



An Autoethnography of the Challenges That the Teachers Faced Adopting the Distance Learning Process in a Primary School in the UAE During COVID - 19

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May 23, 2023

# **An Autoethnography of the challenges that the teachers faced adopting the distance learning process in a primary school in the UAE during COVID - 19**

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## **Abstract**

This autoethnographic study explores the challenges faced by primary stage teachers and the emotions they experienced during the sudden transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the study is to highlight the difficulties encountered by teachers and the emotional impact of the rapid shift to online education. The study employs semi-structured interviews to evaluate the real experiences of teachers as this paper provides insights into their challenges and emotions during the pandemic. The findings reveal that many teachers were unprepared for the transition, facing difficulties in interacting with students and collaborating with parents. This approach is valuable as it captures the professional experiences and reflections necessary to understand the effects of rapid educational changes in response to the pandemic. The study underscores the importance of addressing the challenges faced by primary teachers and offers implications for improving the teaching and learning experiences in such circumstances.

## **Keywords**

Distance learning – Challenges – shift - primary- COVID 19

## **1. Introduction**

The educational institutions in the whole world faced a historical challenge due to the spread of COVID -19 pandemic. Most of the schools decided to suspend face-to-face learning and move to online/distance learning. All schools in my country had been closed since the beginning of March 2020, as it marked the first month of the sudden shift to the distance learning. There were many challenges for teachers, students, and their parents particularly at the beginning of the pandemic time in primary schools' grades 1 to 4 with students ages range from 5 to 10 years old. As educators, particularly teachers we could not ignore that these experiences signified insights that remarkably alter the trajectory of our lives (Denzin, 2013).

There were many confrontations that I faced as a teacher of English language skills to young learners in a whole different classroom environment. Other teachers and I experienced different emotions while we were cooperating to bridge the gap between face to face and distance learning process. Additionally, how we needed to communicate with primary students' parents as we could not ignore their crucial role and how they supported their children to secure their online achievement (Steeves & Webster 2008) consequently, supported us as teachers to overcome any difficulties at that hard time.

Several studies explored effective time management in distance learning, benefiting both teachers and students (Reimers et al., 2020). Wise utilization of this learning format can enhance teacher motivation and facilitate effective teacher-student communication. The abrupt transition from in-person to online education may adversely impact teachers and students. Teacher preparedness, interaction with students, and communication with parents are contingent upon the support provided to manage the teaching process during the prevailing pandemic situation (Buheji et al., 2020; Meishar-Tal and Levenberg, 2021).

The purpose of this research was to shed the light on my feelings and emotions as well as my experiences as a primary stage English language teacher and two of my colleagues, a science teacher, and a music teacher during the pandemic hard time. Also, I would like to provide insights into the challenges that influenced my teaching through the sudden shift to distance learning with my primary stage students. Additionally, I considered other

factors that influenced my whole teaching process regarding my communications and interactions as a teacher with the primary students and working with their parents who played a vital role in their children's online learning process.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review of this autoethnography focused on the initial month of the pandemic in March 2020 and the abrupt transition from traditional face-to-face to distance learning (Gherheş et al., 2021). The sudden closure of educational institutions worldwide necessitated the mandatory shift to distance learning, without prior preparation or planning (Sahu, 2020). Makwembere et al. (2021) highlighted the need for further investigation into online learning amid the ongoing COVID-19 situation. Therefore, this autoethnography aimed to deepen understanding of personal experiences and contribute to research on teacher challenges in distance learning (Hoey, 2017), shedding light on an aspect often overlooked in public discourse (Philipson, 2021).

Limited research focused on online learning for primary stage students and their parents, with few autoethnographic studies conducted in primary schools (Kim, 2020; Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Existing studies during the pandemic primarily highlighted the technological revolution outside traditional classrooms (Zhao & Watterston, 2021) but offered limited insight into the challenges faced by teachers. This autoethnography stood out by emphasizing the experiences of primary stage teachers, exploring their challenges in online interactions with students and parents, and addressing their emotions during the COVID-19 period. It shed light on the lack of support teachers needed to navigate this unfamiliar situation (Vallade & Kaufman, 2020). The aim of this autoethnographic account was to inspire informed decision-making among educational stakeholders, particularly in supporting primary stage teachers.

