

A CASE STUDY OF KOSOVAN TEACHERS' TRANSITION TO DISTANCE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Marigona Morina,^{1,*} Antigona Uka,² & Kashif Raza¹



Marigona Morina



Antigona Uka



Kashif Raza

¹ University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

² Kosova Center for Distance Education – Meso Online, Pristina, Kosovo

*Address all correspondence to: Marigona Morina, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, E-mail: marigona.morina@ucalgary.ca

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education globally; however, different contexts around the world have responded to the challenges distinctively depending on the available resources. Developed countries, like the United States, Canada, and Qatar, transitioned to online education within a few days after the spread of the pandemic, while developing countries such as Pakistan and India kept their schools closed for several months. However, the selected context of this study is Kosova, where distance education received attention only after the closure of schools following the spread of the virus. This shift marked innovations in distance education, but the experiences of the teachers in their transition to online education remain unexplored. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the challenges that middle school teachers in Kosova faced in relation to the implementation of online education and to investigate teachers' attitudes toward integrating the online component into traditional education systems. This article involves multiple case research studies on the pedagogical crises resulting from the pandemic. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 teachers (n = 12) and data were thematically analyzed through cross-case analysis. The findings showed that teachers' challenges varied between the setting, planning, and implementation of online classes. Teachers' main concerns were their lack of professional development for online teaching and the lack of technological equipment for both students and teachers. Despite the difficulties, teachers considered that online education served not only the purpose for the emergent situation with the closure of schools, but also that their online teaching experience

positively influenced their attitudes about integrating the online component into their traditional teaching system. The study highlights the need for policy intervention in distance education, specifically in relation to directives in online learning implementation. Implications suggest that the Kosovan Ministry of Education should offer resources for teachers' professional development, provide the necessary technological equipment, and encourage technology integration and use in traditional classroom settings.

KEY WORDS: innovation in education, distance education, online learning, teachers' challenges, blended learning, teachers' attitudes

1. INTRODUCTION

In this current technological era, there are ways to widen access to education at various levels—specifically, by adopting innovations in learning management systems (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). However, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), the delayed adaptation of innovations in distance education has affected around 1.5 billion students and 63 million teachers from 165 countries around the world since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 transition to online education occurred at a global level and countries around the world responded to it differently. For example, in the Philippines the Department of Education launched its educational platform in advance, whereas in Uganda teachers prepared some take-home materials for their students within a day (UNESCO, 2020). In addition to governmental support, institutions have also taken initiatives to support teachers, as well as students, in this transition through training, support systems, and adjustments in educational policies.

While the essence of educational technologies is being recognized, the role of teachers in creating successful learning environments during online classes has also received considerable attention from researchers as well as teacher trainers. Raza et al. (2020) highlighted the challenges (i.e., heavy reliance on technology, irrelevance of textbooks in online classes, and teacher readiness) in relation to the continuously changing needs posed by the pandemic in language education and argued that the role of teachers has evolved from *important* to *the most important* in facilitating student learning. Furthermore, they recommended that higher education should invest more in teacher training to make teachers ready for multiple modes of education (e.g., online, blended, or face to face), especially with a focus on the socio-cultural context where these teachers teach; since the context is often framed within teacher effectiveness (Raza, 2018, 2020), designing teacher training programs that align with contextual requirements would provide better results (Raza & Coombe, 2020).

Despite considerable supports (e.g., webinars, workshops, and conferences) given to higher education teachers adjusting to fully online education, what remains unexplored are the types of challenges teachers are now facing in their classes, how they are

responding to these challenges, and how this has affected their performance as educators. Since these emergent interventions may differ from place to place, to ensure better understanding researchers should investigate the experiences of teachers in particular contexts and understand how they are coping with online education during a pandemic (Raza et al., 2020). Formed as a case study bounded by a unique research phenomenon (Yin, 2018), this study aims to report how teachers in Kosova adjusted to their new transition to online education by exploring the types of challenges they faced and how this influenced their attitudes toward online education.

Considering that the online component of education is taking further attention and may be part of future schooling, the purpose of this research is to identify the challenges that teachers face in the implementation of online classes and their effect on teachers' attitudes toward the integration of the online component into the traditional learning system. Understanding these challenges would lead to effective provisions to ensure that the quality of online education coincides with that of face-to-face education. At the same time, it is important to investigate teachers' attitudes about the integration of the online component into the traditional system to create a blended learning system since teachers' attitudes and beliefs often influence teaching practices (Raza & Coombe, 2020). This is especially important since currently blended learning is considered to be the most effective mode of instruction (Porter et al., 2016). To understand how teachers in Kosova experienced the transition from face-to-face to fully online learning, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges are middle school teachers in Kosova facing while resuming classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the emergent online teaching platform influence teachers' attitudes regarding the integration of the online component into the traditional system?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Online Education

Historically, distance education goes back three generations (Simonson et al., 2011): the first generation, which dates back to 1833 (Garrison, 1985), is widely known as correspondence education; the second generation, dating back to the 1950s, involves the ability to broadcast using technologies such as radio and television (TV); and the third or actual generation, known as the computer-mediated mode, is recognized by the possibilities presented by interaction or otherwise known as online education. Distance education is a learning mode that is defined as “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009, p. 1). The concept describing the teacher–learner relationship that exists when the teacher and learners are separated by space and/or time was coined as transactional distance (Moore,

1997). Moore's theory of transactional distance recognized the combined importance of the structure of the instructional programs, the dialogue, and the interaction (Moore, 1997). This theory contributed to the move toward the computer-mediated mode of distance education.

