



BACK TO SCHOOL AMIDST COVID-19 IMPACTS: A PERSPECTIVE REPORT

SANYA GROVER[1], SHUBHREET JOHAL[1], POLINA KYRYCHENKO[1], SELVIN LEENUS[1], DENISE SABAC[1], PETER SOLIMAN[1]

[1] BACHELOR OF HEALTH SCIENCES (HONOURS), CLASS OF 2022, MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Although the merits of in-person learning outweigh those of virtual learning for elementary students, online learning is often implemented in response to rising cases of COVID-19. As such, the significant number of barriers to remote learning must be addressed in order to promote effective and health conscious learning for students during the pandemic. Students have been facing challenges with self-regulation, work management and lack of socio-emotional connections while teachers have been facing obstacles related to effectively using technology to deliver content and engage students. Parents have struggled to understand and fulfill their role supporting their children within the online school environment. Considering the perspectives presented in the literature, efforts should be made to promote connectedness and support for families during this difficult time. A resource toolkit is suggested for caregivers of children enrolled in online school to implement strategies at home to assist their children in their education.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Many Canadian school jurisdictions have implemented virtual learning in light of rising COVID-19 cases within communities. The choice of reopening schools or continuing virtual learning is a complex one with multiple aspects and stakeholders to consider. In this paper, some of the facilitators and barriers in online learning for elementary students will be discussed.

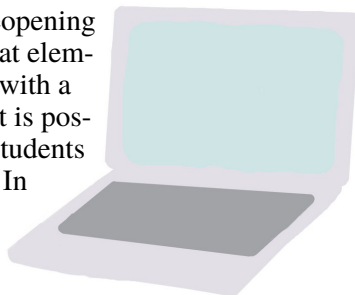
Some positive aspects of virtual learning to consider are flexibility in timing due to asynchronous teaching and instructional methods that educators can employ, such as engaging with a variety of virtual programs and activities for students to use. There can be increased access to resources, particularly in rural communities. In addition, online learning is associated with a greater course credit completion and school completion.[1]

One barrier to effective online learning is the higher level of self-regulation that virtual environments require in comparison to in-person, which younger students are still developing.[2] It is crucial that online learning for

elementary school age groups include strategies for monitoring student engagement, support in managing the content and pacing of courses, as well as support for families. The partnership and collaboration between the child's guardian and their teacher is an essential one.[2] Parental involvement in learning is found to be correlated with higher student academic achievement.[3] This relationship is perhaps even more pertinent in an online setting given the fact that parents play a larger role in their child's daily learning since learning takes place at home where parents are also working remotely. The roles of caregivers and teachers are modified as parents take on the motivator and guiding role in the learning, compared to teachers who are content providers.[3] This heightened collaboration between caregivers and teachers can be a difficult one to manage and negotiate, especially as it is novel to everyone and has yet to be fully explored. Studies have noted that parents have reported difficulties in navigating online resources and determining how to best support their child during virtual learning. A USA-based study evaluating the inequalities inherent in virtual learning found that the significant increase in parents seeking out online learning resources for their children varied drastically across socio-economic brackets.[4] This finding, in addition to other literature conclusions, leads to the understanding that online learning has been widening socioeconomic education gaps.[4] Equalizing educational opportunities, such as the ones more commonly offered by in person schooling, would serve to minimize achievement gaps that could become evident in the future.

A benefit of virtual learning is the increased public health safety of minimizing the social interaction of students that in person learning entails thereby minimizing close contact and the chance of the virus spreading further. However, with the minimization of social interaction by opting for virtual learning, other health risks are exacerbated. A study during the early stages of COVID-19 has suggested an increase in the prevalence of disorders, such as anxiety and depression amongst youth.[5] Elementary aged students in particular are undergoing a very sensitive developmental period.[6] Thus, the loss of regular routine and social interaction, along with the prolonged stressors of the pandemic can be harmful not only in the short term but in the long term as well.[5-7] Strategies to promote resilience and adaptability in this age group should be encouraged.

