

# Understanding Student Engagement and Online Learning Post Covid-19 Using Multiple Perspectives

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## Abstract

Corona pandemic besides claiming countless fatalities has affected the overall structure of social institutions at large. The suspension of offline learning and implementation of remote learning in the times of Covid-19 appeared to be the biggest challenge it posed to the education sector in particular and to the nation in general. Specifically talking about the state of Jammu and Kashmir, it has been witnessing the repeated and frequent closure of educational institutions for the last three years but the shift to online mode was completely a new thing as it was for other states of the country. The crisis which emerged with an abrogation of the Article 370 (special status granted to Jammu & Kashmir) in the year 2019, left educational institutions shut for six months and it was only in February 2020 the schools were reopened. Unfortunately due to the outbreak of Covid-19, they were again closed in March of the same year and remained shut again for almost eight months. It was only in March 2021, they were reopened but, due to the surging covid-19 cases, were closed back in April of the same year. This repeated school closure and the recurring shift to online mode during the times of covid-19 disturbed the whole teaching-learning process. In such a chaotic environment of teaching and learning, we are interested to know and understand the student engagement of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students (aged 6-8). Also to know the challenges or opportunities their parents and teachers experienced during the whole school closure period. Parent and teacher perspective was specifically used to realise these objectives. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Later, thematic analysis was used to generate the themes.

**Key words:** Student engagement, covid-19, virtual learning, primary students, parent perspective, teacher perspective.

## Background

Coronavirus, originally reported from Wuhan city in China in late 2019, spread widely and quickly around the world, leading to the closure of educational institutions. This abrupt closure of educational institutions as a protective measure against the corona infection and the shifting of education from in-class learning to remote learning posed significant challenges to students, parents and teachers. Because the shift was not gradual, it happened overnight to resist the severity of the Corona infection (Dhawan, 2020). Early studies

reveal clear challenges for students in general, and for educationally disadvantaged students in particular in terms of learning continuity and school engagement (Devitt et al. 2020; Green 2020). Previous research provides a good insight that school closure increases the chances of inequality of opportunities for those who belong to educationally backward families (Calarco, 2020). Initially, much of the discussion focused on the 'digital divide,' which suggests that low student engagement for some students is caused by lack of access to devices and

the internet (Devitt et al. 2020; Darmody, Smyth, and Russell 2020). Students who had access to internet-enabled classes were found to have higher levels of engagement. Additionally, exposure to a wider variety of academic and socio-emotional learning opportunities is associated with higher levels of engagement. Additionally, students were more inclined to participate online if their families maintained social ties with the families of other students. (Domina et al, 2021). The dissimilarity in the implementation and quality of off-campus education increases the possibility of undesired consequences of remote learning for the development of youth (Morgan, 2015; Sorensen 2012). Physical absence from school environments, besides posing learning challenges, would have consequences for the physical and mental well-being of children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

This paper examines student engagement in primary students post Covid- 19, using the teacher and parent perspective. Moreover, it attempts to know the online learning problems or opportunities perceived by teachers, parents and students. Since the population is 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students, the qualitative approach was found most appropriate. Therefore, a qualitative research design was adopted to get a deeper understanding of their engagement and response to online classes.

## **Contextual Background**

The participants in the current study are all the residents of the village Padgampora, Tehsil Awantipora, located 14 km East of District headquarters Pulwama and 25 km from UT summer capital Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, India. To make contextual background clear the researcher wants to make mention of timing and circumstances together. The data collection process for

this study actually started in the month of September. At that time, private schools located in towns of the district were closed. However, the government primary schools and private schools in the locality had actually resumed providing community classes to these children in school under strict adherence to Covid-19 SOP.

## **Research Objectives**

- Understanding student engagement post Covid-19 from the perspective of parents and teachers.
- Understanding the challenges or opportunities of online learning perceived by the parents and teachers.

## **Student Engagement**

Student engagement, a multidimensional construct with behavioural, affective and cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004) refers to the active participation, interest and psychological investment of the student in the learning goals. The behavioural dimension may include student's attendance, completion of school activities, active participation in classes, and participation in extracurricular activities (Wang, Willett and Eccles, 2011), emotional engagement involves feelings, interests, and attitudes toward learning and school (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and the cognitive component involves the quality of cognitive processes and learning approaches used by students on school assignments and homework (Walker, Greene & Mansell, 2006).

