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The Impact of the COVID-19 Related School Closure on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Children with SEN and Their Parents in Algeria

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives and affected different nations in different ways. In Algeria, education has been hit hard by the lockdown as schools embarked on a total closure to stop the spread of the virus. For students and their parents, such a closure meant limited access to the support embodied in the school. This qualitative study explored the school closure experiences of parents and their children with special educational needs (SEN). Twenty-three parents and five children with SEN were recruited in the study. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, using online video calling, and was analysed using thematic analysis. Six main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. These were: (1) the participants' emotional experience; (2) the participants' social experience; (3) children's behaviour during school closure; (4) the participants' learning experience; (5) children's new routine; (6) restarting all over again. The study findings revealed that both children with SEN and their parents experienced mental and social-emotional difficulties following the school closure. As such, the findings imply that the school climate and social landscape have a pivotal role in promoting and maintaining the students' stability and well-being.

KEYWORDS

Algeria; children with SEN; COVID-19; parents; school closure; well-being

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit different vital sectors hard, and the educational system was no exception. Amid the increase of COVID-19 cases around the world, various educational settings embarked on a near-total closure. Further, with medical care being prioritised, mental health services have been disrupted in 93% of countries worldwide (WHO, 2020). Research evidence has demonstrated that the pandemic had a detrimental impact on the mental health of people of all walks of life (Pierce et al., 2020), but especially including children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Duan & Zhu, 2020; Mbazzi et al., 2021; Xiao, Fang, Chen, & He, 2020). Therefore, research is needed to expand knowledge pertinent to our understanding of the outcomes of the COVID-19 related school closure. Moreover, evidence regarding the social-emotional well-being of children with SEN and their parents is needed to inform well-being and

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education practices. Based on these goals, the following research question was formulated: *What are the experiences of children with SEN and their parents of the school closure in Algeria?* In Algeria, schools were completely closed for more than seven months. This study examined the experiences of the children and parents of children with special educational needs in Algeria with the aim of identifying supports and practices that can be implemented safely.

Algeria is the largest country in Africa and the Arab world, covering an area of 2.4 million km² with a population of 43.9 million people (CIA, 2021). From a total number of 9.56 million students enrolled in the Algerian schools, 31,700 are students with SEN (APS, 2019). Although the country has passed a number of legal provisions concerning the right of students with SEN to inclusion, 'things seem more theoretical than practical' (Bessai, 2018, p. 371). Algerian schools provide social and psychological guidance services to all the students. However, research on SEN in Algerian schools is characterised by a dearth of information (Rohwerder, 2018). Moreover, there remains a paucity of evidence on attitudes towards students with SEN in Algeria. However, studies from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have provided important information on the perceptions of SEN in the Arab world. Extensive research has shown that children with SEN in the Arab world are excluded from social and educational settings due to negative perceptions and attitudes and disability stigma (Alkhateeb, Hadidi, & Alkhateeb, 2016).

Algeria, which reported its first COVID-19 case on 25 February 2020, announced a school closure from 12 March 2020. In answering a question regarding the students' situation in the country since schools were closed, Djamila Khair, the chair of the National Federation of Parents' Association (*Fédération nationale des associations de parents d'élèves*), asserted that 'distance learning didn't really exist, other than correspondence courses. There had been a few initiatives previously; there was a television station that had classes to help study for the baccalaureate' (ETF [European Training Foundation], 2021, np). Further, the lack of training, connectivity issues, and structure of Algerian families were front-and-centre during the discussion on the reasons behind the complete school closure. As a result, the baccalaureate exam in the country was postponed until September 2020. After seven months of school closure, primary school students returned to schools on the 21st of October 2020, while middle and secondary school students returned to schools on the 4th of November 2020.

COVID-19 and Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

Literature evidence suggests that health emergencies can result in detrimental and long-lasting psychological problems (Rossi et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, recent evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic had wide-ranging impacts on people of different ages and job categories: patients, children, medical staff (Brooks et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Giallonardo, Sampogna, Del Vecchio, Volpe, & Fiorillo, 2020; Gomez-Duran, Martin-Fumado, & Forero, 2020; Li et al., 2020). However, most of these studies have been conducted in high-income countries and less attention has been paid to the impacts of the crisis in low- and middle-income countries (Kola et al., 2021). A study conducted by Alonzo and colleagues (2021) suggests that parents in low-income countries experienced high-level mental health difficulties following the spread of the virus. In Algeria, one study was conducted by Madani and colleagues (2020). It suggests that lockdown measures in

Algeria resulted in several mental health difficulties. Together, these research findings strongly emphasise the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health outcomes in the general population.

