Attitudes and Concerns towards Distance Education: The Case of Lebanon

Ramzi Nasser, Notre Dame University- Lebanon
Kamal Abouchedid, Notre Dame University- Lebanon

Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes of schoolteachers and directors towards the worth and value of implementing a distance education program in Lebanon. The study surveys 7 school directors and 112 schoolteachers unequally divided among fourteen urban and rural schools. School directors were negative about the possibilty of distance education meeting the training needs of schoolteachers. In addition, they reported costly training and the purchase of technologies for distance education as inconceivable. On the other hand, teachers held a more positive view of distance education. Though more than 50% of the teachers reported little acquaintance with the specifics of distance education, they reported willingness to put forth the effort needed to familiarize themselves with the new technologies and practices. More significantly, the exceptionally high level of unawareness between the two groups points to the need to organize workshops and technology seminars so that schools can better understand the structural, curricular, and pedagogical practices needed for full blown distance education programs in Lebanon.

Introduction

The most important movement of the 21st century draws on the role of distance education as a tool for meeting a global and exponentially growing information economy. If we consider the globalization of modern schooling based on the work of Boli and Ramirez (1986), education is seen as a social institution- a transnational or "world cultural" phenomenon- where educational developments evolve at the level of world cultures. This conception is argued for by an information driven society - a society which demands other means than the existing traditional medium of instruction adopted by educational institutions today. Because of an axis-shift in the transfer of information, distance education will overcome the tyrants of distance, i.e., it may broaden learners' opportunities in either selecting a scholastic discipline or enrolling in a university.

At present, many developing Asian countries are striding towards globalization through providing a large part of higher education by distance (Tam, 1999). In addition, universities in North America, Asia, and Europe, explore the possibility that in the year 2001 more than 75% of the colleges and universities will use distance-learning technologies as the main medium for the cultivation of global knowledge (Radford, 1997). However, a different perspective among "Southern Nations" downplays the role of distance education on the assumption that it would undermine traditional education, limit students' interaction with peers and faculty, and eradicate the platform for which a deliberate academic discourse takes place (Mathews, 1999). Many Arab countries (e.g., Arab Gulf and Lebanon) now heedlessly give way to a financially costly campus construction by branching higher educational institutions to the remote areas with little considerations for a strategic and futuristic well-planned regional program in distance education. To underestimate distance education's potential may be a loss to further symmetrical development that could bridge the societal, economic, and cultural gaps among Arabs.

In many Arab countries there has been no real implementation of distance education. Despite attempts by local institutions and international organizations like UNESCO to promote regional cooperation through distance education, Ministries of Education do not officially recognize higher education degrees obtained by distance in a number of Arab countries (e.g., Lebanon). Though the Arab Ministers of Education convened in the Lebanese Capital, Beirut on September 18, 2000 and announced the establishment of the Open Arab University in the year 2001, most education decision-makers remain militate against distance education. In fact, strategic thinking is counter weighted by negative attitudes towards the workability of distance education. While the battle for and against distance education goes on, neither policy nor basic research has examined the views and concerns of schoolteachers and directors towards the implementation of distance education programs in the Arab region.

Researchers warn of an inherent problem associated with ignoring classroom teachers' beliefs about any form of technologies for distance education (Czerniak, Lumpe, Haney, and Beck, 1999). The "top-down" approach is also a cause for worry. If directors and educational decision-makers truly implemented distance education programs in Lebanon today, they may lack the needed organizational support from those who would actually run the programs. For example, Schuttloffel (1998) maintains that technical capabilities of technology as well as the belief systems of teachers are major determinants to a satellite-compressed video as a medium for distance education. Not only teachers' knowledge or skills are needed for implementing distance education, but also their perceptions and attitudes of the use of technologies for the purpose of education (Tobin, Tippins, and Gallard, 1994). The need to reform existing educational programs and implement new ones requires the understanding of teachers' and directors' beliefs concerning distance education. It is assumed that those who may be involved in distance education programs consider that literacy, awareness, and interest are powerful agents for curricular change and alternative means to the traditional methods of instruction.