Today, distance education has received attention due to the benefits that it provides to both students and teachers. For instance, a study by Thomson (2011) found that communication by email with students was more personal than initially imagined, and this realization made it easier for teachers to address the needs of each individual student. Thomson's study also found that teachers faced less procedural limitations in the online environment since there was more focus on intellectual content than on administrative procedures. However, in online classes, teachers emphasized the teacher–student and student–content relations over student–student relations.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, moving a classroom totally online or into a blended-learning mode is not an easy process since there are several challenges that must be considered. These challenges can be faced by educational institutions (Cuesta Medina, 2018; Raza et al., 2020), teachers (Cuesta Medina, 2018; Ocak, 2011), and students (Broadbent, 2017; Prasad et al., 2018). Students are reported to face challenges in the online setting mainly because of issues with self-regulation (Summers et al., 2005). Their flexibility to self-direct or undergo autonomous learning activities has resulted in procrastination and spending less time on learning activities and more time on other activities (Rasheed et al., 2020). In addition, the lack of face-to-face interaction makes students feel isolated and unmotivated (Stang, 2012) since they experience discomfort and anxiety due to isolation in online study activities (Lightner & Lightner-Laws, 2016).

Lightner and Lightner-Laws (2016) suggested that blended learning provides a better alternative to exclusively online classes since it improves students' success by increasing the achievement of students in classes at a level comparable to traditional courses. However, creating online teaching content is time consuming for teachers (Long et al., 2017). Furthermore, Brown (2016) found that teachers face challenges in the implementation of blended learning due to their technological anxiety and students' technological illiteracy. Leo and Puzio (2016) reported that teachers are concerned about troubleshooting technology issues, which Bower et al. (2015) found time consuming for teachers.

Teachers' lack of experience in creating instructional content is another challenge for teachers (Maycock et al., 2018; Raza & Brown; 2021). Furthermore, Ocak (2011) found that instructors' problems are categorized into three areas: instructional processes, community concerns, and technical issues. Due to the variety of delivery methods and lack of training for staff, the instructional process was confusing for the instructors. Regardless of equipment availability, teachers did not prefer to integrate technology because of their technological incompetence.

Rasheed et al. (2020) classified findings from a literature review that resulted in listing teachers' beliefs as another challenging category for online learning. The category

includes “technology (as) a barrier to competency development” (Pilgrim et al., 2018, p. 559), “flipped classroom ... regarded as one of the barriers between technology and teachers” (Zengin, 2017, p. 89), and “the quality of online instruction and learning” (Lighter & Lighter-Laws, 2016, p. 236). These challenges have an impact on teachers' beliefs that, according to Farrell and Ives (2015), provide a strong basis for teachers' classroom actions.

2.2 Historical Context

2.2.1 Online Education in Kosova

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online/distance education in Kosova was of limited availability, as detailed in Kosova Institute of Pedagogy (KIP) (2020a). The education system was generally reliant upon traditional, face-to-face learning with limited integration of technology—meaning that schools reported an insufficient number of computer laboratories and poor or no Internet connection in their schools. Many researchers saw this practice as a roadblock to improving the quality of education in the country. For instance, Hyseni Duraku and Hoxha (2020) stated that “the quality of pre-university education in Kosova and the insufficient level of technology integration into teaching processes are obstacles in the implementation and advancement of the online learning process in the country” (p. 2). Some of the reasons for insufficient technology integration in schools were the lack of digital competence and economic conditions (KIP, 2020b). As for digital competence, studies found that teachers in Kosova did not have any previous experience in online education prior to the pandemic (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020) and that “around 42 percent of the school leaders and teachers did not attend any training on technology or practices for teaching online” (KIP, 2020a, p. 7).

Following the 2019 pandemic, governments, institutions, and teachers had to respond quickly due to unexpected school closures. For example, the Government of Kosova announced the closing of all schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19 two days before the first cases of infection were confirmed in March 2020. It took another additional 11 days for the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) in Kosova to launch the transmission of distance classes through Radio Television of Kosova. The program was offered five times a week and covered the majority of subjects, excluding English language and arts. The length of all lessons per grade was 30 minutes/day. Then, all lessons were posted on MESTI's YouTube channel.

In addition to the television broadcasting of lessons, MESTI (2020) unfolded teachers' responsibilities and duties in the time of distance education. Although teachers resumed their classes online due to their own sense of responsibility toward their students, there were no formal or institutional instructions for the implementation of online classes (KIP, 2020a). Therefore, the circumstances under which distance education was implemented affected its overall quality.

The lack of instructions for the implementation of the distance education system in Kosovo led to concerns that burden teachers regarding students' education during this time. Teachers consider the broadcast lessons short and vague and not in accordance with the schools' curriculum (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020). They were concerned that “the results achieved with this teaching format will not be the same as those achieved with classroom teaching” (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020, p. 18). Thus, during their transition from traditional to distance learning, teachers felt “anxious, uncomfortable, confused, insecure, and overloaded” (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020, p. 14).

