Hidden Dropout during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study in Tabas, Iran

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Abstract

Background: Hidden dropout is an important global issue which was studied before pandemics. The present study aimed to explore the experience of students' hidden dropout during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: This is a qualitative study conducted in Tabas, South Khorasan province, Iran in 2021. The participants comprised 37 teachers, parents, and students who were interviewed through semi-structured interview. Data were analyzed via thematic analysis.

Results: Our results revealed that the new ways of teaching were greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing dissatisfaction in the participants. Five main categories emerged, namely unfair educational platform, decreased teacher authority, informalization of education rituals, reduction of the school social dimensions, and the emergence of action norms and preferences.

Conclusion: Upgrading the educational platform on a national scale is one of the serious necessities. Additionally, it seems essential to increase the knowledge, skills, and technological literacy of all groups under similar conditions.

Keywords: Student dropout, COVID-19, Distance learning, Social justice

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has affected all societies worldwide. That said, since the very beginning, such an epidemic created a sense of risk and anxiety in the world (1). The effects of the virus were evident in all human and social spheres, ranging from health and disease to economics and politics (2). Meanwhile, education is one of the areas that has been most strongly affected, with millions of dropouts among students as the first unfortunate consequence of this epidemic (3).

It was previously shown that interruption of in-person instruction and the unpredictable efficacy of alternative forms of education in many countries caused learning loss and disengagement with learning, especially for disadvantaged students (4). In Mexico, the main problems of teachers were found to be connectivity, student attitude, and student attendance in class (5). Comparing different training platforms in China, Chen and colleagues suggested certain ways to make some upgrades, like improving support service, boosting the convenience of interactive communication, optimizing the ease of use, and enriching platform resources such as Student Educational Network (SHAD in Persian) (6).

One of the most important problems associated with COVID-19 was the dropout of many students in different countries, especially in poor ones (7, 8). School dropout is believed to have several adverse effects, including lower rates of school enrollment (7), learning losses (9), nutritional problems among poor students (10), and social exclusion (11). Hence, many studies have focused on the dropout during COVID-19 (12-14). Dropout in this time; however, seems to be related to the quality of learning, considered as a learning shock, by Kaffenberger (15). Such a shock reflects a dimension of educational weakness and backwardness called hidden dropout.

Hidden dropout, as an emotional and cognitive issue, refers to students who are physically present in the classroom while being negligent in learning and teaching processes (16). Furthermore, in a previous paper, hidden dropouts have been defined as students who only hear their names when they are called, but do not have educational qualifications (17). In another paper, it was also stated that hidden

dropout refers to a group of students who, in spite of paying tuition, having student status, and being on the school catalog, are absent from class all day or leave school for a long time (18).

In general, hidden dropout is influenced by complex factors, often affected by a long process of lack of communication with the school. Nonetheless, there are few studies on hidden dropout, indicating that it is on the increase and impacts the proper growth of students' physical and mental health, the quality of teaching in schools, and the stability of the local community. In this regard, a study was conducted among immigrant students in Switzerland, investigating their attitudes toward school values. Based on its results, the quality of the students' relationships with classmates and teachers acted as an important predictor for their lack of communication which leads to hidden dropout (19).

Kaffenberger addressed the educational shock during COVID-19 (15). It seems that hidden dropout is a global issue, with many students being affected by psychological, social, and family poverty; a number of them were unfamiliar with distance education. These students reluctantly attended classes and had no control over online condition. Moreover, part of the education was done with families due to the pandemic situation. Under such circumstances, the quality of education sharply declined and the phenomenon of hidden dropouts became more apparent; nonetheless, no study has been carried out in this area. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the experience of the hidden dropout in the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, we sought to identify the dimensions or, more precisely, the reasons behind the hidden dropout formation. In this study, the researchers attempted to explore the experience of this phenomenon.

