

An Evaluative Study of College Students with Respect to Exploring The Consequences of Covid-19 on Social, Psychological and Educational Aspects Due to Closure of Offline Classes

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Abstract

This research is an evaluative study that explores the social, psychological and educational consequences of the physical closure of colleges, leading to discontinuation of offline/face to face classes upon students' lives. It is based on data gathered from a volunteer sample of 22 second and third year students from various departments of a woman's college, ranging across science, commerce and humanities streams. These participants had switched over from a face- to- face mode of studies to online education suddenly in March 2020, when college campuses closed physically. The participants had experienced online education for more than 10 months when the data was collected from them in January-February 2021. The data was gathered through a question-based telephonic interview. The study was data-driven. The findings indicated that a vast majority of participants sorely missed a closer student-teacher relationship, the college premises as a site of social interaction and a concentration of teaching-learning in actual classrooms. The overall experience was reported as that of social isolation, psychological turmoil and learning losses due to the physical closure of the college. The physical closure of the college was like a spanner in the wheel for each participant in some way or the other.

Key Words: Online Education, Learning Losses.

In response to Covid-19 Pandemic, the Government of India imposed a lockdown on college campuses unexpectedly, and they were closed all over the country in March 2020. There was invisibilisation of the physical premises of the college which has customarily been an integral part of a student's everyday life. There was a complete closure of offline/face to face classes. In the subsequent new academic session, colleges re-opened though the college campus was physically closed. College education continued albeit as online education in virtual spaces. The academic calendar, courses of study, teaching-learning and assessment switched to the remote (mostly online) mode. Teaching was now conducted through video conferencing platforms and instructional materials shared through asynchronous tools like Google classroom. It is not a misnomer to say that the pandemic had changed the face of college education. What were the effects of this epochal change on young students' lives? Several reports, surveys, and researches have appeared in the

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public sphere that have suggested that there have been precipitous educational losses that would have long-term effects on the students' lives (Jain, Lall, and Singh, 2020; Jena, 2020,). The converse question - Were there any affirmative imports of the physical closure of college? - remains worth inquiry. Did the college closure provide the students with opportunities, or time, to do something new or innovative? Did any of these enabling consequences blunt the setbacks caused by the closure of offline classes?

The change in students' lives due to transition from a face- to- face mode to online education has social, psychological and educational aspects. Each of these merits research attention. This evaluative study has been designed as a descriptive, non-experimental and exploratory study that examines the social, psychological and educational consequences of pandemic, which caused physical closure of colleges, on college students' lives. The research is data-driven. It uses the institutional research model to evaluate the consequences of Covid-19 on social, psychological, and educational aspects of students' lives due to closure of offline classes. It is premised on the thesis that the physical absence of college had wide-ranging, or at least significant, effects upon college students' lives. The research makes the methodological assumption that the institution, namely the college, where the students are enrolled, needs to be the site of research and not merely of data-collection from the subjects. In the institutional research model, the college is not the physical location from where data is gathered but the very location of the research in every sense of the term. The researchers are students of education discipline at the college and therefore in a disciplinary position that is conducive to this kind of research, which is aimed at closely scrutinising the impact of physical college closure on students' lives.

Underlying Theoretical Frameworks

Social Factors in College Education

The eminent Russian educator L.S. Vygotsky (1896-1934), in his seminal socio-cultural theory of education, has argued that social interaction is crucial to learning and a student's peers play an important role in it (Vygotsky, 1978). His educational theory recommends developing opportunities for students to learn with peers, teachers and more knowledgeable people in the society. He believes social factors (external world) to be an essential condition for learning which involves internalisation of socially rooted activities since:

An operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally (Ibid: 56-57).

Looked through a Vygotskian lens, college education does not involve mere acquisition of a body of textual knowledge but is a wider social process which is the key to learning. Peer interaction is an important mediator of learning. This is one of the core reasons for cut- throat competition among school leaving students who aim at enrolling in not just any college but illustrious colleges. A social life at college provides opportunities for participation in various extracurricular activities, out-of-classroom learning and cultural events. All of these shifted online since physical closure. But do they serve their purpose in the absence of the social context? One of the three objectives of this research was to explore how the lack of peer contact and direct contact with teachers has affected students lives.

