Parental Involvement in Nonformal Distance Education:
Experiences from Lebanon

Mauro Giacomazzi, Filippo Porcari, Nathalie Awada, Alice Boffi

Abstract: The pandemic has abruptly compelled education systems to change and adapt to a new situation. Across different communities and contexts, the sudden and unplanned transition to distance learning induced by the pandemic has generated many challenges, but has simultaneously offered several opportunities. One of its most widely appreciated effects is the increased involvement of families in the school system. This study was conducted in a refugee community in Lebanon, addressing the needs of out-of-school Syrian children through a distance learning programme for early childhood education and basic literacy and numeracy. Through a phenomenological design, this study investigates the parents' or caregivers' role and the challenges they faced in facilitating the process of distance learning during the pandemic period. A total of 68 parents and caregivers participated in 07 focus group discussions. According to the findings, distance learning can be significantly hampered by the lack of a stable internet connection and a minimum level of digital devices. At the same time, the effectiveness of the process can be greatly affected by the caregivers' logistic and pedagogical readiness to support their children while they were enrolled in a distance learning programme. External support from schools or civil society organisations can improve the caregivers' readiness and positively affect the children's learning outcomes.

Keywords: parental engagement, online distance education, early childhood, COVID-19, Lebanon

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:
- Distance learning experiences have provided new opportunities for overcoming geographical or physical distance and have made asynchronous learning possible.
- Parents are often unprepared for distance education, yet a lack of support from parents has a negative impact on students' attendance and achievement.

What this paper contributes:
- Parental self-perception was considered key to obtaining learners' participation in the distance learning programmes.
- Elements of pedagogical readiness and time to devote to tutoring their children at home appeared to be extremely relevant for the participants.
- Parents and caregivers strongly emphasised beliefs about their own efficacy as an important factor of involvement and success in the home learning experience.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:
- Incorporate parental views and perspectives in nonformal distance education interventions through participatory design, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Support the network between children, families, and teachers to sustain formal or nonformal distance education.
- Allocate additional resources to increase parents' logistical and pedagogical readiness to participate in nonformal distance education interventions in crisis contexts.

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has revealed the weakness of most countries' economic, political, and social systems (Bozkurt et al., 2022; Cano-Hila & Argemí-Baldich, 2021). The education world was especially hard-hit due to the closure of most schools, which has led to greater inequalities between children from lower-income and higher-income families, learning losses, increased dropout rates, and school failures (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The World Bank predicted a tremendous long-term cost in terms of human capital and the likely reversal of decades of progress (World Bank, 2020).

The pandemic abruptly compelled education systems to change and adapt to the new situation (Bozkurt et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter & Bozkurt, 2022). In most countries—including those experiencing crisis and emergency conditions—the traditional way of conceiving education as a face-to-face activity is no longer an option, and educators have been required to make full or partial use of e-learning solutions, either synchronously or asynchronously, in order to facilitate the teaching and learning experience (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Khery et al., 2019; Talebian et al., 2014).

Although the use of technology in education to improve the quality of learning outcomes has been a common practice for decades (Snilstveit et al., 2016; Valk et al., 2010), its effectiveness in crisis situations or in countries with the lowest income or low availability of technology is still unclear (Ale et al., 2017; Stannard & Tauson, 2018). Learners from the most remote areas face the greatest technological disadvantages, thus increasing the gap in educational resources between urban and rural learners (Husain et al., 2020). Moreover, the rapid transition to online education revealed the gap in teachers' pedagogical and technological skills to adapt to the emergent situation (Bozkurt et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2021).

Across different communities, the sudden and unplanned transition to e-learning induced by the pandemic has generated many challenges and revealed many limitations, but it has also provided several opportunities (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Mishra et al., 2021). Recent research indicates how the use of technology has improved the resilience of the education systems by teaching how to respond to crises in a more timely way, with pedagogically relevant and inclusive solutions (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Among the challenges, limited access to the internet or technology, home environments that are unfavourable for concentration, and lack of experience and skills in the use of digital resources and formats have been especially frustrating for both learners and teachers (Aborode et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Fredricks et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, governments and institutions are optimistic about the opportunities afforded by the new learning environment prompted by the pandemic (Husain et al., 2020). One of the most appreciated effects of the pandemic is the increased involvement of families and, specifically, of parents in the school system. Even though acting as teachers can lead to frustration, it allows parents to once again take the lead in their children's education (Cheok & Wong, 2014).

Review of the Literature

Online learning experiences are not new (Kim, 2020; Leszczyński et al., 2018). In the past twenty years, thanks to the digital transformation, distance education has become increasingly common in various fields and levels of education (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Kim, 2020). Distance learning experiences have provided new opportunities for overcoming geographical or physical distance and made asynchronous learning possible (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Kim, 2020; Singh & Thurman, 2019; Yilmaz, 2019). In the literature, a variety of terms are used to refer to these learning experiences; though their specific definitions may differ, these terms are often used interchangeably. Online learning, distance learning, remote learning, or emergency online learning are some of the most common terms (Amanor-Mfoafo et al., 2020). Generally speaking, what these terms have in common is a focus on

creating environments in which teachers can interact with learners in a virtual environment (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). To be effective, however, this process requires careful planning, design, and specific technical and pedagogical expertise and curricula (Ni Shé et al., 2019).