Several requirements for the successful implementation of distance education are required. These are: (i) preparing material; (ii) managing the dissemination and exchange of information through technological means; and (iii) constant upgrading of the course work and the professional development of teachers in the use of technology in education. Are teachers and directors prepared for undertaking the above tasks required for distance education? Will they propagate or hinder a program of distance education whether through management or use of technology?

This paper's research is limited in that it does only assess the attitudes to the worth of distance education among school directors and teachers, but it is significant in showing a decalage within the school systems. This decalage is due particularly, to the gap between the traditional pattern of education and the pragmatic one as personalized in the attitudes of schoolteachers and directors. The rationale of this paper is twofold: (i) Teachers' beliefs are effective in inducing curricula change (McLaughlin, 1990) and represent a clear "guiding stick" in the planning procedure for distance education (Tobin, Tippins, and Gallard, 1994); (ii) Directors are facilitators and pragmatists who guide and reinforce faculty in the process of change.

The Conceptual Framework

This research is based on O'Malley and McCraw (1999) work which adapts Roger's (1995) diffusion model. This model suggests that for any change in the form of innovation and decision-making process, five stages should be taken into consideration: Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation, and Confirmation. The fact that telecommunication and distance education have not found their way into the remotest areas of many Arab countries, particularly in Lebanon, remains a pursuant force in the expected development for change in society. Hence,

change is still at the stages of knowledge and persuasion. In this study, we adopt two of O'Malley et.al. constructs: (i) prior educational conditions; (ii) perceived characteristics of distance education. These two constructs provide a framework for the understanding of school directors' felt- needs and schoolteachers' readiness to engage in distance education.

Objectives

The objective of this study is twofold: First, to assess teachers' training needs and portray their attitudes towards distance education. Second, to understand school directors' views on teachers' training needs, and the readiness of their schools to participate in distance education.

Methods

In order to assess teachers' training needs and portray their views towards distance education, open ended interviewing technique and main attitude scale were the main tools for data collection (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Singh, 1993). The interviewing schedule was laid out in such a way as to generate information by a flexible approach. The interviews were conducted with top school administrative bodies and centered on teachers' training needs in light of the tectonic shifting in both styles and content of pedagogy proposed by the new national curriculum in Lebanon. Additionally, the core educational issue to be explored by the researcher has been the very idea of the value and use of distance education as a medium for meeting teachers' training needs. Pre-pilot runs and consecutive informal panels were tried with students majoring in education and university faculty to establish the validity of the interview schedule and ensure its usefulness in gathering relevant information.

The fact that data collection only operates as indicator rather than confirmation has led us to require crosschecking of the data through the means of triangulation. Thus, in addition to the interview schedule, a survey questionnaire was constructed by the authors, which sought to gather information concerning teachers' views of the value and worth of distance education and see if such attitudes corroborate with those reported by school directors. Thus, prior to the survey of teachers' attitudes towards distance education, the authors conducted an assessment of school directors' views of distance education programs, teacher-training needs, and the readiness of schools to participate in distance education endorsed and run by a private university in Lebanon. A general perceived positive value would provide the reader with those dimensions that may indicate the relative advantage of distance education over other traditional methods of education.

The interview with school directors was conducted informally in which the interviewees were asked, through a friendly and open discussion approach, about the feasibility, worth, and the appropriateness of a distance education program in meeting schoolteachers' training needs through distance education. Because our intention was not to focus on a single issue, we did not approach the research with specific pre-packaged research questions or hypotheses set forth. In fact, as alluded to earlier, our concern was to understand directors' intentions, feelings, and views regarding distance education. In order to further supplement and verify school directors' views on distance education, a questionnaire was administered to schoolteachers as potential aspirants for distance education.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part sought to obtain the following background information: age, gender, teaching experience, level of teaching, degrees held, and academic major. The second part of the questionnaire was adapted from Bratina and Templeton (1997) and from O'Malley, and McCraw (1999). We constructed a 17 item, 7-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Cronbach alpha=0.62). The main seven