Also, in Indian society, stereotypes for a specific gender are tightly framed and social expectations within family life tend to be based on these. Many restrictions are often imposed on women students, like not being allowed to go outside the home without any rational reason. In the years spent at college, youth mainly explore their own personal vision by spending their time with peers. In the process they start to build

new relationships, enjoy stress free time away from the tension of their family life, thereby experiencing independence. But during the college closure period, women students' burden exacerbates in the absence of an enabling environment at home. Confined to their homes the women students got overwhelmed into playing dual roles of a household domestic worker along with that of a full time student. Based on national-level panel data from October 2020's Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) and Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) database:

India has amongst the most unequal gender division of household work globally. Comparing hours spent on domestic work pre- and post-lockdown, we find that for both men and women, hours spent on domestic work increased during lockdown, with the increase being higher for women than men.

Through this research, we have also attempted to explore, if women college students also face these stereotypical burdens? And if they do, how do they manage time to pursue their studies? The first objective of the research has been to examine the consequences of these social dimensions.

Psychological Challenges Faced by Students

The early days of Covid-19 pandemic confined students within domestic spaces which completely cut off the social contacts beyond immediate family. Human psychological functioning is co-constituted by the social domain, as the individual lives in a society, where he/she builds relationships, experiences interactions and shares bonds with each other. This social life not only shapes cognitive learning as mentioned in the previous section but also determines the mental and emotional well-being of an individual. There was a sudden social isolation in the students' lives as Covid-19 spread all around. They got restricted in their spaces, sticking to the screens and gadgets all the time while there were news' reports that this leads to serious mental health issues like anxiety, depression, stress and alienation. The closeness to electronic screens was particularly accentuated for students as their education had become online. This estrangement of students from the social world became a psychological challenge confronting their emotional and mental well-being. This social distancing has created a deep void within a being. This pandemic could exaggerate the problems for the people who have been facing psychological inadequacies since before the pandemic. The second research objective has been to investigate how the college closure affected the psychological well-being of students.

Educational By-Products of these Socio-Psychological Factors

College is a public space where students from different sections of the society, different parts of the country, varied caste, class, and socio-cultural background come together. There is no difference in the quality and quantity of formal education that students gain in the physical classroom. But the online education divided the students based on infrastructural endowments. Undeniably, online education was the only medium through which students could have continued formal education during the pandemic. But the student has certain cognitive capacities like memory, attention, concentration, and conceptual understanding. Does learning and cognition in the online education remain the same process? For example, can students concentrate or use attention processes in the same way as in an actual classroom?

Another major aspect regarding college closure is the change in the pedagogical aspects of education. The physical environment surrounding the students changed completely but was there a need for changes in pedagogy? The pedagogical online education, uncritically, came to the fore as soon as it was introduced

(Menon, 2020; Raina, 2020b). Were the teachers trained enough by the concerned institutions to adapt to the qualitative difference required for e-learning? The lockdown brought various opportunities for the teachers to update themselves with the new technology. Did these have an effective impact on online classes?

Research Question

The broader research question was to evaluate the consequences of physical closure of college, accompanied by discontinuation of offline classes, during the Covid-19 pandemic upon college students' lives. This wide research aim was examined for the social, psychological, and educational aspects of college students' lives, respectively. The first objective is to explore the consequences of the social dimensions with respect to closure of offline classes. The second objective is to investigate how the near-complete physical college closure affected the psychological well-being of students. The third objective of the research is to assess the educational consequences of closure of offline classes especially its relationship, if any, with learning losses.

The statement of null hypothesis could be stated as : The closure of offline classes because of Covid-19, did not lead to any consequences with respect to the social, psychological and educational aspects of college students' lives.

Key Words

Several words and terms that are used in this research report have a general dictionary meaning. The key ones are defined hereunder in a way that is specific to the needs of the present study.

Online education has a wide variety of conceptualisations, definitions, and interpretations. In the present study it is defined as the cessation of offline classes by teachers accompanied by classes through various synchronous and asynchronous electronic technologies.

Learning losses are defined as not been able to gain knowledge, skills, and competency that a student has capability to acquire.

Social refers to the human need for other people in one's immediate environment. It is based on the need to live together in some kind of an organisation. For the college students, it is their peers within the class who constitute the direct social aspect of their life. The other students, teachers and staff members of the college are also a constituent part. So are the members beyond the immediate family including one's extended community.