### **2.1 Moving to Online Teaching**

Moving to distance learning became mandatory that all teachers should follow but without any previous preparation. The teachers adopted the new method of online learning, halt face to face teaching and postponed all school activities including assessments and co-curricular programmes (Sahu, 2020). Many teachers were stressed with sudden working in a new system without having any previous information. They felt that there was a disconnection that prevented them from communicating with their colleagues, students, and their parents.

Moreover, the greatest challenge in moving to online learning was the remarkable increase in the workload. Aristovnik et al (2020) stated that many teachers felt this workload because of the sudden transition to distance learning that needed some skills they unfortunately were not trained for. Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) indicated that the teaching profession brought pressure due to the workloads increase and insufficient training. This lack of training certainly led to feelings of despair for teachers. They felt as if they were in a dilemma with the decisions taken regarding the best technological method to adopt. Although there had been endless discussions on the transition of the whole teaching and learning system, distance learning remained as the only solution that suddenly erupted with the continuous spread of the pandemic everywhere (Yarovaya et al., 2020).

### **2.2 Online Interacting with Primary Stage Students**

During the COVID-19 situation, some studies examined the online teaching and learning experiences of teachers and students (Lalani et al., 2020; Damşa et al., 2021). It was highlighted by Colao et al. (2020) that satisfying children's socialization needs was crucial, as they lacked opportunities to share their interests and emotions in virtual classrooms where teachers felt isolated with limited communication. The sudden transition to online learning left many teachers unprepared and disappointed, struggling to manage remote classrooms (Scherer et al., 2021). The online interaction between teachers and students was often poorly managed, leading to the dismissal of academic life (Bittman et al., 2011). Consequently, some teachers reported a negative impact on their teacher identity and didn't feel like true educators (Kim and Asbury, 2020).

### **2.3 Online Working with Students' Parents**

Effective communication between teachers and parents played a vital role during the lockdown period in schools. Several studies emphasized the collaboration between parents and schools, highlighting their crucial role in supporting their children's home learning (Wellington, 2001; Knopik et al., 2021). With schools closed and social

isolation in place during the pandemic, parents took on the responsibility of ensuring their children's academic performance (Buheji et al., 2020). Additionally, parental support boosted children's confidence and mitigated the negative effects of the sudden shift to online learning. Parents became instrumental in facilitating effective home learning through their engagement in various educational activities (Couse & Chen, 2010).

Teachers' collaboration with parents had the potential to improve students' academic performance. Parents' interests and skills in supporting their children, along with the support from teachers, were crucial during the online learning period. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) emphasized the importance of parental involvement in reducing the harmful consequences of increased online time. Teachers working in tandem with parents formed a central part of the teaching and learning process. However, in some cases, online collaboration with parents became burdensome for teachers, who had to manage additional responsibilities and address the concerns of unsatisfied parents regarding the sudden transition to online learning. Moreover, Knopik et al. (2021) discovered instances where parents completed assignments for their children, leading to frustration among teachers. Some teachers found that certain parents lacked the experience and understanding to provide adequate academic support for their children's online learning, which proved challenging for teachers to monitor.

### 3. Research Questions

This autoethnography seeks to address these questions:

RQ1: What were the emotions and challenges the teachers experienced in moving their teaching online?

RQ2: What were the emotions and challenges the teachers experienced in interacting with their students online?

RQ3: What were the emotions and challenges the teachers experienced in working with parents online?

