



Editorial

Beyond the COVID-19 Era: Psychological Resilience and E-safety in Education across Gulf States

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1. Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019)] pandemic, which brought about twin shocks to health and the economy, is unprecedented, has had devastating effects on national educational systems, and has affected the psychological resilience, e-safety, socio-emotional and mental well-being of students, teachers, and families. The global pandemic showed the darker side of humanity and modernity as it reminded us of the weaponization of education as some children experienced food insecurity and other effects of poverty, including the anxiety of living in vulnerable conditions or having one or more parents who had less education, time, or resources to support their studies. These impacts resulted from the pandemic's direct health toll and economic shocks, and indirect ripple effects such as diminished family income, food insecurity, increased domestic violence, and other community and societal effects have placed educational systems in a precious place. As such, promoting resilience has emerged as a way to tackle the significant increases in mental health concerns, including loneliness, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, that the pandemic has brought about (Killgore et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress” (p. 1). In this way, resilience, a multidimensional construct, represents “the ability to react positively despite difficulties, turning them into opportunities for growth” (Sisto et al., 2019, p. 2). Resiliency speaks to the ability to overcome traumatic events which can cause psychological distress, and the power of students to overcome the trauma caused by the pandemic is paramount to their success in school. Reivich and Shatté (2002) suggest seven skills through which resilience is promoted: (i) emotional management and regulation; (ii) controlling impulses; (iii) being optimistic; (iv) thinking

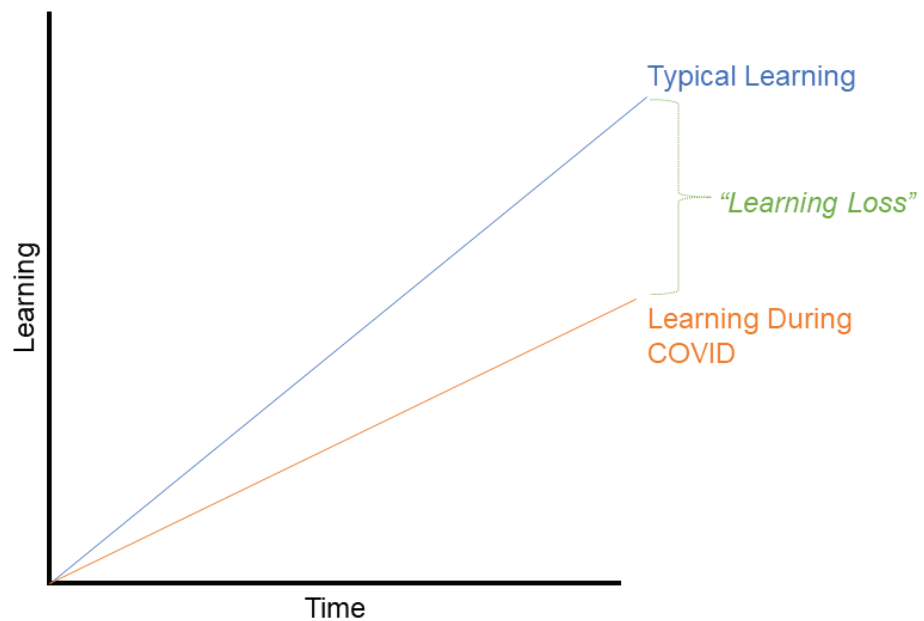
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flexibly; (v) empathy; (vi) achieving self-efficacy and confidence; and (vii) thriving positive relationships with others. Thus, schools are essential in promoting children's resilience. Resilience has been associated with academic performance (Allan et al., 2013) and promotes social and emotional well-being (Cahill et al., 2014). Seligman et al. (2009) suggest that positive education (PE) is one way in which students can be taught resilience in schools. Getting through and beyond the pandemic necessitates a proper support system since appropriate student engagement correlates to better learning outcomes based on several factors and the interplay of relationships inside the learning environment (Bond et al., 2020).