Psychological aspects are - those phenomenon that are related with human thinking, feeling and actions. They are located in the mind and are personal in nature, logic and functioning.

Educational is defined as the formal processes of teaching and learning that take place in a college.

Research Methodology

The Institutional Context

The research study was undertaken at a premier woman's college affiliated to University of Delhi. The college has more than 4500 students and 216 teachers on its rolls. The physical infrastructure includes a

state-of-the-art auditorium, open air theatre and a sprawling sports field. Interdisciplinary groups like NCC, Equal Opportunity Cell, and Gandhi Study Circle. National Service Scheme and Women's Development Centre provide social outreach; and contextualize the formal undergraduate education of young women in the wider socio-political milieu of contemporary India. The college supports more than a dozen literary, creative, and performing arts societies. These out-of-classroom engagements nurture oral, visual and performative processes of knowledge production. A robust academic landscape encourages inter-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and trans-disciplinary seminars, conferences, and related engagements.

The college has a vibrant institutional culture nurturing collaborative undergraduate research projects. The multi-disciplinary ethos of the college is very useful for undertaking such research studies. The institution is the only college in the south campus of University of Delhi to offer education in all the four streams of Science, Commerce, Humanities and Elementary Education. Many undergraduate research systems, mechanisms and programmes have been institutionalised in the college for more than a decade now. The present work was undertaken under the aegis of one such institutional research scheme called the Pathfinder Project. Under the scheme, the initial research proposal received inputs from the faculty members of a Pathfinder Committee drawn from varied disciplines,

The Design and Sample

The research was designed in a descriptive, exploratory, data-driven, evaluative, and non-experimental approach. The data was gathered from a volunteer sample (henceforth participants) of 22 2nd and 3rd year students from various Departments of the college ranging across Science, Commerce and Humanities streams. The pandemic limited access, personal spaces, choice of sample and tools as there was no scope for face-to-face interaction with the larger college population. The data for the study were gathered in January-February 2021. The participants had been experiencing physical college closure accompanied by discontinuation of offline classes for more than nine months by then.

Research Tool

The data gathering tool was a question-based telephonic interview developed by the Researchers. The interview was designed to enable interviewers and interviewees to examine participants' responses in depth. It followed the interview guide approach. The interview was in three parts, each of which covered the scope of social, psychological and educational arenas. Each interview presented the same questions to all the 22 participants for a total duration ranging from 45 minutes to an hour.

The interview investigating the social dimensions consisted of five questions. These were on difference between experiences of online learning and learning in a physical classroom, effect of absence from college on student-teacher relationship, virtual experience of participation in the co-curricular activities (including webinars, festivals, and workshops), enrolment in other non-formal activities and changing gender role as young women. The psychological effects were examined through three questions based on perceived mental health issues like anxiety, depression, or stress, changes in students' cognitive capacities and effects of absence from the natural surroundings of the college premises. The two questions on educational consequences focussed on whether online education facilitated perspective building in the curricular courses of study and learning losses, if any, due to connectivity or other access related issues.

Data Presentation

All the interviews were transcribed though the transcriptions are not reproduced here for the sake of brevity. To retain a sense of holism the data from these transcriptions are presented hereunder succinctly in Figures 1 to 10. This is largely a numerical reporting. A further descriptive analysis, based on the same transcriptions, is attempted which summarises the data narrative in respect of the three parts of the interview schedule examining the social, psychological and educational consequences of physical college closure and is presented in the penultimate section on research findings.

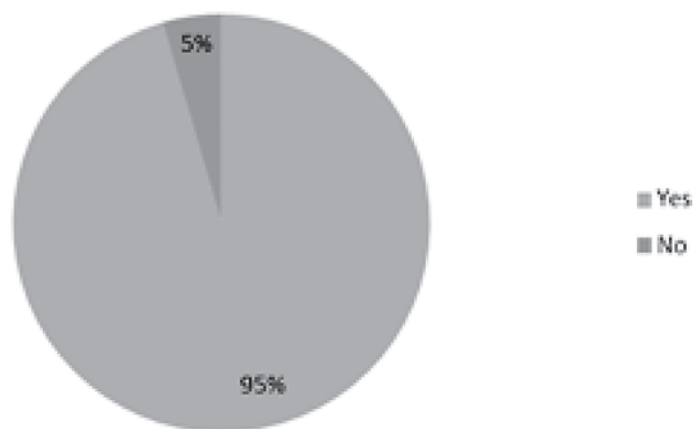


Figure 1: Difference in learning experiences post-college closure
95% of participants experienced a difference in the learning experience.

