

Victory For All:
Overcoming the Difficulties of Remote Learning in Children with Autism

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects that remote learning had on children with autism. Faculty members at Victory Academy in Wilsonville, OR were interviewed on their experiences teaching remotely during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They were asked 8 open-ended questions that covered topics regarding their classroom, transitioning to online learning, transitioning back into the classroom, and how their students are doing now. Results indicated that there were increased levels of distractibility and lower levels of engagement in their students while doing remote learning. Further analysis indicated an increased presence of mental health issues as well as some students- specifically high-school aged students- feeling like they lost out on key life events, such as prom, that they were unable to make up. This study concluded that remote learning did negatively impact students with autism. Although long-term effects are unknown, the students have been able to continue with their education with minimal backtracking and are once again able to foster their social needs and regain the in-person support that Victory Academy has always prioritized.

Overview

The inspiration behind this research came from my experiences volunteering at Victory Academy during high school. Victory Academy is a year-round school for children with autism located in Wilsonville, Oregon. It was founded by Tricia Hasbrook and Thea Schreiber in 2009 and was inspired by their sons as they were unable to find a school that met their needs. Victory Academy prides themselves on being inclusive. This means that all faculty ensures that every student gets the same opportunities regardless of where they are on the spectrum (Oregonian 2015).

During my time there as a peer mentor, I was able to form really special and close connections with the students I was partnered with. Because of how impactful my experience at Victory Academy was, being able to work with Tricia Hasbrook, the founder and director of the school, as well as her faculty for my capstone project was really meaningful to me. My personal motivation for pursuing this project also stems from the fact that many different age groups are suffering developmentally due to the effects of remote and virtual learning since the COVID-19 pandemic.

While volunteering at Victory Academy I was able to notice the team that is behind each student and how they work together to ensure the student succeeds. During the pandemic, I struggled to adjust to remote learning, but I would oftentimes think about the students at Victory Academy and how they were handling these new changes. Every age group has missed out on developmental and social skills due to being isolated and children with autism is a demographic that is oftentimes overlooked. For this reason, I became really interested in learning more about what changes teachers have noticed in their students before, during, and after remote learning for a significant portion of time.

The introduction section of this paper will give a better understanding of what autism is as well as how remote learning has impacted students not only developmentally, but socially and emotionally as well. The methods section will describe how 15-minute interviews were conducted with faculty at Victory Academy to understand their experiences firsthand. The results section dives deeper into what was uncovered in the qualitative interviews while the discussion section provides an analysis.

Introduction

Autism Defined

About 1% of the world's population is on the autism spectrum which equates to over 75 million people (Therapeutic Pathways 2021). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder with deficits in social communication, the presence of restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. ASD is also a pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) which is an umbrella term for a group of disorders that have delays in communication and social skills (Hodges 2020) such aspergers, disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder in addition to autism.

1 in 59 children (up to age 8) are diagnosed with ASD and is more common in males with a 3:1 ratio. ASD is present in all ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, but caucasian children are more likely to be diagnosed- due to resources (Hodges 2020). Evaluating a child for ASD begins with screenings recommended at 9, 15, and 30 months with specific autism screenings at 18, 24, and 30 months as indicated by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Some early potential indicators of ASD include a lack of eye contact, trouble responding to one's name, difficulty sharing, not being able to gesture at 12 months, and loss of social skills and language. Children

then get referred to their team which is composed of a pediatric neurologist, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician, child psychologist, and child psychiatrist (Hodges 2020).

