

Perceptions Of Parents About Online Learning And Physical Activity Of Their Children During The Covid Pandemic

Abstract

The present research study aimed to assess the perceptions of parents about online learning and physical activity of their children. A qualitative study was undertaken to determine the perceptions of parents about online learning during COVID-19 to get a deep insight into real-life experiences. Open-ended questionnaires were administered online to forty-five parents who could be accessed easily and had children studying in Grades 1-3. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis included the following: increased monitoring role of parents, need of IT skills, provision of additional support from schools, challenging nature of online learning and sedentary behavior of their children. With a purpose of understanding perception of parents and their viewpoints about online learning, it was deduced that parents initially had to face many challenges but soon adjusted well with the new method of teaching as it was the need of hour during Covid-19 Pandemic.

Key Words: Online Classes, Parents, Covid-19

Introduction

The universal pandemic has led to a worldwide shutdown. Research and reports have proven that not only has it affected the world in different ways but has also affected various types of groups with diversified intensities. The Corona pandemic forced an unprecedented global closure of schools. The education of young children has been disturbed in many ways, As a result the roles of teachers, students and parents changed. The educational institutions particularly schools before the covid pandemic required their students to be physically present all through the weekdays in order to help students to learn collaboratively. Unfortunately, due to the covid crisis the schools were closed and the students were unable to physically attend schools. Hence, the site of learning from schools moved to the students' homes which resulted in learning taking place mainly by the students themselves or with the support of their families with the help of technologies.

In order to overcome the changes of the covid-19 crisis in the education sector, the Education ministries and concerned stakeholders took a stand at their national levels. For continuous education many countries like United States, France, Egypt and United Arab Emirates followed the distance education method through the internet as well as other online forums. Mexico, Peru, Iran, Rwanda, Thailand, Korea and China are teaching online via open online course styled lessons (MOOC). These modules are provided and communicated through television, various softwares or other networks. Moreover, teachers' training for online education is also accessed through these forums (Chang & Yano, 2020).

Unlike many other countries, the education ministry in Pakistan was unable to combat the educational challenges during Covid-19. According to UNESCO, COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response (2020) Pakistan has 8,636,383 students registered in pre-primary institutes, while students registered in primary and secondary schools are 22,931,305 and 13,357,618 respectively. The schools that are run privately all over Pakistan initially chose to give their students homework that actually covered the curriculum of the academic time. However, they afterwards declared summer holidays since the condition aggravated uncertainty (Hasan, 2020). According to Ali (2020) although there is limited access to the internet facilities, at university level in Pakistan online classes are being conducted. The educational institutions were asked to promote the students to the next class (Saeed, 2020). Schools that are run privately on low-cost on the other hand because of the pandemic are on the verge of closing down (Yousafzai, 2020). Unfortunately in such times of uncertainty and limited access towards quality education there is a lot of confusion in the education sector in Pakistan.

Globally Physical Education as well as any form of planned active break intervals that used to take place in the educational institutions have come to a halt or are now part of online schooling. Millions of school going students all over the globe have come across intense disruption in their usual routines towards learning as well as physical activity (PA). It is necessary to researchers in the field of education to research the various facets of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic with the purpose to minimize the dominance of the anecdotal evidence as to how the closure of schools has impacted the lives of the school going students (Krumsvik, 2020). This is extremely imperative as the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) is anticipating more upcoming worldwide outbreaks.

The purpose of this research paper is to shed light on how COVID-19 and the shutting down of educational institutions has disturbed and reduced the physical activity (PA) of school going students in the course of the times when schools were closed and students had shifted to home schooling. Research conducted by (Biddle, Ciaccioni, Thomas & Vergeer 2019) has acknowledged that physical activities play essential part in both physical as well as in the psychosocial health and also the well being of children and young students. Research has documented that a sedentary routine in young children is accompanied with serious illnesses in the late stages of life, as well as further wellness issues like harmful dietary styles (Carson, Hunter, Kuzik, Gray, Poitras & Chaput, 2016; Tremblay, Carson, Chaput, Connor Gorber, Dinh, Duggan, Faulkner, & Zehr 2016). There is universal fear lately regarding the decrease in the PA followed by the escalation in the sedentary activities along with child obesity during the Covid crisis (UNICEF, 2019).