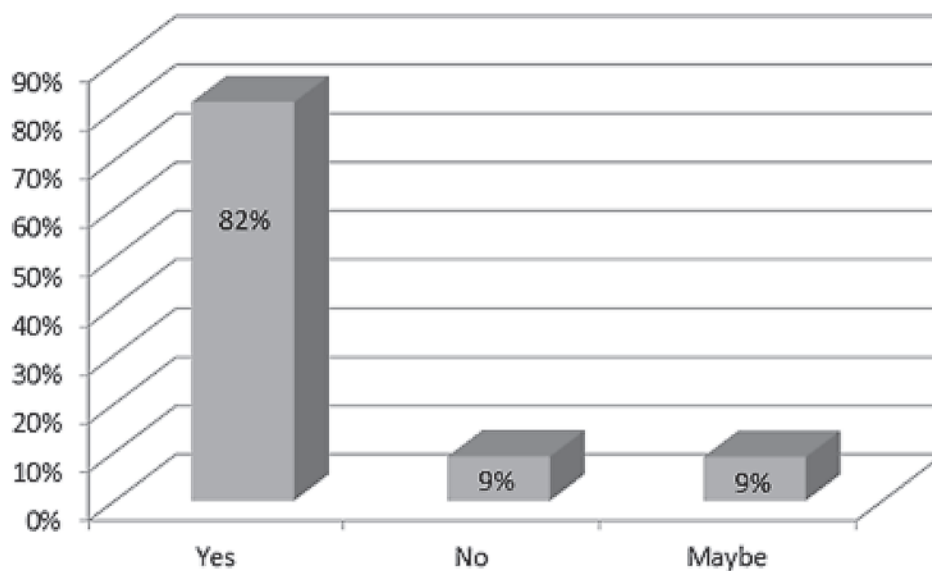


Figure 2: Change in student-teacher relationship

A vast majority of participants reported that their student-teacher relationship got altered because of physical college closure and transition to the virtual mode.

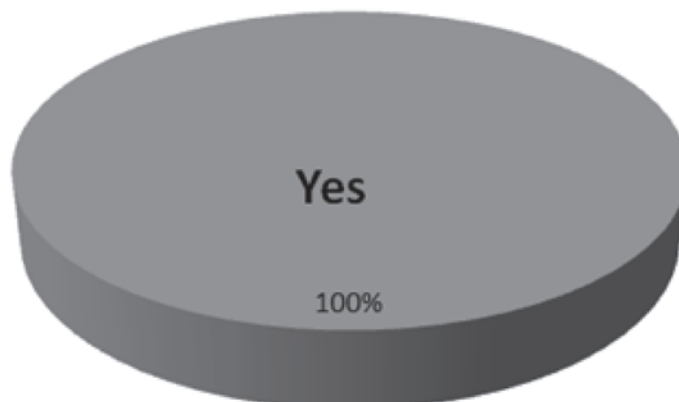


Figure 3: Change in experiencing the co-curricular programmes

All the participating students responded that the cultural landscape of the college was changed.



Figure 4: Nature of involvement in internships and extra-curricular learning programmes

A vast majority of participants had got enrolled in different kinds of internships and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