While it was established from Hyseni Duraku and Hoxha (2020) that teachers felt unprepared and lacked confidence during the transition to online education, the reasons for this anxiety had yet to be evidenced. Therefore, this study set out to examine the extent to which technology adoption impacted teachers' anxiety in Kosovo. Since the existing literature suggests that Kosovan teachers have experienced challenges with educational technologies due to inadequate training and institutional support (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; KIP, 2020a), our study aims to better understand the experiences of Kosovan middle school teachers with the transition to online education and to see how these experiences affect their willingness to support a blended education system in the future.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research is built upon the assumption that the process of transition from traditional to online education has been challenging for teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the challenges that Kosovan middle school teachers faced in the implementation of online classes and how this influenced their attitudes toward the adaptation of blended learning when the pandemic is over. This study was designed using a multi-case study research design, which investigates several cases linked together, each with a unique story, while focusing on a similar research phenomenon (Stake, 2006). Since this is a very context-specific case of middle school teachers' transition to online education, the case study format was deemed as an appropriate methodology. This methodological approach allows researchers to bind their data around their research phenomenon and select the most suitable information to address their research question(s) (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2018). This bounding is helpful in understanding the phenomenon understudy in detail and guides researchers in deciding what needs to be included in data collection and analysis, and what will remain excluded. Interviews, as one of the most common data collection tools in case studies, allow researchers to collect in-depth information from people who are directly involved in the issue that a study aims to understand (Josselson, 2013). Based on this understanding, our study explored the cases of 12 teachers that experienced the innovation in the transition from traditional to online

education. The scope of the study was on the common themes that arose from these cases.

3.2 Participants

The participants represented the multi-cases of the study ($n = 12$) and were sample selected from public, middle school teachers employed in urban and rural areas of Kosova who shifted from face-to-face to online education as a result of the 2020 COVID pandemic. Participant selection was conducted through purposeful sampling, where the judgments of the sample were made based on the purpose and context of the study (Emmel, 2013). The selection criteria, used as the unit of boundary, for the participants were that they should be teachers in one of the public schools in Kosova and had attempted to conduct their classes online in the transition to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 12 teachers of various subjects (five men and seven women), were invited to participate in the study. The average age of the participants was 34.5 years old, with an average of 10 years of teaching experience. Out of the 12 teachers participating in the study, seven considered their technology competency as intermediate, five considered their competency as basic, and none considered their competency as advanced. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the teachers that participated in the study.

3.3 Data Collection

This study utilized in-depth individual interviews as the primary data collection method. The interviews followed the Josselson (2013) guidelines, in which interviewing is defined as an interpersonal process and participants are considered as actors in an event and not just witnesses. For this study, the selected teachers were invited for 45-minute anonymous, online interviews. The participants were provided informed consent forms for the interview and recording, which they were required to sign and submit. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out using a pre-designed interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews enable reciprocity between an interviewer and interviewee (Galletta, 2012), and allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions according to the interviewee's responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interview questions were open ended and asked about teachers' feelings and experiences as they transitioned from the traditional to the online classroom, their use of online instruction, design and implementation features, challenges, benefits, and attitudes toward using blended learning in the future. Appendix A provides the "little q" questions (Josselson, 2013) that teachers were asked during the interview.

TABLE 1: Participant demographics

Parameter	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Age (average), $n = 34.5$		
Gender		
Women	7	58
Men	5	42
Education (degree)		
Bachelor	6	50
Master	6	50
Experience (average), years = 10.33		
Subject		
Social Sciences	9	75
Hard Sciences	3	25
Area		
Urban	5	42
Rural	7	58
Total	12	100

3.4 Data Analysis

The first step in the analysis was transcription; each interview was transcribed manually by the researchers as a way to analyze (Glesne, 2006) and develop insight into the participants' perspectives (Powell & Bodur, 2019). The transcription of each interview was sent back to the participants to ensure transparency and accuracy and then followed by a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). The data analysis was conducted using the QDA Miner coding software program, where codes, categories, and themes were cross-checked by the authors and modified accordingly to ensure accuracy of inter-rater reliability. Data were analyzed using the cross-case analysis method employed by Powell and Bodur (2019), which “helped reveal similarities and differences among teachers, and highlighted teachers' collective perceptions” (p. 23). The categories were predetermined from the interview questions, whereas the codes were developed during the transcription of the interviews. Furthermore, cross-case analysis of the codes and categories led to emerging themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), which were the challenges of dissemination, facilitation, effectiveness, interaction and engagement, resources, and teachers' mindset.

4. RESULTS

The final six themes that emerged from the interview analysis included the following: dissemination, facilitation, effectiveness, interaction and engagement, resources, and teachers' mindset. Each of the themes represents a challenge that further translates to factors affecting teachers' attitudes about the use of online components in the future. The next paragraph explains how each theme emerged from the categorization or common themes found in the teachers' responses.

The dissemination theme emerged from categories such as the decision of switching to online classes as well as teachers' first impression about the transition and the organization of distance education. Similarly, categories such as lesson planning and classroom management informed the construction of the second theme, facilitation. The effectiveness theme was based on the discussions about the quantity as well as quality of the covered material. Interaction and engagement emerged from the categories such as teacher–student relationship, students' participation in class, and group work activities. Furthermore, the resources theme emerged from the categories of teacher professional development and available technological devices for both teachers and students. Finally, the mindset theme was informed by the categories such as assessment as well as teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and preferences regarding online versus face-to-face education.

4.1 The Challenge of Dissemination

Teachers generally had negative feelings about the transition to online classes and described their transition with statements such as “I did not feel comfortable switching to online classes” from Teacher 2 (T2), or “it sounded funny and I did not take it seriously at the beginning, but as I got involved it felt as challenging as teaching for the first time because it took time to get familiarized with distance education” from Teacher 3 (T3).

Even teachers who reported having had neutral feelings about the transition stated that they considered it challenging. For example, Teacher 9 (T9) stated, “I thought it would be challenging but wanted to wait and see the advantages and disadvantages from the experience.” Overall, the negative reactions were due to teachers' inexperience with the online teaching format and the lack of technological devices. However, the transition was found challenging even for the teachers with some sort of experience with online teaching. For instance, Teacher 10 (T10) stated, “I was familiar with online teaching, but I knew this was going to be more difficult because I had done only 1-on-1 sessions and not group teaching.”

