

‘The Loneliest Generation’: Aftermath of The Pandemic— Isolation, Emotional Disconnectivity and Voidness in a ‘Crowded’ Virtual Learning Space

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic, schools have been forced to adopt emergency remote teaching as a response. The effectiveness of ERT has been widely evaluated in academia during the last two years; while most scholars explored ways to improve the quality of online education, a limited amount of research has been dedicated to its effects on students who are about to sit for their public exams. This research examines the traumatic effects of zoom fatigue, increased sense of loneliness, learning loss, and demotivation based on the cases of three students. These secondary school students are learners of band one schools— elite schools in Hong Kong, who have had to sit for their university entrance exams in 2021 and 2022. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the narratives and stories described by these informants are analysed. This findings of this research include the following: i. ERT has kept their learning going, but has also led to social and emotional loneliness that has remained unaddressed; ii. Societal expectations, pressure from parents and teachers are the main reasons for these students’ academic achievements, even if university entrance itself does not motivate them. Despite a strong sense of purposelessness, these students forced and pushed them to perform well and them all achieved remarkable results, and successfully entered the University of their First Choice. However, the unaddressed sense of loneliness as well as the constant comparison with their peers via social media have led to serious self-doubts in these students. Even though the pandemic has passed, and these students have soldiered through their exams, there is no doubt that the pandemic itself is a transformative experience for them and has brought some unresolved issues to their mental health. Using the theory of transformative learning, this research looks into whether change of habits of mind has taken place despite the lack of critical self-reflection in these students.

Keywords: covid-19 pandemic, emotions, elite schools, loneliness, transformative learning theory