

How Does Studying Online Affect the Well-Being of Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities?

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Abstracts: The current paper aimed to explore the impact of studying online during the coronavirus pandemic on the well-being of a sample of students (n=74) who were classified as students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in five Dubai-based schools. An online 18-item Likert scale survey was developed and distributed among participants; however, this resulted in no statistically significant findings. However, there was a slight negative trend, suggesting that the students' well-being was somewhat affected by studying alone in an online context. Ultimately, the study recommended the need to provide counselling programs to improve the well-being of the students with SEND due to the circumstances imposed on them by the pandemic; and highlights the need for more support services for these students when they study online.

Keywords: Online Learning, Digital Education, Emergency Remote Teaching, Well-Being, Special Educational Needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of psychological well-being is a central part of positive psychology. For decades, researchers have investigated ways to achieve psychological well-being, as a higher goal for the life of an individual; as a result of its association with the positive mood of the individual, life satisfaction and self-esteem [1]. Psychological well-being is arguably the backbone of positive psychology because it deals with the prosperity side of an individual's personality [2] and is affected by both external and internal factors of the individual. Well-being itself has been defined as the individual's enjoyment of good positive mental health, and the ability to pursue meaningful goals and establish connections with others [3]. It is a notion that considers how an individual evaluates her own life, including one's emotions and feelings about life's experiences [4]. The concept of well-being has been associated with many positive characteristics in the literature, such as optimism, self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, empathy, and environmental compatibility for individuals [5]. Well-being theory, as it was originally defined, measures life satisfaction [6]. According to the theories of well-being, the goal of positive psychology is no longer the sole pursuit of well-being or happiness, but rather the goal of positive psychology has become to increase the amount of prosperity in the lives of people in general. In addition to the main elements of well-being, social scientists have identified six additional features associated with well-being, and where a person who possesses three of them is considered thriving; these include self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships [7].

People around the world faced a severe impact on their mental and psychosocial health due to the coronavirus pandemic. Psychological distress spread among large segments of society, directly affecting health and well-being. Much research was conducted on mental health during the pandemic. High rates of anxiety (6-51%), depression (15-48%), post-traumatic stress disorder (7-54%), and nonspecific psychological distress (34-38%) were reported worldwide [8]. To determine the psychological impact of the pandemic on children, and the experience of studying online in isolation, a study was conducted on a sample of approximately 650 children. The study found multiple negative effects on children's health due to quarantine and staying away from school; 72% of the children were impacted by the lockdown and this was reflected through changes in their behaviour, while 57% of them reported mental symptoms that had not been observed before. In fact, 36% of children suffered from ADHD, while 36% experienced loneliness and isolation and 18% suffered from lack of attention. Also, 41% of children experienced nightmares and sleep disturbances, while more than 75% experienced frequent loneliness and nostalgia for friends

and/or school.

A study was conducted to identify psychological disorders arising from the outbreak of the coronavirus in Saudi Arabia and found psychological loneliness, anxiety and depression, social fears, and obsessive-compulsive disorder [9]. Additionally, another study shed light on some psychological problems and disorders resulting from the pandemic, including problems such as depression, psychological distress, obsessive-compulsive disorder, boredom, eating disorders, sleep disorders and social fears [10]. Moreover, a team of researchers investigated the impact of the pandemic on the psychological well-being of students, with results indicating that 35.33% of participants were classified as anxious and 72.93% depressed [11]. Ultimately, the societal changes caused by the coronavirus were far-reaching, which caused psychological, social, economic and other challenges to everyone without exception. This caused many individuals to suffer from mental disorders and decreased the quality of life and the level of well-being for many, such that some actually developed psychological disorders such as depression and increased rates of anxiety.

