Letter to the Editor

Mental Health and Educational Trajectories in Students During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Carmela Sánchez - Ballester [1*]

[1] Faculty of Psychology, ARA Group, University of Valencia, SPAIN

***Corresponding Author:** carmelasanbal@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The COVID-19 pandemic has produced a significant psychological impact on the student population and the greatest alteration of traditional educational practices in recent history. The consequences of the pandemic on the mental health of students and their educational trajectories will likely endure globally for years to come. Online education seems to have come to stay permanently in education systems, and we may be at the beginning of a new era in learning methods. The present study reflects on the need to provide students with quick and effective assistance for their mental health problems, and to implement evaluation systems on online teaching to limit its negative impact on the learning process. **Keywords:** mental health, learning, teaching, coronavirus pandemic

Dear Editor,

COVID-19 has become the most serious public health problema these days with important consequences for the population. In addition to the already known risks, directly related to the disease (morbidity / mortality), many others must be added, including the impact on students´health and the effect of the pandemic on their learning trajectories. The mobility restriction and social distancing measures established around the world aimed at stopping the transmission of the virus (WHO, 2020), have produced an important impact on the psychological health of the student population (Li et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020), and probably the largest alteration of traditional educational practices in human history, affecting millions of students in countries around the world (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

In addition to sociocultural, political and economic problems, the current pandemic has revealed the largest known educational crisis (Karakose, 2021). The closure of schools and universities has had a major impact on the student population worldwide. Despite the measures provided by different countries and some organizations such as the WHO, establishing protocols for the formulation of health policies in educational contexts (WHO, 2020b), the consequences of the pandemic on students and their educational trajectories will probably persist globally during the next years.

MENTAL HEALTH IN STUDENTS

Recent studies have shown that during this pandemic younger age groups are being more vulnerable to stress, depression and anxiety symptoms (Varma et al., 2021). Furthermore students face various risks: individual risks (infection), family risks (infection of relatives, loss of loved ones, decrease in family income, family estrangement, etc.), which have affected them psychosocially (Zhai and Du, 2020), and they also face risks related to the alteration of their educational trajectories rapid implementation online education, little social interaction, lack of teamwork and difficulty in adapting) (Li et al., 2021).

Numerous studies confirm that the pandemic has generated anxiety problems in students (Wang and Zhao, 2020), depression and stress (Odriozola et al., 2020). The pandemic has created uncertainty among students about what will happen in the future, which generates stress, and stress has unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of students (Sahu, 2020). Higher perceived stress is associated with more emotional distress, depression, fear, compulsion, anxiety, neurasthenia, and hypochondria (Yang et al., 2021).

Students are worried about issues related to their studies and their future profesional careers, they feel anxiety and fustration (Aristovnink et al., 2020) and great uncertainty until they are clear about how their courses will be restored after the

crisis (Daniel, 2020) In some cases the lack of computer skills and a higher workload have prevented students from performing adequately while adapting to distance education. It can be affirmed that academic and daily difficulties have generated in students high levels of anguish and mental health problems, which are associated with difficulties in concentrating on academic work and sometimes job loss (Kecojevic et al., 2020).

EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES

The global education community, different international agencies and educational authorities of many countries, recognized the need to urgently adopt an online teaching approach. However, distance learning represents a complex field to which little attention has been paid to its development (Appolloni et al., 2021). In general, it can be said that both students and teachers are ill-prepared to take an online learning approach after traditionally using classroom-based instruction (Delafosse, 2021).

E-learning platforms represent a challenge for many students due to technological barriers, limited internet access, inadequate devices for online learning and lack of technical knowledge for many of them. A recent study (Owusu et al., 2020) revealed some problems for students caused by the closure of schools and the introduction of online teaching; for example, they faced difficulties in studyng effectively from home, and parents encountered difficulties in supervising their children's learning process. In another study (Aucejo et al., 2020) it was found that due to the pandemic a significant part of students had delayed their graduation, and lost a job. In addition, due to socioeconomic differences, some of the students have to reduce their study time, which is why lower-income students are more likely to delay graduation. Delays in academic activities have been positively associated with anxiety symptoms (Cao et al., 2020), and therefore with more difficulties in achieving academic goals. Institutions and educational systems must make special efforts to help those students whose parents do not support them and whose environments are not conducive to studying (Daniel, 2020).

The reopening of schools after the relaxation of restrictions is another challenge with many new procedures in place (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). The question is whether there will ever come a day when things will go back to the way they were before the pandemic. The answer is difficult, but the return to normalcy will probably not be a simple transition to life as it used to be before the pandemic. In the first place, it will be necessary to definitively defeat the virus, something that is still far from being achieved somewhat closer for the more developed countries, but still distant for most other countries, given the growing inequalities in the vaccination-immunization processes that are taking place.

DISCUSSION

The pandemic will inevitably have a serious long-term impact on students at all educational levels, as there are significant disruptions and rapid changes in all education systems. In addition, future graduates will have to face the severe challenges of the global recession caused by the crisis (Sahu, 2020). Public and educational authorities must urgently pay attention to vulnerable student groups by providing mental health services that reduce the psychological impact. Mental health problems also affect educational trajectories, so assistance for dealing with uncertainty, anxiety, stress and depression is doubly necessary in this population.

Online education seems to have come to stay permanently in education systems. Some ideas have been raised to improve their results, moving from a teacher-centered approach to one centered on the student, in which various actions are considered (Delafosse, 2021) such as: flexibility of teachers in the administration of online content, a fair distribution of student´s workload, a shift from didactic contextual learning to a conceptual one, changes in the assessment of skills and competencies. In addition, adequate computer equipment and permanent internet access should be readily available to avoid interruptions in learning, and technical support available to both teachers and students. Teachers need technological training to teach online and students need continuous guidance systems with accessible and quality student-teacher interaction (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Online learning is not the most optimal, but the expansion of this type of learning will accelerate even more in the immediate future, and the eductional institutions will organize more systematically to pursue the aspects of technology-based learning wich they have found more useful (Daniel, 2020). It is, therefore, necessary to anticipate the potential effect of the negative aspects of the online teaching-learning process (Karakose, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

We may be at the beginning of a new era in learning methods. It is necessary that the different administrations, and the public and educational authorities implement evaluation systems to know how teaching is developing in the current circumstances, and limit its possible negative impact on the learning processes. They must provide the necessary tools so that online teaching is carried out with the same quality standards that apply to face-to-face teaching, and avoid greater negative consequences in the learning trajectories of students. In the reopening, adequate planning must be established in the combination between virtual and face-to-face teaching, addressing potential barriers to access and influencing socio-economic and cultural aspects. Students must be provided with prompt and effective assistance for their mental health problems caused by the pandemic, and that significantly affect their academic development.

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