

Article

# Schools' Challenges in Distance Learning during Emergency Education: Focus Group Methodology

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**Abstract:** The present research uses the focus group discussion methodology to report the challenges met by the educational system in distance education during emergency education. It shows the different potentialities of this use. In doing this, it studies the practices used by schools during emergency education. Furthermore, the research verifies the suggestions given by a group of educationists to cope with challenges in emergency education. A focus group of nine participants met in the frame of a Ph.D. course to discuss the issues in which the present research is interested, and the number of discussion sessions was four. The research results indicated that the reasons varied for agreement and disagreement in the FGDs, where these reasons were mostly experience-based, perception-based, affiliation-based, inconsideration-based, compromise-based, and suggestion-based. Moreover, the types of agreement and disagreement were mostly complementary, vis-à-vis agreement-with-objection and agreement-with-advancement. The facilitator performed the following different functions: (1) initiator, (2) caring about the different voices in the FGD, and thus encouraging equity in the FGD, (3) making the discussion smooth, (4) advancing the discussion, (5) and orchestrating the discussion. In addition, the discussion of the participants addressed challenges related to the teachers, to the Ministry of Education, and to the resources. The schools' and the Ministry of Education's practices included different actions in an attempt to overcome the challenges of distance education: holding workshops related to distance education, suggesting the schools as places for the teachers to teach their online lessons, and making declarations for the public and families. The suggestions given by the participants to maintain and improve online learning included communicating with the students and holding workshops for the professional development of teachers at regular times. Close relationships between the Ministry of Education, the schools, and the parents were recommended in order to maintain an acceptable level of distance education.

**Keywords:** focus group discussion; school principals; students' participation; teachers' participation; distance education; emergency education



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## 1. Introduction

Focus group discussion (FGD) has been suggested for data collection for decades. Talking about the history of the use of focus groups, Morgan [1] says that during the 1980s, academic social sciences began experimenting with 'active experimentation with focus groups', which led to the method's popularity. Despite the long tradition of FGDs, researchers generally do not report the results of FGDs differently from interviews. In the present research, we suggest a specific way of reporting the results of FGDs. We do this by reporting the challenges of teachers' and students' participation in distance learning during emergency education.

Educational researchers have paid attention to challenges confronted by teachers and students in distance education in general and during emergency education in particular.

Still, research is needed to investigate the distance education challenges in different countries because they differ in their social and economic conditions. The present research intends to verify the challenges of teachers' and students' participation in Palestinian schools, that is to say in a developing country with little economic means. In the present research, a group of Ph.D. students discussed distance education challenges as part of emergency education due to COVID-19. These Ph.D. students were engaged in distance education, as officials in the government, officials in the university, school principals, or schoolteachers. They discussed the challenges met by the country in the frame of a Ph.D. course, called 'Technology in Education'. The focus group's discussion followed in this research enabled the participants to have rich arguments that included agreements and disagreements that shed light on the distance learning challenges and how the country coped with them.

### *1.1. Distance Learning and Challenges*

Bušelić [2] defines distance learning as the delivery of instruction, typically on an individual basis, through the use of technology rather than by being physically present in a classroom or other traditional educational setting. Sadeghi [3] says that, through distance learning programs, students can stay in touch with their teachers, communicate with each other, and receive educational material through electronic means. UNESCO [4] says that distance learning methods provide different perspectives on the generation and acquisition of knowledge because of their pedagogical advantages. According to Traxler [5], using distance education can widen access to higher education and increase student diversity, where students have the opportunity to learn anywhere, anytime, and from anyone. In addition, distance learning could contribute to teachers' and students' educational processes [6], interaction in the classroom [7], and the social aspect of students' learning, resulting in enriching their substantial learning [8].

In addition to the above, researchers pointed out challenges met by teachers and students in distance education. Mupinga [9] mentioned challenges such as the workload for online instructors, communicating with students, the cost of training online teachers and students, and motivating teachers and students to engage in distance education. Below, we elaborate on these challenges of distance learning during emergency education.

### *1.2. Challenges of Distance Learning during Emergency Education*

Tomczyk and Walker [10] identified seven categories of challenges attributed to what they called crisis e-learning. The first category is 'technical problems' considered as problems with software. The second category is 'the use of non-standard solutions', considered as the implementation of solutions typical for blended learning. The third category is 'the search for solutions to increase the effectiveness of e-learning', considered as the internet-based assessment of students' skills and knowledge. The fourth category is 'the transfer of proven applications and programmes', considered as the use of official government resources. The fifth category is 'problems with students', considered as a lack of control over student behavior during e-learning. The sixth category is 'problems with parents', considered as a lack of support for the student in the home environment. The seventh category is 'the modernisation of workstations', considered as the purchase of basic equipment such as a laptop.

Özüdoğru [11] investigated the problems faced during the COVID-19 pandemic by preservice teachers in the distance education process. The preservice teachers stated that they mainly faced problems in five categories. The first category is 'implementation', considered as suffering from the lack of time spared for live courses. The second category is the 'student', considered as suffering from the failure to establish communication with peers. The third category is 'impossibility', considered as suffering from a lack of the internet. The fourth category is 'technical', considered as suffering from connection problems to the live lesson. The fifth category is the 'instructor', considered as suffering from being unable to establish communication with the instructor.

Lepp and Luik [12] studied the challenges and advantages that were caused by the change of educational roles during emergency remote education in Estonia as revealed by Facebook messages. They found that the challenges were 'school management issues', 'home schooling', 'parents' lack of competence', 'students' issues', 'teachers' unreadiness', 'problems related to technology', and 'communication issues'. The advantages were 'successful coping', 'support for cooperation', 'importance of teachers', 'Thanking', 'stress management', 'changes in education', and 'assistance from digital tools'.