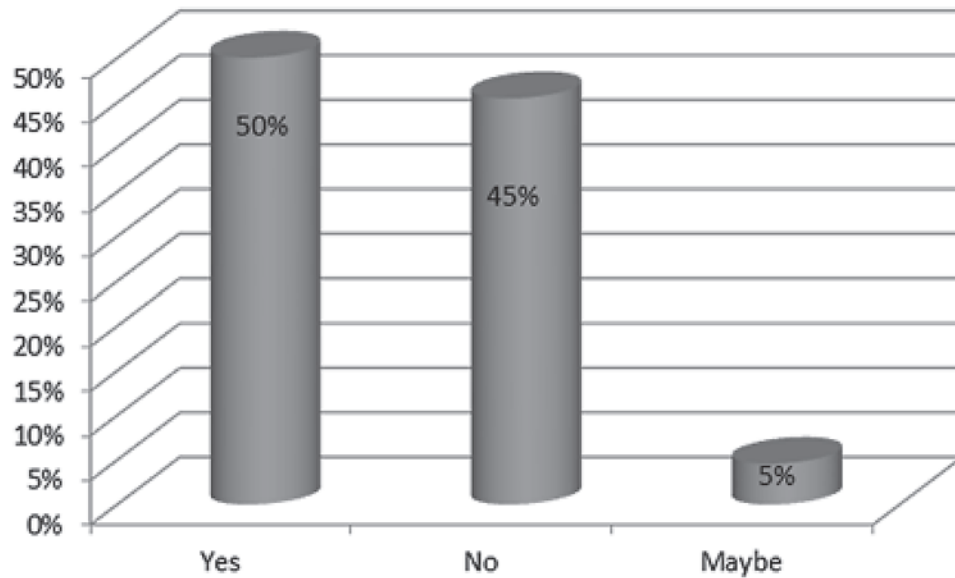


Figure 5: Effects of gender role as a woman

About half of the participants experienced gender biasness in the nature in which their education was affected.

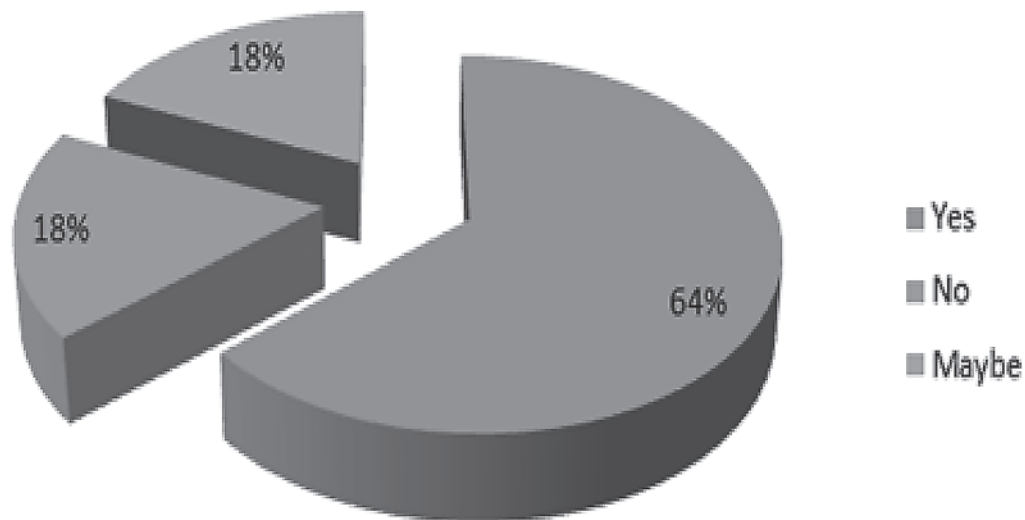


Figure 6: Deteriorating mental health

A sizable majority of participants suffered from mental health issues while many were ambiguous in this regard.

