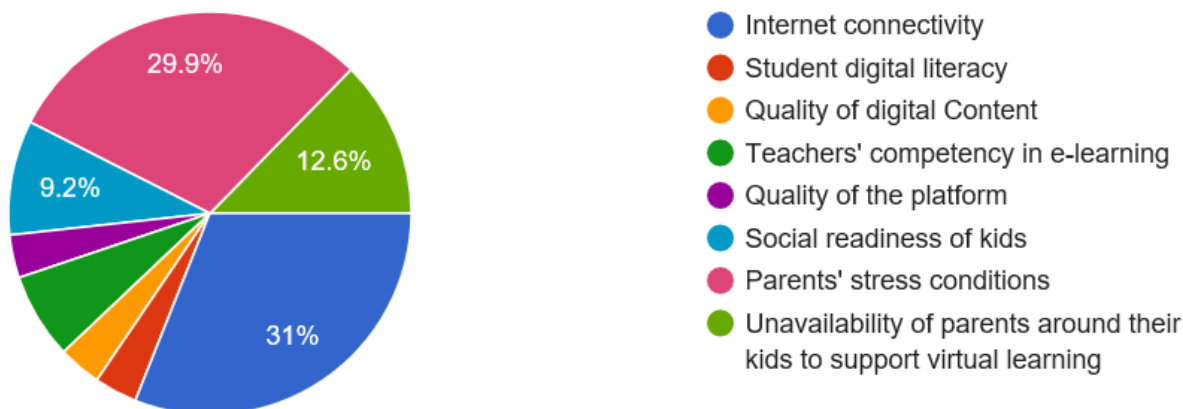


Figure 11: Obstacles confronting virtual learning through the lens of parents

Other obstacles noted by parents were the stress conditions parents were living throughout the corona pandemic (29.9%); teachers' competency delivering virtual learning (12.6%); and the social readiness of children (9.2%) as this has been their first encounter ever with home schooling. Other factors mentioned by parents include: children's digital literacy which might play a negative role especially in lower grades in primary schools; the quality of the digital content offered to children; and the quality of the platforms chosen by schools(in terms of platform numbers).

On the brighter side, and as figure 12 shows, 65.5% of parents thought that despite all the challenges virtual learning remains the optimum tool to learn during crisis.



Figure 12: Opportunities of virtual learning through the lens of parents

Few parents (10.3%) thought that virtual learning served as a useful tool for children to learn based on their preferences and abilities. Even fewer parents (8%) thought that virtual learning enabled school principals to lead learning more effectively during crisis.

Yet virtual learning was only viewed as the appropriate tool for learning during crisis. This is manifested in figure 13 which shows that 64.4% of parents thought that there is no future for digital learning apart from education during crisis.

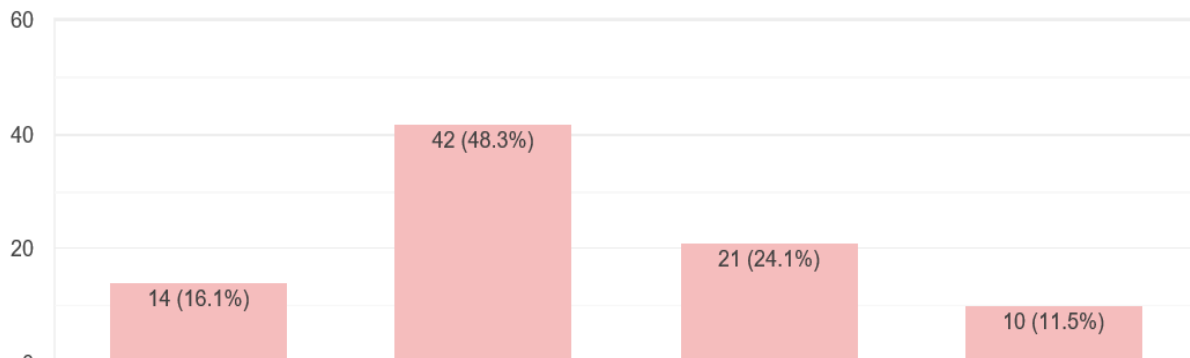


Figure 13: Future of virtual learning apart from education during crisis as per parents

The above finding comes harmonious with the fact that the majority of parents (73.6%) assured that if they were given any chance in the future to enroll their children in online schools; they would not do that as figure 14 shows.