It is crucial to understand that autism is unique in every instance and has many components such as biological ties, cognitive ties, sociological ties, linguistic ties, epistemic ties, affective ties, and social ties (Belek 2019). Diving further into symptoms, they can begin in early childhood and can easily go unrecognized but will continue to persist and interfere with one's daily living. Sensory issues are also very common along with verbal communication as roughly $\frac{1}{3}$ of people with autism are nonverbal. Individuals may have trouble maintaining eye contact, understanding tone of voice, recognizing intentions and emotions, expressing themselves through emotion, gestures, and facial expressions. Other skills such as taking turns in conversations and understanding the concept of personal space may not come as naturally to those on the spectrum. Sensory issues are also very common and can also lead individuals to become overwhelmed in certain scenarios such as social situations (Autism Speaks 2022). Looking into restricted and repetitive behaviors, repetitive movements with one's body and objects are prevalent. Ritualistic behaviors (similar to OCD) such as repeatedly touching things or lining objects up are also a common behavior. Individuals with ASD also thrive when they have a consistent and set routine. Finally, narrow and specific interests are the last symptom in the restricted and repetitive behavior component (Autism Speaks 2022).

Looking into treatment methods, applied behavioral analysis, the Early Start Denver Model, occupational therapy, and speech therapy are common among many others. Some individuals also take medications to help lessen symptoms. Lastly, it is important to note that other medical conditions are common in conjunction with ASD such as, trouble sleeping, seizures, and GI issues (Autism Speaks 2022).

Remote Learning

In March of 2020, 57 million children had to suddenly make the switch from in-person to remote learning. Because of the US education system, the quality of remote learning is not adequate for long periods of time. It is known that the earliest years set the trajectory for a child's future, meaning that the younger they are, the more likely they are to be impacted. Also, children with disabilities, living in low income communities, or the black, LatinX, American Indian population are more at risk (McKenna, et al 2021). During the early stages of the pandemic, many educators expressed concerns about how to best engage with their students and build their classroom community online. It was recommended that children ages 2-5 have 3 hours of live remote learning each day (this included music, movement, free choice, science, math, etc). Because of this, many educators found themselves uploading videos to other platforms such as YouTube where parents would be able to help their children access content outside of school hours (McKenna, et al 2021).

In a survey sent out to early childhood educators, the 1,053 responses gathered indicated an overall lack of time to prepare for the shift to remote learning. It was also discovered that 25% of educators were not given any type of guidelines or expectations on how to conduct remote learning. Also, less than half of the educators who completed the survey were given a device (computer or tablet) if they requested one. Lastly, 87% of educators in this study said they developed their own lessons and materials (McKenna, et. al 2021). These findings indicated that within remote learning, the connection between educators and caregivers is crucial especially due to barriers such as lack of wifi, poor connection on Zoom, etc.

It is already known that children with autism face significant challenges regarding their development of critical communication skills and social skills, but remote learning heightens this. In a study looking at the comparison of in-person and remote support for interventionists who were implementing an intervention method known as JASPER on children with autism- which focuses on comprehensive social communication with goals to facilitate children's social engagement as well as their spoken and nonverbal communication and play skills (Shire, et al 2020). The intervention sessions with the children were an hour in duration and in person and on a weekly basis. It was found that there was no difference between interventionists who had face to face or remote training (Shire, et al 2020). It is important to consider teachers' and other educators' and helpers' impact on children with autism as they require consistent and reliable support.

A study that took place in Scotland, focused on the experiences of students with autism partaking in remote learning during the pandemic. The students reported losing the routine that going to school gave them which included having less structure in their day and learning as well as less engagement with their teachers. Due to their loss of routine, students reported sleeping more as they did not have the structure in their day that forced them to wake up (McCorkell & Lobo 2021). This is because remote learning relies on independence, self-regulation, and motivation which can be hard for certain individuals to foster for themselves. The students in this study also explained that they missed working in groups in a classroom setting because if they had trouble understanding something, it is likely that one of their peers would (McCorkell & Lobo 2021). This is also due to the invisible barrier that can occur with technology that can decrease communication in group settings.