Over the last 50 years, national educational provision has seen considerable growth worldwide. At the height of the pandemic, some 1.6 billion children in more than 190 countries, or 94% of the world's student population, were out of the classroom - the most significant disruption to education in the Anthropocene's history. Over 135 countries were forced to roll out or scale up several types of remote learning modalities or "emergency response teaching" (Azevedo et al., 2020) to support the continuity of learning during school closures, including online platforms (90%), television (87%), take-home packages (85%), and radio (61%) (UNESCO et al., 2020). As multi-modal approaches and low-tech and non-tech remote learning solutions were developed, there was an increased demand for online platforms and tools. As such, COVID-19 has led to increased investments in the education technology sector, with the online education market projected to reach \$350 billion by 2025 (Li & Lalani, 2020). Despite the potential benefits of online learning, such as satisfaction, learning styles, learning gains, and study habits (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020), schools and teachers have also struggled to adopt online-based instruction solutions as they balance keeping students and staff safe by maintaining an effective learning environment and adequate infrastructure (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2022; Boltz et al., 2021). Concerns about e-safety are also surfacing as policies identify how vulnerable children should be protected. Additionally, differences in connectivity access, technological infrastructure, and previous knowledge and experience of Digi-pedagogies caused differences across countries and among students within the same countries. The amount of engaged learning time experienced by students also fluctuated drastically in different locations. Moreover, challenges related to learning loss, social isolation, and the exacerbation of existing inequalities in relation to the digital divide have emerged with the rise of e-learning (Lai & Widmar, 2021). Yet, UNESCO (2021a) highlights that there was little effort around innovation for teachers, and the focus was on bringing learning strategies to scale rather than on equity in access and outcomes. Teachers and administrations

Figure 1

How to think about “learning loss” associated with COVID-19 (Pier et al., 2021).



were unprepared for this transition and had to build emergency remote-learning systems (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022). UNESCO (2021b) notes that despite government efforts, some 500 million pre-primaries to upper-secondary school learners had no access to remote learning during the pandemic. This has caused unprecedented learning loss, (Learning loss is often described as a decline in student knowledge and skills and occurs when educational progress does not occur at the same rate at which it had historically done in previous years (Aurini & Davies, 2021; Pier et al., 2021)), unfinished learning, “learning poverty” (Azevedo et al., 2020), or the “COVID Slide” (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020), where students are not learning content and mastering skills at the same rate as they typically would during the typical academic year (see Figure 1). The education disruption caused by the pandemic poses long-term effects on school dropout, gender equity, well-being, mental health, and child protection. Such learning loss will affect an entire generation. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) placed the potential economic impact of COVID learning loss at \$14 trillion dollars lost over the next nine years (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020).

The existent literature on learning and labor market returns has documented the impact of numerous crises on education ranging from teacher strikes (Belot & Webbink, 2010; Jaume & Willen, 2019; Wills, 2014) and pandemics (Meyers & Thomasson, 2017) to famines (Dercon & Porter, 2014), floods (Thamtanajit, 2020), hurricanes (Sacerdote,

2012), and earthquakes (Andrabi et al., 2020; Ceyhan & Ceyhan, 2007) and to the Asian financial crisis (Cameron, 2009) and the 2008–09 global recession (Shores & Steinberg, 2017). However, the research also suggests that recovery from a major crisis can take many years (World Bank, 1998), and adolescent girls and marginalized populations are particularly adversely affected after a major crisis (Bandiera et al., 2019). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was already tackling a global learning crisis, with an estimated 53% of students living in learning poverty (Azevedo et al., 2020). The World Bank (2019) notes that pre-COVID-19 poverty measures in low-income countries show that only 10% of children could read and understand a simple story by age 10, in contrast to 90% of children in high-income countries. However, the World Bank has recently argued that the losses from school closures could reduce the gains that students make in their lifetime from 7.9 to 7.3 years, amounting to some \$10 trillion of lifecycle earnings [at the present value in 2017 PPP (purchasing power parity)] could be lost for this cohort of learners (Azevedo et al., 2020). This means the loss of family livelihoods and household income, and human capital investments, especially for girls and other marginalized groups, will be exacerbated due to the pandemic. On the demand side, income shocks have led to more children not returning to school (and never returning) and heading to the workforce. On the supply side, governments are now cash-strapped as they have exhausted all of their resources in the health sector, so little is left for educational reform. However, even as schools reopen, along country's overall COVID-19 health response, parents are reluctant to let their children attend.

2. The articles in this issue

The articles in this issue address various challenges that Gulf educational systems dealt with during the pandemic. The authors show how these countries tried to keep their educational systems from falling apart and some of the innovations that were used to keep learning loss at bay. However, at the same time, for a small set of students, the pandemic offered them a different way of learning, gaining new knowledge and skills, learning autonomy, and spending more time learning with their families. For parents, it allowed them to gain knowledge about the constraints that teachers face daily with learning and engagement while providing them with the ability to increase their engagement in their children's education. Teachers increased their Digi-pedagogies and learned how home circumstances affect student behavioral patterns and how deeper collaboration can result in more significant educational parental partnerships. But there is a glimmer of hope; for the first time since COVID-19 began, schools across the Gulf are beginning to