constructs focused on the worth, feasibility, quality time, training, effort, acceptance, and benefits of distance education. Items that were judged as attributive to construct ratings were summed and divided by the number of items obtaining a mean rating on a specific construct. For instance, those items that provide an indication to the worth of distance education were summed and divided by the number of items that reflected the specific construct. To overcome the within and between confoundment, the mean rating was obtained for specific items reflecting certain constructs. Then the neutral point was incorporated in which a t-test was used to determine whether the ratings departed significantly from the neutral point. Respondents were given a functional definition of distance education (see appendix) and directions were given to rate the 17-item scale. The responses of the questions were data recorded and analyzed. The semantic differential items presented direct measures of attitude toward distance education along the seven constructs i.e., worth, feasibility, quality time, training, effort, acceptance, and benefits of distance education. Validity of the instrument can be inferred by its adaptation to criterions. A panel of judges and directors consensually assessed the applicability, adequacy, and clarity of the questionnaire items with the conceived constructs. Convergence among judges provided a positive assessment based on objective criteria. The measures on the scale were further verified, cross-checked, and supplemented with interview data obtained from school directors.

Sample

Fourteen private schools were selected for the study. In order to allow for a rural-urban dimension in the analysis of data, seven of the fourteen private schools situated in rural area were also selected for the study. All schools had a complete educational program from Kindergarten to Baccalaureate II (13th grade) with exception to two schools which had elementary classes only (urban). Teachers (n=112) were selected from fourteen schools in such a way that they represented all educational cycles officially recognized by Lebanese Ministry of Education, namely; elementary; intermediate; and secondary. Regarding directors, only seven were available for the interview, of whom four were drawn from urban schools and three from rural ones.

Although the sample of the study was not representative of the total population of schoolteachers and directors in Lebanon, this limitation did not prevent us from making common sense discussions having broader applicability. Over all, "case-study work derives its validity not from the representativeness of its samples but from the thoughtfulness of its analysis" (Silverman, 1993, p. 169).

Results

Interview data showed that directors were concerned with four main issues: funding, training, feasibility, and loss of time. Directors were not focused to the interview questions and not so much concerned with the value or worth of distance education, but showed concern for distance learning processes.

Directors were concerned with the issue of time loss in training teachers to use technology for distance education. Major concerns among directors expressed the lack of finances and the needed infrastructure to establish "distance education units." Money needed also revolved around the budget deficits and current status of the schools. One school director expressed the idea as a myth which would require the recruitment of additional faculty. Other school directors turned down the idea that their own teachers have no time for the training or even enough time to prepare for the lectures. This came to our surprise, as much as our beliefs in positive reform or change, the role of directors to guide, organize, facilitate or even implement (Wenzel, 1998) was swept away by their negative assumptions. However, positive feedback and encouragement may

provide the very support needed for the technology phobic and novice teachers.

The 112 teachers who properly returned the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS. Seven constructs were measured: acceptance/worth (items 12, 13 and 15), feasibility (items 8 and 11), quality time (items 4 and 7), training (item 10), effort (items 12 and 17), benefits (items 2 and 6), and effectiveness (items 1, 5, 14, and 15). All negative items rating (5, 8, 10, 14, and 16) were reversed in order to maintain a homogeneous profile score.

A higher mean rating suggested that teachers were more in agreement with constructs or items devised. Teachers tended to be close to the neutral point in assessing the worth of distance education (no significant difference was found at the 0.01 level). Teachers thought that a distance education program would not be feasible to run out from private schools, as it would burden the schools with substantial amount of financial debit. However, teachers believed that distance education program would save them time in fulfilling their educational goals (significant at the 0.001 level). Furthermore, they were neutral about the needed training to run a distance educational program (significant at the 0.01 level), yet they were willing to invest considerable effort in a distance education program (with a significant alpha level of 0.001 and 0.01 respectively). However, teachers reported that such a program would not work in countries like Lebanon. Moreover, they believed that they were to benefit and provide important support for any future program in distance education. Table 1 presents the t-test differences for the seven constructs from the neutral point.