2. Methods

This is a qualitative study conducted in Tabas, South Khorasan province, Iran. Hidden dropout is a phenomenon in which most important criterion is the dissatisfaction of teachers, students, and parents with the quality of education. More than ever, during the COVID-19 pandemic, almost parents, students and teachers were worried about the low quality of education. In this situation, students only get a degree or certification while practically, not having learned anything. This study aimed

to explore this negative development. The present research is a qualitative study conducted in 2021 in Tabas city, South Khorasan province, Iran. This city has its own mixed socio-cultural context due to the presence of mines. Additionally, this city contains different social cultures in Iran. Therefore, the researchers believed that this multicultural society gives a better understanding of hidden dropout. The participants in the study included students, teachers, and parents of the city's elementary and middle schools. The sampling method was purposeful, and in some cases, snowball sampling was employed. The inclusion criteria were having a student child (ren), and being a teacher or a student. The exclusion criteria; on the other hand, were dissatisfaction with participation in the research or the existence of a problem hindering the participation. In line with the data saturation criterion, 36 participants were recruited in the study (Table 1).

To collect data, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted among the teachers and students at school and with parents in the park or in some cases, at home. Arrangements for the interview were made in advance. Of note, the participants were informed about the purpose of the interview, and after setting the time and place, the interviews were conducted. They started with a general question followed by a number of additional questions. The first questions asked included: "Please tell us about the educational challenges and concerns during COVID-19." "How did teaching in COVID-19 affect learning and interacting in the classrooms?". Subsequently, for more in-depth information, some exploratory questions were posed, such as "Can you explain more or give an example?". In the end, the researcher thanked the participants and asked them for other possible comments. Of course, due to the differences among the participants concerning their roles (parents, teachers, and students), the interview method was flexible. The interviews were recorded after obtaining the participants' consent.

Afterwards, the data were transcribed using Clark and Broun's thematic analysis method (20). The steps included getting familiar with the data, exploring the initial codes and sub-themes, reviewing the themes according to the codes or statements, and defining and labelling the themes. This process was carried out through a critical reflexivity approach. Moreover, data analysis was performed manually.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants in this study

Number	Role	Condition	Number	Role	Condition
1	Mother	Has a secondary child	20	Student	Eighth grade
2	Father	Has a secondary child	21	Student	Sixth grade
3	Mother	Has two secondary children and one primary child	22	Student	Eleventh grade
4	Mother	Has two primary children	23	Student	Tenth grade
5	Father	Has a primary child	24	Student	Third grade
6	Mother	Has two primary children	25	Student	Ninth grade
7	Mother	Has a secondary child	26	Student	First grade
8	Father	Has a primary child	27	Student	Second grade
9	Mother	Has a primary child	28	Student	Ninth grade
10	Mother	Has two secondary children	29	Student	Eighth grade
11	Mother	Has a primary child and a secondary child	30	Student	Fifth grade
12	Father	Has a primary child	31	Teacher	Second grade
13	Mother	Has a primary child and a secondary child	32	Teacher	Secondary school
14	Mother	Has two primary children	33	Teacher	Secondary school
15	Student	Fourth grade	34	Teacher	Secondary school
16	Student	Twelfth grade	35	Teacher	Fourth grade
17	Student	Fifth grade	36	Teacher	Secondary school
18	Student	Seventh grade			
19	Student	Eighth grade			

Table 2: Concepts, categories, and themes related to experiencing hidden dropout during COVID-19