Impacts on Development

Language and literacy skills develop through verbal and nonverbal interactions- remote learning has made this incredibly challenging for some. Remote learning also made parents and caregivers take on the role of a teacher in addition to their pre-existing responsibilities. It also shone light onto the fact that many individuals such as students from lower income neighborhoods or those with learning disabilities do not have access to the resources and support that other students do. Teachers also expressed that students were missing out on a lot of important social interactions especially in elementary school. Without the regular social interactions that happen at school, it becomes increasingly harder to build community and causes students to feel lonely- especially only children (Timmons, et al 2021). Some families may not have as loving and caring home environments and rely on school to provide that to their children. Other parents felt like the quality of teaching had diminished during remote learning especially as kids who loved certain classes were now bored out of their minds in those subjects that used to interest them. Overall, most parents felt like they were spread thin between their careers, parenting, and now teaching (Timmons, et al 2021).

Looking at research conducted after 13 weeks of online learning, students indicated that they felt a lack of connectedness to school. Previous research has indicated that when students feel connected to school, there are positive outcomes such as decreased risks of anxiety and depression (Perkins, et al 2021). Positive relationships with peers is also related to feelings of connectedness at school. With remote learning in place, the feeling of connectedness to school was difficult to achieve. In the 2021 study, 22.8% of students reported increased anxiety and 19.4% reported increased symptoms of depression. Overall, females reported higher rates of anxiety and depression than males who reported higher rates of school connectedness (Perkins, et

al. 2021). Remote learning takes students out of their usual learning environments and forces them to be self-sufficient and self-motivated which can be challenging when students lose their social connection and feelings of connectedness to school.

Methods

This research was created via the Senior Capstone: Applied Projects course at University of Portland for academic purposes. Due to the population this study is researching, interview questions and other documents regarding the project were submitted to University of Portland's IRB committee for approval. An 8-question interview with open-ended questions for collecting qualitative data was developed. Faculty at Victory Academy were emailed a handout with information regarding the study as well as a consent form. At the beginning of the interview, participants were read a paragraph explaining what the study would entail as well as reminding them the main points of the consent form they had signed prior to the interview beginning. See Appendix A for a complete list of the survey script and questions and Appendix B for the consent form used in this study.

Demographics

4 faculty members from Victory Academy participated in this study. 3 of the 4 participants answered all of the interview questions and 1 participant was able to answer half of the interview questions due to not having worked at Victory Academy during the pandemic. All participants had been in their current profession for at least 6 years. Their time working at

Victory Academy ranged from 8 months to 14 years. Aside from teaching experience, no other demographic related questions were asked due to the focus of the study being on their students.

Qualitative Data Collection

Each participant consented to being recorded for their interview (interviews were recorded for transcription purposes). The questions asked aimed to gather information regarding developmental and other changes that educators noticed in their students. Before diving into questions regarding their students, participants were asked how long they had been teaching, how long they have been working at Victory Academy, and the duration of time they were teaching remotely for. Then, they were asked more observational questions about their students and how they adapted to this new format of remote learning.

Analysis

Since all data for this study was qualitative, data was analyzed through thematic analysis. Because open-ended questions were utilized, themes- along with key aspects and features were taken account of. Following this, the themes were categorized in order to solidify findings of this study. See Appendix C for the full interview transcriptions.

Results

The first question that each participant was asked was how long had they been teaching (or in their current profession) and how long had they been at Victory Academy? Participant #1 had been teaching for 14 years at Victory Academy for 5 years. Participant #2 had been teaching for 13 years and at Victory Academy for 11 years. Participant #3 had been teaching for 15 years

and at Victory Academy for 7 years. Lastly, participant #4 had been in their current profession for 6 years and at Victory Academy since July 2021. All participants reported teaching or working with students all over the autism spectrum.

Since Victory Academy is considered a therapeutic learning program, they were only online from March 2020-July 2020. Although, participant #3 reported teaching students virtually and in person during the entire 2020-2021 school year as they had some students who were still learning remotely. Currently, all of the participants are working and teaching in person.

When their students made the sudden switch to online learning, participant #2 reported students finding the concept of Zoom and online class really novel at first. In addition to this, all participants reported an overall lack of engagement- which was the biggest theme within this study. Especially after the first month of online learning, attendance was down and more cameras were turned off. Participant #1 did also report that their students were able to adapt to Zoom fairly well, but that was not the case for all students and classrooms. They also reported having to change curriculum to help keep students relaxed and engaged. This was done through taking little breaks and coming up with dynamic activities to keep them engaged. Participant #3 reported that their students were easily distracted, had difficulty engaging, and experienced Zoom fatigue.