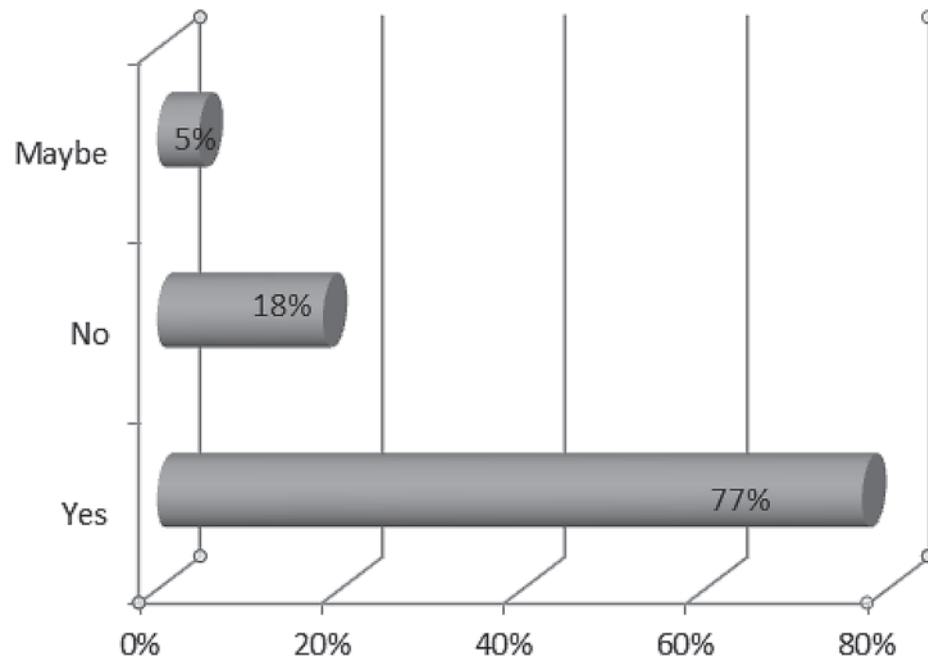


Figure 7: Altered cognitive capacities

More than 2/3rd of participants reported adverse effect on their cognitive learning capacities like attention, memory, concentration, and conceptual understanding.

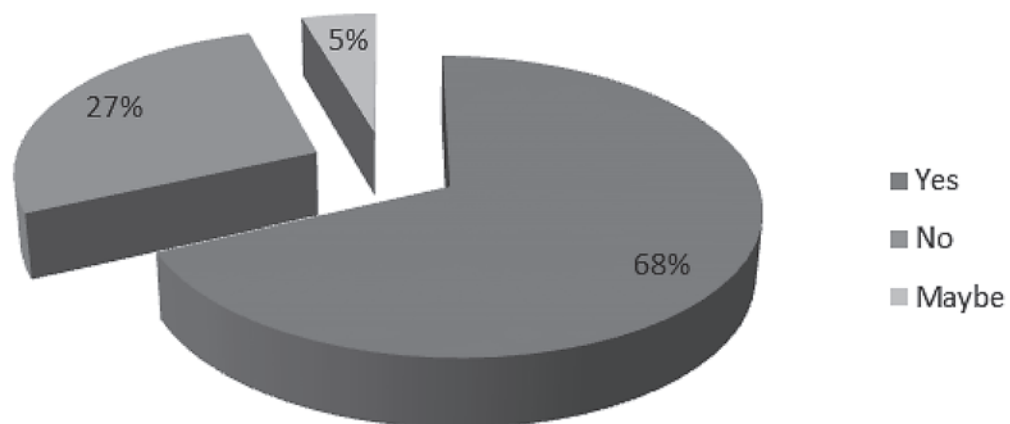


Figure 8: Overall emotional well-being

A great number of participants experienced deterioration in a sense of optimum overall well-being, particularly emotionality.

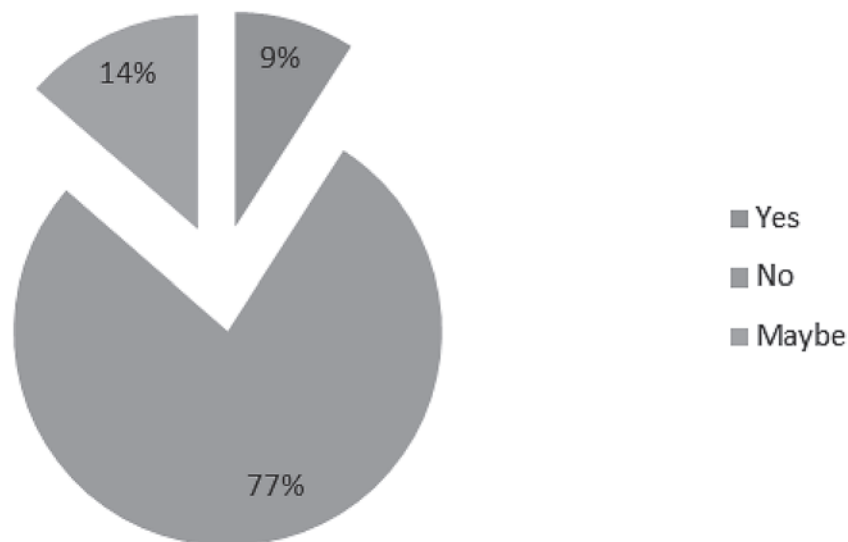


Figure 9: Perspective building

77% participants reported not gaining the essence of the course subjects while 14% were not sure about it