Concepts	Categories	Themes
SHAAD platform problems, lack of comprehensive training, unequal educational situations, not having access to a range of educational platforms, limited use of teaching aids, reduction in collective learning	Poor educational infrastructure, formation of unequal educational context, poor educational potentials in the new context	Unfair educational system
Teacher's scarce social media literacy, students' high knowledge of the media space, lack of communication between students and teachers, poor teaching methods, learning errors, lower students' expectations of the teacher, belief in the appropriateness of service and inexperience of teachers	High media literacy of students, lack of two-way communication, poor control over the training platform, students' critical attitude	Decreased teacher authority
Poor teaching, reduction in the quality of teaching feedback, superficial learning, irregular curriculum, students' disorderliness, neglecting orders, presence of interfering factors, entry of emotional behavior in class, ignorance of the evaluation system, certainty of passing courses	Disruption of the training process, extracurricular courses curriculum, dominance of informal behavior, poor evaluation system	Informalization of school rituals
Inefficient interactions with family and friends, lack of educational incentives, alteration in the pattern of encouragement and punishment, extreme family interventions, conflict in roles, reduction in training supervision and control, inadequate virtual education rules	Inefficient real interactions, poor system of encouragement and punishment, conflicts and institutional interventions, inadequate educational rules	Reduction in the social dimensions of learning
Severe dependence on parents, preference for teaching aids to in-person teaching in high school, carelessness in education, the earning of a degree via money, the worthlessness of learning and education	Emergence of dependencies, higher educational procrastination, intensification of paper qualification	Emergence of action norms and preferences

Basically, trustworthiness is a main factor in any qualitative research. Based on the previous literature, the following four criteria promote trustworthiness: (a) credibility (internal validity); (b) transferability (external validity/ generalizability); (c) dependability (reliability); (d) confirmability (objectivity) (21). To verify credibility, the approach of member check was used. In terms of transferability, there were explicit connections with the cultural and social contexts, where the data collection was completed. In addition, to assess dependability, a researcher who is blinded to the data collection and data analysis processes examined the processes and the research results and then confirmed them. Audit trial and critical reflexivity were also employed to assess the confirmability of the study. In this work, it is noteworthy that we strictly adhered to the research steps and respected honesty in analysis and presentation of the results.

The ethical principles in the study included obtaining informed consent from the subjects for participation and assuring them about anonymity and confidentiality when recording the interviews, and also giving out subjects the right to withdraw from the study.

3. Results

The participants in the study included students, teachers, and parents of the city's elementary and middle schools. In line with the data saturation criterion, 36 participants were recruited in the study. The following five main themes were extracted in this study: unfair educational system; decreased teacher authority; informalization of education rituals; reduction of school social dimensions; emergence of action norms and preferences (Table 2).

3.1. Unfair Educational System

The outbreak of COVID-19 created a different and new context of education which was known to be unfair. That said, primarily, none of the users of this system has enough experience in this regard, which led to injustice. Unequal educational platforms, poor educational infrastructure, and reduction in potentials and capacities of face-to-face education in virtual education were regarded as important factors affecting students' hidden dropout. Many students could not afford a cellphone to use this platform. In addition, the cost of the Internet was regarded as a financial burden for certain families. Accordingly, it was not possible for every student to participate in an equal educational environment. SHAAD is an educational platform in Iran which has its drawbacks; therefore, both teachers and students had to use other platforms, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, which had their own problems. Unlike virtual education, in-person education placed all students from different classes in the same situation, leading to an increase in dropout rates.

Participant No. 10:

"Many teachers did not accept the SHADD program at all, saying that the infrastructure was such that there was little interaction and they could not do any tests. This encouraged the students to get connected via Telegram or WhatsApp."

Participant No. 20:

"Previously, we were all in the same class at school and we were learning the lessons whereas now, we have to be at home. Well, I did not have a separate room and I wanted to learn the lesson by sound."

Participant No. 1:

"There was no laboratory, practical work, or group work. Well, the student is trained individually, and this individual training cannot be much interesting, and we cannot communicate well."

3.2. Decreased Teacher Authority

In the face-to-face environment of education, teachers enjoyed a traditionally accepted authority which declined in virtual education. The formation of education in the context of cyberspace reduced interaction among students and teachers. This, in turn, affected students' familiarity with the classroom and caused a lack of two-way communication. Additionally, little control over the teaching platform, the weakness of the teaching method and the associated educational flaws, the training noises, the power outages, and the weak Internet connection made it difficult for the teachers to control the virtual teaching platform. Another reason behind this issue is that students' media literacy was more than their teachers, especially high school students. In some cases, the students offered their teachers some tips on using online programs. These lead to the degradation of the teachers' authority.

