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Teachers' Perceptions of Distance Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia –Riyadh **Educational Area**

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Abstract:

The Internet is one of the most prominent discoveries in the world today. The move of most businesses and establishment to the online platform has been witnessed increasingly. Education is not left out of this development and the government of Saudi Arabia has been reported in several studies to have dedicated to providing the citizens with the best educational option. Studies have also shown that Saudi Arabia has embraced majorly the on-ground method of education given that most students are not intrigued by the idea of online education even though they find it preferable. Several studies have however been carried out on the perception of students of distance education. This 2020 study brings to light the perception of teachers in schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia by obtaining a group data. The study showed that teachers positively perceive the method of education but do not have enough resources and training to properly handle teaching through the method. The government is thereby pleaded with to help improve the accessibility of students and training of staff in necessary basics concerning the method of education.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Distance Education, Teachers' Perception, E-Learning, Online Education.

تصورات المعلمين بشأن التعليم عن بعد أثناء جائحة كورونا فى المملكة العربية السعودية - منطقة الرياض التعليمية

الملخص:

يعد الإنترنت أحد أبرز الاكتشافات في العالم اليوم. حيث شهد انتقال معظم الشركات والمؤسسات إلى عالم الإنترنت بشكل متزايد، ولم يتم استبعاد التعليم من هذا التطور. وقد افادت التقارير والدراسات أن المملكة العربية السعودية تبذل جهوداً حثيثة ومكرسة لتزويد المواطنين بأفضل خيار تعليمي. أظهرت الدراسات أيضًا أن المملكة العربية السعودية قد تبنت إلى حد كبير طريقة التعليم على أرض الواقع نظرًا لأن معظم الطلاب غير مهتمين بفكرة التعليم عبر الإنترنت على الرغم من أنهم يجدونها مفضلة. ومع ذلك، تم إجراء العديد من الدراسات حول تصور الطلاب للتعليم عن بعد. تسلط هذه الدراسة في عام 2020 الضوء على تصور المعلمين في مدارس مدينة الرياض، المملكة العربية السعودية من خلال الحصول على بيانات جماعية. أظهرت الدراسة أن المعلمين ينظرون بشكل إيجابي إلى طريقة التعليم ولكن ليس لديهم ما يكفي من الموارد والتدريب للتعامل بشكل صحيح مع التدريس من خلال الطريقة. وبالتالي، فإن الحكومة مطالبة بالمساعدة في تحسين إمكانية وصول الطلبة وتدريب الموظفين على الأساسيات الضرورية المتعلقة بطريقة التعليم.

كلما**ت مفتاحية**: جائحة كورونا، التعليم عن بعد، تصورات المعلمين، التعليم الالكتروني، التعليم عبر الأنترنت·

1. Introduction

The Internet is one of the greatest advancements that have been experienced in the field of education. The availability of information is relatively easier than previous years. Notwithstanding, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the sectors of every country and the educational sector is not left out of this instability. Saudi Arabia, being a country with a heightened focus on educational development has implemented measures similar to that of developed countries by providing distanced education mediums. The Saudi Arabia government has been observed over the years to address urgent matters relating to education and have sponsored the facility and the needs of academic officials and students in the country. However, in combination with this development is the new requirement for computer literacy in the country. These conditions have led to transformation and adaptation in the members of staff. The teachers and students have to learn to adapt to this new modern system of education. Although most western countries are familiar with this system of education, Saudi Arabia is still mildly transformed in this area. The pandemic has affected the usual way of studying both for the student and the teachers. Currently, students are expected to connect via the Internet with their teachers for face-to-face education but without physical contact.