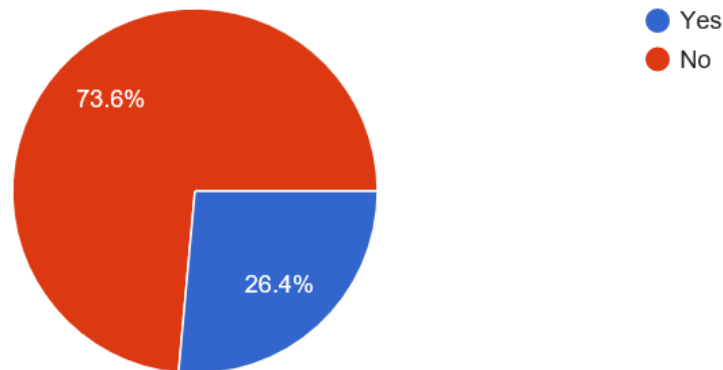


Figure 14: Chances parents would enroll their children in online learning apart from crisis situations

On the other hand, figure 15 shows that the majority of parents (74.7%) thought that the Lebanese government should acknowledge online and virtual degrees.

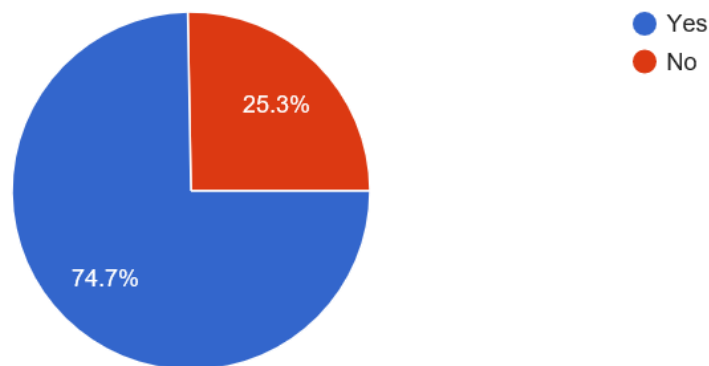


Figure 15: Parents' views as to whether online degrees should be acknowledged by the Government

Qualitative Data

Background Data

18 parents volunteered to take part in e-focus group interviews. The sample distribution in terms of duration of children involvement in virtual learning is presented in figure 16.

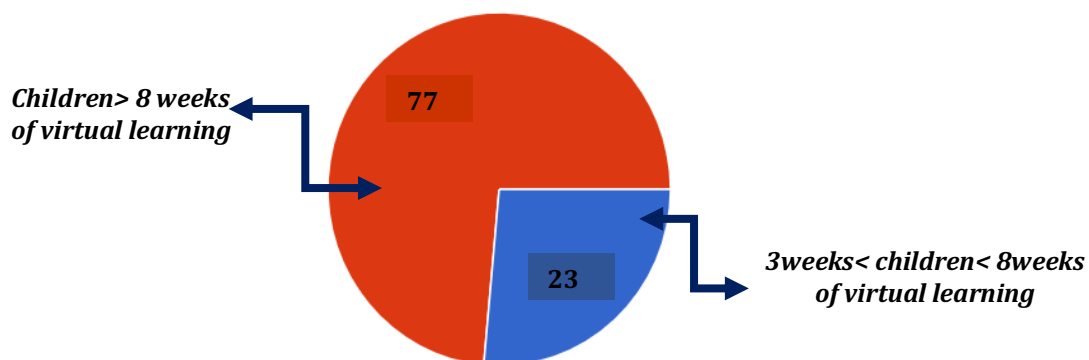


Figure 16: Classification of e-focus group interview sample in terms of children's duration of involvement in virtual learning

Figure 16 shows that the majority of parents (77%) taking part in the study had children whose duration of involvement in virtual learning was more than 8 weeks.

Theme-Based Analysis

The 18 participants divided into 3 groups of 6 took part in 3 e-focus group interviews. The duration of each e-focus group interview was 15 minutes. The platform used was Zoom and the interview was recorded then transcribed. The interview included one question: *How can virtual learning opportunities be improved?* Raw data was analyzed using theme-based analysis generating the themes presented in table 3.