There are no specific parameters for defining the term disability. No one can say that people with a particular disability are the same. Depending on the level of disability, environmental factors, and physical and psychological conditions, there are differences related to individuals who share a common disability. However, in an attempt to simplify the matter, the World Health Organization (WHO) has come up with a definition "Disability is a general term that covers impairments, activity limitations, and participation limitations. A defect is a problem with the function or structure of the body; an activity restriction is a difficulty an individual has in carrying out a task or procedure; Whereas restriction of participation is a problem experienced by the individual in participating in life situations".

Considering the negative effects of the coronavirus felt by the general public, one can only imagine how students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) were impacted. Some claim that in an ideal scenario, students with SEND benefit most from direct individual learning with a teacher, who is adequately trained in teaching students with their specific type and severity of the disability [12]. Moreover, students with SEND are able to develop their social skills through direct interactions with their peers and teachers as a part of their daily school routine [13]. Unfortunately, closing schools and keeping children at home resulted in extraordinary physical and psychological difficulties for pupils with SEND. They lost the ability to receive care and achieve goals at the hands of specialists; and they were deprived of the ability to leave home in order to receive treatments or support. In some cases, this deprivation led to a deterioration in their psychological condition and a noticeable delay in their levels and abilities [14].

For example, the hearing impaired who depend on lip-reading were affected by all people wearing masks on their faces, which hindered their communication with others. Another example is that of the visually impaired, who faced difficulty in engaging with online lessons because they needed to read in Braille. In the same context, people with motor disabilities faced major problems in practising any educational or non-educational activity that supports them, and those with mental disabilities faced major problems in implementing educational plans directed to them to develop their mental weaknesses. Additionally, students with learning difficulties faced major problems in completing their study plans. Essentially, it seems that all categories of SEND were greatly affected by the pandemic more than others, and this caused the level of their educational attainment to decline.

According to international law, particularly in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an inclusive education system at all levels should be in place to ensure students with SEND are educated without discrimination and based on equal opportunities. Essentially, this means that countries are obligated to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system because of their disability. Furthermore, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 9 on the rights of children with disabilities, makes recommendations for the effective realisation of the right to education for children with disabilities and emphasises that inclusive education should be the goal of educating children with disabilities for their psychological well-being. Fundamentally, to achieve the well-being of students with SEND, ministries of education should provide the necessary support to facilitate effective education to persons with disabilities, including the provision of appropriate accommodations, tools appropriate to their needs and individual support

measures, in addition to the employment of qualified and trained teachers to teach persons with disabilities in regular schools [15].

It should be noted that online, blended and hybrid learning are not new concepts; rather, they have been conceptualised and implemented since the 1990s [16]. However, they were previously adopted by experts of technology enhanced learning; whereas, during the pandemic, the entire world was forced into Emergency Remote Teaching, which had its drawbacks because most institutions were not adequately prepared [17]. Educational leaders did not know how to manage online learning [18], educators did not know how to effectively teach online [19], and students did not know how to study online [20]. It was a challenging time for everyone at all levels, and so the question arises “how did students with SEND cope with online learning”? And in light of the above-mentioned discussions about well-being, “How does studying online affect the well-being of students with SEND”? Having reviewed literature on this topic, we noted there was a research gap, particularly for the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE); hence we decided to explore this.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was grounded in two research questions:

1. What is the impact of studying online on the well-being of students with SEND?
2. What role does gender, SEND type, place of residence, or academic year play in their well-being when studying online?