When asked about how their students re-adjusted to in person instruction in July, most students were able to have a relatively easy transition after about a week. It was reported that there was some hesitation and anxiety surrounding COVID. Other students were very excited to see their friends since for most of them, it was the first time seeing their friends since starting remote learning. Participant #2 reported that students were really energetic and some found it

overstimulating at first. Participant #3 reported their students forgetting their school routines and schedules as remote learning and being at home did not have as much structure.

All participants reported that their students are continuing with their education as normal and have not had to backtrack as much as expected. The students' routines are also re-established now. Participant #3 did say that their students will sometimes ask about Zoom as an option if they are sick and cannot attend class in-person. Currently, students have re-adapted to the routines they had pre-pandemic, but it was reported that they are seeing a lot more mental health issues than before. This is because it was difficult for students to be involved in the community during the pandemic which also made some students feel like they lost a couple formative years of their teenage years and certain key events such as prom or other activities out in the community. Certain students have felt the need to make up that time, but are unsure how. Aside from that, the students are continuing at school similarly to how they would have regardless of the pandemic.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that children with autism were impacted in the three months they spent learning remotely. Although the sample size for this study was small, the interviewees were able to give adequate information and back up their experiences with those of their colleagues. Upon analyzing the interviews, all of them indicated lack of engagement from their students especially after the novelty of online learning wore off, which was around the one month mark. Many more of the same themes came up during interviews such as high levels of distractibility, Zoom fatigue, and students needing to readjust to in person learning once they returned to in-person learning. Overall, my sample of educators also had to adapt their own

teaching strategies in order to combat the negative repercussions that remote learning can have on students.

The first set of project questions pertained to how long each participant had been teaching and how many students they currently teach. Participants reported teaching between 6-9 children whereas others reported working with all of the students or up to 43 depending on who needs the resources and help they offer. Faculty at Victory Academy work with children all over the Autism spectrum as well. Their classrooms are not only by age, but they are also categorized by the skills the students are learning. This includes typical academic skills, but also social, emotional, and daily living skills. Students are able to practice these skills on a regular basis with support from their teachers and classrooms.

The second set of questions focused on shifting to remote learning. Since Victory Academy is a therapeutic learning program, remote learning only lasted three months. Some teachers, including one in this study, did teach using a hybrid learning format for the 2020-2021 school year as there were some students who felt more comfortable learning from home. Within those three months, faculty reported finding it difficult to engage with students even in one on one settings. Some classrooms were able to adapt to Zoom better than others, but they still experienced difficulties due to the remote format. In addition to low engagement, students also had trouble concentrating and were easily distracted compared to how they were learning pre-pandemic.

The third section of the survey focused on how the students transitioned back into the classroom once remote learning came to an end for Victory Academy in July 2020. The consensus from these questions was that many students had forgotten their school routines since remote learning at home did not provide them with as much structure in their day. Other students

felt like they had missed out on key events (such as prom) and were unsure of how to make up for the time that they had lost. Participant #3 did report seeing more mental health issues in their students than pre-pandemic, likely due to those feelings of lost time and not being able to be as involved in their community. Other than that, students were able to readapt fairly quickly and were especially excited to see their friends- most of them for the first time since transitioning to online learning. It was reported that all classrooms have had different experiences, but there has been less backtracking on course material than anticipated.

Lastly, I would like to note that participants in this study did mention having to adapt their teaching strategies during remote learning. This was to try and increase students' levels of engagement and decrease levels of distractibility. Faculty at Victory Academy did this by changing some of the curriculum, implementing little breaks throughout the day, creating dynamic activities to keep them engaged, as well as finding ways for students to take breaks from staring at screens for an entire school day.