The broadcasting of lessons on TV was experienced differently by teachers since some of them taught subjects that were not included in the program. Teachers whose subjects were part of the transmission program considered it helpful. For instance, one teacher stated that “The good thing was that the videos, though, are accessible so the students

can watch them whenever they need” and “the broadcasted lessons served as a guide for the focus of the classes.” On the other hand, teachers whose subjects were not covered by the program considered that the lack of TV-based lessons negatively affected the overall quality of distance education or even disabled the learning process entirely for those who could not attend online classes. For example, T2 noted, “the lack of broadcasted lessons made teachers the only ones responsible for distance education, and not all were able to resume classes online” while Teacher 11 (T11) stated that “English lessons should have been broadcasted at least for elementary students because we have not been very successful with them through Zoom.” However, there were teachers who considered that the broadcasted lessons were sometimes limiting for teachers. For instance, Teacher 8 (T8) stated, “for students it is better when their teachers explain the lessons because teachers address their learning needs,” while T3 said that “my course has not been broadcasted, but as a parent I could see that TV lessons covered limited material and that further limited teachers too.”

In addition to the TV-based lessons, teachers were urged to resume their classes online by MESTI. However, due to the lack of instructions, most teachers were slow in mobilizing themselves and resuming their classes online, while the remaining teachers did not resume their classes at all. Teachers who resumed their classes online used video conference applications, such as Zoom and Skype, and/or messaging apps, whereas teachers who did not resume their classes online used only messaging apps for questions and assignments.

4.2 The Challenge of Facilitation

Overall, teachers identified that lesson planning for online classes took teachers more time than planning for face-to-face classes. This was because teachers felt that for online classes they had to plan every minute of the class and provide more detailed instructions, which takes a considerably longer amount of time. For example, T8 stated, “Online lesson prep is longer due to the fact that in absence of interaction you need to visually present every word or lesson that you give out,” and T9 said that “instructions for students need to be more detailed and they certainly take more time.”

Teachers also found class preparation for online classes more complicated than that of face-to-face classes. This was often identified because they could not include the same activities as in face-to-face classes, such as pair or group work activities, which resulted in innovating beyond traditional teaching ideas to think of alternatives. First, T2 claimed, “we plan according to the curriculum; however, it is not the same [as face-to-face classes]. I have altered my methods to ensure students gain a better understanding of the subject's concepts.” In addition, Teacher 12 (T12) described that “lesson planning for online classes was more difficult because extra work was needed.” Students would complain about a lot of homework, so we had to stop and exercise more during the classes. Also, during online classes, the teacher has to talk for most of the time.” T8 explained another reason why

lesson planning is more difficult for online classes by stating that “we cannot include the same activities as for face-to-face classes; we cannot have pair or group work activities so we have to think of alternatives.”

From the sample, there were only two teachers who found lesson planning for online classes easier than for face-to-face classes. However, that was linked with administering and reporting. For example, as Teacher 1 (T1) claimed, “online planning is easier because we are not required to prepare detailed daily lesson plans as we used to do for face-to-face classes; now, the process is simpler.” Similarly, T11 stated, “online lesson planning was easier because everything was digital. At school, we are usually required to submit handwritten lesson plans, while during this time, I typed them on the computer and sent them to the director.”

While lesson planning was more challenging and time consuming, classroom management was a better experience for teachers in online classes. For instance, T10 stated “class management is really good in online classes; it is way easier compared to the management of face-to-face classes. I can say this is the best part of online classes.” This experience was attributed to the lack of issues with discipline. As T8 claimed, “the discipline was not an issue at all, and this was because those who usually distract the class did not attend the class.”

Teachers faced some difficulties in measuring students' participation during the classes. Only a couple of teachers mentioned that they required students to have their webcams on during classes. Others stated that they could not impose this for various reasons, which made it difficult to observe students' participation. For instance, T12 reported “I told my students that they were not required to turn their cameras on because I realized that they were often in the presence of other family members.” In this regard, T11 claimed that there were students who did not want to turn the cameras on, but they still participated in the class and mentioned that “whenever I called the names of these students, they responded, if not, I just kept a note.”

Another issue with facilitation turned out to be the class limit. In Kosova, the time limit for a face-to-face class is 40 minutes. However, most of the teachers claimed that they needed to initiate the call for the second time because the 40-minute limit was not sufficient for them to cover the material. For instance, T3 stated, “a normal class is 40 minutes but we continue the class if we cannot finish all of the exercises,” whereas T8 stated, “the class is usually longer for 20–30 minutes.” Similarly, T10 reported “the online class is way longer than the face-to-face class; it usually lasts for one hour.”

Thus, facilitation was a factor that made the online classes more challenging for Kosovan teachers. Since teachers needed to adjust their classroom activities, they found lesson planning for online classes more difficult, and consequently more time consuming. While they found classroom management easier in online classes, they reported that most of the time the allocated time for classes was not enough for them to cover the material as required by the curriculum.

4.3 The Challenge of Effectiveness

Regarding the quantity of the covered material, only two teachers experienced covering more class content in online classes than in face-to-face classes. For example, T1 claimed to have covered more material in the online classes than was usually covered in the face-to-face classroom. This was explained by the argument, “we are unable to cover the same amount of material in a classroom setting because, in a 40-minute class, 10 minutes or so are needed just for settling and facilitating the lesson. Whereas for online classes, I can also extend the class as needed.”