It is hard to get positive learning outcomes without positive engagement or involvement of students in their learning. The existing student engagement literature has demonstrated a positive relationship between student engagement & quality learning outcomes & learning

achievement (Carini, Kuh & Klein 2006; Coates 2005). It is associated with improved learning, performance, retention, persistence, experience, and achievement (Appleton et al., 2006; Carini, Kuh & Klein 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

## **Online Education**

Education received through the internet without stepping out of home is referred to as online education. It involves the use of the internet in the teaching-learning process which allows flexibility of time. Online learning is more student-centred, advanced, and flexible to use (Singh & Thurman, 2019). It happens either through synchronous or asynchronous settings. Synchronous learning is where students engage in active learning. There is real-time interaction between teachers and students, and instant feedback is possible. On the other hand in asynchronous learning, learning content is not directly associated with the type of instruction. It is available in a wide range of learning systems and forums and instant feedback and direct response are not possible (Littlefield, 2018).

## **Methodological Framework**

Sampling is a critical component of qualitative research design (Mason, 2002). A sample selection criteria, i.e., inclusion or exclusion of participants, must be specified for the study in order to demarcate a sample universe (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Patton, 1990). The sample participants consisted of 70 parents, 20 primary-level students and 10 primary school teachers working in different government and private schools of the respective district and were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. The rationale behind using a purposive sampling strategy was to ensure the inclusion of the participants in the sample the researcher believed had

a unique and different perspective on the phenomenon under study (Mason, 2002; Trost, 1986). Participant observation of children and the interview of parents and teachers were used for data generation. Data was collected in the form of recording by conducting a face-to-face semi-structured interview (interview with 5-7 topics about which the respondent is urged to speak (Wilkinson et al., 2004) to parents and teachers. Parents were asked how engaged the children are with their learning activities at present and what kind of difference they feel in their engagement during this period where no offline education is provided. The parents were also asked to tell the challenges they themselves and their children face in the online education system. Also to what extent do online modes engage students with learning goals? Interviews with teachers began with similar questions followed by the ideas/points they were revealing to the researcher at the moment.

Participant observation of children happened simultaneously during this period as the researcher was already giving tuition to these children at home. But during the analysis process, the researcher de-familiarised her to only reflect upon the perspective of teachers and parents but this observation definitely helped to get insight into what the parents and teachers were revealing. Since the data was collected in the form of recording, Thematic Analysis Technique was found most appropriate to be used with this data set. Therefore Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was used to do the analysis of collected data pertaining to the current study.

During the sample selection process, the researcher ensured the research ethics are followed properly. Therefore, proper consent was sought from all the participants before commencing the

interview process. Since the content sought from them was not sensitive, they freely explained what they had gone through and how engaged they saw their children with studies. Moreover, they acknowledged the study objectives.

## Analysis

Analysis constitutes the major part of any research study. In qualitative research, it refers to the process of systematically searching and arranging the data (interview transcripts, observation notes, or other non-textual materials) that the researcher accumulates to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. The data for the current study, using face-to-face semi-structured interviews, was collected in the form of recording, therefore, Thematic Analysis Technique was found most appropriate to be used with this data set. It is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke 2006) and then use these themes to address the research or say something about the issue.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was used for doing a thematic analysis of the collected data pertaining to the current study. The steps involve: Becoming familiar with the data, Generating initial codes, Searching for themes, Reviewing themes, Defining themes and Write-up. It is essential to mention here that this thematic analysis is a recursive process; the movement is back and forth as required throughout the phases. Since, the data was collected in the form of recording, it was essential to listen to the audio recording of the interview several times before transcribing the same. The familiarity was gained by listening to the audio recording and transcribing the recordings which helped in producing initial codes, separating chunks of text and labelling them as belonging to specific categories. Similarly, these

categories were reviewed and later sorted into potential themes. In this way six major themes emerged as follows:

### Online education: an opportunity

Online education, introduced with a constructive approach to prevent disengagement and ensure engagement (ensure online classes are covering the syllabus) during Covid-19 crisis, although, creating chaos initially, helped in engaging back children with learning activities. It made classes possible during the times of pandemic for a large number of students. The deteriorating condition of the education sector faced before and after the immediate suspension of offline teaching-learning process as a result of the Corona pandemic outbreak has been improved to some extent with the commencement of online mode. One-third of parents appreciated the initiative saying that it prevented learning loss, made classes accessible during the Covid-19 crisis and helped children get an education without getting infected by the Corona infection. Because the time it was introduced everything was paralyzed and no moment was seen anywhere in the world. In such a chaotic situation it seemed the desired initiative, serving the purpose of educating students during the Covid-19 crisis. Waqar Ahmad, a parent while talking to him said "With the suspension of offline schooling, student engagement started to decrease at a speedy pace. Since covid-19 put everyone's life at risk so health was the first priority and nobody was paying attention towards education of children which added to the deteriorating condition of student engagement initially. But with the commencement of online classes it started improving. In such a situation it seemed the desired initiative, serving the purpose of educating students during covid-19 crisis. Also teachers working in private schools appreciated

this immediate move. A teacher namely Mubashir Wani said "Shift to online mode during the Covid-19 crisis was the only option to prevent learning loss one could think of. If it would not have been done the situation would be worse, it at least prevented complete disengagement". This means that it has somehow helped the students to remain in touch with their studies. Comparing the situation education has faced in the valley during the crisis in 2019, virtual mode at least did not let children completely disengage from studies.

### **Online education: an alternative not a substitute**

Although online mode helps in engaging children back with studies, it is not free from limitations. The prolonged school closure and repetitive shifting to online mode disturbed the whole process. The way children learn and get engaged with learning in offline mode can never be expected in an online teaching-learning environment. No matter how much effort a teacher puts in to make the connection strong and make sure the material/content is learned by children, children only do what they want to. He fails to ensure their maximum participation and positive involvement which results in partial student engagement. Sameer Ahmad, a primary school teacher said, "Student engagement has definitely dropped due to the prevalent circumstances as we see a partial interest among children towards learning. He further added, it is hard to ensure their complete positive participation in an online class (because of physical distance) that directly affects their performance and hence can never replace physical school". It can only be an option during an emergency and can never be a substitute. Almost one-half of parents had the same opinion. They believe online learning has affected the health and mental well-

being of their children (psychological pressure, boredom). Giving the reason that prolonged school closure and continuous exposure to the online world is distracting them from the right track.

### **Learning problems & Student Engagement**

Online learning is completely based on virtual interaction, one needs to be mature enough to make the right use of it. Considering the immaturity and flexible nature of primary-level children it could not make a satisfactory contribution. The reasons may involve their flexible nature, physical distance, inappropriate teaching strategy, less concerned parents and many more. "In online education, an appropriate teaching strategy is difficult to adopt. Primary children learn more by play way method, they are group lovers, they like to learn along with the group rather learning individually, which is not possible to provide in an online class" revealed a primary school teacher, she further added They need help from elders, in case they are not available, or parents are uneducated, engagement and results are unsatisfactory". In addition to this, in an online learning environment usually, one-way traffic is working, children are supposed to listen to the lecture which is completely a theoretical part. In such a situation, they lose motivation and interest which further makes the intended outcome hard to achieve and eventually results in the failure of the intended purpose of the class. Mostly the students from uneducated and poor households were seen to be facing severe consequences because they lack family guidance. "We are afraid that our children will refuse to enter schools again. Their involvement is terribly low; they have forgotten what they had learned earlier in school. The corona pandemic has caused great damage to children's education

interests. Online classes are of no use in our case neither do we have those devices nor do we have knowledge of how to handle them and run an online class. We are unable to support them anyway” said Sabzar Ah. a parent. Thus, online classes fail to serve the purpose in their case.

### **Online learning: a challenge**

The sudden transition to online learning created chaos and disturbance among the people as nobody had thought of such a drastic change before. To embrace this change was really a challenging task for a large number of people. It posed challenges in terms of demanding knowledge about ICT and running technological devices for uneducated parents, children and some teachers as well. “Initially it was so challenging because the shifting to virtual mode was so sudden. We faced challenges in terms of low or weak student response. As we are talking about primary children who are difficult to handle even in offline classes. To ensure their presence in the online class during the initial phase was very much challenging. However, with consistent efforts they started to learn the process. They became familiar and started showing the signs of engagement. But at the same time, they learned things they were not supposed to learn such as playing online games and accessing YouTube” Said a primary school teacher. Teachers got a weak response from students which has been causing difficulty to ensure positive student engagement in an online class. Indiscipline and improper conduct from students in online class was the biggest challenge teachers faced in the initial phase. As of now, the situation is not that critical but the teachers are still not able to ensure maximum student participation and are completely unable to ensure students do their home assignments honestly and on time.