Table 3. Themes Generated from e-Focus Group Interviews

Themes		Meaning
1	<i>Teacher Training</i>	- Teachers lack needed training - Teachers repertoire of practice need to change
2	<i>Student Digital literacy</i>	- Students need to be trained - Students lack the needed digital literacy - Limit the number of e-tools
3	<i>Blended Learning</i>	- Schools should blend face-to-face with online learning to succeed in crisis.
4	<i>Parents' Availability</i>	- Online learning fails when parents are not around - Parents time is exhausted during online learning
5	<i>Parents' Digital Literacy</i>	- Parents who lack digital literacy threaten learning - Parents whose jobs involve IT are in better stances
6	<i>Socio-economic Status of families</i>	- Children of parents who cannot afford technology are endangered during online learning.
7	<i>Connectivity</i>	- Weak connectivity is a threat to online learning - Internet connectivity needs to be made free

Theme 1- Teacher Training

As table 3 shows, 7 themes were generated from e-focus group interviews. The first theme related to teachers, whereby many parents thought that teachers were teaching online the same way they taught in regular classroom making learning dull, boring and inappropriate.

"It is astonishing to me how the Arabic teacher wants to recite online the same way she does in regular class" (P1,6).

"The teacher online continues to dominate the picture. She cannot understand that what she does in class cannot be applied on-line" (P3,3).

Parents thought that schools were not making the effort of growing the skills of their teachers to handle online learning. They believed that teacher training for handling learning via such platforms needs to be handled seriously and with a priority should the pandemic continue to exist.

"I do not really think that my kids school is paying any attention to the need to have its teachers follow a training program that could help them improve their performance online" (P2,6).

"I and parents of our kids grade level have written to school urging them to better train their teachers as I am expert in the field and sure that teachers are not trained enough to handle this kind of learning" (P1,2).

Theme 2- Student Digital Literacy

Another emergent theme from e-focus group interviews is student competency in terms of digital literacy. Parents noted that success in virtual schooling is directly linked to children digital literacy which was polarized among children of primary schools.

"I think that kids who were encouraged and allowed at homes to use technology prior to Corona pandemic will be doing better at virtual learning" (P1,1).

"I am a strict mom who never allowed screen time more than 1 hour a day prior to this crisis [Corona pandemic]. So basically, I think I have been wrong and I should've allowed them to use technology enough before as that exposure would've helped them succeed now" (P2,5).

So, in order to succeed, parents thought that children need to be trained on using the various e-tools prior to launching learning and teaching using them. As per parents, this never happened.

"I don't know how schools think! They are expecting our children to know how to use the digital tools immediately without the slightest directions or training. This is just unacceptable" (P2,7)

"My daughter who is in Grade 2 was expected by her school to use Microsoft Teams spontaneously without the least kind of training prior to actual lessons" (P1,4).

Finally, parents complained about the excessive usage of digital tools and platforms and thought the only way to improve learning opportunities for children is to revise those tools and go to the minimum possible number.

"You feel that schools are competing against one another in terms of who is going to use the largest number of digital tools. This is catastrophic for children" (P2,3).

"School need to understand that less is more in terms of digital tools. They should focus on using what is really appropriate and needed for kids to learn." (P3,2).

Theme 3- Blended Learning

According to parents, schools would've succeeded in their virtual schooling endeavors had they been blending learning in any shape or form prior to the pandemic. They considered blended learning to be integral for schools to live and survive in the future.

"You know, because my kids' school was already using digital tools, though in a limited fashion, I don't feel the size of the trouble other parents are mentioning in this group" (P1,4).

"Schools should learn the lesson, though the hard way: blend learning for any future virtual or online learning to succeed." (P2,4).

Theme 4- Parents' Availability

An alarming theme from e-focus group interviews has to do with parents' availability for their children during virtual learning. According to parents, in their absence the likelihood of having their children manage to succeed in virtual learning opportunities is very low.

"I have been available for my son across the hours of online learning. If I leave him to do something else, I would immediately see that he is struggling" (P1,1).

"I agree with all moms here that kids at this age level are not ready to take over online learning independently." (P2,7).