Another study that looked at the challenges and advantages of emergency remote education is that of Seabra et al. [13]. They found that secondary school teachers in Portugal mentioned the workload, work conditions, and time management as the most frequently mentioned challenges. They also emphasized participation, the role of parents, a lack of contact, and autonomy as related to students' constraints. The advantages that they highlighted were gains such as the development of digital competencies and the opportunity to transform teaching and learning.

## 2. Research Goals and Rationale

The present research is twofold. First, it is interested in suggesting ways in which FGDs could be reported or presented. By doing so, it will address three reporting components with which FGDs could be reported. It will show how to report the type of 'agreement' or 'disagreement'. It will also show how to report reasons for the 'agreement' or 'disagreement'. In addition, it will show how to report the function of the facilitator in the FGD.

Second, the present study intends to utilize FGDs in order to study educational phenomena, here the challenges of schools' participation in distance education during emergency education, in addition to the practices taken by the schools in this emergency education. Furthermore, the research intends to verify what suggestions a group of educationists give to cope with challenges in emergency education.

The diversity of the discussants in the focus group's discussions is expected to enrich the talk about and shed sufficient light on the challenges of participation in distance education. Thus, the focus group interview or discussion will reveal the disputed issues related to the challenges of participation in distance education.

This study would enrich the existing studies regarding challenges in distance education in general [14] and in emergency distance education in particular [10], especially in developing countries [15].

The goals of the present research will be achieved by investigating the types of agreements and disagreements in the FGDs, in addition to the challenges faced by the schools during emergency education. We will also focus on the schools' practices to confront the challenges met during emergency education.

### *Research Questions*

1. What are the types of agreements emerging in FGDs regarding the challenges faced by Palestinian schools in emergency education?
2. What are the types of disagreements emerging in FGDs regarding the challenges faced by Palestinian schools in emergency education?
3. What are the challenges faced by the Palestinian schools in emergency education according to the FGD?
4. What are the Palestinian schools' practices to confront the challenges faced by them during emergency education?

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Research Design*

The present research utilizes qualitative research, and FGDs are considered one type of qualitative research. We held FGDs with four groups, discussing the same phenomenon, with four sessions of discussion for each group. The analysis of the data for the four groups revealed similar types of agreements and disagreements, in addition to similar challenges

and ways to confront these challenges. The present research reports the findings of one group of the four, as they reflect the categories and themes found in the other FGDs.

### 3.2. Research Context and Participants

The study was held in the context of a Ph.D. course called ‘Technology in education’ for students at the Arab American University in Palestine. These students specialized in educational administration. The course was held in the second semester of the year 2020/2021 and the first semester of the year 2021–2022. Each course included two groups, with 8–10 students in each. In the present research, we report the FGDs in one group that included nine students described in Table 1 in terms of age and role outside the university.

**Table 1.** The participating students’ age and role outside the university.

Participant	Age	Role
P1	46	A secondary school principal
P2	53	An official in the government
P3	36	An official in the office of the president of a university
P4	51	A primary school teacher
P5	53	An official in the Ministry of Education
P6	50	A middle school teacher
P7	40	A secondary school teacher
P8	42	A primary school teacher
P9	38	A middle school principal

The selection of the participants fit the goals of the present research, as the participants are a group of educationists composed of principals, Ministry of Education officials, and teachers. All of them were involved in addressing the challenges of distance learning in emergency education.

### 3.3. Data Collecting Tools

The data for the present research was collected by utilizing a focus group discussion (FGD). The present study utilized four discussion sessions, where each session lasted between 50 and 60 min. The sessions occurred in Zoom, where electronic channels are considered fit for qualitative interviews and FGDs [16,17].

In the present research, the participants were Ph.D. students who knew each other, so it was expected that they would enjoy discussing the course’s issues with each other and with the lecturer.

Furthermore, we wanted the participants to discuss their perspectives regarding the distance learning practices enforced by emergency education, and this topic involved talking to them as they were experiencing it. This fits the argument of Akyildiz and Ahmed [18] that FGD would be a useful way to bring together participants with similar experiences to discuss a particular subject of interest; in our case, the subject of interest was distance learning in the context of emergency education.

Generally, researchers argued that six to ten participants fit the FGD. Bedford and Burgess [19] and Cronin [20] suggested that the group should include between four and eight participants, but Cameron et al. [21] state that a focus group involves between six and ten participants. In the present research, seven participants out of nine participants discussed the issue of distance education in Palestinian schools as a means of learning during COVID-19 emergency education.

Examples of questions or prompts initiated by the facilitator during the FGD are as follows: Let us hear other experiences of distance education in your schools; why does the picture described in the Ministry’s news not deliver the actual picture of distance education in the schools? Can you elaborate more? So how do you evaluate the educational state in the schools?

### 3.4. Data Analysis Tools

To interpret the FGD, we looked for the group’s negotiation processes related to agreement and disagreement. This was completed through deductive content analysis. Specifically, we looked for reasons for these agreements and disagreements by utilizing the work of Chiang and Guo [22], where they mentioned the following reasons for agreement: ‘same-viewpoint-based’, ‘plausible-explanation-based’, ‘trust-based’, ‘harmony-based’, and ‘self-dignity-based’. In addition, Chiang and Guo [22] mentioned the following reasons for disagreement: ‘explanation-based’, ‘experiment-based’, ‘compromise-based’, ‘doing-nothing-based’, and ‘inconsideration-based’. Table 2 describes examples of these reasons based on Chiang and Guo [22].