The pandemic has exponentially increased the need to make online learning experiences available to a broader range of students, from early childhood education through higher education (Bozkurt et al., 2022). In several situations, however, this shift was not accompanied by adequate support for school systems. As a result, researchers refer to the online experiences offered in response to the COVID-19 crisis as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020). The absence of accurate instructional design and technological support characterise many such distance teaching and learning experiences as emergency remote teaching rather than online education (Branch & Dousay, 2015; Hodges et al., 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020).

Especially in emergency or crisis situations, difficulties of internet access, teachers' lack of expertise in planning for an online learning experience, and limited digital competencies of learners and parents can greatly hinder the active and regular participation of learners, gravely affecting their performance (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Kim, 2020; Omotayo & Haliru, 2020; Subaih et al., 2021). In crisis situations, the level of poverty has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic, and oftentimes families cannot afford an internet connection; thus, the poorest and most vulnerable face additional challenges and are at greater risk of seeing their children drop out (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020).

Although this digital transformation certainly came with challenges, it also brought several opportunities. Whether synchronous or asynchronous, remote learning does not depend on being in a specific physical location, thus increasing the number of potential participants. Moreover, it can be a cost-effective solution since it reduces the travel and other costs linked to the physical presence of learners in an institution (Fedynich, 2014; Yilmaz, 2019). Especially in the case of students who are also working, it allows for greater flexibility in their time-management (Smedley, 2010), and self-pacing (Kim, 2020).

Parents were not prepared for this radical change (Husain et al., 2020), and yet their role has been documented as key. Conversely, a lack of support from parents had a negative impact on students' attendance and achievement (Koi-Akrofi et al., 2020). In less privileged communities in terms of access to health and education services, food security, safety, water and sanitation, and in crisis contexts, parents can become key allies in facilitating access to learning initiatives by monitoring how learning takes place and by supervising their children while caring for their physical and psychological wellbeing (Amanor-Mfoafo et al., 2020). Their positive attitude towards remote learning experiences becomes a great support to their children (Kong, 2018; Lubis & Lubis, 2020).

This study was conducted in a refugee community in Lebanon, where the education system has been facing multiple crises (e.g., the Syrian refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Port of Beirut explosion, and the unprecedented economic crisis). School age children and education personnel were severely impacted by the protracted emergency. The formal education sector was unable to develop a contingency plan in a timely manner that would affect the continuity and quality of learning. The nonformal education sector that is providing accessible learning to Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon faced an even bigger challenge in supporting vulnerable out-of-school children. The COVID-19 pandemic called for an abrupt transition from traditional to distance learning at all levels of education. Lebanese teachers only received limited technical support from their school administrations, the Ministry of Education, or both.

To adapt to the Lebanese Government's decision to suspend in-presence educational activities, the AVSI Foundation, an international organisation operating in Lebanon, developed and implemented two distance learning programmes tailored to the needs of children and in accordance with governmental standard operating procedures for nonformal education. The programmes took place between November 2020 and June 2021 and aimed at ensuring continuous access to learning for vulnerable

children, who were supported with nonformal education programmes in community centres. Children in crisis contexts are vulnerable when their needs and capacities are not sufficient to respond to the crisis they live in. Vulnerability criteria are (i) being out of school, (ii) being exposed to protection risks, including child labour, violence and abuse, and (iii) belonging to deprived households.

The first nonformal distance education programme consisted of the adaptation of the national Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN) programme, which targets refugee children aged 10-14 years, who had limited or no prior formal learning and could not therefore enrol in formal education. The programme provided distance learning in Arabic, foreign language, and mathematics. It also aimed at fostering general life skills and offered psychosocial support. The second programme adapted the national Community-Based Early Childhood Education (CB-ECE) to the distance learning model. CB-ECE targets refugee children aged 3-5 years, who have no access to formal early childhood education. It provided structured distance play and learning opportunities focused on five main areas: language, cognitive, social-emotional, physical/psychomotor, and artistic development.

The remote learning lessons were shared by the teachers through WhatsApp. Each teacher was in charge of creating the content for each lesson, video recording the lesson, and sharing it with the caregivers. The recorded lessons contained the explanation of the content as well as instructions for the learners and the caregivers on how to complete the related assignment. The learners and caregivers were asked to complete the assignment and share it with the teacher in a private chat, usually in the form of a picture, voice message, or video. On average, 4 lessons for each subject of the CB-ECE programme and 6 lessons for each subject of the BLN programme were shared every week.

Learning was asynchronous: this allowed households with only one device to have more than one child participate in the distance learning programmes. The children had not had the chance to meet their teacher in person prior to the start of the programmes.

Study Objectives and Research Questions

This study investigates the parents' or caregivers' role and the challenges they faced in facilitating the process of distance learning during the period of the pandemic in the context of the two programmes presented above. Among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it is quite common to have minors entrusted to the care of a foster family or relatives. In the description of the findings, all participants are referred to as caregivers. The research questions that guided this study were: 1) What challenges did parents and caregivers face in implementing the distance learning programmes offered by the AVSI Foundation? 2) What were the main factors that influenced parents and caregivers' readiness in supporting distance learning programmes in Lebanon? 3) What were the parents and caregivers' perceptions of the learning outcomes achieved by the distance learning programmes?

Methods

Research Design

Researchers adopted a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design (Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2014) to investigate caregivers' readiness in supporting the distance learning programmes in Lebanon and unearth the factors that helped or hindered them in their role. The phenomenological design is intended to provide a means of elaborating on how participants make sense of their social and personal world and the meaning of a particular event (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This design aims to describe the individuals' understandings and perceptions, rather than to make general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2008); the focus is on the personal perception or account of an experience. Thus, the findings should enhance the insight into parents' experience of distance learning and aim to contribute to the development of new hypotheses and research questions.