Parents thought virtual learning took massive time on behalf of parents and as such it is very demanding and not practical.

"I am working from home, so I can still manage my two kids online learning. However, I wonder what would other moms do- those who cannot afford working from home? That's a real problem!" (P1,5).

"I am a working mom, I work in a hospital and I think that my girls are not doing well in virtual schooling because I am not available for them like others are" (P2,2).

"I believe one of the parents should quit job if online learning will continue next year " (P3,5).

Theme 5- Parents' Digital Literacy

Parents stressed the importance of being digitally literate for online learning to succeed. They also thought that children of parents whose jobs involved sophisticated skills in IT were in huge advantage.

"Honestly, I am very novice in terms of using technology. I feel I am being forced into using it during this pandemic for my job and for my kids. Yet, while I am learning how to use it, some other parents are sort of 'flying' with their kids using it" (P3,6).

"It is not fair that all of a sudden your knowledge of computers and the internet will determine the success of your children at school" (P3,7).

Theme 6- Socio-Economic Status

Parents went far in describing the discrepancies in learning opportunities for children in terms of what their parents afforded to them. Thus, the socio-economic status of parents has been believed to determine partly the degree children would be learning.

"I cannot afford for each child a laptop or a mobile or a tablet; they all have to use one item I am able to afford for their learning. I think money is playing an ugly role here." (P1,7).

"I think the government should helped making digital tools available for families at cheap price if they want all kids to have equal access to learning. " (P2,6).

Theme 7- Connectivity

All parents without any reservations believed that the future of virtual schooling is incumbent in the quality and availability of the internet. They stressed that the weak connectivity and the high cost of the internet would hinder any endeavors whatever outstanding they would be.

"Let us make it very clear: virtual schooling will fail if the internet in this country is not strengthened and also not made available for free for the purpose of learning" (P1,2).

“ Weak internet connection is definitely a real threat to whatever effective digital tools schools will look up for the purpose of virtual schooling” (P2,5).

DISCUSSION

Covid-19 has hit very hard the educational systems globally. School closure was inevitable, enforcing distance learning which seems to have had a disproportionately negative impact on vulnerable students. Such students seem to have fewer learning opportunities than their peers who come from a relatively advantaged socio-economic statuses. Students from privileged backgrounds are able to seek alternative forms of learning opportunities.

This unprecedented crisis has exposed the unsustainability of the educational systems worldwide. It has exposed the inadequacies and inequities ranging from broadband and computers needed for learning to withstand. It has also shown that schools are still far away from being 21st century schools that call for digital literacy and digital citizenship. There is a lack of supportive environments conducive for this particular form of learning and a strong misalignment between resources and needs.

Distance learning requires parents to support kids around their learning and this is quite impossible for many parents who work for a living. Students who come from marginalized groups, who lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at a high risk of dropping out.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the majority of parents were involved in their children's learning. Virtual learning opportunities provided to children were both online and offline. Moreover, parents' satisfaction varied, yet they were more inclined to rate the experience positively simply because it ensured their children remained current with their teachers, curricula and classmates. Schools were using a myriad of platforms to secure virtual learning; and the main challenges confronting virtual learning include internet connectivity, parents' stress levels, and social readiness of children. While parents' valued virtual learning and believed that the government should take virtual learning more seriously in terms of equivalency and acknowledgement of corresponding degrees; they thought it is valid only during crisis.

On the other hand, this study has shown that parents are highly frustrated in relation to virtual schooling offered to their children. The underlying reasons for such exasperation have been attributed to the time that it requires them to put into their children learning; the money they needed to spend on technology; the lack of proficiency they suffered from using digital technologies; the preparedness of their children's teachers in terms of using technologies; the competency of their children using digital technologies; and the internet connectivity in the country. It can be therefore concluded that student access to education in light of Covid-19 is getting more linked to higher levels of socio-economic statuses thus advancing education inequality even more.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is limited by the sample size where by only 87 parents participated in the study. So the degree of generalizability might be questionable. Besides, the study considered the perspective of parents only. It is recommended to investigate the perspectives of other stakeholders as well. The

viewpoints of students themselves would be a great added value. Teacher, subject coordinators and principals' view would be integral to better advice on next phases of virtual schooling.

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