### 4. Theoretical Underpinning

I applied the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to guide my research (Bandura, 1964). The SCT was developed by Albert Bandura in 1960 (Figure 1). This reflexive was a valued path, as it captured the professional confronts required to recognize the effects of fast changes to teaching and learning process in response to the pandemic. The framework of this theory explained how the teachers adapted to the significant changes in the whole teaching process. The SCT represented the interactions between the teachers and the primary stage students and their parents through our behaviour and personal feelings particularly during the sudden spread of COVID - 19 situation. By employing the SCT, I wanted to focus on the element of reciprocal determinism as a main factor in influencing our personal feelings as well as the flexibility of our teaching practices and how we could approach our roles in the entirely different work environment. Additionally, our behaviour as teachers had been shaped by the interactions of some factors such as cognition and environment (Bandura,1978). The implementation of the SCT concentrated on the primary stage teachers' experiences and their personal adaptation to the change of environmental factors represented by the pandemic and how it affected all our aspects of life particularly the process of teaching and learning.

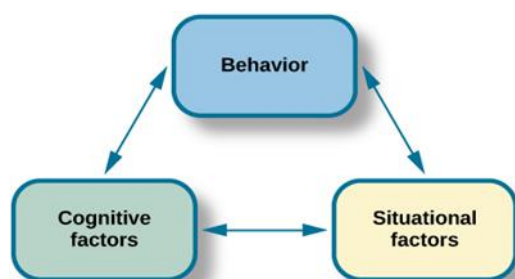


Figure 1: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Source: Bandura, 1964)

## 5. Methodology

Autoethnography was the research method that I sought to demonstrate and carefully analyse personal experiences to comprehend cultural practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography required self-reflection and evaluation aimed at enhancing the quality of outputs (Duncan, 2004). The approach involved documenting perceptions and views that depicted the challenges and emotions faced by teachers during the pandemic. However, certain limitations, such as message conveyance and event recall, needed to be acknowledged (Wamsted, 2012). The focus was on the experiences of primary stage teachers, necessitating continuous documentation of personal encounters to avoid memory loss of details and emotions (Denejkina, 2017).

### Participants

Autoethnography aims to showcase individuals as they navigate through decisions, life choices, and struggles (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). In this study, autoethnography was employed to explore the real challenges experienced by both me and fellow teachers during the sudden shift to distance learning. Emphasis was placed on the communication and interaction between teachers and primary school students, as well as the role of parents in guiding their children and supporting teachers during distance learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). As a researcher and participant, I relied on my own personal experiences as the primary source of data. Additionally, two colleagues from the same primary school, a music teacher, and a science teacher, participated by providing answers to interview questions for data collection.

### 5.1 Data Collection

Qualitative methods were employed to collect data from personal artifacts and reflections in a primary school setting, aiming to enhance understanding of the research problem. The data collection process encompassed various methods, including observations during virtual classes, interviews with the music and science teachers, WhatsApp text messages, memories of discussions with parents, personal notes, and emails sent to parents (Creswell, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the music and science teachers, allowing them to provide reflective insights on the autoethnography subject and uncover previously unconsidered research areas (Boudah, 2010).

### 5.2 Methods of Data Collection

#### Interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the music and science teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives regarding the sudden shift to online teaching. The interviews aimed to elicit the teachers' experiences and gather information related to their interactions with students during online practical lessons, as well as their collaboration with parents.

#### Observations

Observation was employed to focus on the challenges teachers faced in monitoring and guiding their students during virtual classes. Six observations were conducted, with each lasting 30 minutes, encompassing two lessons for each teacher (music and science) and two observations in my own online classes. An observation sheet was used to record comments on the teachers' emotions and reactions during their online interactions with students.

#### Memories and Notes

Data were collected through personal memory and notes taken over the course of one month. Initial reflections on online lessons were recorded, including notes as evidence of actions and encounters. Memories were utilized to capture feelings, thoughts, and decisions during that challenging time.

#### WhatsApp Messages and Emails

WhatsApp messages exchanged with parents were collected, including 10 messages from my communication with parents and 10 messages each from the music and science teachers. These messages addressed various aspects of online learning, such as homework, assessments, and parent inquiries. Additionally, 10 emails sent to parents

containing information about homework, assessments, and instructions before joining online classes were collected.