reopen and welcome students (Sircar, 2021). However, the return to in-person or hybrid learning, similar to the transition to remote learning, brings new administrative, policy-oriented, and education-related challenges and opportunities. Almost three years into the pandemic, many wonder whether the adoption of online learning (through e-learning courses, Digi-pedagogies, and distance learning programs) will continue to persist post-pandemic. The articles in this volume discuss the consequences of the pandemic on Gulf education and offers recommendations based on the lessons learned. The evidence from these articles in this volume suggests that governments in the Gulf region have their work cut out for them as they need to reform their educational systems to curb the learning loss that will occur, redesign in-person instruction, and pay attention to Digi-pedagogies and not focus on assessments and measurements but on the holistic education of the whole child. There is a need for new educational opportunities across Gulf states, and the pandemic has only served to expose the hardships that students, teachers, and parents face and the work needed to correct these.

tavis d. jules, Ashley Mayworm, and Amy Christensen Nelson examine the use of positive education (PE), which aims to build strengths, capabilities, well-being, and resilience in educational communities, before and during the pandemic to combat learning loss and its efficacy upon learning in the governorate of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), the UAE. They differentiate between social-emotional learning (SEL), implemented in the USA for a while now, and PE, borrowed from Australia to the UAE, and argue that based on how PE has been implemented in the UAE, SEL may be seen as one facet of PE. They look at how PE has been applied in private schools in RAK and its role in combatting learning loss before and during the pandemic. In investigating how educational leaders, teachers, and students perceive PE and its influence on student well-being, as well as how well-equipped students and teachers were able to handle the effects of the pandemic after participating in PE, they contend that although PE has been diffused globally, in the UAE, it provided students with the ability to cope with stressors associated with the pandemic. They observed that the pandemic impacted students' well-being in different ways. For example, they noticed that as the amount of student screen time increased because of the pandemic, this profoundly affected students academically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically. They also show that PE was instrumental in supporting student resilience and well-being by providing scaffolding for students during the pandemic. They recommend that a whole school approach be embraced as PE is implemented, allowing its principles to be supported by teachers, families, and students.

Junifer Abatayo uses Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* to explore how teachers reflect through communities of practice (CoP) on their understanding of their own "selves" in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on in-depth interviews with five Gulf teachers, Abatayo highlights that before the global pandemic, teachers were already facing challenges in their teaching and personal development. The pandemic provided a space for them to reflect on this. Abatayo's focus on developing teachers' professional lives and its connection to exploring ourselves, our practices, and the works of scholars and peers are central to teachers' personal and professional growth. Abatayo shows how an undivided life, where personal and professional identities intersect, is an essential component of reflection that allows teachers to understand their "own" engagement in different CoPs. She argues that online communities provide a learning space that enables teachers to share their individual goals, learning, and expertise freely. Abatayo illustrates the role of online professional learning communities and concludes that they became sophisticated during the pandemic and provided the tools teachers needed to enhance their professional growth. She offers recommendations of how teachers' lived experiences might inform their undivided life and reflective practices.

Martina Dickson's article on university student-parents' experiences in the UAE during COVID-19 speaks to their challenges with their children's learning experiences, well-being, and peer and instructor interactions. Using data from some 175 university student respondents on their parental needs, Dickenson notes that since most student-parents have responsibility for at least one child while also attending school, this affects their learning and ability to meet academic deadlines. She explains in meticulous detail the struggles that student parents face and how the global pandemic only exacerbated invisible parental labor. She contends that in addition to dealing with their own closers at the university level and shifting to remote learning, student-parents also needed to contend with the challenges of at-home childcare, their children's remote learning, and parental supervision due to school closures. These combined situations and experiences created a toxic cocktail of pressure and more responsibility for student-parents. Dickson discovers that while a small percentage of student-parents found positive changes stemming from the pandemic, a majority of student-parents were significantly affected by the pandemic, given they found working from home, often without a dedicated workspace, while simultaneously having childcare responsibilities and distractions a deterrent to their studies. In other words, student-parents found their academic outcomes impacted by the pandemic. Dickson also observed that socioeconomic status determined the extent to which the pandemic influenced student-parents,

with those student-parents who had a dedicated working space at home where they could focus on schoolwork, fearing better during the pandemic. These findings speak to the need to provide post-pandemic academic spaces, such as university libraries, study pods, etc., that allow students to thrive in their studies. She recommends that college administrators will need to begin to care for the holistic student-parent, as student life is not just about academics.