The rest of the teachers (11 out of 12) reported having covered less material during online classes. Teachers claimed that the amount of covered material depended on their course. For instance, Teacher 4 (T4), the art teacher, skipped some theoretical concepts to make the experience more interesting for the students, stating that “I covered the same topics, but I avoided some theoretical aspects to simplify the process and avoid boredom. So, I focused more on the practical aspect,” whereas for English language teachers, speaking sections did not get fully covered due to the lack of group work activities. For instance, T9 stated “in online classes we could not focus on all skills; reading and writing can be covered, but there is not enough space for speaking and listening, especially speaking activities.” T11 explained that there was limited time to get everyone talking in the classroom and when given speaking homework, “students would submit prepared responses, not authentic.”

Regarding quality control, teachers believed that online learning outcomes were lower than in face-to-face classes. In most of the cases, this was linked to classroom management. Teacher 7 (T7) noticed that students were more likely to lose concentration in online classes when someone else may have been in the room. When hosting a video conference and teaching at the same time, T11 and T12 stated that they could not keep track of who was actively on the call and who was not. T12 further stated, “of course the quality is lower than in face-to-face classes because there are cases when a student logs in but then does not follow the class. When we give lessons, maybe students do not listen, whereas during face-to-face classes, you can notice when a student is not listening.”

Low quality control also affects the quality of attainment. For instance, in relation to checking mechanisms, T1 stated that in classrooms teachers can observe and see whether there are intentions of cheating; while in online classes, T1 considers it impossible to oversee actions such as plagiarism, use of Google translation, use of technology to exchange information, and so on.

With the closure of schools, in addition to the previously raised issues, teachers believed that in general this method of teaching can be considered a good alternative to continue education during the pandemic. When asked for the overall effectiveness, T1 said, “as the old saying goes, ‘any port in a storm’; so, for the current situation this is the least we must do to not leave children behind in their education.”

4.4 The Challenge of Interaction and Engagement

Student engagement often depends on the teacher–student relationship. In our study, opinions were equally divided when it came to whether this relationship had improved in some way or declined in the online setting. Five teachers, around 32% of the interviewed teachers, claimed that teacher–student relationships had grown stronger. For instance, T9 stated that “the used emojis and other symbols made students feel more relaxed and they made us closer to each other.” Four other teachers, representing around 33% of participants, reported that this transition had weakened teacher–student relationships. Specifically, T11 said that “I believe that the relations have weakened because of the lack of personal contact,” while T4 explained that “(...) the pedagogical aspect lacks in online classes as we focus mainly on the content and we do not have a chance to discuss the issues individually with the students.” The rest, three teachers, 25% of the interviewed teachers, claimed to not have experienced changes in their relationships with the students. However, one of these teachers, T12, stated, “the relations with the students were the same, but the triangle teacher–student–parent worked better. Parents observed their children and then they were more involved and asked questions about their children's performance.”

Eight out of 12 of the participating teachers claimed that student engagement improved during the online classes. There were different factors pointing to what could have caused this, such as parents' influence, flexibility, and the environment. T4 stated that the triangle of teacher–student–parent relationship worked in distance education, while T1 assumed that “maybe students were in greater pressure from their parents and they may have wanted to show their hard work to their parents, too.” The rest, five teachers, claimed that students' participation remained the same. For instance, T9 said that “Students who were not interested in face-to-face classes did not join video calls either; those who were interested in face-to-face classes remained interested on online classes.”

While students were individually more engaged in online classes, their interaction in student partnerships decreased. Teachers identified group work as among the hardest activities to be implemented in online classes. One-half (i.e., six out of 12) of the interviewed teachers tried group work activities but considered the implementation as not successful. For example, T11 stated, “I once assigned students in groups and I realized that their work was not a product of a group work. In classes we can ensure that everyone is contributing, but online it is difficult.” The other half of the interviewed teachers did not try carrying out group work activities due to their beliefs and assumptions that group work activities are not effective in an online classroom setting. T12 stated that “I have not tried group work activities ... maybe it would be better to try ... but I decided to not do group work activities from a personal experience as an attendee of an online training.” This highlights the lack of teacher professional development in conducting online classes, which will be covered in the next section, the challenge of resources.

4.5 The Challenge of Resources

Throughout their careers, teachers go through different training and modules as complimentary professional development for their teaching. However, while all teachers have had some form of training in technology competencies, they have not had any training specific to online teaching. Therefore, the teachers sat down with their colleagues and tried to help each other in the use of platforms specifically attributed to e-learning.

Seven out of the 12 teachers considered that most of their students were equipped with digital devices, which gave them access to e-learning. T10's strategy to qualify or report students as equipped or not equipped with technological devices was to look at students' consistency of attendance. Specifically, she stated, "Those students that did not attend a single class I marked them as 'with lack of assets.' Others that joined the classes for a few times were marked as un-interested or un-engaged."

However, while most reported to have some devices available, those that did not attend online classes were mainly in dire need for such devices. For instance, T8 and T11 shared that students who did not attend online classes did not possess technological devices, or their families did not have enough devices for all children in one household. T4 even shared a case when "a parent said that he is struggling to feed his children and at the moment I cannot deal with the problem of online attendance."

Overall, students in rural areas and those that came from minority groups were reported to have lack of equipment. The lack of student digital devices resulted in the limited use of learning management systems for online classes. Teachers acknowledged that platforms such as Google Classroom are more suitable to run online classes, but felt that these platforms were not equally effective for classes when accessed through phones. As a result, video conference applications or messaging apps were the main means that teachers used for distance education.