Reflection

This project helped me to better understand the effects that individuals- specifically children with autism have experienced throughout the pandemic and online learning. I was able to educate myself on the developmental difficulties, fatigue, and burnout that has impacted students of all different age ranges and at varying points on the autism spectrum. Prior to conducting this research, I was having many conversations with people about how remote learning had been difficult for them and readjusting to in-person classes was tiring among many of the other emotions and feelings uncovered in this study. During these conversions, I could not

help but think about the students I had worked with at Victory Academy and how they had been handling returning to the classroom.

For ethical purposes, I decided to interview faculty members at the school which also uncovered information on how they had to reevaluate their curriculum and make changes to ensure success for their students while remote learning. One of the main challenges I experienced throughout this study is how new the concept of remote learning during a pandemic is- specifically regarding certain demographics. Although I was able to find relevant research and studies, the long-term effects are not known.

However, I do think that if this study were to be replicated, it would be interesting to interview not only teachers, but parents/caregivers, and students. From my research, these are the three main groups that are impacted by remote learning and have to adapt in different ways. Teachers and educators may have to adapt their content and the way they teach it. Parents and caregivers have to learn how to balance their work lives, parenting, and a newfound teacher role while their children are learning from home. Children have to adjust to a new routine and learn in a new way. Comparing these three groups may allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the impacts of remote learning.

Finally, as we are still navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still learning new pieces of information regularly and adapting accordingly. Looking at our future from a psychological perspective, I do believe that remote learning has been a setback. Having to unexpectedly adapt to a new lifestyle is challenging. Even though it was the right decision health and safety wise, it increased mental health issues, encouraged distractibility, and caused low engagement among students. Moving forward, it is crucial to know and be aware of the impacts in order to be prepared for similar scenarios. By taking into account relevant research, we are

able to overcome mental health disparities and find ways to increase levels of focus and foster engagement.

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Appendix A

Interview Script and Questions

Hi- thank you for choosing to participate in this study and filling out a consent form. To recap, by consenting to this study you are agreeing to be voice recorded for an interview that should last no more than 15 minutes. Your name will not be attached to your responses, I will not be asking for any personally identifiable information, and your interview recording will be used for note taking purposes later and deleted after transcription. Finally, your participation is voluntary, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. Finally, Do you verbally consent to participate in this study and be voice recorded?

How long have you been teaching and how long have you been teaching at Victory Academy?

How many students do you teach and what age?

Where on the autism spectrum are your students?

How long were you teaching virtually for?

What did you notice about your students when you were doing online instruction?

What did you notice about your students when they first came back to in person instruction?

What do you notice about your students now?

How is this different from students you have taught pre-pandemic?

Thank you so much for your participation. The interview is now complete and the recording has stopped.

Appendix B**Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Emily Mottern, from the University of Portland's psychology department (PSY 498 Applied Projects Capstone class). The goal of this study is to understand how remote and virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted children on the autism spectrum.

Key Information: As described in more detail below, you will be asked open ended questions in a Zoom interview format regarding your teaching experience, students you have taught or are currently teaching, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Someone like you might be interested in participating because this study is regarding a relevant topic and by completing an interview, you may have a better understanding of how the pandemic has impacted your students as well as contributing to my research in conjunction with University of Portland. Because there are some risks, such as possibly increased anxiety, you may not want to participate. It is important for you to know that your participation is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop your participation at any time. More information about all aspects of this study is provided below.

This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

If you decide to participate, you would complete an interview on Zoom that would take no more than fifteen minutes. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom for transcription afterwards, but answers will be anonymously recorded. There will be no experimental procedures within the interview.

Some additional risks may include increased anxiety regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Potential benefits from this study could include being more aware of how children with autism have reacted and developed due to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I cannot guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research. You will not receive any financial compensation for your participation in the survey.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with University of Portland or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Emily Mottern (mottern22@up.edu) or her capstone professor, Dr. Lauren Berger (bergerl@up.edu) If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Portland Institutional Research Board at irb@up.edu. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix C

INTERVIEW #1:

How long have you been teaching and how long have you been teaching at Victory Academy?