Table 1. Mean Ratings and t-test Results for Seven Constructs Conceptualized for the Attitude Toward Distance Education Program (1 = most negative opinion, 7 = most positive opinion)				
	Mean Score	**Standard Deviation**	**T-Test**	**n**
Acceptance /Worth	4.14	0.86	1.69	108
Feasibility	3.67	1.39	-2.46*	107
Quality Time	5.35	1.34	10.57**	110
Training	3.56	1.95	-2.39	112
Effort	4.79	1.35	6.14**	110
Benefits	4.30	1.16	2.71*	110
Effectiveness	3.21	1.01	-8.09**	107

* Significant at the 0.01 level, ** Significant at the 0.001 level

Discussion

Interview data obtained from school directors and teachers raised a number of issues, which inadvertently went beyond the boundaries of the study in terms of teacher training. These issues are worth reporting, having broader relations with existing limitations connected with implementing distance education in schools in Lebanon. There were several specific areas on which the researchers focused: worth, feasibility, quality, time, training, effort, acceptance, and benefits of distance education.

In a hierarchy of satisfaction of basic needs where day-to-day-life in Lebanon is demanding, and in light of the limited professional rewards from teaching, judging by what school directors reported, the furtherance of higher education through distance was not the teachers' highest priority. Teachers, on the other hand, were neutral about the worth of a distance education

program, or its contribution to their training needs. To overcome attitudes of indifference, teachers' horizontal development may be the most appropriate practice and could maintain teachers' networks that give purpose focus and support (Yelland and Bigum, 1995).

The present study evinces that there are cycles of commutative ignorance to the idea and utility of distance education. Interview results show that there is wariness (if not outright rejection) among school directors regarding distance education. The researchers were subject to comments from an administrator who believed that the idea is new to her and even strange that one could suggest it as an alternative model to education. Teachers' attitudes towards contributing to a distance education program were more positive than those expressed by directors. This is expressed in the willingness to put effort to contribute to a distance education program, with a significant and high difference from the neutral point (t=6.14, df=109, p<0.001). Attitudes were different among those who were acquainted with the idea of distance education and those who were not. We ran a one-way ANOVA with two groups, those who were acquainted with distance education and those who were not on the rating of item 17. A significant difference F(1, 105)= 4.088, p<0.05 was found for teachers who were acquainted with distance education by rating higher (M=4.83, SD= 1.27) than those who were not acquainted on their ability to contribute to a distance education program (M=4.23, SD =1.68). Lack of familiarity with distance education or lack of understanding the strategies for using the technology in distance education are major problem areas for those who are advancing a program in distance education (Sherry and Morse, 1995).

In a further exploration of the possibility for introducing a distance education program in schools in Lebanon, a school director put several impasses to the idea. He described it as a very financially costly one, which would require the recruitment of additional teachers into each department. He added that the school might not even be capable of securing salaries for more teachers needed to run the program. In asking a director of rural school about the physical difficulties faced by his school, he preferred that we pay a visit and see for ourselves. The school director stated to the researchers that when he was the director of a hospital many people proposed to him projects whose implementations were practically inconceivable. It seemed that the implementation of a distance education program in that school was itself inconceivable. A director of an urban school expressed another example of the wariness of the idea of distance education. To a question on the school's readiness to endorse a distance education program, he said that his school neither had enough classes nor teachers to consider distance education. When the researchers asked him about teachers' interest in pursuing higher education through distance, he said:

> "Lebanon is still recovering from protracted civil strife…my school is suffering from serious financial problems and we do not have regular classes and enough teachers to participate in any distance education program. "

In view of the interview conducted by the researchers with the school director, that by limiting the discussion to financial problems, lack of teachers, and irregular classes in the school, the director was pushing the idea to a deadlock and probably he was aware of it. Teachers who reported that a distance education program would not be a feasible thing for the schools where they work in due to financial constraints shared the director's view. Such attitudes are similar to those expressed in developing countries which lack the technological infrastructure, finances, and communication systems that are constantly broken-down by strife (Connell, 1998).