**Table 2.** Examples of reasons for agreement and disagreement in FGDs.

Reason of Agreement/Disagreement	Example
Same-viewpoint-based	My answer is the same as his.
Plausible-explanation-based	This explanation is reasonable.
Trust-based	You can try it if you don’t trust me.
Harmony-based	That agrees with my approach.
Self-dignity-based	[Hesitating] I agree with her.
Explanation-based	I think she has not given us a good explanation.
Experiment-based	You can try doing it.
Compromise-based	We cannot compromise.
doing-nothing-based	No.
inconsideration-based	I still consider my opinion right.

We followed the inductive content analysis to investigate the challenges in distance education faced by school principals, teachers, and students during emergency education. Although some reports were published regarding these challenges, little research has been completed that uses FGD as a collecting tool regarding the challenges of distance education in a developing country. Table 3 describes the themes related to each category of distance education challenges found in the present research.

**Table 3.** Categories of distance education challenges.

Category	Themes	Examples
Teachers’ technological competencies	Technological competence, learned a technological tool, practiced a technological tool	We practiced various technological tools that increased our technological competencies
Governate’s issues	Governate’s status, governate’s problems, governate’s infrastructure	Bethlehem schools are not the same as Nablus schools
Gender issues	Gender impact, gender influence, gender factor	Female teachers are more qualified in technology integration than male teachers
Teacher’s age issues	Teacher’s age, age influence, challenges of teacher’s age	It is difficult for older teachers to cope with distance education
The Ministry of Education policy’s issue	Declaration of the Ministry of Education, policy of the Ministry of Education, influence of the Ministry of Education policy	The Ministry of Education declared that learning through Teams cannot replace Face-to-face
The decentralization of authority	Need for the decentralization in the Ministry of Education, influence for decentralization in the Ministry of Education, need of the schools to have authority	The schools need to have authority over their steps in coping with emergency education
The home education issue	Turning a home into a school, fitting ourselves to home education, the influence of home education	You are turning a home into a school

Table 3. Cont.

Category	Themes	Examples
The issue of monitoring teachers' and students' attendance	The importance of monitoring, the features of monitoring, the impact of monitoring	Monitoring encourages the implementation of distance learning by teachers
The resources issue	Lack of a resource, type of a resource, availability of a resource	The schools need to be equipped with high-speed internet

### 3.5. Validity and Reliability of the Data Collecting and Analysis Process

Data saturation guarantees that the collecting process ensures the validity of the results, i.e., that the emerging categories cover the whole educational phenomenon. We considered data saturation in order to decide whether to carry out further focus group sessions or not. Data saturation was satisfied after analyzing three focus group sessions, but no new categories related to the studied phenomenon emerged [23]. We carried out an analysis of the fourth session to verify the saturation, which ensured its satisfaction. In addition, the analysis of the discussions of the rest of the groups showed similar categories and themes.

The present research ensures the credibility of the research, as it is established through the accurate identification and description of the research participants (Table 1). Dependability is also related to this description, which addresses how data remain stable over time in different conditions. The dependability is also related to the analysis completed for the four groups, as they revealed similar categories and themes. Conformability was addressed by computing coders' agreement. Two experienced coders coded the resulting transcripts of the focus group's sessions. Here, the two coders coded the four sessions of the reported group, i.e., they coded 25% of all the data, which is accepted for computing the agreement between coders [24,25]. They searched for the occurrences of themes that indicated a distance learning challenge. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to compute the two coders' agreement. The computation of Cohen's Kappa coefficient resulted in 0.89 to 0.94 for the different categories of the distance learning challenge. It is agreed that these values are accepted as indicating good coders' agreement.

## 4. Results

In reporting the results, we will not keep the flow of the discussion of the group of participants as it happened, but we will try to present the results according to their themes. We will number the participants according to the original flow of the discussion. The rows are numbered according to the original transcription. Here, we will not answer each research question individually, as the four research questions could be answered when analyzing the episodes. We will address each of the research questions in the Discussion Section. The titles of the sub-sections in the Results Section are related to the challenges of the schools in distance learning.

In addition to the above, in analyzing the episodes of FGDs, we will address four issues: the studied phenomenon, the type of agreement or disagreement, the reason for agreement or disagreement, and the function of the facilitator.

### 4.1. Challenges Related to the Teacher

The category 'Challenges related to the teacher' is composed of four subcategories: The different situations of online teaching, the teacher's governate, the teacher's gender, and the teacher's age. Below, we describe each one of the subcategories where the focus group discussed the issue of governance and gender in the same episode.

#### 4.1.1. The Different Situations of Online Teaching

One of the participants, P7, who is a secondary school teacher, described her school's experience with emergency education. Episode 1 illustrates her description.

79 C: Let us hear other experiences of distance education in your schools.

80 P7: I want to talk about my school in Jerusalem. The school includes 1500 students and 60 teachers. I was one hundred percent against distance learning because of the little technological competencies of the teachers in the school. We participated for one week in a workshop in which we learned the Google forms and the Teams program. We were exposed to many programs, which made it difficult for us to grasp all the options of these program.

81 C: So, how did you succeed to manage?

82 P7: The first couple of weeks were very hard, especially in the management of Teams. But we were determined to succeed in distance education. We had the support of the school's principal, side by side with the teachers' exchange of knowledge and experiences among them. This led to better coping with distance learning.

83 P8: Not all teachers turned into a positive attitude toward distance education. In my school, only half of the teachers participated actively in distance education. The rest did not really try to do so, probably because of their little competencies in technology. They also did not develop these competencies as they had negative attitude toward using technology in teaching.