Sampling

In June 2021, around 2,000 households were engaged in distance learning programmes offered by the AVSI Foundation. The planned sample for the study was comprised of a total of 80 caregivers participating in 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) distributed across the 4 areas of intervention where the AVSI Foundation activities took place (one FGD per programme in each area): North (Akkar and North governorates), Bekaa (Baalbek-Hermel and Bekaa governorates), South (South and Nabatieh governorates), and Beirut (Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates). Caregivers of children across each programme's age range were represented in the FGDs. The gender distribution of the children whose caregivers were invited to participate in the FGDs stand at a 50-50 ratio (28 males, 28 females for CB-ECE, and 16 males, 17 females for BLN).

Only 07 FGDs were conducted, because it was impossible for BLN caregivers in one geographic area to reach the FGD location. There were 68 caregivers who actually participated in the FGDs (13 males, 55 females). Of these, 36 caregivers (9 males, 27 females) participated in 4 CB-ECE FGDs, and 33 caregivers (4 males, 29 females) participated in 3 BLN FGDs.

Data Collection Method and Tools

The 07 FGDs were conducted in June of 2021 and lasted an average of 45 minutes. Each FGD followed a semi-structured protocol that asked all the participants to express their views on each of the open-ended questions. The researcher asked probing questions to clarify some statements when needed.

Participants felt more comfortable speaking without being audio-recorded; out of respect for their preference, accurate notes were taken by two notetakers. The notes were checked and compared at the end of each FGD. The discussions were held in Arabic, and the notes were translated into English for purposes of analysis.

Personally Identifiable Information (PII) was recorded confidentially and, when data were shared, all the documentation was anonymised.

Data Analysis

The data were converted to electronic format in Microsoft Word, and the analysis was done using ATLAS.IT (ver8) following a three-phase approach: reducing data (open coding), categorizing data (axial coding), and interpreting data (thematic coding) (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2014). The researchers analysed the first FGD independently, and through discussion they generated an initial list of open codes. Then, the first author analysed the remaining transcripts and generated a second iteration of open codes and the axial codes. The other researchers coded the transcripts independently based on the codes proposed by the first author and then met to discuss areas of disagreement. The discussion resulted in a refined set of 59 codes, grouped into 10 main categories. The authors also fully agreed on 5 main themes: 1) technological readiness; 2) logistical readiness; 3) pedagogical readiness; 4) teacher support; and 5) learning outcomes.

Figure 1. Representation of the Themes vs Codes Network.

Presentation of the Findings

This section relies on the identified themes to address the research questions. First, the section presents the caregivers' identified challenges and opportunities in implementing the programmes; second, it describes the factors that influenced the caregivers' readiness; finally, it summarizes the caregivers' perceptions of the learning outcomes achieved by the programmes.

Caregivers' Challenges

Technological readiness. The two distance learning programmes required a minimum level of internet connectivity and a smartphone device that allowed caregivers to use basic phone applications for sending and receiving messages, documents, voice messages, and videos.

Most participants stated that they had access to at least one smartphone in their household or could access one through their neighbours. However, this did not come without challenges. Several caregivers (34) lamented that one phone for the entire family was not enough when one member worked and needed the phone during the day for job-related issues, "I only have one phone and I need to take it with me when I go outside the house" (FGD-BLN-1); or "My children are not learning during the day since the phone is with my husband, so they have to study at night when he comes home from work" (FGD-BLN-2). This had an impact on some children's learning since they could not access the phone during the day or at a convenient time. Conversely, if families prioritized the children's need for the phone, caregivers were disadvantaged. As one parent stated: "When I go out, I can't take the phone with me since my children need it to study at home" (FGD-BLN-2).

Families often had more than one child enrolled in a distance learning programme, and this further compounded the technological challenge, as stated by some (10) caregivers: "This puts pressure on us because there is only one phone, and I have more than one child" (FGD-CBECE-3). The problem was exacerbated when the children were enrolled in higher levels of education, where several lessons in a distance module were conducted in a single day: "We have one phone, and I have eight children. My eldest daughter is doing her Baccalaureate, and she needs the phone for at least six hours per day" (FGD-CBECE-4).

In such a situation, solidarity among the community members sometimes helped in dealing with the problem: "There are approximately ten of us using one phone, so I wait for my neighbour to come so I can borrow her phone" (FGD-CBECE-4). Nevertheless, the circumstances remained challenging and a potential source of conflict or tension within the family: "My children are fighting over my phone since we don't have another one" (FGD-BLN-3).

Furthermore, the caregivers' smartphones were basic, and several participants lamented that the phones could not save all the documents that were sent by the teachers, due to the limited data-storage capacity: "The memory on my phone is not enough" (FGD-CBECE-1); "I am not able to keep personal things for myself on my phone since I have to keep enough storage for the lessons" (FGD-BLN-2). When technology is such a relevant factor for enabling the learning process, the limitations related to the quality of the devices available to caregivers for supporting children's learning can become a major hinderance: "My son had an exam last week, but I had already deleted the lessons before, so this was a problem. I am deleting lessons from my phone because I don't have enough memory" (FGD-BLN-2). Poor-quality devices can also lead to poor participation or learning disruptions, as these caregivers observed: "My phone is not good. It is very slow and sometimes breaks, so my children get frustrated because they cannot study" (FGD-BLN-3). This may also lead to children dropping out of the programmes, as one parent reported: "My son stopped taking lessons for 15 days because he wanted to save up to buy a new phone so he can study" (FGD-BLN-2).