Other factors that limited access to e-learning included the lack of access to technology among teachers. T3 reported that "as a teacher and a parent of a third grader, it was challenging to manage the usage of the devices throughout the day." Another factor was the lack of electricity or Internet, as Teacher 5 (T5) stated "... the lack of devices, Internet, and power has delayed the start of distance education in our school for almost a month." In addition, teachers explained that their institutions did not have upgraded accounts for unlimited video calls, and as such they had interrupted classes.

4.6 The Challenge of Teachers' Mindset

Teachers claimed the need to adopt innovative assessment techniques. For them, it was more difficult to assess students online since they did not use the standard assessment forms. Teacher 6 (T6) even claimed to have been advised by the school director to "put the same grades that students had in the previous semester" when the classes were held face to face.

The experience with online classes has played an enormous role in teachers' perceptions about the online component of blended learning. Teachers felt that, for some, online education is more suitable than the traditional system. Even those who stated that traditional education cannot be entirely replaced by online education considered that online education would make a good combination with face-to-face education for supplemental classes or lessons. For instance, T10 stated, "I realized that there are big benefits associated with online teaching. Anyway, traditional education cannot be entirely replaced by online education, but it would be ideal to use as a supplement."

Considering the unfolding benefits of online learning, the teachers' willingness to include online learning for the purpose of transforming traditional learning to blended learning seems to be positive. The teachers felt that the students were less reluctant and more relaxed about asking questions during online classes by saying that "I do not know why, but it seems they feel more relaxed to ask online." Therefore, teachers seemed motivated to integrate the online component into their classes.

However, in addition to the potential of online education, the teachers seemed eager to go back to face-to-face classes because of the social aspect that was missing in online classes. The teachers provided expressions such as "I cannot wait to go back to school." This was also related to the overall challenges they faced, but the teachers also felt that going back to face-to-face classes was important for the students. They mentioned that "it is important for students to have social interactions" and "the real effectiveness of online education can be seen only when we go back to school."

5. DISCUSSION

The need for the immediate transition from face-to-face to online education during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic identified teachers who were put in the position of improvising in order to be able to conduct online classes. As such, the situation required examining the extent to which challenges faced by the teachers during this transition impacted the process of teaching and learning. This study offers insights from a similar context, where teachers had to transit to online education without sufficient training or resources. During this process, they faced various challenges that reflected their struggles in shifting to online education and pointed to variables that may affect their attitudes toward future initiatives of blended education in Kosova. The information obtained from this examination contributes to understanding teachers' experience and how such experiences translate into their willingness to using blended learning in the future.

The literature review highlighted that students are more isolated and unmotivated (Stang, 2012) and experience discomfort and anxiety when learning via online classes (Lightner, Lightner & Lightner-Laws, 2016). However, Kosovan teachers' perspectives revealed that students were, in fact, more relaxed during the online classes, and as a result the teacher–student relationships improved. However, this difference could be due to the unique circumstances, such as the lockdown and the lack of face-to-face social interaction, which motivated teachers to strengthen the relationships with their students.

This study confirms that teachers' challenges in transitioning to distance education had begun before the instructional implementation. First, in terms of expertise, the study found that teachers were inexperienced and lacked professional development in the area of online education, which represented a challenge for teachers to create instructional content (Maycock et al., 2018; Raza & Brown, 2021; Raza et al., 2020). Similar to the studies conducted by Ocak (2011) and Rasheed et al. (2020), the findings from this research suggest that the level of competence in technology can be a hindering factor toward the adoption of innovation in distance education. In terms of planning, similar to Long et al. (2017), who found that creating online teaching content is time consuming, the Kosovan teachers felt that lesson planning for online classes was more overwhelming and took them more time to create than lesson plans for face-to-face classes.

When implementing online classes, teachers have less administrative procedures, and hence can focus more on instructions; however, there is also less focus on student-to-student relationships (Thomson, 2011). This study indicated similar results since Kosovan teachers reported less administrative work and more time spent directly on teaching. However, teachers were still not able to cover the same amount of content as in the face-to-face classroom situation due to other factors, such as the lack of direct contact with students, as well as the lack of pair/group work activities.

The study further confirms that teachers' beliefs pose another challenge (Rasheed et al., 2020; Raza, 2018, 2020; Raza & Coombe, 2020) since teachers had negative first impressions about the transition to distance education. For instance, T2 had a negative impression about online education and therefore decided to not resume online classes. Instead, he used only the messaging apps to communicate with students to make sure that they completed the given homework.

The study also unfolds teachers' skepticism about the effectiveness of online education (Rasheed et al., 2020) since teachers claim that the quality of online education is not the same as that of face-to-face education. However, the findings indicated that aside from the challenges and these beliefs, teachers developed a positive attitude toward the integration of technologies and the online component in their classes. This change in attitude occurred as a result of teachers' raised awareness on the importance of technology and supports what the literature considers as something that has a lot to offer to improve teaching and learning quality (Hamidi et al., 2011; Hussain et al., 2011). Based on this changing attitude toward online education and integration of educational technologies into the curriculum, it is reasonable to conclude that teachers may feel comfortable with blended learning once the pandemic is over and on-campus classes resume (Raza et al., 2020).

6. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Knowledge about the challenges that teachers face in transitioning to distance education—as well as their attitudes for the use of blended learning in the future—has implications

for addressing the type of support needed. The findings from this study indicated that access to technology remains an issue for many students and teachers. Students' absence should also be investigated with the purpose of determining if it happened due to lack of interest, as sometimes proclaimed, or lack of digital devices, which was also deemed an issue. The issue of technological devices should be resolved by the Kosovan Government, which should seek to provide resources for teachers and students in need to enable access to distance education for all. MESTI should make sure that the curriculum supports the use of technology in classrooms. At the same time, while the findings of the study also highlight that public school teachers need professional development to support the facilitation of online classes, MESTI should support teachers by providing professional development workshops that help teachers integrate technology in their overall teaching practices. Such workshops should focus on lesson planning, teaching methods, and assessment for online or blended classes (Raza et al., 2020).