84 C: What do you suggest to overcome this situation?

85 P8: The school administration and the Ministry of Education need to hold workshops for the teachers in technology integration. They need to do that in regular time and not in a time of emergency.

#### Episode 1: Coping with emergency education

Episode 1 shows the different states of distance teaching and learning during emergency education. P7 describes the beginning of the emergency education experiences in her school, where the teachers were not ready at the beginning for distance education but managed to engage in this education due to three factors: their determination to do so [R82], the school principal's support [R82], and preparatory workshops [R80]. P8 expressed a different state in her school, where some teachers did not have a positive attitude or participate actively in online teaching [R83]. The two participants drew two different pictures that added to the whole picture of distance education in a small country. We can say that the agreement type was a complementary one, where the participants drew a picture of the available educational states of online learning during emergency education. Here, the reason for the negotiation situation was experience-based.

The facilitator acted in Episode 1 as an initiator, as he approached the discussants and asked those who did not talk to describe their experiences of distance education in their schools [R79]. Here, the facilitator acted also as caring about the different voices in the FGD and thus as encouraging equity in the FGD. The facilitator also acted to make the discussion smooth, as he requested P7 to describe what the school did to manage the educational situation [R81]. Another function of the facilitator was to advance the discussion, such as when he requested P8 to suggest actions to overcome the challenges in distance education.

#### 4.1.2. Teacher's Governate and Gender

The participants discussed teachers' and students' activity during the distance emergency education, not agreeing on the governate issue but agreeing on the gender issue. Episode 2 illustrates part of this discussion.

16 C: Why doesn't the picture described in the Ministry's news deliver the right picture of distance education in the schools?

17 P1: The Prime Minister accompanied the minister of education in attending a lesson given through Teams by a female teacher in the city of Bethlehem. The Prime Minister showed content regarding the performance of the teacher. I say, let the Prime Minister come to attend a lesson in a village in Nablus district. He will change his opinion of the teachers' online performance.

18 P2: What is the difference between Bethlehem a village in Nablus district?

19 P3: You are a principal. What about the lessons in your school? Your claim is a convection of yourself.

20 P1: No, no. I do not convict myself. I describe the reality in the schools. I suppose that the teacher or the principal called the students to attend. They chose a female teacher. We know that female teachers are more active than the male teachers.

21 P2: [With sarcasm] You claim that there is a civilization gap between female and male teachers?

22 P1: Here, in Nablus, we have schools that have had almost no Teams lesson. Some teachers quitted their lessons to work in another job in order to earn more money. Those teachers do not know how to open Teams. So, there is a huge gap between Teams and teachers' knowledge of online teaching. I wanted the Prime Minister to attend a class, here in Nablus district, where only three students out of forty or forty-eight participate in the lesson.

23 C: Can you elaborate more?

24 P1: Some schools in Nablus district have little used online education. I am not talking about my own school only, but about many schools in the governate, for example the school of my children.

25 C: So how do you evaluate the setting in the schools.

26 P1: There is a dissonance between the various actors in the schools, the Ministry of Education, the teachers and the parents, regarding distance learning.

27 P4: This could happen at the beginning, but afterward all can settle down to normal education, more or less. [She turned to P1] We now have a teacher who is prepared to online education and using the techniques of online education.

28 P1: This could happen probably when the teacher is female. Female teachers are better with technology.

29 P4: This is probably right, but male teachers could do more. This is an emergency education and teachers, whether females or males, should try to do their best to succeed in this emergency education.

Episode 2: discussing the influence of the governate and gender on the teachers' involvement in distance education

P1, who is a secondary school principal in the Nablus governate, argued that although one female teacher's distance teaching in the city of Bethlehem was assessed by the Prime Minister as acceptable, we cannot infer from the case in Bethlehem that distance teaching is acceptable in all the cities and villages in Palestine [R17]. Here, P1 perceives the preparedness for distance education as not similar in the different governates in Palestine.

A situation of disagreement emerged. P2 and P3 disagreed with P1, as their opinions were different from his concerning the differences between governates regarding their preparedness for online learning [R18–R19]. It seems that the reason for this disagreement was perception-based, as the different participants had different perceptions regarding the difference between the governates in the discussed issue. Here, the participants did not complement each other but contradicted each other, and thus the type of disagreement was a vis-à-vis one.

Afterward, a situation of agreement emerged. P1 referred to another issue that could have influenced the current situation of distance learning in Nablus Governate, which is the gender of the teacher [R22]. P1 argued that the reason for this situation is the teachers' knowledge and experience of distance teaching, where the little knowledge of teachers made them quit online teaching and work in another job to earn more money. It turns out that this is true for males who are not as qualified in technology use as female teachers [R28]. This little qualification could have encouraged the male teachers to work in another job, as they could not cope with distance learning teaching skills. Here, the participants agreed on this issue, and the reason for their agreement was experience-based.

Even though the participants agreed upon the issue of gender as argued by P4 in [R29], this agreement was disputed by P2 [R21]. In addition, P4, a female teacher, suggested that all teachers should put more effort into succeeding in distance education, no matter whether they are males or females [R29]. Thus, the types of agreement here could be described as agreement-with-objection and agreement-with-advancement.

The facilitator acted as a part of an inquiry community, as he requested the discussants to justify why they consider the picture described in the Ministry's news as delivering the right picture of distance education in the schools [R16]. The facilitator also acted to make the discussion smooth, as he requested P1 to elaborate more [R23]. Moreover, the moderator acted as a motivator of the discussion, as he requested P1 to evaluate the setting in the schools [R25].