Distance education involves the education of certain groups without the classroom experience. Distance education occurs via the Internet between individuals that are not physically organized. Distance education is a development that has been recently implemented because of the measures taken by governmental bodies to protect citizens against the COVID-19 pandemic. In Saudi Arabia, technological development is regarded as one of the major developments in the educational sector of the country. Saudi Arabia is widely known as a country that gives great attention to the educational sector and implements ways to improve the academic experience of its citizens. Specifically, in the higher education sector of the country, Saudi Arabia has spent millions of Saudi Arabian rivals on the implementation of e-learning facilities in the country (Aljabre, 2012). Developed countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America have fully implemented virtual learning systems before the pandemic and have had no trouble switching temporarily to this system of education. However, Saudi Arabia is still a developing country in this aspect. E-learning is targeted towards delivering information to students in an easier, quicker, and more effective manner through the implementation of advanced media technologies (Alwahoub et al., 2020). E-learning and distance learning can also be explained as a process of interaction that occurs amongst academically involved individuals (teachers, students, and others). Distance learning is a mode of education targeted at either replacing or reinforcing traditional education (Fidalgo et al., 2020). Whether distance education replaces or assists traditional education is dependent on the societal approach and needs.

Distance learning is also known to render learning assistance to dwellers in rural settlements and undeveloped localities. Aside from assisting learners, teachers and other academically inclined individuals can also use this medium to access information beyond their geographical limits. Mobile phones and devices have been generally addressed as a medium that is mostly accepted for accessing the pieces of information available on the web. Due to the cheap cost of smartphones, it is the most accessible technology device that can be used by learners to stay updated on the information being distributed in society. Also, it is safer and can be less disturbing to move the devices since they are smaller in size and lighter in weight. The purchase of mobile devices has also been reported in studies to have had a surge in the Saudi Arabia. Albalawi, (2017) in his research on the perception of teachers to the use of electronic social media for teaching noted several important researchers that have made remarkable discoveries on the use of smart phones in teaching. These researchers according to Albalawi, (2017) had concluded that the use of smart phones has positive and improving effects on the students both in communication and performances.

Mobile phones and smartphones are built and designed as personal devices and thus have the adaptability and portability required to remaining hidden. Smartphones are designed to features emails, cameras, and many more that allow information to be shared easily amongst students, teachers, and school members. Smartphones, although are useful as personal smart devices can also emulate functions in academics and as a tool for sharing information. Distance education, therefore, is a way of connecting individuals that are academically related and this includes the use of the Internet through a technological device. According to a report by Maajoon & Alenezi, (2012), and obstructive agent to the proper development of e-learning in Saudi Arabia is the lack of adequate knowledge and concrete skills. According to ALsaysi, (2016), there is a lack of a strategy-based plan in the method for the implementation of distance education in Saudi Arabia.

1.1 Literature Review

Currently, as far as the researcher knows, there has been no research on the teachers' perception of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic, but before the occurrence, there are several related studies. Distance education may also be a plus for people who reside in localities where access to a good education is scarce. However, some influences have been observed by lecturers and teachers over the years and many of these have been reported in the increasing research and studies in Saudi Arabia. Alwahoub et al., (2020) in their study while analyzing the reports on the perceptions of teachers and students in Saudi Arabia on distance education reported that in a study conducted in primary and secondary schools conclude that teachers perceive the system of education as more effective, encouraging, productive, and co-operative. The study claimed that teachers in these levels of education believed that distance education helped to improve the achievements and productivity of their students.

Mishra et al., (2020) in their 2020 study regarding the perception of teachers and students in India using two set of questionnaires and with 78 teachers and 260 postgraduate students at Mizoram university discussed that the unavailability of smooth internet connectivity and unhindered flow of resources has resulted in several setbacks regarding online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Examining another study on teachers' COVID-19 awareness by Lapada et al., (2020). This 2020 study was based on (2300) responses obtained through questionnaire distributions to Philippine institutions. The study result showed that the teachers in this country were ready and very aware of the conversion to the distance education method of learning. Nevertheless, the researchers noted complaints regarding low resources and devices to properly supervise the learning.

A study by Abassi et al., (2020), which was conducted on Pakistan's medical students receiving (382) responses through questionnaires showed that (77%) of the students' perception of online education was to the negative and face-to-face learning is mostly preferred.