However, while the findings of this research are important, there are limitations that should be considered from this research. First, the small number of cases devalued the statistical tests, such as the chi-square or regression tests—specifically, for the second research question—hence, the results may not be generalizable to other educational contexts. The study also focused on middle school teachers, but it is equally important to investigate the challenges faced by teachers of other age groups. In addition, the participants in this study did not include a sufficient number of teachers who did not resume their classes online. That is, since the number of teachers in Kosova who did not resume their classes online was significant, we recommend a research study sampling this specific group of teachers. Due to the drastic shift, a research study tracking the effects of online education or the lack of online classes in students' academic success in the following year or over the long term is also important. Finally, since the teachers expressed a change in their attitude, it would be informative to explore how Kosova's classrooms of tomorrow will change due to the imposed distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted education in Kosova and the impacts this had on teachers and their teaching. As a case study of educational interruption caused by a global challenge, the study helps us further understand how teachers from middle schools experienced the challenges posed by the pandemic, how their perceptions influenced their decisions to approach the challenges, and how those who tried and remained persistent were able to see the brighter side of educational technologies and online education, thus paving the way for making an argument in support of blended education in Kosova.

The six challenges revealed in our study were dissemination, facilitation, effectiveness, interaction and engagement, resources, and mindset. These challenges emerged from various issues within the Kosovan educational system, which included the following: teachers' prior experiences with online education; lack of quality in teacher training;

unavailability of technological devices; lack of motivation among teachers, as well as students; and poor planning and performance of the education ministry. In addition to interrupting educational activities, the increased stress for many teachers and students, and the exposure of the weaknesses in the Kosovan education system that need to be addressed soon, suggest the experiment with online education and educational technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic provided a positive outcome for the country in many ways. Specifically, it positively impacted teachers' attitudes toward distant education since they were able to experience how this mode of education reduces teachers' workload, contributes to developing positive rapport between teachers and students, and opened doors for innovation and development in teaching and learning. Similarly, it also invited discussions about blended education as a future consideration, giving Kosova an opportunity to explore avenues of online education since teachers' perceptions about educational technologies and distance education are now changing. Finally, the results obtained from documenting the challenges Kosovan teachers face in preparing for online education or otherwise, as done in this study, are viewed as positive outcomes. Such literature will be helpful for the education ministry in making informed decisions about the type of support and resources provided to teachers to perform better in the classroom.

REFERENCES

- Bower, M., Dalgarno, B., Kennedy, G. E., Lee, M. J. W., & Kenney, J. (2015). Design and implementation factors in blended synchronous learning environments: Outcomes from a cross-case analysis. *Computers & Education*, 86, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.006>
- Broadbent, J. (2017). Comparing online and blended learners' self-regulated learning strategies and academic performance. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 33, 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.01.004>
- Brown, M. G. (2016). Blended Instructional practice: A review of empirical literature on instructor's adaptations and use of online tools in face-to-face teaching. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 31, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.05.001>
- Cuesta Medina, L. (2018). Blended learning: Deficits and prospects in higher education. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 34(1), 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3100>
- Emmel, N. (2013). *Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research: A realist approach*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Farrell, T. S. C. & Ives, J. (2015). Exploring teacher beliefs and classroom practices through reflective approach: A case study. *Language Teaching Research*, 19(5), 594–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814541722>

- Galletta, A. (2012). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. New York University Press.
- Garrison, D. R. (1985). Three generations of technological innovations in distance education. *Distance Education*, 6(2), 235–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791850060208>
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Pearson.
- Hamidi, F., Meshkat, M., Rezaee, M., & Jafari, M. (2011). Information technology in education. *Procedia Computer Science*, 3, 369–373.
- Hussain, A. J., Morgan, S., & Al-Jumeily, D. (2011). How does ICT affect teachings and learning within school education. *2011 Developments in E-Systems Engineering*, 250–254. <https://doi.org/10.1109/DeSE.2011.50>
- Hyseni Duraku, Z. & Hoxha, L. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on education and on the wellbeing of teachers, parents, and students: Challenges related to remote (online) learning and opportunities for advancing the quality of education. In *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and wellbeing* (pp. 18–45). University of Prishtina.
- Josselson, R. (2013). *Interviewing for qualitative inquiry: A relational approach*. Guilford Press.
- Kosova Institute of Pedagogy (2020a). *Mësimi në distancë/e-mësimi në arsimin parauniversitar në Kosovë, në rrethanat e krijuara nga pandemia Covid-19: Përmbledhje e hulumtimit* [Distance education/e-learning in pre-university education in Kosova under the circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic: Research summary].
- Kosova Institute of Pedagogy (2020b). *Mësimi në distancë/e-mësimi në arsimin parauniversitar në Kosovë, në rrethanat e krijuara nga pandemia Covid-19: Separat i hulumtimit* [Distance education/e-learning in pre-university education in Kosova under the circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic: Research section].
- Leo, J. & Puzio, K. (2016). Flipped instruction in a high school science classroom. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 25(5), 775–781. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-016-9634-4>
- Lightner, C. A. & Lightner-Laws, C. A. (2016). A blended model: Simultaneously teaching a quantitative course traditionally, online, and remotely. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 24(1), 224–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2013.841262>
- Long, T., Cummins, J., & Waugh, M. (2017). Use of the flipped classroom instructional model in higher education: Instructors' perspectives. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 29(2), 179–200. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-016-9119-8>
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Maycock, K. W., Lambert, J., & Bane, D. (2018). Flipping learning not just content: A 4-year action research study investigating the appropriate level of flipped learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 34(6), 661–672. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12274>

Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (2020). *Udhëzues i përgjithshëm i MASH për organizimin e mësimit në vitin shkollor 2020/2021 në kushtet e pandemisë COVID-19* [General guide from MES for the organization of education in the school year 2020/2021 under the Covid-19 conditions]. <https://masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2020/08/udhezuesi-final-file-10-09-2020.pdf>

Moore, M. G. (1997). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education*. Routledge.