#### 4.1.3. Teacher's Age

P1, a principal of a secondary school, was the first to raise the issue of teacher's age as influencing the utilization of distance learning in education. Episode 3 describes the group's discussion regarding this issue.

60 C: Please elaborate on the issue of the teachers with long experience in your school.

61 P1: My school, in the last five years, is one of the schools that get the first place in the national exam at the end of the twelfth class. Eyes are wide open on it in the directorate, so I follow day and night its management. I have ten teachers of the age 55–60 years. These teachers are considered the best teachers in the directorate, and they teach the principal subjects that the Ministry of Education decided to include in distance education. I got the report from the server that only four teachers did not participate in distance teaching. One of them said that he cannot afford the cost of the internet that distance education utilizes.

62 C: Why does not he come to the school and use its internet utility?

63 P1: I agree, in fact, this is what we did. What surprised us was the attendance of students. Just 3–4 students attended each class.

64 P3: It could be because of their late experience. Probably the school needed to call each student to tell him or her about the new distance learning schedule.

65 P5: I agree with P3. We experienced such little participation in distance learning. We confronted this phenomenon by not only contacting the students, but their parents too. This led to an increase in students' participation in online lessons. We had implemented this solution of communicating with the parents before the emergency education to solve problems related to the students.

Episode 3: discussing the influence of age on the teachers' involvement in distance education

In Episode 3, P1 talks about the distance learning experience of ten teachers aged 55–60 years in his school [R61–R63]. Four of these teachers could not cope with the conditions of distance teaching. The facilitator suggested the school as a place to handle this situation [R62]. P1 agreed, saying the facilitator's suggestion was the step taken by the school to support online teaching [R63]. Here, the facilitator behaved as a participant in the FGD, and an agreement situation emerged, in which the facilitator and P1 were involved. The reason for the agreement was suggestion-based. Here, the agreement type was agreement-with-advancement, where P1 elaborated, saying that the administration strategy to encourage students' attendance in distance learning did not have great success.

Attendance problems were another challenge [R63] to the emergence of an agreement situation. P3 suggested that students should be contacted about the new distance learning program after a month of absence [R64]. P5 endorsed this suggestion, describing how her school was able to increase participation in the online lessons of students who had previously had little contact with distance education [R65]. Here the type of agreement was the complementary agreement, where each student's idea complemented an idea of a previous student. In addition, the reason for the agreement was experience-based.

The facilitator acted to advance the discussion, as he requested for P1 to elaborate on the issue of the teachers with long experience in his school [R60], and he suggested to P1 that the teacher should come to the school and use its internet utility [R62].

#### 4.2. Challenges Related to the Ministry of Education

The category 'Challenges related to the Ministry of Education' is composed of three sub-categories: the Ministry of Education's declarations, the decentralization of authority, and monitoring teachers' and students' attendance. Below, we describe each of them.

#### 4.2.1. The Ministry of Education's Declarations

The participants' discussion led one of the participants, P1, to describe how the Ministry of Education's policy negatively affected distance education's practices. This discussion is presented in Episode 4.

33 C: [Turns to P1] A week ago you were optimistic. What happened in one week, so you changed your mind?

34 P1: The declaration of the Ministry of Education. When the parents and students complained about the exams results, the Ministry of Education declared that the learning through Teams cannot replace Face-to-face. This made our students quit entering Teams.

35 P3: This is risky declaration of the Ministry of Education if it indeed had such a declaration. It would loosen the rope for the educational process.

36 C: [Turns to P2] You are part of the government. What do you say about what P1 claims regarding the declaration of the Ministry of Education?

37 P2: P1 is in the field, and he knows more than anyone else regarding what happens in the schools. So, he and other principles, those who know what is happening in the schools, should meet and discuss, with the Ministry of Education officials, the distance education's situation in order to correct the course of distance education in the schools.

38 C: Is there a mechanism to encourage this exchange of ideas?

39 P2: The Ministry puts the policy based on the reports from the schools and specifically the principals and the supervisors. The problem that I see is the absence of mechanism that makes the meeting of the field with the Ministry of Education possible. It might have a flaw. The teacher has a responsibility, and the principal has a responsibility, certainly more than the teacher, to contact the Ministry of Education and discuss the situation with them. This can mitigate the damage occurring to the emergency education.

Episode 4: discussing the reasons and influence of the Ministry of Education's declarations

In Episode 4, P1 stressed the problematic declaration of the Ministry of Education that distance learning cannot replace face-to-face learning [R34]. P1 argued that this declaration was problematic because it influenced the participation of students in online learning [R34]. As a government official, P2, who was supposed to know what occurred in all ministries, including the Ministry of Education, attributed the ineffectiveness of online learning to the lack of coordination between the schools and the Ministry of Education and, specifically, to the absence of communication mechanisms between them [R38]. The reason for the negotiation situation here was inconsideration-based, from the side of P1, while it was affiliation-based, from the side of P2. The type of negotiation here was agreement-with-objection.

The facilitator acted to facilitate an inquiry community, as he requested P1 to explain the change in his statements about the state of distance learning [R33]. The facilitator also acted to orchestrate the discussion, as he requested P2 to contribute to the discussion as an official in the Ministry of Education [R36]. In addition, the facilitator acted as an advancer of the discussion, as he asked about a mechanism to encourage the exchange of ideas between the schools and the Ministry of Education.

#### 4.2.2. The Decentralization of Authority

P1 raised practical issues related to the school's management during the emergency education. Episode 5 illustrates the issue of the decentralization of authority.