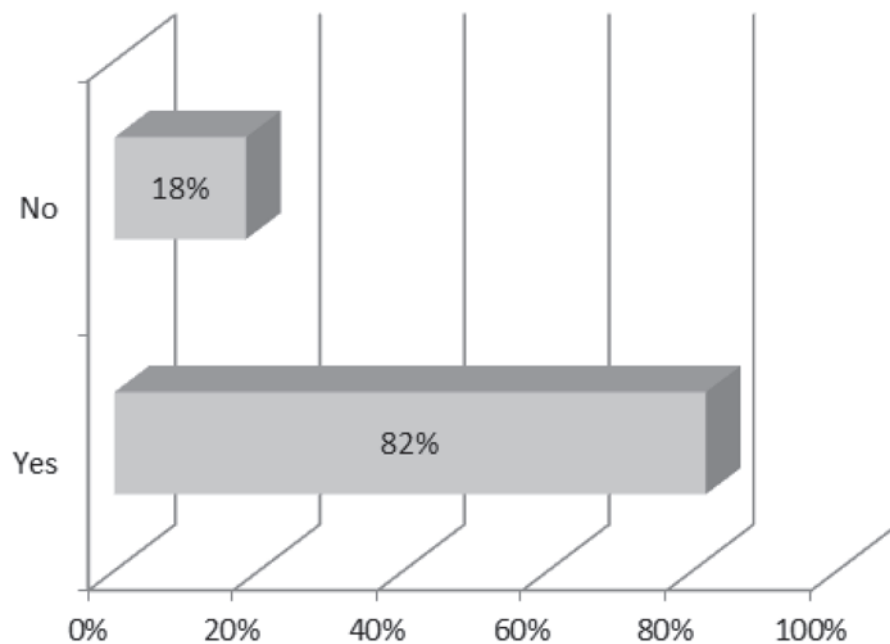


Figure 10: Experiencing learning loss

A vast majority of participants experienced learning losses due to a variety of reasons. These reasons included lack of connectivity, limited gadgets, and infrastructural limitations.

Research Findings

Social Isolation, Psychological Tumult and Learning Losses as Consequences of Physical Closure of College Campus

The day-to-day fallout of physical closure of the college was that the participants found themselves confined between the four walls of their homes. They reported that the physical spaces of college's robust co-curricular programmes, including festivals, seminars and sports days were opportunities for cross cultural and multi-disciplinary interactions. The students from different departments of college as well as from other colleges defy caste, class, and community, gaining access to common physical spaces on the campuses. Even the college library plays this inclusive role in students' lives. Students develop self-expression, self-esteem, and an integrated personality during participation in such programs. But with physical shutting, this coming together in the spirit of equal opportunity has been almost eradicated. These were sorely missed during the college closure. Though some of the co-curricular programmes of the college shifted online as well, but these did not have the same impact, and the experience was a rather contrived one of undergoing the strain of extra screen time. Within the formal curriculum too, group activities, field-based projects and learning through discussions especially for the practicum subjects were obviously missing, leading to not only learning loss but also psycho-social consequences. In the physical mode, the teachers knew each student by their face and name but now they hardly recognised their students beyond their pixelated identities as circles on the screen of a video conferencing system. The participants reported this as among the causes of social isolation from both their peers and teachers, apart from other wide-ranging psychological consequences of such insulation. Somehow this lack of classroom social cohesion contributed to participants' disinterest in engaging with online classes. During these classes, participants faced absence of non-verbal communication, non-maintenance of eye-contact and inability at judgment of the readiness-level of students through their body language, by teachers. This exacerbated since students keep their cameras off for various technical limitations. One of the reasons for this was the lack of gadgets, connectivity issues and limited data packages. This indirectly was among the causes of students' unwillingness (as well as lack of confidence) to turn on their video during online classes or interact with teachers in the virtual class. There was a perpetual fear of network loss. This further resulted in gaps between one class to another finally causing inability to cope up with the curriculum. An analysis of the transcriptions of the interview schedule examining the educational arena of research objectives indicates that more than two-thirds of the participants experienced an overall sense of educational loss. Only a very small number of students gained perspectives or conceptual understanding of their curricular course work during the online education. They were not able to fully comprehend the 'content' (knowledge was perceived as content in online mode) taught in online classes. This tended to cause a communication gap between the teacher, the course content being taught and the student causing a déjà vu sense of losing out. The lectures online were like monologues which did not involve student participation. There was less exchange of personal experiences in the class. The lectures were more focused on the presentation of tightly defined course curriculum rather than personal meaning-making of ideas and concepts from course work. The participants also admitted that the teachers attempted creative pedagogical possibilities to overcome this by giving at least one internal assessment assignment on their life in the current situation. Yet the participants clearly expressed that remote teaching is simply not creating the condition for a conceptual understanding necessary to write an assignment independently that connects curriculum with participants' lived realities.