Poor internet connectivity was also reported as a common problem, as some caregivers expressed (10): "The internet is very slow" (FGD-CBECE-1; FGD-CBECE-5; FGD-BLN-3). This also seemed to hinder teacher-learner interactions: "My son really loves the teacher, and he likes to interact with her, but we have the problem of the internet" (FGD-CBECE-5); and the process of sending the learners' homework back to the teachers: "The internet is very slow, so we are unable to send videos to the teacher" (FGD-CBECE-5).

On top of poor internet connectivity, participants often experienced power outages: "We don't have electricity to continue online" (FGD-CBECE-1); and "We are not able to afford extra subscriptions to electricity" (FGD-CBECE-1).

The organisation implementing the programmes distributed internet plans to address the gaps linked to internet connectivity. Although the caregivers appreciated this as an initiative that facilitated the participation of the children, some problems emerged, such as: "The recharge cards for the internet are not enough for us" (FGD-CBECE-1); and "We are receiving the internet recharge cards very late. My children had to stop attending the classes online since there is no mobile data left" (FGD-BLN-2).

Logistical readiness. The technological readiness of parents and caregivers in implementing the distance learning programmes was only one of the many challenges families faced. A number of limiting factors related to the very nature of distance learning and especially to the logistical arrangements in which the programmes took place in the children's homes.

Many people lived in very small spaces, where they had to share just one or two rooms. The participants pointed to this issue as an element of distraction and stress for the children who were enrolled in the programmes: "The house conditions and other stressors don't help in being committed to online studying, so we cannot always commit to online studying" (FGD-CBECE-1). Sometimes, there was not enough space for a child to even sit, "My house conditions are hard. There is not a quiet room where my child can sit" (FGD-CBECE-3). In such a situation, supporting children's attention became a real challenge: "At home, there are almost thirty individuals staying together, so there is always chaos and +children are not able to focus" (FGD-CBECE-3). Another caretaker stated, "There are eight of us at home, so providing the right environment for my children to study is very hard" (FGD-BLN-3).

This could become quite stressful in a family of several children and only two adults who needed to work to take care of the children's needs. Oftentimes, caregivers simply lacked the time to follow up with their children: "I go out at 6:30 a.m. and I get back at 5 p.m. and my wife doesn't know how to teach my children" (FGD-CBECE-1). Another parent said, "I am suffering a lot with my children… I sometimes return home from work at 11:00 p.m. and I am very tired when I see them" (FGD-BLN-2). Several caregivers said that they needed to "sit next to the children, all the time" (FGD-BLN-1), for them to study and follow the lessons. This made the caregivers question enrolling their children in the programme: "I was scared about enrolling my children in this online programme since I would have had to sit next to them all day and would not be able to do my household chores" (FGD-BLN-3).

In this situation, the children's workload was often perceived to be too cumbersome by the caregivers, who struggled to follow up with all the children and felt pressured by the stringent deadlines set for each child: "We don't have time and we have household chores, and the deadlines for the classes are tight" (FGD-CBECE-1); "I come home at night and I am very tired so most of the time I am late in sending the lessons [completed assignments]" (FGD-BLN-2).

Caregivers sometimes felt exhausted: "At the end of the lesson I am drained, as I have to sit long hours with them" (FGD-CBECE-1) and "I feel obliged to sit with my children and teach them and this is tiring" (FGD-CBECE-4). This could result in caregivers losing patience with the children, "My children wake up excited to learn but then they get distracted, so when my husband comes home, he beats them" (FGD-CBECE-3).

Compared to in-person schooling, distance learning requires caregivers to dedicate a large amount of time to their children's instruction and to play an active role in the learning process, "The smaller children need more attention and time from us" (FGD-BLN-3). The caregivers also observed that they needed time to learn the content of the lessons themselves and then explain it to their children; depending on the lesson and on the individual child's learning abilities, it sometimes took the entire day to complete this work. More generally, as some caregivers (7) noted, "It is hard for kids to get used to distance learning, and they want to go to school" (FGD-CBECE-1) and said that the children were disappointed that school did not begin (FGD-CBECE-1).

The AVSI Foundation anticipated the need for the children to have school materials at home so they can follow the lessons and complete the assignments. The families and children appreciated the sets of educational materials that were distributed: "They [the children] are using them. The books have photos, and these help the children" (FGD-CBECE-3). The learners felt motivated: "Our children are very happy with what they received from you [AVSI Foundation], and they felt as if they were at school again" (FGD-BLN-3). "The items that you gave us helped the children a lot. They now have books and so they are more motivated to study and to write" (FGD-BLN-1).

Factors that Influenced Caregivers' Readiness
Pedagogical readiness. As described in the previous section, the caregivers felt that the distance learning programmes required a lot of their attention and time: but what kind of pedagogical approach did they use with their children? For the most part, they supported their children by sitting with them and

tutoring them while they were following the online lessons. They said, "I sit with my child, or the father sits next to him" (FGD-CBECE-3). While some caregivers expressed feeling burdened by the large amount of time required, some of them (6) felt that helping their children to complete their assignments or following the lessons was not a cumbersome task, and they carried it out with pleasure: "We don't have any problems with finding the time to sit next to our children and teach them" (FGD-CBECE-4). Another parent stated, "My priority is to teach my children, so I don't mind giving them my time since my priority is them" (FGD-BLN-1).