This research article reports on how the shutting down of schools have disturbed the physical activity of children in Grades 1–3 across Lahore. During the Covid crisis all school teachers in Pakistan were directed to conduct online classes while using digital devices or through distant teaching (Krumsvik, 2020). According to Blikstad-Balas and Klette (2020) Pakistani teachers and school management like other educators worldwide were not ready to go digital immediately regardless of the relevant technological infrastructure. In this article, we have recorded and reported the essential challenges that Pakistani parents faced to keep their children physically active during the pandemic.

Methodology

The present research study intended at exploring the perceptions of Pakistani parents about online education and supervision in the course of the hard times of the pandemic. Qualitative researches permit the researchers to examine the situation from a parent's personal involvement in the changing conditions and state. Hence, the current study used the descriptive qualitative design in order to seek the relevant responses and to gain insights into real-life experiences faced by parents during COVID 19.

Participants

The most appropriate sampling technique in the selecting the participants, particularly, during the period of the Pandemic was the purposive sampling technique as people globally were upset because of the fearful situation and felt quite anxious. Besides, in qualitative research the sampling technique adopted is purposive as it satisfies the research need as well as the phenomenon undertaken. It therefore, permits the researchers to highlight the underlying assumptions with regards to the situation and how the participants are selected on the basis of the criteria set for inclusion. For the present research study a set of 45 parents from Lahore were selected. These parents were selected to be a part of this study since they were fluent in English language, they had spent at least three hours for teaching their children in a formal manner and also had internet connection and facilities.

Instrumentation

To explore the perception of Pakistani parents towards Covid-19 and home learning four open-ended questions were sent to the respondents through Google Doc Forms. Responses were gathered through the forms as the interviews could not be conducted since mostly parents preferred to reply using online forms. The preference of filling the online forms was selected by the parents for many reasons out of which the strength of the signals and the disruptive noise of at the place of residence were the most common ones, since they stated that mostly all the individuals in the family were at their residence and so it was difficult to remain focused during an interview conducted telephonically. In view of the COVID crisis, the researchers therefore, decided to share the link of the Google form via email to all the respondents.

One of the open-ended questions addressed PA and was used to find out the likelihood of how different groups of the students varied in physical activities. The question was about the time spent when being involved in physical activities apart from regular physical education exercises, whereas the remaining open-ended questions were about the intriguing experiences faced during this period.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis of the data was conducted manually.

Qualitative Analyses of the Open-Ended Questions

Four open-ended questions through Google forms were used in order to elaborate what parents thought about the challenges and benefits while the students were home learning during Covid-19.

1. Impact on the Daily Routine

The findings of the study revealed the abrupt shutting down of schools to be very disturbing since they were worried about the daily routine of their children. Parents were of the view that schools were a place where students could develop a routine that was structured formally. This was due to the fact since they had to attend school at least five times a week, submit their assignments on time that helped them understand the significance and further to develop the skill of time management. Hence, according to the respondents the schools played a very important role in shaping the students future work traits. According to most of the parents, “Schools play a very important role in disciplining their children.” They further added, “ It was difficult to structure their routine.”

2. Increased monitoring role of parents

The respondents stated that due to the covid crisis there was increase in the amount of homework. They mentioned that since their children were not going to schools the parents had to take up the teachers’ role as well since they had to explain the worksheets and manage other learning related activities. Many of the students while sitting in front of their screens felt shy or due to poor internet questions were unable to ask questions from their concerned teachers. As a result of which all questions and confusions were directed towards the parents who themselves were already working from home.

It was very challenging for those parents who had to meet their work deadlines and online meetings. It was extremely cumbersome for them to manage their children’s learning as well as to manage their household chores since all household assistance was stopped from entering the homes due to covid SOPs. Hence, parents had to allow their children to do their learning independently. Many mothers reported that had to continuously monitor their children just as one

mother commented, “ I had to sit with my girl throughout the class as she could not access the session independently.” Working parents confided their problems stating, “Many times our meetings clashed with the timings of our child’s online classroom sessions.”

One mother shared her experience and said, “checking my children’s learning all the time, now that I do not have any household helper, has become an additional burdensome and I end up letting my kids do things as they wish to.”

3. Challenges in Shifting from On Campus to Online Learning

One of the major concerns that the parents shared was that their children had to make a sudden switch from physical on campus to online classes, which most of the Pakistani students were not used to. According to them all the disciplinary routine has been disturbed like going to school and engaging in different classroom activities. Learning was badly affected since students were not taught through diverse teaching techniques due to the online learning. Moreover, the physical presence of a teacher according to the parents was really important since a teacher plays a very important part in instilling the seriousness among students which was unlikely to happen through online learning. The respondents were also of the view that one of the factors that hindered students’ learning was: “Distant Education is challenging whenever teachers are not properly skilled for it.” Lack of teacher training to teach online was one main factor that had hampered the learning of the children. This was highlighted by many parents as one of the parents shared her views in the following words:

“Online learning is difficult for the students as teachers themselves are not trained for it.”

