Synthesis Literature Review

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Online Learning and Social Isolation:

A literature review of scholarly, trade, and popular sources on the relationship between online learning and social isolation uncovered several levels of influence that the practice has on society. These include the general effect of online learning on mental health of students, the additional difficulties online learning brings for students with special needs, and proposed solutions for socialization during online learning.

**Online Learning and Student Mental Health**

When it comes to the impact of both online learning and online work on mental health, opinions and results vary greatly between researchers. While some experts see this virtual technique as a major contributor to the post-COVID-19 mental health crisis, others claim that, if used correctly, it may actually be a useful tool in combatting it. In a 2021 article, Zhou and Zhang write that in virtual education, “the lack of in-person interaction between teacher-student and student-student may lead to loneliness, even anxiety, or depression.” (para.4). According to CNN, the percentage of parents of children with virtual or hybrid education who indicated a decline in their children’s mental health was nearly 25% in 2020. This is 9% higher than for those receiving traditional in-person education (Wood & Mascarenhas, 2021). A survey conducted by Son et al (2020) revealed these mental conditions have a variety of causes. Out of 195 college students, 86% named “decreased social interactions due to physical distancing”, while 82% cited “increased concerns on academic performance” as factors affecting their mental wellbeing (para.4). Other common factors included “disruptions to sleeping patterns” cited by 86% of students, “fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones” cited by 91%, as well as “difficulty in concentrating” cited by 89% (para. 4). Based on these results, the researchers concluded that COVID-19 did have a significant impact on students’ emotional and mental health, and that solutions to the issue need to be urgently developed (para.5).

While the above evidence can give a very negative impression of online learning, some authors’ findings paint a less gloomy picture. For example, while acknowledging the anxiety and stress it can cause to a student, Van et al point out that virtual education is not the only element influencing these issues, citing additional factors like lifestyle, psychology, and physiobiological characteristics of students (2022). Using evidence from the research of others, the authors argue that “digital education has advanced in catering to a broad audience with location flexibility, extensive availability of courses and information, instant feedback, and time flexibility.” (p.140). Therefore, they conclude that despite the complications and negative effects that may arise with it, the benefits of online education should not be disregarded, with its effectiveness depending mostly on the way an individual instructor uses it (2022).

**Online Learning and Students with Special Needs**

Sources relating to the impact of online learning on special needs and disabled students and show that these individuals generally face greater difficulties than their able-bodied peers. The sudden, rapid rise in virtual education during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic, has sent some researchers looking for ways to alleviate this toll, proposing solutions to help this particular student group.

As mentioned before, the isolation that often accompanies digital education can adversely affect the students’ emotional and mental wellbeing. But where the able-bodied can seek help, learners with disabilities are often alone in their struggles. According to Mullins & Mitchell (2021), [disabled students’] “unique needs are often not taken into consideration. As a result, students can become marginalized and alienated from the online classroom.” (para.1). The writers’ study, aimed at Canadian college students, demonstrated that, in addition to issues with technology and time management, the subjects struggled with the absence of student support typically present on a physical campus, as well as problems concentrating on studies in a distracting home environment. Additionally, because of the nature of virtual learning, disabled students were often expected to personally request any needed accommodations, something not all students felt comfortable with doing (2021). Despite that, the authors mention that online education has its benefits for this category of learners, offering special needs students flexibility not seen on campus, along with additional resources like video tutorials, lecture recordings, quizzes, and polls. They conclude by recommending that the research into accommodations for disabled students be continued, in order to identify more services that can be provided to them, and make the process of requesting these services easier (2021).

TO BE FINISHED IN FINAL DRAFT. ADDITIONAL REFERENCES TO BE ADDED.

References:

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