The kinds of help that the caregivers provided varied from simple accompaniment, to helping the kids concentrate, to "teaching them" (FGD-CBECE-1; FGD-CBECE-3; FGD-BLN-1). "We help our children by reading the questions for them and we train them" (FGD-BLN-1). For some participants, sitting next to the children and helping them understand gave them an opportunity to refresh their own memory of the content of the lesson: "When I sit with my child and study, I feel like I am refreshing my memory and reviewing my information" (FGD-BLN-1).

Caregivers further explained their pedagogical practice by offering the following descriptions: "I sit next to my child and tell him how to answer the teacher" (FGD-CBECE-3); "I teach him by using the phone I have, and then I recite the lessons for him after the teacher finishes" (FGD-CBECE-4). Similarly, two other participants stated: "I imitate the teacher and repeat for my daughter everything she got from the teacher" (FGD-CBECE-5); "My son has problems with his speech, and it is hard to teach him. He loves to study a lot. I tell him the word the teacher is saying, and he repeats it after me" (FGD-CBECE-5).

Assuming the explicit role of teacher came with several pedagogical challenges and limitations. Participants expressed that, despite their willingness to do their best to help their children, they felt that they lacked the necessary expertise for teaching them properly and with confidence: "I found it hard to replace the teacher" (FGD-BLN-1), since "the teacher knows better how to teach the children to write and hold the pencil" (FGD-CBECE-5).

Although the parents appreciated the role the teachers played in the distance learning programmes, they also noted that children accorded a different level of authority to teachers compared with parents. Parents highlighted the fact that teachers had gained their children's trust and respect: "The teacher has her unique impact on the children" (FGD-CBECE-4). Similarly, another participant said, "The teacher has more influence on the child than us" (FGD-BLN-2). Caregivers referred to the teachers' expertise as one explanation for the greater authority that the children accorded to teachers: "The child understands the teacher better than the parent" (FGD-CBECE-1); "The kids watch the videos sent by the teacher and I feel that they understand better by watching than if I were to explain the videos to them" (FGD-CBECE-3).

According to the participants, the children found the teachers' lessons practical and playful, "Things are concrete now; not just theory" (FGD-CBECE-1). "The child is happy with the online classes—they think it is a game" (FGD-CBECE-4). Moreover, it was sometimes difficult for the caregivers to hold the attention of their own children, a difficulty exacerbated by a lack of caregivers' confidence in their own knowledge of the content taught, "My children listen more to their teacher than they listen to me and I might be teaching them the wrong things, so I prefer that they learn in school" (FGD-BLN-3).

This challenge was particularly evident when it came to teaching the English language or another language unfamiliar to the parents: "My wife used to follow up with our children, but the lessons are in English and we can't help them since we don't know how to read and write, so we don't know how to help them" (FGD-BLN-1). Similarly: "English is hard for me and I don't know how to teach it to my children" (FGD-CBECE-4). The participants also suggested that the teachers provide caregivers with additional explanations and translations in Arabic, to help them better understand: "We are not able to understand the English lessons that the teacher sends. … It is better to include explanations in Arabic in the English videos" (FGD-BLN-2).

The challenge was even greater when parents were illiterate: "I am illiterate and I don't know how to teach my kids" (FGD-BLN-1). In this case, older siblings might stand in for the parents in supporting younger siblings: "My daughter is the one who teaches my other daughter since I don't know how to read and write" (FGD-CBECE-4).

Finally, some of the caregivers expressed disappointment over their children's lack of motivation and the challenges they faced in identifying effective motivational strategies. They highlighted their inability to keep the learners on task and described the steps they took to keep the children engaged and committed, "We are promising to give our kids toys, so they agree to study" (FGD-CBECE-1). Offering some type of reward seemed to be quite a common practice, "I bribe my child to study. This saves me a lot of time, and she finishes her studies quickly. This motivates her to do her homework alone" (FGD-CBECE-5). Some caregivers also mentioned that resorting to corporal punishment to increase their children's attention was not effective, "I always motivate him to study by giving him a biscuit or something else. Hitting him will not help. I tried it before, but it didn't work" (FGD-CBECE-4).

However, the participants also shared that they sometimes felt truly overwhelmed by the overall situation and resorted to punishments keep their children on task: "My children always want to play and don't want to study. When their father comes home, he makes them stand in the corner and shouts at them to recite the days of the week" (FGD-CBECE-5). As already noted, these approaches were not effective: "I always shout at my children to study but they don't listen to me" (FGD-CBECE-5).

Teachers' support. The parents were very grateful for the support they received from the teachers during the distance learning programmes. In particular, several of them were surprised by the patience demonstrated by the teachers and the individual care for each participant, "The teacher always listens to us; she is very responsive and patient and talks to us privately" (FGD-CBECE-3). A caregiver elaborated: "The relationship with the teacher is very good; she answers us at any time. She is very responsive and quick. She helps us when we have questions" (FGD-BLN-1).

The caregivers also appreciated the relationship that the teachers established with their children and the individual attention the teachers gave to them: "The teacher is very respectful with us and always responds privately and explains the lessons to the children. She reviews all their work and corrects things for them" (FGD-BLN-2). Participants highlighted that the teachers were available to the learners and showed care for them: "The teacher always asks about our children and cares about them and motivates them" (FGD-BLN-2). Moreover, the teachers' efforts to visit the children at home was deeply appreciated by the parents, "The teacher is very responsive, very nice, and she visited us at home and my children were very happy to meet her" (FGD-BLN-2).