41 P1: I want to talk about the centralization of authority related to the Ministry of Education and the schools. We need decentralization in the Ministry of Education. We have a clear centralization in the Ministry of Education. We adhere to this centrality, but the schools need to have authority over their steps in coping with the emergency education. This authority enables each school to take the decisions that fit its conditions. I really appreciate the declaration of the minister of education that the school principal has the authority to decide what steps to take to cope with the emergency education. Nevertheless, the centralization is still beholding us. Some principals do not have the

courage to take hard decisions regarding the emergency education. Principals who have the courage to do so succeeded in suiting the teaching and learning processes in their schools to distance learning.

42 C: How would the hesitant principals begin to have initiation over the teaching and learning processes in their schools?

43 P1: They need to be convinced that the Ministry of Education intends seriously to give the schools the freedom over their decisions regarding the teaching and learning processes during the emergency education.

Episode 5: discussing the decentralization of authority

In Episode 5, P1 argues that the Ministry of Education needs to follow the decentralization of authority. He raised four issues in his argument. The first issue is the need for the decentralization of authority, as it enables making decisions based on the school's conditions [R41]. The second issue is that some principals are afraid to take this responsibility [R41]. The third issue is the success of the implementation of distance education by principals who indeed took responsibility for the decision related to their schools [R41], while the fourth issue is the need to convince the principals who did not use the decentralization of authority to do so [R43]. Here too, the FGDs were engaged in a negotiation situation whose reason is suggestion-based. The type of negotiation is complementary, where the question of the facilitator prompted P1 to elaborate on his previous argument.

The facilitator acted as an advancer of the discussion in the FGD, as he suggested considering the issue of the hesitant principals regarding the actions that need to be taken in order to ensure the quality of distance education in their schools.

#### 4.2.3. Monitoring Teachers' and Students' Attendance

The sixth issue that the group of participants discussed is the need for monitoring the distance education practices of teachers by the Ministry of Education in order to develop these practices. Episode 6 illustrates this discussion.

55 C: The question is how we can give feedback regarding online education.

56 P3: We can utilize the cloud recordings of the lessons given by each teacher. These recordings give us a picture regarding the attendance of teachers and students in the online lessons. This allows us to give feedback for the students, the teachers, and the Ministry of Education. This feedback will lessen the absence from online lessons, whether of teachers or students. This feedback supports the Ministry of Education in its advancement of a policy that fits the current state of emergency education.

57 P2: I will emphasize the importance of monitoring. This is especially true for the principal. First, we should make sure that the teacher in his or her school is in control of distance teaching, and second, they implement this teaching. We took a course about decision making. Here, we are talking about decision making of the principal in the light of emergency.

58 C: Can you please elaborate on the monitoring of the Ministry of Education. P1 talked about the monitoring of the principal?

59 P2: The monitoring is hierarchical, upside down or the opposite. The Ministry of Education should monitor the distance education activity of the schools through its various directorates. Some of the governates have three directorates, what means that the Ministry of Education has the ability to monitor the performance of teachers. At the same time, the principals can monitor the schoolteachers' performance and give feedback to the Ministry of Education.

Episode 6: discussing the monitoring of teachers' performance in emergency education

In Episode 6, the group of participants discussed the monitoring needed by the Ministry of Education and principals for the success of distance education practices. They suggested ways of keeping the prevalence of this monitoring. P3 emphasized the importance of cloud recording, where the monitoring of these recordings will encourage attendance in online lessons, whether of teachers or students [R56]. P2 emphasizes the

monitoring of principals, talking about two types of monitoring: monitoring the preparedness of teachers for such education and monitoring their attendance in the lessons [R57]. As argued by P2, monitoring and decision-making are linked; monitoring helps prepare for and facilitates decision-making [R57]. P2, afterward, mentioned the Ministry's ability to oversee distance learning activity through its directorates but also said it is the principals who have a similar primary responsibility for this. As the previous description shows, the type of agreement situation that prevailed was the complementary type, and P3 described a way for the principals to monitor the work of teachers in order to give them feedback, while P2 emphasized the importance of this monitoring. The reason behind the agreement was suggestion-based.

The facilitator acted as an advancer of the discussion in the FGD, as he requested to address the issue of how feedback regarding online education can be given to the stakeholders [R55]. Again, he acted as an advancer of the discussion in the FGD, as he requested to elaborate on the monitoring of distance learning by the Ministry of Education [R58].

#### 4.3. The Resources Issue

The category 'the resource issue' consisted of two subcategories: home education as a resource for online learning and school resources for online learning. Below, we describe each of these subcategories.

##### 4.3.1. Home Schooling as a Resource for Online Learning

Talking about the challenges of online learning, and specifically the reasons behind the difficulties of this learning, one participant, P5, raised the issue of home education, as in Episode 6.

50 P6: Agreeing with P1 and P2, I think that continuous feedback should be given by the schools to the Ministry of Education. This would lessen the many difficulties in implementing distance education. One of these difficulties is the home education. You are turning a home to a school. It is difficult to implement such education. My house is not small, and each of my children has his or her own room. When I teach, I close my room. Doing online teaching all day makes me get a headache at the end of the day. Face-to-face teaching is preferred over online teaching. It is much easier.

51 C: This is the situation now, the need for distance education. What do you suggest doing?

52 P6: Feedback and again feedback. We are all leaders now. We must identify the problems we face in home education. This might improve our confronting of this education.

53 P3: We need to fit ourselves for home education. It is a must to succeed in the present emergency education. There is no alternative. We need to implement it without complaint.