Ocak, M. A. (2011). Why are faculty members not teaching blended courses? Insights from faculty members. *Computers & Education*, 56(3), 689–699. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.10.011>

Pilgrim, M., Hornby, G., & Macfarlane, S. (2018). Enablers and barriers to developing competencies in a blended learning programme for specialist teachers in New Zealand. *Educational Review*, 70(5), 548–564.

Porter, W. W., Graham, C. R., Bodily, R. G., & Sandberg, D. S. (2016). A qualitative analysis of institutional drivers and barriers to blended learning adoption in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 28, 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2015.08.003>

Powell, C. G. & Bodur, Y. (2019). Teachers' perceptions of an online professional development experience: Implications for a design and implementation framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77, 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.09.004>

Prasad, P. W. C., Maag, A., Redestowicz, M., & Hoe, L. S. (2018). Unfamiliar technology: Reaction of international students to blended learning. *Computers & Education*, 122, 92–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.03.016>

Rasheed, R. A., Kamsin, A., & Abdullah, N. A. (2020). Challenges in the online component of blended learning: A systematic review. *Computers & Education*. 144, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103701>

Raza, K. (2018). Adapting teaching strategies to Arab student needs in an EFL Classroom. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 16–26. <http://www.ejecs.org/index.php/JECS/article/view/93>

Raza, K. (2020). Differentiated instruction in English language teaching: Insights into the implementation of Raza's teaching adaptation model in Canadian ESL classrooms. *TESL Ontario Contact Magazine*, 46(2), 41–50.

Raza, K. & Brown, R. D. (2021). Language acquisition theory and context in materials development for second language EFL writing courses. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 18(2), 649–656. <https://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2021.18.2.19.649>

Raza, K. & Coombe, C. (2020). What makes an effective TESOL teacher in the Gulf? An empirical exploration of faculty-student perceptions for context-specific teacher preparation. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 143–162. <http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/538>

- Raza, K., King, M., Reynolds, D., & Abrar-ul-Hassan, S. (2020, June). *Language Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. [Webinar]. Qatar University. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMJwSgtG3dE&t=311s>
- Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing the data*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Schlosser, L. A. & Simonson, M. (2009). *Distance education: definition and glossary of terms*. Information Age Publishing.
- Simonson, M., Schlosser, C., & Orellana, A. (2011). Distance education research: A review of the literature. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 23(2–3), 124–142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-011-9045-8>
- Summers, J., Waigandt, A., & Whittaker, T. A. (2005). A comparison of student achievement and satisfaction in an online versus a traditional face-to-face statistics class. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29(3), 233–250. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-005-1938-x>
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. The Guilford Press.
- Strang, K. D. (2012). Skype synchronous interaction effectiveness in a quantitative management science course. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 10(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4609.2011.00333.x>
- Thomson, D. (2011). Conversations with teachers on the benefits and challenges of online learning for gifted students. *Gifted Child Today*, 34(3), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107621751103400309>
- United Nations Development Programme (2005). *Human development report*. World Bank. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/266/hdr05_complete.pdf
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020, March 30). *COVID-19 Webinar: A new world for teachers, education's frontline workers*. <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-webinar-new-world-teachers-educations-frontlineworkers-covid-19-education-webinar-2>
- Yazan, B. (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 134–152. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss2/12/>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Zengin, Y. (2017). Investigating the use of the Khan Academy and mathematics software with a flipped classroom approach in mathematics teaching. *Educational Technology & Society*, 20(2), 89–100.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In this study, the participants were asked following interview questions:

1. How did you feel when you first got the news about the schools' closure and the transition to distance education?

2. What changes did you have to make in your lesson plans as you switched to online classes? How did you adopt the curriculum?
3. How would you compare lesson planning for face-to-face classes with lesson planning for online classes?
4. What was the impact of the television-based lessons for your subject, or how has your class been affected by the lack of television-based lessons for your subject?
5. How would you compare the amount of covered material in online classes with that in face-to-face classes?
6. How would you compare the quality of lessons in online classes with that in face-to-face classes?
7. Overall, how do you feel about the effectiveness of distance education?
8. From your experience, how does classroom management change in online classes compared to face-to-face classes?
9. How do you measure students' participation in online classes?
10. How would you describe students' participation and engagement in online classes?
11. How do you feel about organizing pair/group work activities in online classes?
12. What platforms are you using for your online classes?
13. Have you had prior knowledge about these platforms before you started using them?
14. How do you feel about your technological skills after the experience with online classes?
15. Do you feel that you and your students are well equipped for online classes?
16. How have your assessment methods and techniques changed in the online setting?
17. Before the pandemic, what was the place of technology in your subject?
18. Besides these challenges, what benefits have you noticed from online learning?
19. Considering these benefits, how do you feel about integrating technology in your classes after the experience with online learning?
20. How do you feel about going back to school when the restrictions are lifted?