Not only is a classroom the site of education but the natural environment of a college campus, it is also an integral part for education and a thoughtful mind. In his essay 'My School' by Rabindranath Tagore, the great philosopher, states that the aim of education is to saturate the young mind with the idea that he is born in a human world (Tagore, 1921:111-150). Physical presence in a campus allows for this saturation of a human experience. Participants reported that lack of physical activity, previously normal in a regular college day, led to restlessness, anxiety, and depression among them. Psychological effects on the students' lives were reported due to missing physical socialization with their fellow classmates in the physicality of the college campus. This can be understood in the light of various educational theories in the Indian tradition which value physical mother earth of an institution. Tagore makes it possible for the Researchers to understand the effects of the physical learning space and the social presence on students' lives as he writes:

It must be an ashram where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities; where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored; where nature's festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from man; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life (Tagore, 1933:110).

The college has a salubrious campus with a rich flora and fauna which is unusual for a metropolis. The closure in fact witnessed its flowering to an unprecedented beauty (Raina, 2020a). The research findings, that not being physically present in spacious surroundings of the college premises, impoverished the participants psychologically, can be clearly understood through Indian educational thought.

Stereotypical burdens of household oppression were reported but only among half of the participants. Of course, this can be read as the sample being from the urban metropolises of the country with more liberal familial ethos. Rather it was encouraging to note that most participants reported efficient time management which helped them cope.

A major finding of the research was that all the participants experienced a change in the teacher- student relationship. This had wide-ranging social, psychological as well as educational consequences. In the physical classroom the students and the teacher are together which supports cognitive learning directly. The very physical presence of the teachers is an enabler of concentration on teaching and learning which aligns with student's tendency to pay attention to course work. This aids curricular conceptual understanding as well as perspective building.

The humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers considered the inter-personal relationship as central to learning, arguing that self- actualization of young learners needs a stress-free facilitative teacher-student relationship (Rogers, 1961). The participants reported psychological void and a sense of learning loss in the absence of this relationship (Rogers, 1970), an explanation for which can be found in his words,

It means that she comes into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that the facilitator is being herself, not denying herself (Rogers, 1983: 154).

Where is the facilitative teacher-student relationship when the teacher meets students only on a computer screen for a limited time which is continuously stressing their body, eyes, and overall physical comfort?

A large number of participants, diverted the freeing of time from attending college physically to enrolment in various new online courses/ internships. However, these virtual engagements were simply too restrictive for actual learning or even skill development. This corroborates existing research evidence that not more than 5% students, who enrol in such type of courses, end up completing them and barely 7% return to register for such programmes for a second time (Reich and Ruiperez-Valiente, 2019).

Conclusion

The physical closure of the college was like a spanner in the wheel for each participant in some way or the other. The biggest effect of this pandemic is borne by the students as their whole academic life shifted overnight from offline to online mode. The findings indicated that a vast majority of participants sorely missed a closer student-teacher relationship, the college premises as a site of social interaction, concentration of teaching-learning in actual classrooms and were at the brink of mental ill-health. The Null Hypothesis - that the closure of offline classes because of Covid-19 did not lead to any significant consequences with respect to the social, psychological and educational aspects of college students' lives is rejected- in the light of the research findings. The overall experience due to closure of offline classes was reported by participants as that of social isolation, psychological turmoil and learning losses due to the physical closure of the college. Physical college closure and discontinuation of offline classes thus had wide-ranging adverse social, psychological, and educational consequences upon students' lives.

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