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

Citation: Sánchez - Ballester, C. (2021). Mental Health and Educational Trajectories in Students During the Coronavirus Pandemic. European Journal of Environment and Public Health, 5(2), em0087. https://doi.org/10.21601/ejeph/11097

ARTICLE INFO
Received: 4 May 2021
Accepted: 29 Jun. 2021

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 problem 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 professional careers, they feel anxiety and frustration (Aristovnink et al., 2020) and great uncertainty until they are clear about how their courses will be restored after the
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 studying 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 relaxing of restrictions is another challenge with the lack of technical knowledge for many of them. 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 educational institutions will organize more systematically to pursue the aspects of technology-based learning which 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.

Funding: No external funding is received for this article.
Declaration of interest: Author declares no competing interests.
Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable.
Availability of data and materials: All data generated or analyzed during this study are available for sharing when appropriate request is directed to the author.

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 educational institutions will organize more systematically to pursue the aspects of technology-based learning which 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).

Funding: No external funding is received for this article.
Declaration of interest: Author declares no competing interests.
Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable.
Availability of data and materials: All data generated or analyzed during this study are available for sharing when appropriate request is directed to the author.
REFERENCES

Appolloni, A., Colasanti, N., Fantauzzi, C., Fiorani, G. and Frondizi, R. (2021). Distance Learning as a Resilience Strategy during Covid-19: An Analysis of the Italian Context. *Sustainability, 13*(3), 1388. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031388

Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N. and Umek, L. (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of higher education students: A global perspective. *Sustainability, 12*(20), 8438. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208438

Aucejo, E. M., French, J., Araya, M. P. U. and Zafar, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 epidemic on mental health of undergraduate students in New Jersey, cross-sectional study. *Journal of Public Economics, 191*, 104271. https://doi.org/10.1016/jjpueco.2020.104271

Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J. and Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Research, 287*, 112934. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934

Daniel, J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects, 49*(1), 91-96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3

Delafosse, K. (2021). Pedagogic recontextualization in health science education during a global pandemic: Faculty perspectives on instructional adaptations (Education Doctorate Dissertations). https://openriver.winona.edu/educationeddissertations/1

Karakose, T. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on higher education: Opportunities and implications for policy and practice. *Educational Process: International Journal, 10*(1). 7. https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2021.101

Kecojevic, A., Basch, C. H., Sullivan, M. and Davi, N. K. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on mental health of undergraduate students in New Jersey, cross-sectional study. *PLoS One, 15*(9), e0239696. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239696

Li, X., Fu, P., Fan, C., Zhu, M. and Li, M. (2021). COVID-19 stress and mental health of students in locked-down colleges. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(2), 771. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020771

Odriozola-González, P., Planchuelo-Gómez, Á., Iruitia, M. J. and de Luis-García, R. (2020). Psychological effects of the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown among students and workers of a Spanish university. *Psychiatry Research, 290*, 115108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.115108

Owusu-Forjou, C., Koomson, C. K. and Hanson, D. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on learning-the perspective of the Ghanaian student. *European Journal of Education Studies, 7*(3), 88-101. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3753586

Pokhrel, S. and Chhetri, R. (2021). A literature review on impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning. *Higher Education for the Future, 8*(1), 135-141. https://doi.org/10.1177/25476311209853481

Sahu, P. (2020). Closure of universities due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): impact on education and mental health of students and academic staff. *Cureus, 12*(4), e7541. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541

Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X. and Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students’ mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22*(9), e21279. https://doi.org/10.2196/21279

Varma, P., Junge, M., Meaklim, H. and Jackson, M. L. (2021). Younger people are more vulnerable to stress, anxiety and depression during COVID-19 pandemic: A global cross-sectional survey. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry, 109*, 110256. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pnpbp.2020.110256

Wang, C. and Zhao, H. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on anxiety in Chinese university students. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 1168. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01168

WHO. World Health Organization. (2020a). *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak (No. WHO/2019-nCoV/MentalHealth/2020.1).* Geneva: World Health Organization. Available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331490

WHO. World Health Organization. (2020b). Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises. Geneva: World Health Organization. Available at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240017468

Yan, L., Gan, Y., Ding, X., Wu, J. and Duan, H. (2021). The relationship between perceived stress and emotional distress during the COVID-19 outbreak: Effects of boredom proneness and coping style. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 77*, 102328. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102328

Zhai, Y. and Du, X. (2020). Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 7*(4), e22. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0566(20)30089