Although, the various impacts of the virtual learning environment on elementary aged students' development and mental health should be accounted for with the possible risk of reopening schools.[8] Despite the fact that elementary schools are reopening, with a reevaluation of the situation, it is possible that closures ensue and students will return to virtual learning. In this case, it is important to adapt virtual learning to address the aforementioned



challenges that exist to improve learning for students, their families and teachers.

PITCH

Our proposed plan of action focuses specifically on caregivers of online school students.

We will be developing a resource that provides caregivers with recommendations on how they can best assist their child's learning experience from home. The information provided will be developed in collaboration with various stakeholders involved in the delivery of education to students, as described below. This toolkit aims to instill confidence in caregivers and their ability to support their children in education, while providing strategies that extend beyond the context of school.

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Students

Since the transition to online learning, students have been struggling with self-regulation and scheduling in terms of engaging with their school work and physical isolation from their peers and teachers, which is essential to their socio-emotional connection and educational growth.[9-11] Additionally, students with disabilities do not have access to the same support they received with in person classes, such as within-school aides, assistive devices and special accommodations, adding further barriers and amplifying the current challenges faced by students already.[12-13] Our toolkit will provide caregivers with strategies to directly support their children in various aspects of school, including scheduling of work time and play time, managing their deadlines and keeping up with homework, along with supporting their wellbeing by identifying personal challenges their child faces.

Teachers

Online platforms have presented multiple challenges for educators relating to the accessibility of learning platforms, adjustments in their teaching methods, as well as additional workload in an online setting.[14-15] Teachers have expressed to government the need for better institutional investment in more advanced technologies and training to enhance the quality of content delivery and class engagement.[16-17] This toolkit will be developed with direct consultation and input from the teachers' association of the respective school board the toolkit is offered in, to ensure that the educator perspective is at the forefront of the strategies and instructions provided. By providing strategies that caregivers can use to support their child, they also indirectly support teachers by lessening their workload of ensuring individual students'.

Parents & Caregivers

Parents and caregivers have been struggling to identify their role in online learning, especially navigating their relationship with teachers.[18] As such, the toolkit will highlight tangible items that caregivers can do to support their child (e.g. helping to set up their remote platforms, supervision) and what items teachers will be responsible for (e.g. engaging the child during class time). This will help foster a collaborative relationship, while ensuring both parties still have a significant role in the child's success. Additionally, the toolkit will cover tips for technological support such as internet connection and platform navigation for those caregivers who may not be as comfortable with online settings.[19]

Administration & School Board

The Ontario Ministry of Education and provincial school boards will play a vital role in the regulation and distribution of this toolkit. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, communication has been fragmented between school boards themselves due to the increased isolation of school-to-school management in virtual education, thus calling for a greater need for a standardized approach (20). As such, this toolkit will be distributed within each school to ensure that communities have equal, transparent communication; each school will

receive a toolkit with the same baselines structure and communication facets. The Ontario College of Teachers will also be directly involved in the creation of this toolkit to ensure the teachers' perspective and expertise are being included in its implementation.[20]

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a dynamic, evolving situation, we will have to ensure that the toolkit is adaptable and applicable if circumstances change. This is especially important with the reopening of many Ontario schools, in which case our toolkit would be more valuable if paired with in-person tips such as social distancing and other precautionary measures.[21] Despite the challenges virtual learning presents, the pandemic has highlighted online learning as a possibility in the future. As such, our toolkit would require a more comprehensive, long-term revision that considers how to have sustained accessibility and a positive experience for all stakeholders involved. However, before such further revisions and recommendations are made, stakeholders must obtain and evaluate the effectiveness of the toolkit to address its strengths and identify areas of improvement.

