K-12 schooling and COVID-19 In Iran: Solutions and challenges

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Abstract
Like all countries worldwide, COVID-19, despite creating many challenges, could not stop education in Iran but instead exposed the role of virtual schooling or online-learning as the best solution in crisis times. Based on the author's experiences and some evidence, this short article introduces how primary and secondary education in Iran is affected and responded to COVID-19. It also points to four significant challenges.
Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, education, Iran.

Dealing with the COVID-19

Like many countries (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is the first and foremost public health matter in Iran. Although various vaccines have been made in Iran and large shipments of different non-Iranian vaccines are constantly being imported, reducing the impact of the pandemic and new variants of virus has largely depended on public health and government interventions to slow down the spread of the virus. These non-pharmaceutical interventions have varied in cities and provinces across the country. However, they have generally included social isolation-distancing, closure of high-risk jobs, teleworking, schools/universities closures, and travel bans (Rassouli, Ashrafizadeh, Farahani & Akbari, 2020).

Primary and secondary education and COVID-19

For primary and secondary education, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the most considerable disruption in Iran's history (Ahmady, Shahbazi & Heidari, 2020), affecting nearly 15 million learners in 31 provinces. Consequently, the country immediately opted for online learning (Mohammadimehr, 2020). Before that, a single platform becomes mandatory; some teachers recorded and uploaded their lessons online for the students to access. Some were even more innovative and used online sites and social media (like Skype, WhatsApp). However, now all schools have to use a single platform called the **"***Educational Network of student***"** (with acronym *Shad* in Persian) for online teaching and assessment (Shadweb.iranlms.ir).

Shad is the most extensive interactive App and has been implemented by the first and largest mobile phone network operator in Iran (*Hamrah-e-Aval*). It has resulted in the most extensive online movement in education history, with more than 14 million users attending online classes in Iran (Shadweb.iranlms.ir).

Challenges of online education

Although online education may have different challenges (Nikdel Teymori & Fardin, 2020) but given the existing experiences, the following challenges are very important and fundamental:

Technology

Some teachers (especially in disadvantaged and poor areas) have difficulty accessing all their students online. Besides, those who work with a high percentage of poor students (in rural schools and distant areas) may find that their students have fewer internet connections at home and access to computers or smartphones. According to official reports, this restriction does not only include Iran and is observed in many countries (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020)

Home-schooling and families

During the Pandemic, Iranian families and parents have been beneficial. It is widely agreed that they have made a significant contribution to students' learning at home, especially for primary students (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). The expansion of home-schooling may be seen quite positively, as it may be useful. Nevertheless, this role is typically seen as a complement to school input (Daniel, 2020). Unfortunately, this may not be a complementary education, and many student learning responsibilities may be informally delegated to parents.

Although there are no official or published reports, unofficial reports indicate that some schools (mostly primary schools) do not have acceptable performance for managing education at home and do not have a clear plan in this regard. In addition, there are many differences between families to the extent that they can help their children learn, differences in the time they devote to home education, differences in teaching skills, and the amount of knowledge required for It.

Assessment

The closure of schools not only has interrupted the teaching, but it has also created many challenges to assess students' learning properly. The purpose of assessing learning is to provide information about the child's progress to families and teachers. Loss of this information delays the recognition of learning problems and can have long-term detrimental consequences for the child (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

Now, assessments may be less critical than in the past. Taking online exams to make an accurate and complete assessment of actual learning is a big challenge. Although there was a great variety of assessment methods initially, clear directions are gradually being communicated to schools by the Ministry of Education. In general, schools are replacing traditional exams with online assessment tools. This is a new area for both educators and students, and it will likely have larger measurement error and bias than usual.

Effectiveness for primary schools

The effectiveness of online learning varies in age groups. The consensus about primary school students is that a structured and orderly environment is necessary for better and more sustainable learning (Daniel, 2020). These students are easily distracted, and the teacher must always engage them (Lilburn, 1962). Primary school teachers have not received the necessary training to do this online and do not have much skill. Although parents are a big help, there is serious doubt that online education is instrumental in primary schools, especially for first and second graders.

Education after the end of pandemic

Parents are now eagerly awaiting the end of the Corona pandemic. They also want their children to go to school as soon as possible. However, it is an outstanding and useful

experience for everyone, including parents, teachers, students, and decision-makers, that online education is an unavoidable but useful tool in critical situations.

While some argue that an unplanned and rapid move toward online learning - without training and preparation - is not beneficial to the sustainable growth of education in Iran, others argue that the integration of information technology in education will accelerate. Online education will eventually become one of the components of school education in Iran.

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