#### **5.4 Data Analysis**

Autoethnography was employed to analyze recorded data, illuminated personal experiences that reflect cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). A manual thematic analysis approach was used, focusing on key points related to teachers' challenges and emotions during virtual classes. The analysis emphasized the teacher's role, involvement, and enthusiasm in the online teaching process. It also examined how teachers dealt with student and parent interactions during online classes. This analysis was complemented by transcribed and analyzed teacher interviews, ensuring an unbiased enhancement of the findings and discussions.

Memories, notes, WhatsApp messages, and emails were analyzed analytically. Significant changes in online teaching experiences, interactions with students, and collaboration with parents were identified through highlighted key phrases in written memory, notes, WhatsApp messages, and emails. Sequentially reviewing these records, linked to the beginning of the COVID-19 situation, allowed for an examination of how teachers' challenges and emotions evolved during the sudden transition to online learning.

The data analysis employed the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to support research themes, providing a holistic framework for structuring the emerging categories from thematic analysis. Throughout the pandemic, teachers' behaviors and actions were influenced by observations and experiences in their work environment. The SCT facilitated a descriptive focus on how teachers adapted to significant changes during this challenging time.

#### **5.5 Validity and Reliability**

Addressing methodological weaknesses and leveraging their strengths. Observations were meticulously maintained to accurately record teachers' challenges and emotions. Interviews with teachers were carefully designed to promote enthusiasm and motivation. The collected data were critically reviewed to establish research validity. However, potential concerns related to observation's impact on teachers' and students' behavior were mitigated by the researcher's dual role as both researcher and teacher in the same school, supporting the natural behavior necessary for valid research results.

## **6. Findings and Discussion**

The findings showed that the teachers applied different approaches to adapt virtual teaching and learning.

### **6.1 Emotions and Challenges in Moving to Online Teaching**

My reflections pointed to the personal, technical challenges of maintaining regular online communication. The reflections captured the periods when I prepared for online interactions with students as well as online working with parents. When the sudden shift to online teaching started in all schools, I had a feeling of isolation from my natural practical life as I used to work face to face with my students when I started my teaching job a long time ago. It was a very hard experience to work with my young learners in English language classes, to correct their writing paragraphs, follow their progress in reading texts, correct their grammar mistakes or support them with the right word pronunciation.

The same feelings of isolation were dominant with both my colleagues, the music, and the science teacher when they started their online classes. The music teacher found that it was impossible to train the students in playing music using the musical instruments available at our school while the students stayed at home and attended virtual classes. She felt isolated from her students as she could not teach her practical lessons and could not support her students in learning new ideas. The science teacher felt the same isolation that she could not show her students the scientific experiments that they used to do in the school laboratory. She just used to present slideshows for her students to explain the scientific concepts and experiments. She felt disappointed that she followed the routine of the online teaching and did not offer any varieties for her students in terms of using instructions of differentiation that needed to be emphasised as it supported the students in their future learning (Ufford, 2021).

The greatest challenge for all of us was the lack of preparation due to the sudden shift to online learning. It included new plans for almost everything, another school improvement plan, technical plan, lessons, and weekly plans. The teachers and I felt overwhelmed with all the plans that needed to be updated so they could be appropriate for the COVID-19 situation. This lack of preparation led to less learning time as the students in primary schools could not stay online for a long time. I found that the weekly schedule for lessons was decreased particularly for the co-curricular activities as well as the other lessons in the other subjects. It was reduced between 5 and 6 hours, each lesson was reduced from 40 to 30 minutes, compared to face-to-face school time (Huber et al. 2020). Despite this lack of preparation and what the teachers needed to reconsider in planning, we felt confident that we could overcome all the planning problems we faced in our online classes at that difficult time (Ajzen, 1991).

## **6.2 Emotions and Challenges in Interacting Online with Students**

The online interaction between the teachers and the students plays a main role in distance teaching and learning. We supported our students to build on their own knowledge particularly in the practical classes that needed the students to work by themselves (Bandura,1978). My colleagues and I spent most of our online teaching time communicating with our students thus we faced many challenges. One of our greatest challenges was the classroom management that was confirmed with the science teacher's interview,

“It was difficult to control the children for online 40 minutes. I felt disappointed that my class was chaotic.”