With regards to children with SEN, research evidence demonstrates detrimental impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of children with physical and intellectual disabilities (Masi et al., 2021; Theis, Campbell, De Leeuw, Owen, & Schenke, 2021). In the context of Africa, a study recently conducted by Mbazzi and colleagues (2021) indicates that lockdown measures had a negative influence on the mental health and social life of children with disabilities in Uganda. Further, many researchers investigated the impacts of different containment measures on children with SEN in different settings. In regard to school closure and mental health, in Europe several research findings indicate that the school closure had adverse effects on children with SEN (Catro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Thorell et al., 2021). In the context of low- and medium-income countries, a study conducted by Sulsilowati and Azzasyofia (2020) in Indonesia reports that home-schooling during the pandemic increased the levels of stress and anxiety among children with disabilities and their parents in Indonesia. The findings were similar in another study in Pakistan (Imran, Zeshan, & Pervaiz, 2020). Overall, all of these studies across multiple contexts have found that school closure has aggravated the mental distress of children with SEN.

In the context of the study, no research to date has explored the impacts of the pandemic on the well-being of students in Algeria. Furthermore, only a few works in literature investigated the social-emotional well-being of children with disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs (SEN) and their parents in developing countries where schools were fully closed. Overall, the literature findings signal the need for additional studies to expand our knowledge of the impacts of lockdown measures on well-being, with a particular focus on supports, practices, and intervention strategies that can be implemented.

The Role of the School in Promoting the Well-being

In addition to providing learning resources, the school supports the students' development by providing stability and continuity. The school is 'a unique setting within which young people's social and emotional well-being can be promoted' (Barry, Clarke, & Dowling, 2017, p. 435). As has been previously reported in the literature, the students' feelings and attitudes about school life influence their well-being (Gage, Larson, Sugai, & Chafouleas, 2016). Recently, a study conducted by Lombardi et al. (2019) demonstrated that the school climate is a factor that promotes the students' well-being. The awareness of the school's role in cultivating the students' well-being resulted in a plethora of research on potential strategies, programs, and interventions for promoting social-emotional skills in schools (Brown, 2018; Weare, 2010). The role of the school goes beyond providing educational support. In many geographic regions, the school is considered the strongest institution in the child's life (Kavithakiran, 2015). The support that the students receive from their peers and teachers has a key role in boosting their emotional experiences and competencies (Wentzel, 2012). There exists a considerable body of literature on the students' social relationship inside the school as a predictor of their well-being outcomes (Littlecott, Moore, & Murphy, 2018). Furthermore, school-based mental well-being services play a great role in supporting students worldwide.

In addition to being a crucial source of mental well-being services, the school is a very important setting for establishing interpersonal relationships and developing social skills. In some regions, the school can be the only social setting where children can seek social support and develop personal skills, particularly if those skills are not present or reinforced at home. Taking into consideration the limited access to educational and social resources in Algeria during the pandemic, the total school closure has caused disruptions to the students' and their parents' daily routines. There is no denying that the school plays a major role in the students' social life and its closure can result in serious social and psychological difficulties. The school in Algeria can be considered as an important setting for developing social relationships and social skills. The ability of a child to connect to school has been outlined by different researchers as a key protective factor and one that decreases the health-risk behaviours (Libbey, 2004; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Therefore, the loss of schooling in children with SEN can mean the loss of emotional support and social interactions. Although a large and growing body of literature has investigated the impacts of the pandemic and its containment measures such as quarantine and self-isolation on people from different groups, there is relatively a small body of literature on the influence of school closure on the well-being of the students.

Methodology

In the quest for answers to the research question, this study sought the lived experiences of children with SEN and their parents. This study is not representative of all children with disabilities and their parents in Algeria as such, but it sought to find common and illustrative themes between the participants. The study deployed an exploratory qualitative approach in investigating the subjective reality of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and emotional well-being of children with SEN and their parents. It is worth noting that this study was intended to shed light on certain phenomenon, not to quantify them.

An exploratory case study design was followed to collect in-depth data regarding the phenomenon under investigation. This study was bound to a particular case, which was Algerian parents and children. The choice of the case study design aimed to 'illuminate reader to understand the phenomenon under study' (Merriam, 1998, p. 30) and allowed 'for a relativist perspective' (Yin, 2003, p. 13).

The study obtained ethical approval from the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education. Furthermore, the research was conducted in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (2019). A data management plan was developed for this study and data collected from the participants was stored on an encrypted laptop. Participants were provided with information sheets and consent letters to sign before taking part in the study. The information sheets carefully outlined the objectives of the study in order to avoid raising the participants' expectations. Moreover, participants were assured that their identity would not be revealed in the study. Also, they were informed that they have the right to withdraw consent at any time up to the publication of this paper. Thus, participation in the study was voluntary, unpaid, and anonymous.

Participants

A non-probability (purposive) sampling design was chosen in order to obtain a homogenous sample of participants who could offer insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The participants in the study were children with SEN and their parents. In light of the health measures that were placed following the increase of the COVID-19 cases, social media platforms (Facebook) were used to recruit participants for the study. This platform was selected because it is widely used in Algeria. Furthermore, the use of social media as a recruitment tool has gained momentum recently given its effectiveness in accessing hard-to-reach and low-prevalence participants (Gelinas et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the use of social media may have led to an under-representation of different demographic subgroups in the study. The demographic characteristics of the participants are highlighted below.