In order to answer these questions, a mixed-method approach was adopted, combining the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Based upon our readings of previously published literature, we used Google Forms to create an electronic survey composed of 18 Likert-scale items; followed by open-ended questions pertaining to student well-being and their experience of studying online during the pandemic. A total of 74 pupils participated in this study, from five K-12 schools located in Dubai, UAE. The sample included both female (n=31) and male (n=43) students from grades 4 to 6; most of them were resident in Dubai (n=31), some were resident in Sharjah (n=26), and a few were in Ajman (n=17). All participants were classified as SEND students and their demographic information was collected from the Head of Inclusion at each school. Five SEND types were identified in this sample; pupils either had learning disabilities (n=26), or ADHD (n=19), or hearing difficulties (n=13), or visual impairment (n=11), a speech disorder (n=5). A pilot study was conducted to ensure validity of the data collection instrument, and reliability was established through Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha=0.87$). Attention was given to ethical considerations throughout the research process and the guidelines and recommendations of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) have been followed. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and a thematic analysis was used for interpreting qualitative data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were performed in order to interpret the data. To our surprise, there were no statistically significant findings to report. The variables ‘gender’, ‘SEND type’, ‘place of residence’, or ‘academic year’ were insignificant; and more importantly, survey responses did not suggest that studying online was a negative experience. This was a highly unexpected finding, and we believe this may be due to the young age of participants in our study; because logically speaking, the Covid-19 pandemic had many effects on many community services, be it health, social, economic, or educational. During the outbreak of the pandemic, at least one-third of children around the world were deprived of education; and arguably, the most affected by the pandemic were pupils with SEND [21]. It could be argued that students with SEND need direct teaching, in a face-to-face context; rather than studying online alone [22].

Indeed, some studies have shown the suffering of students with hearing impairment because they lost the advantage of lip-reading, as a result of everyone wearing masks. Students with visual disabilities lost the advantage of reading in Braille as distance learning systems were not always able to provide this. According to UNICEF,

children with disabilities were three to four times more likely to experience violence before the pandemic than their peers, and this risk was increased even more during the pandemic [23]. The pandemic, and specifically studying online, was a challenge for children with SEND, as the disruption of a daily routine and the lack of supportive services available in homes had a clear impact. In fact, some studies reported an increase in symptoms of depression and psychosomatic disorders among children with SEND in light of the Corona crisis and being forced to study online.

Furthermore, parents' attitudes toward online learning were unequivocally negative because their children faced a plethora of challenges; and these difficulties varied according to the nature of the child's disability. These parents indicated that online learning was detrimental for their children's well-being and quality of life; especially because of self-isolation and social distancing. Again, it should be noted that even though our findings were not statistically significant, there was a slight negative trend, suggesting that the students' well-being was somewhat affected by studying alone in an online context. This trend is logical because needless to say, this group of students is more vulnerable to mental disorders, low psychological flexibility and a lack of psychological resilience. Thus, transitioning to an online learning context is not a simple feat, and such students require additional learning support when studying alone at home [24]. Ultimately, most studies have confirmed that the pandemic had a significant impact on how people led their daily lives. The sudden change and mandatory measures such as home isolation and social distancing, was a unique challenge for children with SEND and their families. Studying online was undeniably challenging and its long-term effects on their well-being should be monitored [25].

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore the impact of studying online during the coronavirus pandemic on the well-being of students with SEND. 74 pupils from five Dubai-based schools participated in the study by completing a well-being survey. Although there were no statistically significant findings, there was an overall trend, which indicated that students well-being was indeed affected negatively. The current study was concerned with discussing the impact of coronavirus on the well-being of a sample of SEND at the primary level in Dubai schools. Students who were classified as having special needs were selected by teachers from the selected schools. Based upon our research and real-world experience as practitioners, we close this paper by making the following recommendations: (a) every school should provide counselling programs to improve the well-being of the students with SEND; (b) there is a need for more support services for students with SEND when they study online; (c) schools should invest in digital platforms that facilitate meaningful teaching and learning online for students with SEND, considering a wide-range of learning difficulties and disabilities.

This study has numerous limitations, which may have caused the lack of significant findings. Firstly, we only collected data from students with SEND; in hindsight, we could have also collected data from parents, teachers and even school leaders. Secondly, we only used a survey as a data collection instrument; in addition to the survey, we could have also collected data via interviews and/or focus groups. We propose that future studies consider exploring (a) the participation and engagement levels of students with SEND during online learning courses; (b) the impacts of social distancing and online learning on the quality of life and well-being of students with SEND; and (c) the psychological and educational support for families of students with SEND during online, blended and hybrid learning courses.

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