As for the furtherance of their higher education by distance, teachers reported that if courses would fit within their timetable, they would take more courses by distance leading to a university degree. A distance education program would save them lots of time provided the Ministry of

Culture and Higher Education approved it, schoolteachers reported. The mean on these items (M=5.35, SD=1.34) was higher than the middle point reaching significance i.e., high agreement (t=10.57, df=109, p<0.001). To some extent, this finding corroborated O'Malley et al. study in which teachers felt that they were to benefit from instruction through distance education especially that such a program would save them time. The positive assessment of distance education by teachers reflected a different perspective than that presented by schools' directors on the ability of schools to accommodate for distance education. Judging by what one school director said the physical conditions of his school could not accommodate for installing computers needed for distance education. The pertinent literature discloses that many schools operate aging computers in places such as the US and Australia (Becker, 1994; Shearman, 1997). In principle the school director favored the idea of distance education but added that the matter concerns teachers, who in her opinion may not have the time and money to pursue higher education through distance education. Teachers' main concern, she assumed, was to find extra jobs for better income generation. By contrast, teachers reported that a distance education program would save them time to obtain a university degree by distance (t=10.57, df.=109, p<0.001).

Data obtained from interviews with directors showed that teachers training needs to accommodate for the educational technologies proposed by the new Lebanese national curriculum were always there. However, teachers were neutral on the number of trainers or the effort needed to run a distance education program. Connell (1998), who suggests that highly skilled staff need to be trained in the use of new technology, shared this finding. Although a number of interviewees, mostly teachers, expressed grievance against the training sessions they received and reported that additional traditional training was not a priority. A teacher in a rural school, for instance, reported that she did not benefit from the training sessions she received since they were chaotic, disorganized, and incongruent with her training needs. A teacher-trainer at the Center Educational Research and Development (A Governmental Center for Educational Research and Training) shared this view. He said to the researchers during an interview that: "…there is much chaos in the training and many schools in North Lebanon started to question the worth of the training sessions they received". Our data showed that 50% of the teachers agreed versus 28.6% disagreed with the fact that there is a shortage of qualified trainers who will carry out the cycles of teacher-training in Lebanon. Despite teachers' views, a key administrator had faith that teacher-training programs with a new thinking is an objective worth striving for.

This study has presented uncertainty regarding the implementation of distance education in schools. This uncertainty can be assorted into the followings: (i) there is wariness to the idea of distance education; (ii) the idea of distance education was seen as a relatively new one; (iii) economic and physical constraints are not conducive to the implementation of distance education program (Interviews with school directors). An overriding caution permeated those school directors who thought that distance education might keep teachers from performing their daily duties. A different picture is presented by Cuban (1990) as an important construct to a fundamentally more traditional picture that appears in Lebanon. He observes that there is a cycle of technology promotion advocated by directors and researchers in the West, because teachers are under-trained to use technology with little funding for meeting their training needs. In Lebanon this picture appears to be at variance. School directors think of distance education as inconceivable, while teachers are more positive of its benefits and general workability and feel that training is a necessity.

Not withstanding the dry results of the study, there are no facile generalizations that are very helpful to conclude that the idea of distance educateon is inconceivable. Our results may not reflect the same strictures in other schools in other countries in the Middle East since these

schools may have their own sociological, demographic and pedagogical characteristic features. The fact that the results are only confined to the sample of the study, facts presented are essential to establish a framework for future action on distance education.

The idea of starting distance education in schools in Lebanon should take into consideration the following: First, sufficient attention has to be given to school realities. More recognition of teachers' training needs and ability to participate in distance education should be explored. Workshops recruiting school directors and teachers may present the agenda of distance education, clarify the matter and answer participants questions and queries. Second, the idea of distance education needs marketing. The distribution of a prospectus about the program, its pedagogical philosophies, and objectives can be helpful in educating schools about the serviceability of distance education. Third, presentations delivered in schools by tutors from the Departments of Education in universities about the nature of distance education can be helpful in crystallizing the idea and marketing it. Fourth, follow up meetings with schools can promote the idea and make it more argumentative.

Generally speaking, our results do not rule out the possibility of implementing distance education programs in schools in Lebanon, nor do they recommend its immediate implementation. The main finding presented in the study was that overt unfamiliarity with distance education by respondents is a factor chiefly responsible for their lack of sustenance for the idea. The respondents' questioning of the applicability of distance education in their schools is least likely to taint a futuristic project if further steps for familiarizing them with its tenets were considered.

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