Many parents were of the view that it was difficult for their children to sit in front of the laptop all day long as they were not used to it. One mother said, “Arranging internet and electronic gadgets was an additional burden on their pockets.” Online schooling necessitates the accessibility of electronic gadgets and internet connection for the given time period as required. Noisy home environment due to joint family system and small homes created a lot of distractions. Listening to the teacher while being in the bed was the most common comment given by the parents.

4. Need of IT skills

Most parents felt helpless in how to use online learning platforms such as Google Classroom for their children. Many of them tried to befriend technology but struggled hard to handle minor tasks such as downloading files, submitting homework through attachments, accessing audio and video files etc. in online learning sessions. Hence, social media such as Facebook and Whatsapp groups were used extensively by mothers to help each other towards the use of online learning for their children.

5. Provision of additional support from schools

Even though schools have played a remarkable part in transforming the traditional mode of teaching and learning according to the need of the day, but many of the parents reported that additional tutorial classes, online library access, reading sessions and additional resource packs to be provided to them. They further shared that it was necessary to have online physical exercises component to keep their children healthy and active.

6. Challenging nature of online learning

Ensuring that in order to attend online classes, the laptop/ tablet and internet access is available. Due to some connectivity or technical problems resulted in missing out the online classes and no learning.

7. Sedentary behavior of their children

Most parents reported that the lifestyle for their children have changed during Covid-19 pandemic. They further shared that their children have become more passive and adopted sedentary behaviour due to online learning. Thirty-four of these respondents highlighted that their children were spending a lot of time in playing video games or using electronic gadgets like smartphone, computer, and tablet. The statements given below illustrate the concerns of the parents about less involvement in physically activity due to the lockdown:

“Spending hours in front of screens and on video/ online games, that leads to reduces amount of participation in the physical activity than normal,” was reported by a father.

One mother said, “I wish there were more homework that my child stops using my mobile for playing games and be outside,” while another mother said, “The homework and the whole school time are now completed before 1 pm, and so the children afterwards spent the entire day in front of the screen either playing computer games or watching cartoons and movies on TV.”

Parents shared that at the time of Covid when students were learning at their homes, increased passivity as well as sedentary lifestyles of children were observed. According to thirty-four of the respondents their children were most of the time using different electronic devices like smartphones, computers and tablets for their entertainment. The following statements highlights the concerns of the parents regarding their children’s reduced physical activities during the period of Covid:

Majority waking hours are spent watching cartoons and playing computer games, no physical games are played. It was not like this before. (Parent of a boy, Grade 2)

I think so children should be assigned practical tasks where they are not required to sit and perform it on the computers. Children are able to do their homework online quickly and school ends up by 12 as a result children spend the rest of the day watching TV or playing computer games. (Parent of a girl, Grade 3)

The statements shared by the parents report the fact that during the times of homeschooling students were physically less involved as compared to the times when they used to attend regular schools. According to them the sedentary lifestyle of students with little or no physical activity was found to be greater in the older students. The parents confirmed the fact that during the times of Covid crisis physical education was not given the due weightage as compared to other subjects that resulted in less involvement of students in the physical activities.

Discussion

In the period of pandemic trauma, it is imperative to note, that in particular to search the required literature according to our study was really very hard. Moreover, the parents who were the participants of this research were also greatly affected due to this global trauma. The parents selected belonged to the urban regions of Pakistan who were struggling to learn and then to adapt to a routine of working from home. The study findings, therefore shared a true reflection of their

pandemic experiences. One of the major research findings was parents concern related to the problems faced by their children as a result of sudden closure of schools as well as a total lockdown of all sought of social gatherings. Opinions and statements by many newspapers and other news agencies discussed the impact of global shutdown on young children's learning (CDC, 2020; Jinshan, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). There are many factors and explanations to it. All of the school going children have been isolated to their homes because of the fact that they may catch the virus. However, on the other hand various medical research findings have suggested that youngsters are apparently not at a high danger to acute infection but they might be asymptomatic and may become the carrier of this virus and passing it to grown-ups and the old age people.