Besides this, making the devices available to children in poor households was the biggest challenge. The uneducated parents, especially those working in fields all day to make the two ends meet failed to assist their kids in any way due to poverty, illiteracy and unawareness-of how to run an online class. Monitoring the activities of children while using the phone appeared another challenge for parents because the process is all internet-connected, chances are inappropriate or sensitive or irrelevant content is accessed that can put parents in trouble. In addition to this, making them join the class and sustain attention was another big responsibility. “The biggest challenge during the whole period was to motivate children to take online classes and ensure they are joining the class on time and ensure their involvement. Since online education runs through an internet connection, most of the time it was snapped for days, posing challenges to bring children back to learning after a break” said Shabir Ahmad, a parent.

### **Parent negligence vs. low engagement**

Some uneducated parents (who have either never gone to school or have studied up to 5<sup>th</sup> class) completely deny the significance of education in general and online mode in particular. While interviewing them it was felt they do not value education due to their narrow perception about it. Their perception that education lacks a utility factor, especially provided in government schools, is not job oriented and indirectly affects their children’s engagement and performance. Because no attempt is being made to make classes accessible to children. While interviewing one parent of such a category regarding the online mode this is what he said “We do not understand this online education system. This is not going to help our kids. What are they going to get in such classes where they actually get

the opportunity to play with the device rather than use it for learning purposes” said Bashir Ahmad, a parent. Therefore no attempt is being made to make online classes accessible to children by the parents which eventually results in their disengagement.

### **Boredom vs. entertainment**

Besides learning about teacher and parent experiences, some students were also asked about the current teaching-learning environment. Although their description is generally considered less important, the researcher believes they possess a transparent nature and say only what they feel, therefore their view was also given space. The children presented a feeling of boredom to the researcher and wished for the resumption of a face-to-face teaching-learning environment. In contrast, government school children are enjoying being at home.

“I really feel bad not because education is provided online but because face-to-face interaction is missing. In school we were happily learning every lesson and were progressing together along with other classmates, the teacher used to teach us different teaching strategies like activity and demonstration methods. It was really wonderful. Online teaching-learning is boring and we do not enjoy the process. We want to go to school to get the same learning environment” Toiba Jan, class 2<sup>nd</sup>, a private school student.

“I am happy being outside the school and I do not want to go to school now. I play with my friend all day at home and nobody is there to restrict us but in school, we are kept in the class for hours and are taught the lessons” Zeeshan, class 2<sup>nd</sup> a government school student.

It can be established from the above-presented description that firstly this online education could not reach the

total student population. Secondly, it caused (prolonged school closure and online mode together) boredom among children who have access to it.

### **Digital addiction**

Digital addiction was the most serious concern revealed by both parents and teachers. Since the learning happens either through smartphone or computer, it makes children learn to operate the devices themselves. Being all day free at home, they feel boredom and to get over this feeling the children try to find enjoyment in accessing online material and playing video games online. This is a clear indication that phone addiction among children may prove adverse in consequent stages of their future as it is causing distraction, also exposing them to things which are inappropriate for their tender age.

### **Results and discussion**

A study is a useless endeavor if it has no practical value or contribution. It is necessary to enquire if the findings are helpful in expanding theoretical knowledge or knowledge of the pertinent issue under consideration. (Yardley, 2000; Silverman, 1993). The present study has a multitude of insights. The first and foremost finding clearly showed a significant negative relationship between the prevailing situation, (created by the corona pandemic) and student engagement. No doubt the data in the present investigation clearly highlighted that virtual learning prevented the complete disengagement of children to these classes but still a significant drop can be seen in the engagement of primary students. The causes are many as discussed in the previous section. The children from government schools especially from poor households and uneducated families could not take any advantage of virtual platforms which apparently increases the risk of their

complete disengagement. They are the vulnerable group to the severe negative effects of school closures and online mode. The majority of children studying in government schools completely were left unattended during the entire online learning period.

The challenges it posed to parents, teachers and students are significant. All three groups felt difficulty in adapting to abrupt changes brought about by the corona pandemic, particularly by the online mode of education. A higher level of adaptability is significantly related to increased positive student engagement (Martin et al., 2013). The challenges faced by the teachers were essentially in terms of weak response most appropriately weak participation and lack of discipline in the online class. Similarly, parents face problems in terms of motivating children to take online classes and making them do their work without delay. Besides this difficulty, uneducated parents faced different other serious challenges due to the lack of academic proficiency or ICT skills. Since, distance learning completely relies on the use of technology, especially the use of the internet, social media, smartphones, and laptops confused the illiterate or less knowledgeable parents which they revealed was a great challenge.