Noha Abbass discusses the role of inclusive education in America and Egypt using comparative methods. Abbass shows the similarities and differences between Egypt and America regarding inclusive education and argues that while the US and Egypt have different political and social contexts, they have endorsed inclusive education for exceptional children in their constitutions, and this inclusion came about differently. In the USA (a centralized system), the civil rights movement laid the foundation for exceptional children and persons with disabilities. In Egypt (a decentralized system), the 2011 revolution cemented the rights of exceptional children. Abbass compares and contrasts how each country stacks up against the other in the areas of law and legislation, administration and funding, school models, curriculum and assessment, and teacher preparation. However, the countries have various enrolment, quality, and provision disparities. She shows that, for example, although exceptional children are protected in Egypt, they still remain excluded from mainstream education. She concludes by suggesting that stronger accountability and monitoring are needed in both systems and makes recommendations that Egypt can learn from the US systems as it undertakes systematic reforms.

Ali Al Matari's study seeks to measure the socio-emotional competencies of students in middle schools in the Sultanate of Oman in the post-COVID-19 era. Using descriptive research method, she examines an OECD socio-emotional learning questionnaire. From a random sample of 936 students in Grade 9, ages 13 and 16, she measured five competencies: task performance, emotional regulation, collaboration, open-mindedness, and engagement with others. The findings demonstrate that students have a high level of socio-emotional competence, with an average of 3.70 (74%). In addition, students' overall performance concerning all five competencies ranged between 60.3% and 82%. The results also demonstrated a statistically significant difference with regard to the variable of gender in favor of girls. Although boys outperformed girls in emotional regulation, the sampled girls exhibited a more remarkable ability to regulate positive emotions. Girls scored higher on the open-mindedness component, demonstrating their willingness to read and engage with different kinds of books and magazines. The recommendations emphasize the need to incorporate socio-emotional learning into school curricula and

classroom activities. In addition, the Ministry of Education is urged to organize courses, workshops, and lectures on socio-emotional learning to raise awareness about its importance in society. Moreover, more comparative studies should be undertaken analyzing socio-emotional programs and their impact on acquiring academic and linguistic skills.

Tania Aghar and Phil Quirke document the challenges that a set of preservice teachers in the UAE faced when the COVID-19 outbreak necessitated a sudden shift to online teaching and learning. They show the impact of the pandemic on school-based experiences, such as teaching practicum (TP), and what was done to cope with the transition to online learning. They discuss how student reflection, a central component of the mentor college teachers, has been instrumental in helping students work through the pandemic as teaching was conducted remotely and on digital platforms. In chronicling how students dealt with digital readiness and the guidelines implemented, they claim that the tenets for the transition consist of four elements: professionalism, structured revised guidelines, flexibility, and a multidisciplinary collaborative effort. They explain that four themes, adaptability challenges, lessons learned, mentor school teachers (MST) support for preservice teachers, and MST positive feedback, arose as themes from the data. They further contend that a productive mentorship relationship between MST and preservice teachers' (PTs) practicums in schools was essential, given that PTs were apprehensive about their lack of preparedness to switch online. They additionally note that PT's ability to face online challenges, given their diverse background and learning styles, has paved the way for them to become resilient and empathetic. They argue that TP adaptability is essential in any higher education institution.

Using an intersectionality framework coupled with a phenomenological case study, Sarah Hopkyns discusses the implication of culturally responsive e-learning in post-COVID-19 higher education by examining cultural, religious, and sociolinguistic dynamics. During the pandemic, she looked at students' perspectives on access, interaction, and engagement during Zoom classes and found that "intersecting factors, such as gender, religion, culture, linguistic challenges in English-medium universities, and fear of judgment, affected participants' comfort levels and learning effectiveness in online classes." She advances that online and hybrid learning needs to adapt to the sociocultural realities of Gulf states to promote student comfort and protect E-safety and privacy in post-pandemic education. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L) was affected by several digital, cultural, gender, and linguistic divides. For example, female students have issues using video cameras for online learning, as this is part of a cultural *Mashrabiyya* structure, which disrobes the privacy of traditional wooden latticework screens found in Arabic homes. Using students' reflective essays,

Hopkyns chronicles why female students keep their video cameras and microphones off during e-learning. From an intersectional perspective, Hopkyns notes that e-learning is affected by the suitability of home environments for online studying, improper e-learning spaces, gender norms, expectations, E-safety, and cultural perceptions of the home. She concludes by arguing that multiple overlapping and interconnected social identities, embedded in what she calls “circles of privilege and circles of disadvantage,” shape educational experiences.

