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The Future of Education

The rise of the Covid-19 virus has greatly impacted the education system around the world, with about 1.38 billion students of all levels having been affected by school closures due to the pandemic. This new “Zoom” era has led many to question what the future of education will look like. After about ten months of the Coronavirus, with a majority of that time spent in online school, new research has become available indicating the potential negative mental health affects and positive academic benefits of online learning. Whether or not this style of learning takes over as the norm will depend on the educators and school administrators' ability to mitigate the social isolation that comes with learning through a screen. However, if done properly, a hybrid of online and traditional learning could offer students the best aspects of each in one cohesive form of education.

For the past twenty years, researchers have noticed a marked increase in the depression and suicide levels young adults. According to the National Survey of Drug Use and Health, the total number of teenagers who recently experienced depression increased fifty-nine percent between 2007 and 2017. In 2017, thirteen percent of U.S. teens, ages twelve to seventeen, said they had experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year. As one would imagine, the social isolation caused by a global pandemic has only heightened the amount of teens facing depression. A different national survey by America’s Alliance conducted during Covid-19 shows that “thirty percent of young people say they have more often been feeling unhappy or depressed.” What may be more alarming is that twenty-nine percent say they “do not feel connected at all to school adults and a similar percentage do not feel connected to classmates or to their school community,” (Margolius, M., Doyle Lynch, A., Pufall Jones, E. &

Hynes, M.). Covid-19 and the switch to online learning has heightened feelings of depression and isolation for a generation with the highest reported levels of depression and suicide.

The social isolation caused by the Coronavirus and online learning is not just detrimental to the mental health of students, but also their social development. Dr. Jessi Gold, a psychiatrist at Washington University says, “learning how to navigate the inner webs of relationships happens in high school. When you retreat behind a computer, you lose some of those social skills,” (Gold via Goldberg). Even without the isolation caused by social distancing due to the pandemic, online learning still takes away from valuable in person social interactions. These are vital not only for young people to learn how to interact with one another, but also for their mental health in the present and the future. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute of Mental Health conducted a study and found that “close friendship strength in mid-adolescence predicted relative increases in self-worth and decreases in anxiety and depressive symptoms by early adulthood,” (Narr). Friendship and social interaction are vital aspects to a person’s social skills and mental health. Online learning takes away from this and can have detrimental impacts on a student’s overall wellbeing in the moment and the future.

Despite the mounting evidence of the negative mental health and social development aspects of online learning, new research has shown promising academic benefits for online learning. Research shows that on average, students retain “twenty-five to sixty percent more material when learning online, compared to only eight to ten percent in a classroom,” (Li, Farah). This is mostly due to students being able to learn faster online. The same research also shows that online learning requires “forty to sixty percent less time to learn than in a traditional classroom setting because students can learn at their own pace by re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts,” (Chernev). However, the effectiveness of online learning depends on the age group. Children, especially younger ones, need a structured environment because they are more easily distracted. In the future, it is likely education will take a hybrid approach of in-person and online learning for older students, while still remaining fairly traditional for younger ones. The evidence for this new style of learning can be found in the economic and business

aspect of education.

The economic trends set by technological and educational companies show that online learning is not a temporary solution to a global pandemic. Many in these fields believe it will definitely play a role in future education. The general consensus is that, at the very least, Covid-19 has accelerated the time table of introducing online learning. It is estimated that by 2025 the overall market for online education is projected to reach 350 billion dollars (Business Wire). The need for online learning, as well its overall accessibility and affordability, ensures that this upward trend will continue that way for years to come. As the market continues to increase, new technology, methods of learning, schools, and businesses will spring up. This will increase the popularity of online learning. However, because of certain aspects of traditional school that cannot be easily done on a computer, like sports or extracurriculars, full online school is unlikely. Therefore, a hybrid approach of part traditional education and online learning is the most likely. With this approach, educators can mitigate the depression and social isolation of teens because there will still be in-person social interactions. By utilizing the positive aspects of both online and traditional forms of education, students can reap the benefits of a faster and more effective style of learning, while maintaining a healthy mental mindset.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has drawn much attention to online learning. While educators and tech companies duke it out over the exact future of education, the Covid-19 virus has made sure that online learning takes some part in it. Whether or not this is a step forward or backward for education will depend on the way it is implemented. A hybrid form of learning would be the most likely course of action, as well as the most effective. The affordability and accessibility of online learning, coupled with the social interactions of traditional education, has the potential to offer students the best academic and emotional support from both worlds. This balance is necessary in order to combat the natural social isolation that comes with learning through a computer.

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