In order to attend to the challenges faced by the students during the Covid crisis the educational institutions have been instrumental in changing the traditional style of learning and teaching. To facilitate its teachers the schools gave the training and required paraphernalia to conduct online teaching. Next, they have also endured in training and assisting both parents and young children to utilize the various online applications (Razzaque, 2020; RNZ, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). During this phase although the school management have tried to facilitate all the concerned stakeholders but things have not been that easy to handle. It took some time to help teachers to overcome camera consciousness in order to conduct live sessions. Subject material needed to be specially developed both in audio and video forms. Teachers needed time to be able to use computerized whiteboards and online teaching and learning tools effectively and efficiently. Before the Covid period the usual method of communication with the parents was either through circulars or notes in the diaries. During the pandemic only a very few schools used different communication channels such as short text mobile messages, WhatsApp or email to communicate with the parents which resulted in a communication gap between the school and the parents. On the other hand the few schools who were able to utilize technology to the maximum and communicate with the parents through videos, graphics, online guides and support, it was also their first time and was new issue for them as well. These schools might have to assess the effectiveness of their new ways of communicating and whether both parents as well as students find it beneficial as to which they have planned to give in the first place. Parents at the same time, also need to find ways to reduce the issues resulting from the lock-down.

According to the findings of the current study during the pandemics the students have not been as physically active than they were before this phase. Before the lock down on an average a school going child spent at least one hour of day in physical activity like the students walked to and from their institutions, moving in and out of their rooms as well as playing in the school playground during breaks which was completely found missing during the pandemic. Also, a large number of students of 6-15 years age perform organized sports at least once or twice or even more times in a week (Hammer, 2017; Bakken, 2019), that they were unable to do due to the closure of the educational institutions. Hence, due to these reasons, it is plausible that before the covid crisis the students had the opportunity to do at least one hour of physical activity normal weekday.

The former researches have confirmed that physical activity plays an integral part in physical, psychosocial, mental health as well as well beingness of children and young people (Biddle et al., 2019). Also, it is research proven that a sedentary lifestyle in students leads to chronic diseases in later part of life and other health-related risk activities such as unhealthy eating habits. (Carson et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016).

A decline in the quality of learning and its effect on students during the Covid-19 pandemic has been highlighted in various newspapers and notifications (CDC, 2020; Jinshan, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The findings of the present research are not in line with the findings reported by Razzaque, (2020); RNZ, (2020); UNESCO, (2020) because our schools failed to provide resources and equipment for teachers to deliver online sessions; they did not educate parents as well as the students on how to utilize the different online apps in an effective manner.

According to Biddle et al. (2019) previous research has found that physical activity plays a vital part in both physical as well as psychosocial health and welfare of children and young people.

The present study findings regarding the parental concern for the decrease in children's physical activity was also similar to the findings reported by Roe, Blikstad-Balas, Dalland (2021). In their research they also suggested that many students were given a lot of responsibility by taking care of their own physical activity in this crisis, making physical activity a dependent factor on their parents' preferences and the opportunities of parents to look into.

They also stated schools need to provide young students with more computerized workout periods and tutorial video clips, by employing various applications as well as devices that would track students' level of involvement in PA.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic crisis has created uncertainty among the humanity generally and particularly for the young minds. It is necessary that the government, NGOs, educational institutions and parents should develop a proper system by employing systematic routines, communicating with each other and developing new partnerships which would be helpful in the reduction of mental as well as physical issues. Although the writings are still evolving, but it is important that lessons to be extracted from the former similar scenarios (Decosimo, Hanson, Quinn, Badu, & Smith, 2019) as well as from countries that were at initially involved (Wang, 2020). The substitute of conventional schooling that has gained a lot of popularity is home learning. It is important to make home schooling effective in order to provide the children at home with the required learning skills while keeping the limited resources available. The online materials that are according to our education's objectives need to be employed at home. Hence, the curriculum should integrate carefully tailored online lessons including both physical as well as psychosocial aspects other than the educational goals (Mason, 2018 as cited in Bhamani).

From the present research it is concluded that parents had to face a number of challenges regarding the online learning of their child/children such as discipline problems, increased monitoring roles, problems in moving towards online learning and acquisition of IT skills. Furthermore, online learning affected the physical activity of their child/ children.

Online learning has appeared to be a substitute to the traditional methods of teaching during Covid-19 situation. Hence, it is imperative to improve its delivery and effectiveness in order to provide important online learning abilities to students while keeping the limited available resources in view.

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