In another study carried out by Yanti et al., (2017) on teacher's perception regarding the use of online learning in academics in a study of (20) respondents, which included teachers from various school subjects, the teachers were given questionnaires to answer as a method through which the research data were obtained. The collated result of the study showed that (65%) of the teachers in the study showed a positive perception of online learning. In the study, just (15%) of the respondents stated a negative perception of the education system. Continuously, in the same study, (55%) of the respondents claim a positive perception towards the ease of use of the education system and (35%) reported a negative perception. Overall, it can be observed from this study that more than an average of the correspondents shows positive perceptions toward distance education. In some cases, it is also observed that the perception of online education is dependent on whether the subject has prior extensive experience of the system.

Another study by Tufue-Dolgoy et al., (2016), which was carried out on a total of (22) teachers in Samoa through the use of a survey questionnaire. The study was carried out to reinforce

the need for training of teachers on the new implementation of technology into the conventional educational system. The result of the study showed that over (72%) of the participants agree to the productivity of the system of learning. Over (63.6%) of the teachers however claimed to have received extensive knowledge from the training of this study regarding ways of improving their teaching and methods to implement.

A study on the student's perception showed that students perceive the online system of education as more affordable, easier, and can be more effective than on-ground education in certain cases (Abedella, 2014). Finally, Saudi Arabia is regarded as one of the fastest-growing countries in the world in terms of technological development in relative to education (Alkhalaf et al., 2012)

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The implementation of technology is no longer a new realization in education. The topic has been widely addressed by various authors and researchers but the study on the teacher's perception during the COVID-19 pandemic is a new scope of research. Generally, as far as the researcher knows, the scope of study on the teacher's perception of distance education is still understudied and requires the intervention of more researchers in this field of study. Also, another possibility that has come to view this scope of the study is that students may have limited accessibility to distance education because the teachers have little or no basic idea of the same. As reported by Alwahoub et al., (2020), the traditional method of teaching is the method that is still largely employed in the Saudi Arabia, however, the COVID-19 pandemic does not allow convening of students. Therefore, it is important to understand why teachers still prefer the traditional method of teaching even after online learning has been discussed by many authors and researchers as 'easier' for students and highly preferred by the same (Alkhalaf et al., 2012; Fidalgo et al., 2020; Al-Juda, 2017; Abedella, 2014).

1.2 Research Questions

This study is aimed at providing answers to certain questions and these questions include:

- 1- What do teachers perceive regarding the use of distance education in schools in Saudi Arabia?
- 2- Can Saudi Arabia provide the required educational quality through distance education?
- 3- Is distance education more productive for teachers and is it an easier alternative to teach students?
- 4- Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the teachers' perception of distance education?
- 5- Is distance education capable of filling-in for the deficit in educational coverage?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to fulfill certain objectives that are of relevance to governmental bodies and teachers at large. These objectives are:

- Study to reinforce the fact that the perception of teachers in Saudi Arabia is relative to the student's productivity
- To highlight the effect of COVID-19 on the teachers' perception of distance education in Saudi Arabia.
- Study to validate the benefits and importance of distance education in emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To uncover various views of teachers about distance education.
- Study to provide a report on teacher's opinions about the implementation of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is aimed to fulfill several purposes in the Saudi Arabian society. It is meant to function in sections from decision making to the classroom or teaching coordination. The perception of teachers as will be reported in this study can serve as a guide for educational bodies in Saudi Arabia to know where to concentrate their training and resources on. Whether to implement e-training for teachers or to provide resources that make the implementation of distance education easier for the staff and students. This can also serve as a template for other studies within this range of research in the country and outside.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

To examine teachers in Saudi Arabia's perception of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic, a focus group approach as described by Frazer et al., (2017) was used. All the respondents in this study are teachers chosen at random from various schools in the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. A total of (80) teachers were addressed separately and confidentially. The (80) teachers all provided information that is relevant to the study.

