Distance Learning during the Coronavirus Crisis in the View of Arab Women Students in Israel: Difficulties, Readiness, and Satisfaction (Short Paper)

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הלמידה מרחוק במשבר הקורונה מעיני סטודנטיות ערביות בישראל: הקשיים, המוכנות ושביעות הרצון (מאמר קצר)

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Abstract

The research objective is to examine the difficulties and readiness of Arab women students in Israel regarding distance learning during the coronavirus crisis. The research presents the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning in general and for Arab women in particular. The importance of this research study is to identify the difficulties that had to be faced primarily by Arab women students, who belong to a conservative minority that is weak from an economic-social-educational point of view. The examination of the difficulties and readiness is important for future conclusions for Israeli academia, so it can adjust and improve digital teaching and learning methods for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The research population consists of eight Arab (Muslim) women students who learn in different higher education institutions in Israel. The research method is qualitative, the research instrument is a semi-structured interview, and the method of analysis is interpretative. One of the main research outcomes is that while distance learning has advantages and disadvantages, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages among the Arab women students.

Keywords: Higher education in Israel, Distance learning, Arab women in Israel, Arab minority.

Arabs in Israel are a native, national, patriarchal-clan minority (Samooha, 2004; Zoabi & Anson, 2017), mostly living in peripheral homogenous communities and found in lower socioeconomic classes (Suan, 2012). Tremendous gaps exist between Arab society and the rest of Israeli society (Haddad-Haj-Yahya & Assaf, 2017).

The Israeli education system is characterized by inequality between students in matriculation examination success and community socioeconomic ranking (Weissblay, 2020). It is difficult

for Arab students to meet higher education acceptance criteria, leading to relatively low representation (Dagan-Bozaglo, 2007).

The coronavirus pandemic caused a shift to distance learning in higher education. This research examines Arab women students' experience with distance learning during the coronavirus.

Methodology

The method is qualitative. The instrument is a semi-structured interview. The population is eight Muslim-Arab students, aged 20-42. Data collection was through frontal or Zoom interviews.

Findings

1. Lack of Knowledge in Digital Learning

Students said distance learning suffered from difficulties of beginners ignorant in digital learning methods/tools. "This was very challenging, suddenly everything became distance learning without preparation…as an Arab woman student, it was harder than other students to participate in the course."(2). Lecturers also had difficulties: "Distance studies aren't effective for different reasons, lecturers don't know to teach via Zoom."(3)

2. Difficulty Learning from Home

In traditional Arab society, single women live in the family home. Interviewees worried about "the family noise with the lecturer on Zoom"(1). "At first learning from home in pajamas was comfortable, but it became harder; at home there isn't an 'atmosphere' suitable for learning."(8). "Coping with sitting and focusing on the lecture although you're at home or with family. A new challenge, to learn and take tests on the computer"(5)

Distance learning has advantages. "To hear lectures when convenient wasn't possible beforehand (recorded lectures). Flexibility in learning time, ability to submit tests or enter the lecture from home, in pajamas or from bed. It saves travel time to university, it's enough to get up half an hour before."(5)

3. Inadequate Infrastructure

During home distance learning there were difficulties with Internet connectivity, because of poor infrastructure in Arab society. "Studying from home was a type of survival according to Internet connectivity"(4). "We needed to deal with this difficulty, Zoom disconnecting after forty minutes and trying to enter again."(7) Distance learning was accompanied by constant fear of the Internet disconnecting during the lesson. "Sometimes it disconnects in the middle, there's no Internet, giving an inadequate experience"(2). "Studying from home isn't effective since sometimes there's a problem connecting to the Internet, which disconnects all the time…there is no atmosphere of a study class in the Arab home."(7)

4. Decline in Physical/Mental Presence/Attendance

Distance learning caused a decline in attendance. The possibility of learning with camera and speaker off made it easier to be absent than in a class frontal lesson with interaction. "On Zoom it was difficult, most were without cameras or turned them off."(3) Student(2) stated that distance learning caused "disrespect in participation in lessons. Everything's recorded, therefore it's more flexible. It's permitted to not join the lesson." "Negligence in attendance and postponing studying. Because it's online and everything's recorded, there's no obligation to be

present during the lecture because I can listen later. Delaying completion of assignments and papers to the last minute."(5)

5. Distance Learning Effectiveness

Some maintained that distance learning was effective. "Despite all the technical problems I feared, especially during tests, in my opinion I succeeded in undergoing a distance learning process even if this didn't happen at first.…this was difficult, but taught me a lot, until I reached the stage in which I dealt with distance learning and achieved a good average."(1) Many interviewees preferred returning to campus. "It is preferable to return to campus, since learning from home requires strength and desire to learn on Zoom. This learning necessitates desire to commit to studies when there is no framework you belong to with specific time-arrangements…."(8)

The degree "type" is critical for distance learning effectiveness. Student(2) asserted: "Not fair. Because the recorded course is psycho-pharmacology, which personally was hard for me to understand the material on medications alone and remotely." The assumption is some courses are not effective in distance learning and obligate classroom attendance.

6. Lack of Classroom Interpersonal/Social Interaction

Student(8) opined that distance learning "distanced" personal connections. "I feel there is a kind of distance in relationships between students…there is no body language, only face." In addition to the importance of direct contact between students socially, Arab students were helped by Jewish students to understand the material: "Generally there was cooperation with lesson summaries and help previously far more…a distant relationship with lecturers, only through Zoom or email, making it harder for lecturers to know me…in most courses we were more than fifty students so in distance learning there was no easy opportunity to know the lecturer or participate in lessons as I would like. All the time we are on mute, it's possible to talk only when the lecturer approves. Most lecturers prefer to speak alone, that there won't be noise."(1)

Integration of distance learning in some courses is a solution for some students, since it frees time for activities such as work and volunteering. Some courses should be on campus. "After an entire semester on Zoom that went successfully, I can say I missed the learning routine at university and prefer to return to learning there. I recommend some courses be remote, this way we can work and have time for social activity and also learn on campus difficult courses and have connections."(4)

Conclusion

This research found that Arab women students lack preparedness and tools for distance learning. Arab schools must change their teaching methods and adapt to the technological era. Technology has an increasing role, but face-to-face communication between teachers and students remains essential. It is important to understand students' background and think how to help them acquire digital literacy and self-directed learning. The recommendation is for Arab women students to learn through live broadcast with mandatory attendance, so they acquire independent digital learning.

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