##### Episode 7: discussing home schooling

In episode 6, P6 raised the issue of home education, which is a special property of the emergency education due to COVID-19. In an attempt to create an educational environment suitable for distance education, P6 closed her room, complaining that houses are difficult to turn into classrooms due to their design [R50]. P6, having been encouraged by the facilitator to suggest how home education can be successful [R51], suggested that teachers act as leaders by initiating feedback for their community. In doing so, the teachers can succeed in home education [R52]. Thus, we have two opinions regarding home education in Episode 3. P6 considers home education difficult-to-perform education, so we need to adjust to it, while P2 considers it a must, so we need to implement it without complaint [R53]. Thus, here the reason behind the agreement was compromise-based since P6 compromised with the facilitator and with herself. Depending on this compromise, P3 suggested to teach according to the conditions of the learning environment in which we have teach. The type of agreement is agreement-with-advancement, as P3 advanced her own opinion about home-schooling.

The facilitator acted as an advancer of the discussion in the FGD, as he requested P6 to suggest actions in order to overcome the challenges in distance education [R51].

#### 4.3.2. School Resources for Online Learning

The group of participants referred to the resources issue, how it influenced the participation of students in online learning, and the management of the difficulties related to resources. Episode 8 describes the discussion of this issue.

67 P5: Let us come to lack of equipment. Many schools approached the local community for assistance in buying the needed equipment. Many teachers took the initiative and made educational packages and distributed it among their students who solved the worksheets in the packages and came back to the school to hand the worksheet to the teachers. The initiative of some teachers included preparing CDs. In addition, one principal told me that she permitted relatives or neighbors to work together using the same computer to attend online lessons. Some schools, as P1 said, opened its doors for the teachers to utilize its resources. These are some of the mechanisms utilized by the schools, especially by the principals and teachers, in managing the challenges met by the teachers and students in their performing of online learning.

68 P6: I want to discuss the internet as a resource in the students' houses. How many students have internet at their houses?

69 P2: The statistics say that 87% of the houses have Internet, which is suitable for distance learning.

70 P6: Is there information about the speed of the internet? You know that Teams requires strong internet connection.

71 P2: No. This information was not given. In any case, I think that we need to do everything in order to make the distance learning experience at the schools successful.

Episode 8: discussing the management of resources in emergency education

In Episode 8, the participants discussed the availability and management of resources for emergency education. To manage the lack of appropriate learning resources for emergency education, the teachers tried to provide the students with alternative learning resources, such as educational packages including CDs [R67]. Additionally, the principals suggested the use of school resources to help the teachers solve the problem of the lack of hardware [R67]. P6 attempted to raise the issue of the internet in the students' houses as influencing their distance learning activities [R68] but did not receive an answer regarding the speed of the internet in the students' houses [R70], and the discussion was not continued for lack of information [R71]. In this episode, the type of agreement is complementary, as P5 described the resources that teachers and principals attempted to provide for the students, while P6 referred to another issue, that of resources at students' houses. The reason behind the agreement was information-based, as the arguments of P5 and P2 show.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, we tried to show the utilization of FGDs for reporting educational phenomena. Here, we showed this utilization in investigating the participation challenges faced by the school community in distance education in Palestinian schools during emergency education, in addition to the practices adopted by the schools to cope with these challenges. Furthermore, we examined the suggestions made by a group of educationists on how to cope with the encountered challenges. We will address each research question individually.

The first and second research questions were concerned with investigating the agreement and disagreement types in FGDs about online learning challenges. In the present research, the participants were engaged in negotiations that included agreements and disagreements of different types, where these agreements and disagreements helped to answer the two research questions concerned with the school challenges in distance education. In addition, this negotiation included suggestions regarding improvements to online learning using different means: contacting the students to bring them back to online

learning, bringing the teachers to the school to provide them with appropriate online tools, coordinating between the Ministry of Education and the schools, etc.

Focus groups were a place in which experts and professionals could agree or disagree on educational issues and the carrying out of educational action. Disagreement led to negotiations that resulted in agreement on the appropriate acts in an educational context. This is in line with researchers who say that sometimes participants modify their opinions and arguments during the discussion [26]. In the present research, the participants referred to the issue of the Ministry of Education declaration regarding the status of distance learning. One looked only at the influence of the declaration, while another participant looked only at the reason for this declaration. To avoid disagreement, two of the participants chose to talk about different aspects of an educational phenomenon. This enriched the talk about the phenomenon and covered two of its aspects. So, in this case, disagreement resulted in complimentary descriptions of the same educational phenomenon.

Moreover, disagreement about issues, like the influence of the teacher's background variables on her or his participation in online learning, led to agreement on this influence. For example, the participating educationists agreed that the governate did not necessarily result in a difference in a teacher's participation in online learning. At the same time, they agreed that the technological competencies indeed influenced this participation.

In addition to the above, the reasons varied for agreement and disagreement in the FGDs, and these reasons were mostly experience-based, perception-based, affiliation-based, inconsideration-based, compromise-based, and suggestion-based. This shows the wide range of reasons that FGDs can provide for the discussants to arrive at agreements regarding an educational phenomenon. In addition, the types of agreement and disagreement were mostly the complementary, vis-à-vis, agreement-with-objection, and agreement-with-advancement types. This shows the nature of agreement in the FGDs, as well as the interrelations between agreement and disagreement in these FGDs. This shows that FGDs constitute a context in which the participants have different interaction paths to study a specific topic, here an educational topic [27].