2.2 Instrument

Two factors were involved in the study and were performed separately. The first factor was the questionnaire session which contained questions that were formulated by the researcher after extensive sessions of consideration and analysis. The questions were categorized based on three factors, they are 'time' 'performance' and 'general'. These categories consisted of questions that had relevance to the actions and occurrences noticeable by the teacher. The second factor is the interview section. The interview questions were also formulated by the researcher after extensive studies and consideration. Some were personal questions to confirm the identity of the teachers and the rest were open-end questions that allow the respondents to make suggestions and give answers freely.

2.3 Procedures

Process of this study was carried out by preparing a questionnaire using Google forms. Thise questionnaire classed the topic and questions in three sections, they are time, performance, and general. A total of (80) school teachers were addressed and some were interviewed. The Google form was dispensed to various elementary, primary, and secondary school teachers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire was sent to the respondents via online methods. The responses were received and tabulated as shown in the tables (1, 2 and 3) below. The results are presented in percentages for strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. (55) of these teachers were also interviewed in an open-end discussion via phone calls and their information was noted anonymously. This information is presented in the results section.

The following questions were asked in the interview with the respondents having enough freedom to answer as they choose to.

- Do you think Saudi Arabia as a country is ready to fully implement distance education?
- Have you done a lesson during the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, how did the students' turn-up and what do you perceive about their performance?
- Do you think educational performance can be rated accurately in distance education?
- What is your general perception on distance education?
- What obstacles have you been faced during distance education?
- What is your advice to the Saudi Arabian government regarding distance education?
- What was your view when comparing education in classrooms and distance education?
- Do you find it easy to teach online? Does the school authority assist in setting up a distance education classroom?

3.0 Results

The results were obtained for the two sections of the study, which include the questionnaire and interview sessions. The first section is the questionnaire-based results and the second is a summary of the interview session.

First Section- Questionnaire

The following table #1 shows the result of the questionnaire that was distributed and filled between (80) teachers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Table (1): The first section (Time) of the questionnaire results (in percentage).

Time	Time Time							
S/N	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (%)	
1	Students are always early to online lectures.	3.7	38.8	21.3	21.2	15	100	
2	Distance education gives students better control of their time.	12.5	27.5	22.5	21.3	16.2	100	
3	Distance education has improved teachers time flexibility.	7.5	26.3	21.3	27.5	17.4	100	
4	Students enjoy long hours lesson online.	5	17.5	32.5	20	25	100	
5	Students adapted to this pandemic through distance education quickly.	12.5	13.8	27.5	37.5	8.7	100	
6	The learning platform has not affected teacher- time of teaching.	6.3	33.8	11.3	30	18.6	100	

Table (2): The second section (Performance) of the questionnaire results (in percentage).

	Performance							
S/N	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (%)	
1	Distance education can increase the performance of the students.	5	23.7	12.5	32.5	26.3	100	
2	Students are more attentive in online teachings	3.7	17.5	13.7	33.8	31.3	100	
3	Students have been more responsive in terms of homework and assessments.	8.8	15	37.5	17.5	21.2	100	
4	Students can understand better during online teaching.	5	11.3	17.4	41.3	25	100	
5	Explaining topics and lessons is much easier in Online teaching.	10	31.3	11.3	17.4	30	100	
6	Students seem to manage their online resources appropriately and increase their academic excellently.	13.8	8.8	31.1	23.8	22.5	100	
7	Distance education has been long-awaited in the school-system	16.5	31.1	20	16.2	16.2	100	

Table (3): The third section (General) of the questionnaire results (in percentage).

Gene	ral		_				
S/N	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (%)

1	Education online is generally easier.	11.3	45.0	8.7	15	20	100
2	It was easy to adjust to the online						
	education directives.	3.7	30	21.3	25	20	100
3	The required tools to successfully maintain online lessons are readily						
	available.	6.3	30	15	23.7	25	100
4	Saudi Arabia educational institutions have enough resources to implement	10	22.7	10	21.2	25	100
	online education.	10	23.7	10	21.3	35	100
5	Students find it easy to connect with online education.	7.5	21.3	10	31.2	30	100
6	I have no problem with handling distance education and have enough	15.5	2.5	1.5	10	22.5	100
	training to give online education.	17.5	35	15	10	22.5	100

Second Section- Interview:

The interview conducted on 55 teachers across Riyadh schools in Saudi Arabia showed the following propositions.