3. The geospatial dimensions of the future of unfinished learning - Thinking ahead of the next pandemic

Although deaths from the pandemic have tapered off as of the beginning of 2023 and new cases are rising in China, as we go to press, the question remains as to what we have truly learned from the global pandemic and what lessons can be garnered toward the next global disaster. In essence, “the fallout from the pandemic threatens to depress this generation’s prospects and constrict their opportunities far into adulthood” (Dorn et al., 2021, p. 2). The pandemic has only shown the exacerbation of educational inequalities globally. Although the 2020–21 school period ended on a high with rising vaccination rates, we must also tackle the longstanding educational inequities in the post-pandemic period. While not all students experienced learning loss, scholars have argued that, on average, students are about five months behind in their learning with widened achievement gaps while affecting historically disadvantaged students the hardest (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Dorn et al., 2021; Nelson Christensen et al., 2022). If the ripple effects of unfinished learning are not attended to, it is estimated that in the US alone, the impact could be about \$128 to \$188 billion every year the post-pandemic cohort enters the workforce (Dorn et al., 2021). Moreover, the students who have slipped backward, losing knowledge and skills they once had, are also at risk of earning less across their lifetime. Academics were not the only thing that impacted student success; several students lost family members, others had caregivers who lost their sources of income, and almost all of them suffered social isolation (and, in some cases, depression, anxiety, stress, and trauma). Moreover, increased levels of trauma and stress levels have been cited as significant causes of concern for teachers, staff, and students.

As we return to some sense of normalcy, many parents are concerned about their children’s mental or social and emotional health and development. This means that if we do not ensure that students complete their unfinished learning, we will face many other well-being challenges ranging from student disengagement and dropping out of

formal education entirely to chronic absenteeism to labor shortages and lower teacher retention rates. These problems can impact an entire generation of students. Evidence is mounting to show the deficiencies of heterogeneous digitally based solutions endorsed during the pandemic and the complexities of the social and multidimensional nature of learning, even in privileged contexts with connectivity and teachers with Digi-pedagogies experiences or in countries that made tremendous efforts to provide such access. The degrees of unfinished learning due to the pandemic differ by student, subject, and grade. For students to recover from this, we need to know the severity of the impact. Therefore, to combat unfinished learning, educators will need to determine the areas where learning needs to be accelerated to provide high-quality instruction and ensure that students are learning adequately. Because educational systems were at various stages of readiness for the pandemic, as students return to school, they will need to be supplied with quality access to opportunities, support systems, and strong and supportive relationships to sustain educational opportunities. Moreover, teacher capacity and institutional fragmentation issues will also have to be addressed with more significant investments in Digi-pedagogies.

To conclude, how we approach learning loss will have consequences for generations of students. We know that education has numerous tangible and intangible goals and outcomes. At the system's heart are assessments that measure short-term, cognitive, and instructional outcomes that do not always provide a comprehensive picture of where learners are. For example, test scores have been found to correlate negatively with students' well-being and confidence (OECD, 2019; Zhao, 2022). Testing does not predict an individual's future success, and several cognitive skills lost during the pandemic play a more significant role in contributing to student success. Therefore, we can take several proactive measures now that the pandemic has begun to subside and schools are opening safely in the Gulf. First, we need to recognize that students have experienced several types of loss, and we need to meet students where they are. This means that rather than applying principles of universalistic learning, teachers should be encouraged to use their professional judgment, work with students individually, care for the whole student, and not focus on curriculum edicts and testing outcomes. Second, while some attention should be given to educational outcomes, attention should be given to both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, and 21st-century learning skills should be emphasized to keep abreast of technological change and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which blends the physical with the cyber-physical. Third, education should be student-centered, and the teacher should serve as a facilitator of learning, especially since COVID-19 has allowed students to develop learning independence, become more

resilient and responsive to different learning environments, and take charge of their learning. Fourth, recent scholarship (Jules et al., in this volume; Nelson Christensen et al., 2022) shows that greater parental involvement in educational learning and outcomes is critical in the future if we are to make significant gains in eradicating and preventing further learning loss. Fifth, we need to assess the virtues of the aspects of online/hybrid/flex learning that have been beneficial to some students and determine what aspects can be incorporated into the current curriculum. Finally, endorse the United Nations Build Back Better (BBB) integrated approach to disaster risk reduction and apply its core principles to education. Such a framework would prepare us for the next educational disruption. The pandemic has shown that disruptions can occur suddenly. Now, it is not if another interruption will occur, but rather a question of when it will happen and how prepared our educational systems will be, how resilient our students will be, how will they cope, and what teachers need to do when the next disruption comes along.

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