We felt unsatisfied when encountered the problem of online classroom management. We could not teach the lesson we prepared as we found some students played games or busy with their Facebook accounts (Rouis et al 2011). I thought it was due to the lack of resources that should be previously prepared.”

Additionally, our greatest challenge when interacting online with our students was that we were unable to control the assessment time. We found that some students needed more support however the big number of students in each class, about 35, prevented us from providing full support to all students.

Moreover, I took the following notes during my observations time:

- Most students got involved in other activities if the teacher was busy and could not help.
- Some students needed guidance on using the Microsoft Teams.
- Some students were hyperactive and needed more activities.
- Some students got bored working long time in one activity, therefore varied online resources should be used.
- Using the differentiation instructions was essential in online classes.

The notes I took during online interactions with students, explained that we encountered significant challenges. Our notes revealed feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction, stemming from our inability to implement effective strategies such as classroom management and differentiated instruction (Terry, 2002). Technical problems also emerged as major obstacles, raising our negative emotions.

## **6.3 Emotions and Challenges in Working Online with Parents**

Moreover, the communication between us and our students' parents were important during the time of distance learning. Buheji et al., (2020) stated that parents were responsible for their children in the social isolation time. The importance of working with parents was confirmed through the music teacher's interview,

“Working with parents is important, they represented the main point of communication with our students”.

I primarily communicated with parents through WhatsApp messages (Egede, 2021). However, I became overwhelmed with the increased workload and the numerous daily messages from concerned parents due to the COVID-19 situation. Despite spending hours responding to messages and emails, some parents remained unsatisfied with their child's distance learning experience. Moreover, some parents didn't regularly check their emails, leading to additional work for us. We faced the challenge of answering repetitive questions, requiring us

to resend emails as WhatsApp messages to ensure they were read, and parents could support their children within the limited time available.

Working online with parents posed challenges, particularly technical issues, and parents' inability to use recommended platforms (Kim & Asbury, 2020). This increased our workload and disrupted class time. Parental interference during assessments also compromised the reliability of results.

Another greatest challenge in working with parents was the language barrier. The science teacher was a native speaker of English language and she had to work online with her students' parents to support their children in explaining some scientific terms. She needed the students' parents' help as she could not take her students to the school laboratory to do the science experiments by themselves. She asked me to help her as a bilingual teacher. In the beginning, I did not mind, and I was pleased to support her however, later I felt overloaded with another heavy task with the time constraints due to the lesson time reduction of 10 minutes.

The emotions of disappointment in online communication with parents was clear through the science teacher's interview,

“Miscommunication was a challenge, I felt disappointed that I could not understand their language.”.

## **7. Conclusion**

This autoethnography explores my teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on online interaction with primary stage students and their parents. It delves into the challenges we faced as teachers and the emotions we experienced during this difficult time. Reflecting on our practices, both the advantages and disadvantages, allowed us to recall our experiences and navigate the challenges. Distance learning also stimulated our thinking and self-esteem, as we utilized various educational technology programs to enhance our teaching approaches. Effective management of distance learning played a crucial role in supporting teachers' well-being and showcasing their creativity. This autoethnography highlights the significance of teachers' professional development in online education, providing confidence and competence to guide their teaching careers. It emphasizes the importance of classroom management, student behavior, timely feedback, collaborative learning, and emotional support for teachers. Encouraging collaboration among stakeholders and informed decision-making by policymakers is necessary to ensure equitable opportunities and positive educational outcomes for all teachers. Policy priorities should include reviewing leadership responsibilities and support plans for primary school teachers, as well as revising evaluation strategies in the online teaching and learning context. The research acknowledges limitations in the focus on teachers' roles and behaviors during the pandemic, as well as the small sample size, which calls for further insights from various perspectives.



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