- 1. Several teachers are not provided or properly equipped with resources to fund distance education through the pandemic.
- 2. Students in elementary, primary, and secondary schools in Riyadh have a little or even no proper understanding of distance education.
- 3. Some of the teachers also hold the opinion that the current development in the country shows vividly that the country is not ready for the implementation of distance education. However, others conclude that the implementation has been long-awaited and is very necessary.
- 4. Finally, most of the interviewed agree that education online is easier than having to control a class and they have quite less to do in terms of student's attentiveness and this may be harmful to the learning of students.

4. Discussion:

Table #1 shows the result concerning questions that were asked under the subject of time. That is the questions were related in the sense of timeliness and time-consciousness. The teachers, however, averagely agree that students are always early to class during their online sessions; this may be due to the intriguing nature of the platform. Also, about (36%) of the teachers disagree with this notion stating that the students were not always early. Being that the question was hinged on always, it is not accurate to conclude on the lateness and timeliness of the student in this consideration. Despite this, teachers perceive that the distance education did not affect students' admiration of short lectures as more percentage disagree (45%) with the notion than agree (22.5%). It can be concluded from this observation that the implementation of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the time of students' lecture in an insignificant way or not at all. There is a conflict in the value obtained when the teachers were asked if distance education provides students with better control of their time. This means, does the education medium improve time management skills in students. There was a (40%) of agreement amongst the teachers with (37.5%) disagreeing with the second question.

In the performance section, a larger percentage of teachers (58.8%) disagree that the distance education can increase their students' performance. This study has also shown as presented in Table #2 that teachers perceive students to be inattentive during online education and learning having the agreed percentage (20.2%) being very low compared to the disagree range (65.1%). More

disagreement is noticed in the fourth question in table #2 as teachers disagree (66.3%) that students understand better during lessons. In table #2, there is a very reasonable agreement (47%) in the consideration that distance education has been long-awaited in the educational system of Saudi Arabia when compared with 32.4% who disagree, this finding agrees vividly with the study of Alwahoub *et al.*, (2020).

Table #3 shows the percentage of agreement and disagreement on the general questions. The correspondents in this study had a (55%) agreement that online education is a very easy and disagreeing value of (35%). This disagreement level can be due to low e-learning skills or other personal factors. Most of the respondents also believed that since the pandemic was sudden, the adjustment to the distance education directive was not easy. Some of the respondents also noted their concerns that students do not find it easy to connect during online education, a total of (61.2%) supported this notion. (52%) of the teachers also stated that they had no problem with handling online education and have enough training in such schemes. (32.5%) of the teachers disagreed with this stating they had no prior training and adjusting with this medium was not convenient. This can be taken as one of the possible reasons for the value received for the ease of online education.

5. Conclusion

In this study, it was established that most teachers in Saudi Arabia have a positive perception of distance education. This perception has existed before the crisis and it is still maintained. However, the pandemic has made it more evident that the need and resources of some of the schools in Saudi Arabia are not fulfilled. Also, proper training of teachers is necessary to improve the students' knowledge of the scheme. Conclusively, from the above-presented results, it can be deduced that teachers mostly find it easy to teach online, but in levels such as elementary and primary schools where students are not very mature, coordination can be difficult. It is also noticeable that the implementation of distance education is very well appreciated but teachers perceive that the country is not yet in a condition to completely implement such schemes as it does not provide enough resources to both staff and students.

6. Recommendation:

The recommendation of this study is to further investigate methods and factors that can be taken to eradicate the insufficiency of resources in coping with related pandemics. It is also recommended that proper empowerment and learning be provided for teachers and faculties to improve knowledge of useful communication devices.

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