The third research question addressed the challenges faced by the Palestinian schools in emergency education according to FGD. Three categories emerged in the analysis. The first challenge is the one related to the teacher and has four subcategories. The second challenge is the one related to the Ministry of Education and has three subcategories, while the third challenge is related to resources and has two subcategories. Below, we discuss these categories and subcategories of challenges and the related coping strategies.

The challenges that were related to teachers address their background features, specifically the teacher's technological competencies, teacher's directorate, teacher's gender, and teacher's age. The participating educationists disputed the effect of the teacher's directorate but less over the rest of the background features. The participants agreed that female teachers were more tempted to follow online learning than male teachers.

The findings of the present study regarding the influence of gender on teachers' participation in online teaching do not agree with previous studies, which showed that compared with their male colleagues, female teachers reported significantly less engagement in their online work [28]. The study of Jelinska and Paradowski [28] was carried out, using questionnaires and quantitative methods, on respondents who are residents in 118 countries. Here, we used focus groups and qualitative methods to address this issue. The present study is concerned with the Palestinian context, which is a context in a developing country. Our study results agree with previous studies that found teachers' digital competencies to influence their participation in online learning. For example, Jelinska and Paradowski [28] found that a teacher with prior remote instruction experience succeeded in coping with the transition to online learning and was most engaged in this mode of education.

Challenges were related also to the Ministry of Education, where the participants talked about the Ministry's declarations and how some of them did not serve the advancement of distance education. Here, the participants talked about their experience of the existing situation. This description of the participants does not contradict other findings of

the positive effect of the Ministry's policy on the success of distance education practices (e.g., [29]).

Other challenges were related to the resources, such as how they influenced the participation of students in online learning, and the management of the difficulties related to resources. The resource challenge is expected in a poor country such as Palestine. Cheap solutions, such as CDs, were suggested to overcome the resource problem. This shows that solutions to educational resource shortages could be found, even in poor places.

The fourth research question concerned the Palestinian schools' practices in confronting the challenges faced by them during emergency education. In addition, the third research question concerned educationists' evaluation of the practices and their suggestions to cope with challenges in emergency education. We will address the answers to the two research questions together.

Distance education emerged during emergency education, so workshops were held to develop teachers' technological skills related to distance learning. It seems that not all teachers could benefit from these workshops, which made a participant suggest that such workshops should be held during regular learning. It seems that this participant thought that the time of regular learning fits with the holding of workshops, as it is not a pressing time.

The participants emphasized that the declarations of the Ministry of Education were influential regarding the interest of the teachers and students in online learning. They pointed to the little coordination between the Ministry of Education and the schools. In addition, they suggested that a continuous assessment should be completed regarding the participation of teachers and students in online learning and that the results of this assessment should be given to schools to improve their performance. Thus, the participating educationists could point at conditions—e.g., careful declarations regarding online learning and actions of the Ministry of Education—as the continuous assessment of the schools' participation in online learning, which would ensure the successful implementation of online learning.

Regarding resources as influencing the implementation of online learning, the participants stressed that further success in online learning would not be successful unless the Ministry of Education maintains the appropriate infrastructure [30].

The facilitator performed the following different functions: (1) initiator, (2) caring about the different voices in the FGD, and thus encouraging equity in the FGD, (3) making the discussion smooth, (4) advancing the discussion, (5) and orchestrating the discussion. These functions are mentioned by Myers [30] as a response to the discussants' claims and thus as enriching the FGD's work.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Distance learning and its challenges have attracted the attention of educational researchers [31–34]. The present research intended to show the potentialities of using a focus group methodology to investigate educational phenomena. Here, we considered the challenges met by schools and the Ministry of Education during emergency education. The focus group's mechanism enabled the interaction of the participants as a means for building knowledge [35], here about the educational practices during emergency education, as a means to meet the challenges of distance learning. This collective knowledge was constructed through agreements and disagreements and negotiations that resulted in some kind of agreement. The knowledge was a collective one, meaning that the knowledge of a participant complemented that of another participant, which added to the wholeness of the characterizing of the studied educational phenomenon.

The discussion in the FGD included the evaluation of the Ministry of Education and the schools' practices. For example, the educationists judged the declaration of the Ministry of Education as having a negative effect on distance learning. This role of the present FGD as a forum for the evaluation of educational practices was pointed out by researchers as one merit of FGDs. Ansary et al. [36] demonstrated that focus groups can be used in evaluation

research, which could help policymakers and program administrators better serve their constituents and stakeholders.

Moreover, Daher and Salameh [29] recommended that to maintain distance education in schools, positive and supportive relationships should prevail among the Ministry of Education, the local community, parents, and schools. Here, the participating educationists did not put an emphasis on the local community, but they emphasized the positive role of communication between the schools and the Ministry of Education. Thus, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education keeps channels of communication with the different stakeholders to maintain an acceptable level of distance learning activity.

Moreover, the present research suggests that FGD-based findings could be reported, considering four aspects: (1) the educational phenomena, as challenges of distance learning, (2) the type of agreement and disagreement in the FGDs that led to the understanding of the educational phenomena, (3) the reasons behind these agreements and disagreement, and (4) the functions of the facilitator. More attempts to study how these methodological aspects can complement each other are needed.

In addition to the above, FGDs are lately attracting the attention of educational researchers [37–39]. Our attempt in the present research showed that focus groups could be a means to study experts' ideas of critical educational issues, and this discussion could contribute to understanding educational situations. Focus groups could help not only in understanding educational situations but also in suggesting improvements to the situation. Researchers support the previous argument, saying that participants exchange experiences, ask each other questions, and challenge each other to develop their arguments during a focused group discussion, which creates incentives for initiating learning processes [26].

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