Participant No. 36:

"We had about 400 students and we could not really recognize them or memorize their names."

Participant No. 19:

"We waited for the teacher to have an error. We chatted on this page a lot and kept talking until the class time was over. The other teachers could not manage it."

Participant No. 16:

"Sometimes, the teacher himself had no knowledge of cyberspace at all, so he did not know what to do. A teacher with 20 years of teaching

experience faced the students while he knew very little about cyberspace to meet their needs. I knew much better than my teacher as to what capabilities there are."

3.3. Informalization of School Rituals

The formation of education in cyberspace caused the curriculum of students to be irregular and their classes to be held at different hours of the day and night. Moreover, teachers sometimes had to reduce the course load and the classes were not held full time. As a result, students did not plan their lessons properly and postponed their lessons to different hours. They were taught through an informal space. The factor of dominating the informal space also refers to the introduction of emotional concepts, due to the virtualization of the teaching process and the use of stickers and emotional sentences as well as words that affected the teaching process. The presence of interfering factors, such as distractions from the home environment as well as the presence of guests and noise pollution intensified this issue and led the students to shift away from focusing on education in cyberspace. All these factors affected them and deteriorated the quality of education. Prior to the pandemic, teaching began with teachers' presentations and continued with questions and answers along with practice and teaching feedback; however, this process was not fully maintained in virtual education. Because students were not seriously engaged in learning, they cheated or asked someone else to take their exams. As a result, they were deprived of studying and learning.

Participant No. 13:

"Children's learning is sometimes complete, but superficial, because there is no practice and repetition in the classroom."

Participant No. 3:

"Some of the family members, especially parents, even took the exam instead of the student. I saw that the student had not even opened his book."

Participant No. 7:

"The students were participated both in the morning and in the afternoon classes because the teachers themselves chose the time of physical attendance."

3.4. Reduction in the Social Dimensions of Learning

Schools offer real interactions which can be attributed to the existence of educational rules, competition, along with encouragement and punishment system for students. Interaction in the school environment was one of the effective factors for the physical presence of students and affected many educational issues. Nonetheless, such interactions were not possible in virtual education. Minimization of competition among students as well as the lack of prior encouragement or punishment system led to a decrease in motivation to learn which is being known as a cause of hidden dropout.

Participant No. 11:

"My elementary school student was very interested in the star stickers that the teacher gave him, and he was very encouraged to study; however, my high school student said that everyone was cheating and we couldn't compete like before, so there is no motivation for study."

Participant No. 2:

"The school environment indirectly provides the context for education, but this is lacking in virtual education. Face-to-face conversation between students and teachers or between students and other groups disappeared in E-learning."

3.5. Emergence of Action Norms and Preferences

Virtual education led to the formation of negative educational norms and practices, including carelessness, not doing homework properly, intensification of paper qualification, and dependency on parents' help; all of which exacerbated the severity of hidden dropouts. Students with hidden dropouts not only did not prioritize learning, but also developed extreme carelessness about education. They suspended their educational affairs and pursued their education to a minimal extent. As for the elementary school students, they found an extreme dependence on family members, especially their parents. This was partly due to the lack of familiarity with cyberspace, which made the parents helpful. Nonetheless, this issue led to the extreme formation of dependence on

parents in education. The students did not pursue their education unless their parents got involved in education. Furthermore, in high schools, students tended to prefer DVDs and virtual learning resources to their teachers. Some students believed that they would get a degree anyway.

Participant No. 22:

"I was not in the mood to sit and study. I didn't want to be present in the training classes. I would have liked to use more educational DVDs, but I did not actually use them. I was very inefficient."

Participant No. 25:

"My teacher asked me just to attend the class so that I can take the exam. I was sure I would be accepted and get my degree if I attended in classes."