The success of online education mode is determined by a lot of factors. Unlike access to the Internet and devices, the difference in the skill of teachers and lack of ICT skills, less concerned parents, unfavourable family environment, flexible nature of children, poverty, were identified as the stumbling blocks to the success of remote learning initiatives in this particular village.

Parental support plays a significant role in children's good or bad performance. Help from elders or adults is necessary not only for positive academic outcomes but for overall development. The

teachers identified the lack of parent support, parent guidance and lack of interest as key barriers to student engagement. Student engagement can be enhanced by a mutual teacher-parent endeavour. The teaching in online learning needs to be supportive in terms of assisting children in attending classes and doing assignments. Also, a good teacher student relationship can do a great help in ensuring engagement of children in online class. Student engagement in virtual learning is likely to increase when the connection between teacher and student is meaningful. Also, the use of innovative teaching-learning strategies by the teacher and encouraging the development of student key skills enhances engagement (Bray, A. et al, 2021).

Given the substantial amount of evidence, covid-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on education. It can be established that student engagement throughout the school closure period could not rise to a satisfactory level. There might be other implicit underlying contextual factors behind i.e., the period of school closure before the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, which resulted from the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35a. Thus, the loss of interest or partial engagement that is visible is somehow related to the past crisis. However, online education during the Corona crisis ensured engagement at least partially and has comparatively contributed to re-engaging children with studies. At the time it was implemented, as mentioned in the previous section everything seemed paralysed, no movement of people was seen anywhere in the world. In such a stagnant environment, it was thought the only option to avoid any serious damage to education. At this point of time, the issue was not whether online teaching and learning methods can provide high-quality education, but rather how academic institutions can



provide solutions by embracing online learning on a large scale (Carey, 2020).

Though online education served the purpose of making education accessible to students during the covid-19 crisis and prevented complete disengagement, it is not free from flaws as discussed earlier. Perets, E. A et al, (2020) stated, the immediate transition to virtual learning influenced student engagement negatively. Online teaching less engaged students after this transition happened. However, course activities helped first-year undergraduate students retain their engagement. Since online mode demands expertise in ICT skills-operating devices such as laptops, smartphones, computers and accessing the internet created a lot of disturbance, the biggest reason seemed unpreparedness of teachers and parents to embrace the change. The move posed challenges not only to students but to teachers also. Most teachers who have never taken relevant training or taught online are less likely to provide effective online education (Chiu, 2017; Ingvarson et al., 2005).

The findings of the present paper that overall student engagement declined during the closure of educational institutions are consistent with the research of Doyle, 2020. The current investigation highlighted the role of parental support in children's education as a must. This finding is consistent with previous research that higher parental involvement predicts higher engagement (Smyth, 2017, Bray et al, 2021).

However, research is an ongoing process that starts and ends with a problem which is actually what makes it interesting. The present investigation has been carried out with a relatively small number of participants and is delimited to one single village which may reduce the transferability of the findings. Therefore, future research

can be conducted with a larger group. It has worked purely with a qualitative approach which if used along with a quantitative approach can increase the generalization of results. Also, more in-depth studies using participant observations, case study and triangulation is suggested for future research.

## Conclusion

Given the evidence, online education during Covid Pandemic played a complex role in the engagement of children with learning. This role can be classified into main three categories i.e., challenge, opportunity and negligence or deprivation. Online education in its initial stage despite causing chaos proved beneficial as mentioned earlier in terms of engaging children back with learning, encouraged engagement that was completely dropped in a short span after the corona outbreak and school closure happened and also protected children from contracting the deadly virus. So the immediate shift was appreciated by both the parents and teachers. Secondly, the paper provided insight into the experiences of the journey during the entire school closure period of both teachers and parents and children. Thirdly, the paper widened our vision about how underprivileged groups who could not even access it due to one or the other reason got into a vulnerable state to experience the ineffectiveness of online education. Particularly the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade students from poor households and children enrolled in Government schools did not get any online classes for the whole period.

Another serious limitation revealed by the participants was digital addiction. It was asserted that children who had access to these classes got affected in another way. Initially lacking the knowledge of running the device connected to the internet was a big

challenge for children but now the same is considered the best source of entertainment, it is now like a game for children to operate the devices and access different sites online. This thing distracted them from the actual purpose. The result is partial student engagement.

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