Caregivers' Perceptions of Learning Outcomes

This section presents the caregivers' perceptions of the impact that the distance learning programmes had on the children's learning outcomes. It also elaborates on the perceived learning on the part of the participants as well as their children as an added benefit of the distance learning lessons.

Participants shared several challenges that their children experienced during their participation in the program, such as the difficulty in understanding certain lessons, or the amount of work that the programmes required the children to complete on a daily basis: "I tried helping them but they are not understanding the lessons" (FGD-CBECE-1); or "the teacher is sending a lot of lessons at the same time. The children are bothered by that sometimes" (FGD-BLN-3).

Foreign language study was especially difficult for the learners, and participants believed that face-to-face learning would have been better for their children: "Face-to-face teaching is better, especially for the hard subjects like English" (FGD-BLN-1). "The English is very hard; my son is not understanding

anything, so he is not sending the lessons" (FGD-BLN-2). Yet, some caregivers were quite positive about the results of their children's English lessons. For example, "My child is more excited to learn English than Arabic" (FGD-CBECE-4); "My son felt surprised when he heard English for the first time, but then he liked it" (FGD-CBECE-4).

Certain specific pedagogical practices employed by the programmes might have affected learning outcomes. For example, some lessons required the parents to take pictures and videos of their children while they were performing specific tasks and then to send the recorded files to the teachers. A few caregivers noted that this was quite embarrassing for the children and made them feel uncomfortable, "My child doesn't like appearing in the video on the phone" (FGD-CBECE-1); "My daughter gets shy when I want to take a video of her to send it to the teacher and she panics" (FGD-CBECE-5).

Generally, when asked about the impact of the programmes on the children's learning outcomes, the participants mostly described the learners' performance in particular subjects; specifically, they referred to children's ability to perform tasks related to that subject or to the marks they were getting. Several of them also referred to the social and emotional learning outcomes of the programmes. It is important to note that the number of excerpts that referred to improvements in performance in a subject were more than double (42 excerpts) the ones that referred to the negative performance of the children (16 excerpts). On the other hand, there were almost as many parents who referred to the negative impact (28 excerpts) that the programmes had on the social-emotional learning of the children as there were those who spoke of the positive aspects (31 excerpts).

As regards performance in the different subjects, a caregiver stated, "some of my children are progressing well but others are not since they are not getting equal time to study on the phone" (FGD-BLN-2). Another participant was quite unhappy about the children's learning outcomes: "They are not learning anything; they are copying from one another" (FGD-BLN-3).

On the positive side, the parents were mostly impressed by the improvements in their children's fine motor skills and literacy: "My child's performance improved a lot; she now knows how to hold the pencil and write" (FGD-CBECE-1). Even the Basic Literacy and Numeracy Programme had quite an impact, according to the caregivers: "I can see that my child has progressed in a very good way. He spent the past four years in a school not knowing how to write his name; now he is able to read and write" (FGD-BLN-2). Another participant said, "when my son used to go to the [learning] centre, he wasn't benefitting. I was shocked that my son benefitted a lot from the online classes" (FGD-BLN-2).

Regarding the children's social-emotional wellbeing, the participants were concerned about their isolation during the lockdown: "Socially, my children did not show any improvement because they are stuck at home" (FGD-CBECE-1); "Our children are stressed out and want to go back to school" (FGD-BLN-3).

On the other hand, several quotes (31) expressed the positive impact that the psycho-social support sessions in distance learning mode had on the children: "The children are watching all the psychological support sessions and they are happy" (FGD-BLN-1). Some caregivers (4) also noted that the programme gave children the opportunity to learn to take more responsibility for their education: "My children now know that they have a responsibility" (FGD-CBECE-3).

Opportunities Afforded by Distance Learning
Despite certain limitations, distance learning was perceived as an opportunity to keep the children learning amid the pandemic: "It is good that the children are able to have online classes. They won't have to lose years of education" (FGD-CBECE-4). Another participant shared that, "distance learning is beneficial to both the child and the caregiver" (FGD-BLN-2).

Distance learning was also an opportunity to enrol children who were not in school into a nonformal education programme: "My son came to me the other day and told me that he feels like a normal human being now. He used to get sad when our neighbour's children were going to school but he wasn't. He is very happy to be learning now" (FGD-BLN-3).

Participants also noted that they got the opportunity to strengthen their bond with their children by spending more time with them, "The relationship with my child definitely improved" (FGD-CBECE-1). The programmes were viewed as having had an educational benefit for the parents too: "We learnt a lot as parents and we are eagerly waiting for the sessions, so we can learn with our children" (FGD-BLN-1).

The Model

The analysis of the data led researchers to identify 3 major groups of factors that affected caregivers' experiences with distance learning programmes: experiences related to the overall system/context (i.e., technological readiness); experiences related to the individual caregiver's immediate circumstances and abilities (i.e., logistic and pedagogical readiness); and experiences related to a specific programme's features (i.e., logistic and teacher support). The relationships between these factors and their influence on learning outcomes is represented in the figure below:

Figure 2. Model Representing the Factors that Impact Distance Learning.
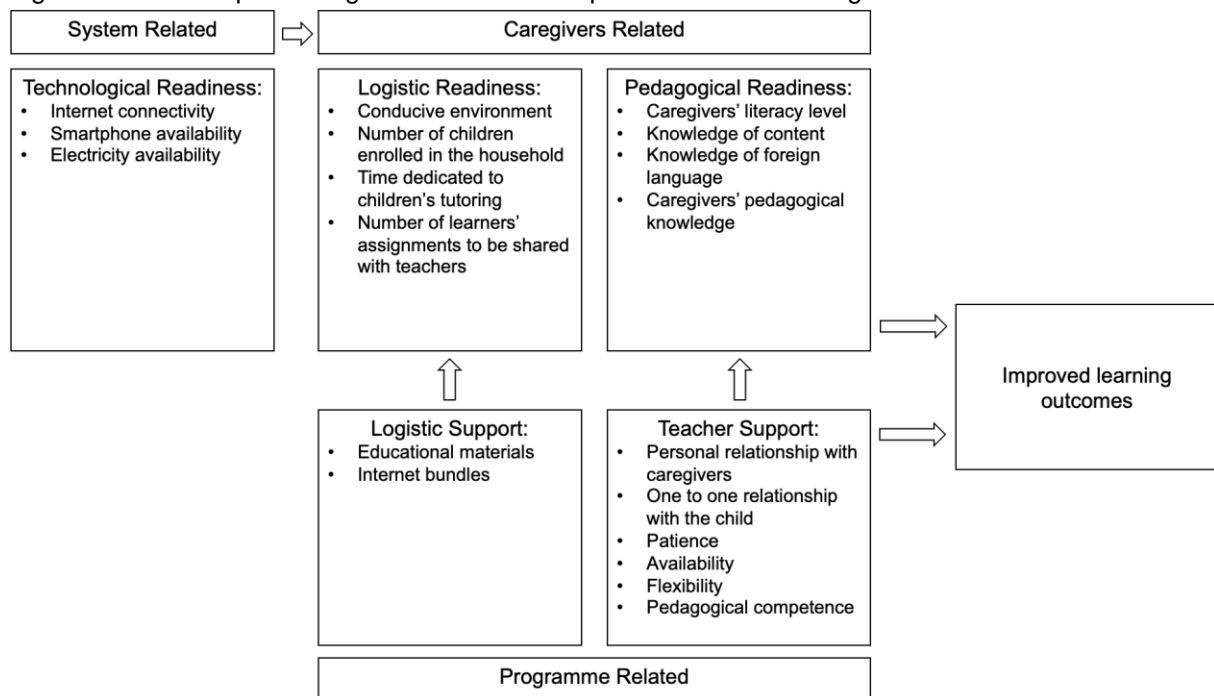
According to the findings, distance learning can be greatly impeded by a lack of general availability of a good and stable internet connection, and it requires a minimum level of access to digital devices. The devices should have the necessary storage capacity for caregivers to download and record the video lessons and educational materials shared by and with the teachers. At the same time, the effectiveness of the process can be greatly affected by the caregivers' level of logistic and pedagogical readiness to support their children while they are enrolled in a distance learning programme. External support from schools or civil society organisations can improve the caregivers' readiness and positively affect the children's learning outcomes. Specifically, a minimum of logistic support in terms of providing internet plans to facilitate connectivity and educational materials for learners to better follow the distance learning sessions were considered key to the successful implementation of these programmes. The teachers' support of caregivers also emerged as key to enhancing parents' readiness to help their children in the

distance learning programmes and served as psycho-social support to them or as an external motivating factor.

Discussion

Prior studies suggested that parental involvement in children's education is generally beneficial for improving academic outcomes, increasing motivation, and reducing dropout rates (Green et al., 2007; Park et al., 2017; Sahin & Shelley, 2020). Even in lower and middle-income countries and in emergency settings, parental involvement has proven to be beneficial—especially for improving learners' numeracy and literacy skills (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020).

Parental involvement in their children's learning has been related to parents' motivating beliefs, perceptions of how others ask for their involvement, how they perceive their life circumstances (Green et al., 2007), parents' beliefs regarding their own self-efficacy, and their perception of the amount of time they had to spend on tutoring leaners at home (Green et al., 2007).

These elements of parental self-perception also emerged from this study and were considered key to obtaining learners' participation in the distance learning programmes. Elements of pedagogical readiness and time to devote to tutoring their children at home appeared to be extremely relevant for the participants. The parents and caregivers strongly emphasised beliefs about their own efficacy as an important factor of involvement and success in the home learning experience, as the literature also presents (Green et al., 2007; Park et al., 2017). Due to the limited level of literacy and education declared by several of the participants, support from teachers was mentioned as extremely helpful, not only for children, but mostly for their caregivers. Research has consistently suggested that parental involvement is motivated more by the parents' relationships with teachers and with their children than by socio-economic status (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Green et al., 2007; Sheldon, 2003). These studies also proved that the older the child, the lower the parental involvement (Green et al., 2007). In our study, we could see that the caregivers of the children who attended BLN (older children) were proportionally more concerned about technological challenges and less concerned about the teachers' support of their pedagogical readiness compared to the caregivers who participated in the community-based early childhood education programme.

The participants in this study seemed very concerned about the challenges linked to the need for the children to study in an environment conducive to learning. A recent study reported similar results and showed how parents were more likely to be satisfied with the distance learning programmes when they had fewer children in the family (Lau et al., 2021). In the context of this research, the stress factors were even greater due to the high number of people living in the same house and sharing few rooms.