1. Burdette PJ, Greer D, Woods KL. K-12 online learning and students with disabilities: Perspectives from state special education directors. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. 2013;17(3).
2. Carter Jr RA, Rice M, Yang S, Jackson HA. Self-regulated learning in online learning environments: strategies for remote learning. *Information and Learning Sciences*. 2020;121(5/6):321-9.
3. Keaton W, Gilbert A. Successful Online Learning: What Does Learner Interaction with Peers, Instructors and Parents Look Like? . *Journal of Online Learning Research* [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2021Feb10];(6). Available from: file:///Users/Polina/Downloads/paper_215616.pdf
4. Bacher-Hicks A, Goodman J, Mulhern C. Inequality in Household Adaptation to Schooling Shocks: Covid-Induced Online Learning Engagement in Real Time. *Journal of Public Economics* [Internet]. 2021Jan [cited 2021Feb10];193. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/science/article/pii/S0047272720302097>
5. Courtney, Darren, Priya Watson, Marco Battaglia, Benoit H. Mulsant, and Peter Szatmari. "COVID-19 Impacts on Child and Youth Anxiety and Depression: Challenges and Opportunities." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 65, no. 10 (October 2020): 688–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743720935646>.
6. Ali, A., & Smith, D. (2015). Comparing social isolation effects on students attrition in online versus face-to face courses in computer literacy. *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology*, 12, 11-20. Retrieved from <http://iisit.org/Vol12/IISITv12p011-020Ali1784.pdf>
7. Thakur A. (2020). Mental Health in High School Students at the Time of COVID-19: A Student's Perspective. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(12), 1309–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.005>
8. Science M, Bitnun S. COVID-19: Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic [Internet]. *SickKids*. 2021 [cited 2021Feb11]. Available from: <https://www.sickkids.ca/en/news/archive/2021/covid19-updated-guidance-school-operation-during-pandemic/>
9. Dhawan S. Online Learning: A Panacea in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*. 2020;49(1):5–22.
10. Bisht, R.K., Jasola, S. and Bisht, I.P. (2020), "Acceptability and challenges of online higher education in the era of COVID-19: a study of students' perspective", *Asian Education and Development Studies*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-05-2020-0119>
11. Lis M, Wolna N, Moczulska M, Solińska K. Social aspects of introducing online learning - the students' perspective. *The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2021Feb12];86(4):36–46. Available from: <https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmetal.element.desklight-7c11703b-ee3-4bdd-98da-9e8a6cfb1bd9>
12. Patricia Navas, Antonio M. Amor, Manuela Crespo, Zofia Wolowiec, Miguel Á. Verdugo, Supports for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic from their own perspective, *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, Volume 108, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2020.103813>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0891422220302456>)
13. Zhang H et al. How Does COVID-19 impact Students with Disabilities/Health Concerns? *Human-Computer Interaction* [Internet]. [cited 2021Feb12]; Available from: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.05438>
14. Scull, J., Phillips, M., Sharma, U. and Garnier, K., 2020. Innovations in teacher education at the time of COVID19: an Australian perspective. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), pp.497-506.
15. Joshi, A., Vinay, M. and Bhaskar, P., 2020. Impact of coronavirus pandemic on the Indian education sector: perspectives of teachers on online teaching and assessments. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, (ahead-of-print).
16. Li, C. and Lalali, F., 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how. [online] *World Economic Forum*. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/> [Accessed 9 February 2021].
17. Valladares, M., 2020. The Covid-19 Crisis Is A Boost To Educational Technology Companies. [online] *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mayrarodriguezvalladares/2020/08/02/the-covid-19-crisis-is-a-boost-to-educational-technology-companies/> [Accessed 7 February 2021].
18. Jan 09 LH· CN· P, January 9 2021 7:00 AM ET | Last Updated: "Felt like crying:" Parents and teachers struggle to balance work and online school | *CBC News*. *CBC* n.d. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/ontario-online-learning-january-1.5862211> (accessed February 12, 2021).
19. <https://plus.google.com/+UNESCO>. Education: From disruption to recovery. *UNESCO* 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> (accessed February 12, 2021).
20. Feb 02 CN· P, February 2 2021 2:42 PM ET | Last Updated: Unknowns loom as educators left with questions about Ontario's school reopening plans | *CBC News*. *CBC* n.d. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-school-reopening-plans-1.5897939> (accessed February 12, 2021).
21. More Ontario schools reopen to in-person learning - *CityNews Toronto* n.d. <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2021/02/08/ontario-schools-in-person-learning-covid19/> (accessed February 12, 2021).