4. Discussion

The formation of virtual education was a new experience on a global scale; the country of Iran was not an exception. The present study aimed to explore the experience of students' hidden dropout in the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that electronic learning altered educational process with the spread of the pandemic in a way that even the knowledge and attitude of students about the school and its functions changed. The five main themes which emerged in the study comprise unfair educational system, decreased teacher authority, informalization of school rituals, reduction in the social dimensions of learning, and emergence of action norms and preferences.

The educational platform in Iran has faced several problems related to educational policy during COVID-19. Meanwhile, educational institutions should make the most benefit from the communication technology infrastructure and be able to design easy-access and low-cost education platforms for families. All studies in this regard have shown that a proper educational platform helps students live in vulnerable families of a society. Significant structural modifications, such as the extensive use of information and communication technology, the development of online platforms for education, and strengthening of rural infrastructure are suggested (22). Furthermore, user-friendly educational platforms, specifically designed for the early childhood

period, are recommended (23). It is clear that realizing educational justice under such conditions, and even under normal conditions, requires fair policies. Thus, policymakers in this field should consider the issue of educational justice as a top priority. Educational inequality has become a problematic challenge in Iran's current situation. When educational justice is not observed in non-pandemic conditions, it is obvious that it will be aggravated in this crisis.

Decreased teacher authority is another reason behind hidden dropout. It was shown that teachers' authority level increases the students' learning ranks to a great extent in the studied society (24). Teacher authority is essentially a form of professional authority granted by students who affirm a teacher's expertise, self-confidence, and belief in the importance of his or her work (25). In addition, the authority of teachers provides a proper context for classroom learning (26). In this regard, it was shown that teacher's authority can control students' aggressiveness and disruptive classroom behavior (27). Moreover, levels of students' legitimacy to their teachers are related to teachers' authority (28). Therefore, the reduction in teacher authority can undermine many aspects of learning, which was highlighted by the findings of the present study as an influential element in hidden dropout.

Informalization of school rituals is another reason for the hidden dropout. School rituals and the related symbolic relationships serve to orient students to particular worldviews (29). The rules, expectations, and customs of a given school reflects its values (30). However, in virtual learning, many of these rituals underwent some alterations because of changes in the context of education. Additionally, students encountered new situations with the minimum control and surveillance. Another finding of the study concerns a reduction in the social dimensions of learning, which is related to the social learning theory. In this theory, teaching and learning can be improved via observation, attention, retention, and motivation. Furthermore, engaging students in a group work to solve problems, carrying out projects, engaging them in role-plays, and conducting inquiry learning to construct the meaning of scientific concepts, issues, and phenomena are among the other effective factors (30). Virtual learning led to the disappearance of these social dimensions,

which augmented the hidden dropout rate. Finally, the emergence of new action norms and preferences triggers hidden dropout. These actions have changed several dimensions of cognition and behavior among students; for example, regarding taking exams in this period, the participants believed that most scores are probably unreal. In addition, some students cheated more easily, resulting in a particular style of behavior. In fact, new rituals of education emerged during the pandemic and worsened hidden dropout.

4.1. Limitations

This was a qualitative study and the results should be generalized with caution. Therefore, conducting quantitative research on this issue will be recommended.

5. Conclusions

Distance learning is a new experience on a global scale; Iran is not an exception. This study showed that the subjects were led towards hidden dropout in the context of study. The issue of hidden dropout is of great importance. Furthermore, it seems as if part of educational systems will operate with distance learning in the future. Hence, better policies are expected in this domain. For this purpose, it is suggested to improve the media literacy of teachers, create accessible virtual platforms, and take into account the vulnerable students in these policies.

Ethical Approval

The Ethics Review Board of Yazd University approved the present study with the code of IR.YAZD.REC.1400.086. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this manuscript declare no relationships with any company whose products or services may be related to the subject matter of the article. Ahmad Kalateh Sadati is a member of the editorial board.

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