Since 2008 (14 years?) and at Victory since Fall 2017 (5 years)

How many students do you teach and what age?

Currently teaching 6 students ranging from 9-13 years old

Where on the autism spectrum are your students?

Categorized by skills they are learning— typical academic skills as well as social, emotional, and daily living skills

How long were you teaching virtually for?

3 months

What did you notice about your students when you were doing online instruction?

Her students were able to adapt to zoom fairly well— not the case for all students and classrooms at victory

But an overall lack of engagement

She had to change curriculum to keep students relaxed and engaged, taking little breaks, activities, and dynamic activities to keep them engaged

What did you notice about your students when they first came back to in person instruction?

Some hesitation due to fear of COVID, overall much happier students, took about a week for them to be back and relaxed in the school element

Victory looked a lot at their mental health which was on the upswing since returning to classroom

What do you notice about your students now?

Her students did not need to backtrack as much as other classrooms and were pretty much able to continue as normal where they left off, overall much happier

How is this different from students you have taught pre-pandemic?

Classes vary so much year to year and so do behaviors, hard to speak on this

But has noticed that they are continuing their education similarly to how they would have regardless of the pandemic

INTERVIEW #2:

How long have you been teaching and how long have you been teaching at Victory Academy?

11th school year at Victory, teaching for a total of 13 years

How many students do you teach and what age?

Teaches all of the students, K-12, one student in the post grad program who is 23

Where on the autism spectrum are your students?

All parts of spectrum

How long were you teaching virtually for?

Just 3 months, Victory is a therapeutic program so they were able to come back to in person learning in July 2020 (students had a choice to be virtual or in person)

What did you notice about your students when you were doing online instruction?

At first it was really novel (pj's, show everyone your dog), after about a month engagement was down (attendance, cameras off, novelty wore off)

What did you notice about your students when they first came back to in person instruction?

Really energetic, super exciting, for most of them it was the first time they'd seen their classmates since beginning of pandemic, overstimulating at first and a lot of energy

What do you notice about your students now?

It's like any school year, but with masks! (mandate is now lifted)

How is this different from students you have taught pre-pandemic?

n/a, all classrooms look different

INTERVIEW #3:

How long have you been teaching and how long have you been teaching at Victory Academy?

Teaching for 15 years, at Victory for 7

How many students do you teach and what age?

Currently teaching roughly 9 students, ages 16-23

Where on the autism spectrum are your students?

all

How long were you teaching virtually for?

March 2020-july 2020, but taught students in person AND virtual during the entire 2020-21 school year– all in person currently

What did you notice about your students when you were doing online instruction?

Distractibility, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, hard to engage (even one on one with students), definitely more challenging than being in person

What did you notice about your students when they first came back to in person instruction?

It was brand new to them, they seemed to forget routines and unaware of their schedules (ex. Check in w teacher to use restroom)

What do you notice about your students now?

Routines are back! They don't really talk about their online portion of the pandemic. They still ask about zoom ("if i am sick can i do zoom?")

How is this different from students you have taught pre-pandemic?

Seeing a lot more mental health issues than pre-pandemic. Students have not been as involved in the community as they were pre-pandemic. Some students feel like they have lost a couple of their teenage years/maturing (prom, lots of social interactions out in the community, feeling the need to make up for that but they don't necessarily know how)

INTERVIEW #4:

How long have you been teaching and how long have you been teaching at Victory Academy?

SLP, 6th year and at Victory since July 2021

How many students do you teach and what age?

Work with 43 students, broad age range

Where on the autism spectrum are your students?

all

How long were you teaching virtually for?

Was not with Victory, but yes at previous job

What did you notice about your students when you were doing online instruction?

n/a

What did you notice about your students when they first came back to in person instruction?

That was her baseline– unsure

Staff at victory has been AMAZING and from their feedback she has understood that remote learning was really difficult for certain students

What do you notice about your students now?

Victory was only online for 3 months

How is this different from students you have taught pre-pandemic?

n/a