Synthesis Literature Review

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Online Learning and Social Isolation:

Online education has many benefits, from a flexible schedule to an abundance of free time. But taking classes completely virtually often comes at the expense of social interactions and connections that are present in a physical learning environment, especially those unrelated to academic topics. The virtual routine can make students feel trapped in an endless cycle of assignments, and socially cut off from their peers. While most students can remedy this by finding activities and connections outside of academic life, things are not as easy for students with special needs and disabilities. Due to the difficulties caused by their conditions, the classroom may be one of only a few places they get to socialize in. The deprivation of this need for human connection can have a major impact on their mental health, consequently affecting their academic performance as well. To protect these students’ well-being, and help them excel in life, a solution to the problem of social isolation during virtual learning must be found.

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 the mental health of students.
* The additional difficulties online learning brings for students with special needs.
* 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 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 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 of them 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, to identify more services that can be provided to them and make the process of requesting these services easier (2021).

When talking about disabled students, one must not restrict the term solely to people with physical impairments, as individuals with learning and cognitive issues also struggle with virtual education. According to Goegan et al, people with such disabilities can experience problems with understanding materials, writing, reading words and sentences, and mathematical expression. Using material from studies and articles, the writers argue that, combined with social struggles, such difficulties can negatively impact the success, and overall college life, of these students (2023). To determine the extent of this impact, they interviewed a total of 283 college students, 54 of whom had a learning disability (LD), about their academic life. The students were asked a series of questions about their college experience, in 45 to 75-minute interviews (2023). While the results were not overwhelmingly negative or positive, the study did uncover some interesting facts. LD students explained that the COVID-19-related transition to online learning caused them a lot of stress due to the sudden increase in assignments. Despite the advantages of flexibility and having their environment under control, they expressed dissatisfaction with things like the sedentary nature of online education, the frequent interruptions by family members entering the room, and technological issues like poor internet connection (Goegan et al, 2023). But another significant problem the students talked about was the feeling that “attending school from their homes blurred the boundary between work and home life, resulting in students working more than they typically would.” (p. 172). With their school, work and home environments melted into one routine, students feel trapped in an ongoing cycle of assignments, struggling to determine when it is okay to finish working for the day (2023).

Finally, the one issue reported by students with LDs that most closely relates to social isolation was the difficulty of making a connection with faculty (Goegan et al, 2023). While some indicated that online education restricted ways of communicating with professors, others credited virtual learning with reducing the anxiety of asking questions in person, which often comes with having a learning disability. Many also praised the amount of support available through virtual learning, and the professors’ willingness to help. Others, however, mentioned a reluctance of some faculty to provide additional accommodations, fearing students would take it as a cheating opportunity. This caused additional difficulties with understanding course materials and added to the stress already experienced by the students because of isolation (2023). Taking all the above factors into account, Goegan et al conclude that, to assist students with LDs in a virtual learning environment, greater access to accommodations must be given, and student-faculty communication must become more open (2023). The importance of sufficient accommodations can also be seen in the work of Meda & Albukhari (2023), who states that “Special education need and disabled (SEND) students were among those most vulnerable to dropping their studies because of a lack of support” (p.1).

**Proposed Solutions to Social Isolation in Virtual Learning**

The facts collected above demonstrate that, despite all its positives, the isolation of special needs students that comes with online education is very much real and significant, needing effective solutions. Faculty and researchers must consider all aspects of online learning, from technical issues to lack of accommodations to loneliness, so that they may help struggling students in the best way possible. Professors must be attentive to any concerns voiced by learners and prepared to address them appropriately.

A common thread seen across some of the articles in this review is the need for more accommodations. Mullins & Mitchel (2021) call for professors to “recognize that students with disabilities are struggling but appreciate they are trying;” (p.25). For this reason, they suggest, among other things, to “provide students with an opportunity to meet to discuss their accommodation needs early in the semester;” and “make [lecture recordings] available to students for future review;” (p.25). Meda and Albukhari (2023) take a similar position, suggesting that “Support staff in conjunction with faculty members must take a leading role in offering differentiated support to [special needs] students and collaborating with external organizations to cater to the diverse needs of students.” (Conclusion, para.1).

In addition to technical and academic support, several sources emphasize the need for human connection between students and faculty. Goegan et al (2023) found that, “Online courses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, seemed to change the in-class dynamic and the interactions between students, which could lead to challenges with socialization and collaboration.” (The Importance of Staying Connected, para.1). Based on this, the authors claim that “supporting students’ need to enhance their connections with others may be an important component to ensuring a positive experience with online learning.” (The Importance of Staying Connected, para.2). Meda & Albukhar (2023) have similar points here as well, concluding that “the aspect of implementing a collaborative working relationship [is] an indispensable way of enhancing [special needs] students’ access and success in online learning.” (Conclusion, para.1).

Finally, one solution that several sources agree on is the continuation of research into the impact of virtual learning on special needs students. Regarding virtual education in COVID-19 times, Mullins & Mitchell (2021) advice that “Future research should explore the mental health concerns that students experienced during the pandemic and evaluate interventions designed to address and prevent these challenges.” (p.25). More specifically, they again stress the importance of accommodations, saying that “Research should identify academic accommodations that facilitate online learning and what additional services and supports are essential for [students with disabilities]” (p.25). The idea of learning more on the issue is also promoted by Son et al (2021), who say that “further study is needed to determine the effects of the pandemic on students’ mental health and well-being in its later phases beyond the peak period” (Limitations and Future Work, para.1). Thus, one way to address the difficulties of online education for special needs students is to start conducting more serious and organized research into it.

**Conclusion**

The above literature review revealed that people with special needs and disabilities studying online face many difficulties. These range from struggles with technology, overwhelming workload, and limited access to accommodations, to being socially isolated and lacking human connection. The impact from this is often larger than for non-special needs individuals. On the other hand, the research also proved that some disabled people benefit from online education. They often praise the great variety of options available in the virtual classroom, and the opportunity to control their learning environment. Some students with learning disabilities say that the remote nature of the online classroom allows them to ask questions without the anxiety often brought on by their condition and feel less stressed about completing their work. However, there still exists a major issue with professors properly responding to the needs of such students, and providing enough help for them to excel academically.

The effort to help special needs students in the virtual classroom should begin, first and foremost, with understanding their needs. Professors and academic officials must work on ways to make the classroom more accessible and inclusive to this student category. This could include regulating workload to prevent burnout, providing easier ways to request accommodations, and making the effort to connect with students more on a human level.

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