Our final consideration is about technology. For the past 50 years there has been an ongoing debate on the usefulness of technology for teaching and learning. Specifically, studies have shown that technology may lead to improved learning outcomes by fostering the use of innovative and participatory pedagogies (Anderson, 2008). The pandemic forced the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to move education online, and as a result, teachers had to abruptly shift to distance learning (Miles et al., 2021). The necessary (though not sufficient) requirements for successful e-learning consist of availability of an adequate supply of electricity, reliable and stable internet connections, and the availability of electronic tools like computers or smartphones to the participants (Amanor-Mfoafo et al., 2020). This study showed the challenges that arise when these requirements go unmet. Poor internet connectivity was mentioned as one of the greatest challenges the caregivers faced. Even though the two programmes provided the families with internet plans, slow internet connections often impaired the progress of the teaching and learning process. Having to share a smartphone with other siblings and with the head of the family exacerbated the problem.

Conclusions

This study suggests that caregivers' participation in the distance learning process during the pandemic was key for achieving improved learning outcomes for refugee children in Lebanon. The analysis of the data collected in the focus group discussions led to the development of an e-learning model that represents the contribution of various stakeholders in the successful implementation of distance learning programmes in crisis situations and in lower- and middle-income countries. This study showed how these programmes, even when they involve very young children, can be successful despite the systemic limitations and the pedagogical and logistic unpreparedness of the caregivers. The low levels of reliable electricity and internet access are the external factors that had the greatest effect on the implementation of the distance learning and the regular participation of the children. This was coupled with the still limited presence and poor quality of the families' technological devices.

On the other hand, the findings highlighted how the practical impossibility of the families to provide a conducive environment for at-home learning was a great challenge that children and caregivers faced. This had direct implications for the strategy the AVSI Foundation used to deliver the programmes: only a limited number of lessons were held each week, and the required student feedback was reduced so as not to overwhelm the caregivers, who usually had more than one child enrolled in the programme. The external support for the family, including the provision of educational materials and airtime for internet access, was deemed crucial for the successful participation of the learners and for their motivation.

The caregivers' pedagogical readiness and their perception of their own efficacy was another key aspect to consider. In the context of this study, most of the adults in the refugee communities had low levels of literacy, and distance learning required caregivers to supplement the role of the teachers by internalising the lesson shared online by the teachers and replicating it for their children. This was especially so for lessons designed for the youngest children. The challenges were particularly pronounced when it came to teaching a foreign language that the parents did not know.

The individualised rapport that the teachers established with them was new to the teachers as well as the families. With the caregivers assuming the role of co-facilitators in the learning process, the role of the teachers was to reach out to the learners in an effective way, but also to coach their caregivers.

Recommendations and Implications

This study suggests that greater attention should be paid to the role that parents and caregivers could play in the teaching and learning process. Even beyond the pandemic, the unique educational and cultural contributions that each of these main actors could make in the children's learning process need to be sufficiently valued. In this sense, educational institutions and formal or nonformal educational programmes should carefully consider the opportunities that online learning could offer. This shift, or course, requires the institutions or promoting organisations to be flexible and continuously adapt to the innovative strategies that technology provides.

The support network between children, families, and teachers should be considered a resource that is extremely beneficial even in the future, when confinement or social distancing will no longer be a necessity.

In future programs greater attention should be devoted to children's abilities to complete their learning from home more independently in order to reduce the burden on caregivers and parents. This would also increase the level of parental wellbeing and reduce the gap between children of parents with lower levels of education and those who have a more extensive educational background.

More research should also be dedicated to understanding how distance learning modalities can become effective in early childhood education and possibly suggest new and innovative ways of meeting the needs of young children in crisis and emergency situations, even after the pandemic. A pedagogy of care should be promoted to support learners in coping with the psychosocial stress linked to both the pandemic and the online distance education. Teachers should be empowered to appreciate that learning can effectively take place only with the support of a parent or caregiver, and they should also consider that these families might have several children to care for. Moreover, teachers' skills in designing online learning tasks should be enhanced to help children better engage in self-directed activities, and increase their ability to learn independently; effective and systematic possibilities for children to seek support and feedback from their teachers should be created.

Researchers and policymakers should collaboratively work to design educational environments that enhance parental involvement, students' participation, and improve their learning outcomes in the field of distance learning education. Governments should prepare and empower teachers and parents to effectively take advantage of distance modalities of teaching and learning. Technological readiness and the availability of proper tools are facilitating factors for supporting online learning and for empowering these stakeholders to become more resilient and creative in times of protracted crisis, with the caveat that internet connectivity and the availability of electricity are necessary for supporting blended or online learning and thus for promoting equity and inclusion in the learning process. Conversely, we must bear in mind that the technological gap could widen the poverty gap—especially in developing or crisis contexts.

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About the Author(s)

- Mauro Giacomazzi, mauro.giacomazzi@avsi.org, AVSI Foundation, Uganda; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3837-5249
- Filippo Porcari, filippo.porcari@avsi.org, AVSI Foundation, Lebanon; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8101-9763
- Nathalie Awada, nathalie.awada@avsi.org.lb, AVSI Foundation, Lebanon; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6228-4067
- Alice Boffi, alice.boffi@avsi.org, AVSI Foundation, Lebanon; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9171-6412

Author's Contributions (CRediT)

Mauro Giacomazzi: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; Filippo Porcari: Investigation, Data curation, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; Nathalie Awada: Investigation, Data curation, Validation, Writing – review & editing; Alice Boffi: Funding acquisition, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethics Statement

The research team upheld approaches that address ethical considerations in dealing with the participants. These included obtaining informed consent for participation in the interviews as well as agreement for audio recording, ensuring the confidentiality of information obtained from the participants and ensuring voluntary participation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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