The inclusion criteria for the research paper were that the adult participants were parents of children aged 8–14 with a minimum of two years of diagnosis of a disability that warranted a special educational need. Besides, the children participants were selected based on their age (8–14) and educational needs. The parent participants final sample included 23 males ($n = 7$) and females ($n = 16$) from different parts of the country (13 from the east, 7 from the west, and 3 from the south). The participants were aged between 28 and 52 ($M = 35.17$). Over half of the participants ($n = 12$) were full-time workers who held an academic degree (Bachelor, Masters). Eleven of the participants were full-time homemakers or unemployed (3 of which held a bachelor's degree). The participants included parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, $n = 8$), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, $n = 5$), Dyslexia ($n = 3$), Dyspraxia ($n = 2$), and vision and hearing impairments ($n = 5$). Furthermore, five children with SEN, aged between 10–14 ($M = 12.2$), were enrolled in the study. The children participants included middle school students with ASD ($n = 2$), ADHD ($n = 2$), and Dyslexia ($n = 1$), a majority of whom were males (males = 4, females = 1). The sample size in this study was determined based on the need to achieve the depth and wealth of the description.

While the data was collected from the parent participants in November/December 2020, data was collected from the children participants at a time when lockdown restrictions were eased in May 2021. It was not deemed appropriate to collect data from children with SEN during the lockdown because of the social and emotional difficulties they were going through. Thus, as part of our ethical approach to this research, children with SEN were recruited when lockdown restrictions were eased to ensure that they were not under pressure.

Measures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online using video calling. The interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience and were conducted in the participants' primary language: Arabic. Moreover, the interviews were planned to last for 40–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Moreover, field notes were made during and after the interviews. The semi-structured interviews involved questions pertinent to their experiences and views concerning education in the country during the pandemic, the support they received, their social and emotional experiences, the impacts of school closure as well as the challenges they faced or are facing as

caregivers of/ children with disabilities in the country during the lockdown. Open-ended questions were used in order to afford participants the power to discuss their experiences. Furthermore, different interview questions and guides were developed for the parents and children participants. The interview questions were pilot tested in order to check for the clarity of the questions. With respect to mental health and well-being difficulties, we asked the interviewees to describe how the school closure affected how they think, feel, and act. Mental health was defined as the way the children feel and think about themselves and their relationships. The exploratory nature of the interviews allowed a natural and smooth construction of how the school closure impacted the participants' lives. The respondents were interviewed until data saturation was reached, and no more new information was obtained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Krysik & Finn, 2010). The interviews were conducted by the first author of the paper.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of analysing the data was followed to 'provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tells' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). We transcribed and read the data several times in order to familiarise ourselves with the data. The transcripts were then returned to participants for comments and/or corrections. We then coded the data and started generating initial codes. An inductive approach was followed in generating the themes as no prior knowledge shaped the analysis. We started searching for codes and identifying differences and similarities between the different codes. We then reviewed the themes and identified the main themes as well as the subthemes. Lastly, we defined and named the themes as the last step in the process. The participants were then asked to provide feedback on the findings.

In an attempt to establish rigorous research, we sought to satisfy the key criteria of trustworthiness. The criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to refine the concept of trustworthiness. In this study, the participants checked the interview transcripts (cross-checking) to establish the research credibility. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that this case study was not a representative sample of the wider population. The study was set out to present rich and detailed data that would enable a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Besides, a detailed description of the research methods was presented. Finally, the study included interview extracts to ensure that the findings are clearly derived from the collected data.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed rich findings regarding the experiences of children with SEN and their parents of the school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the participants in the study denied receipt of any mental health or educational support during the pandemic. Six major themes emerged from the analysis of the parents' and children's experiences: the participants' emotional experience; the participants' social experience; children's behaviour during school closure; the participants' learning experience; children's new routine; restarting all over again. In addition to outlining the participants' experiences, the themes captured the challenges as well as the support practices that need to be taken into consideration moving forward.

The Participants' Emotional Experience

The data collected from the participants casts light on a number of emotional difficulties that were exhibited during the pandemic. This theme reports the emotional experiences of the parents and children with SEN.

The parent participants described the school closure experience as '*emotionally draining*' and '*exhausting*' to their children with SEN. Some of the parents reported that the school experience helps their children in '*regulating their emotions*' given that the school is a source of '*emotional support*'. The loss of schooling, therefore, had a negative impact on the children's '*emotional stability*'. One of the parents argued, '*school closure caused tremendous changes in my daughter's life ... being unable to access the needed support and resources increased her stress and discomfort*' (In 04, father). Furthermore, the participants agreed that their children did not grasp the sudden school closure and were not emotionally ready for such a new experience. It was revealed that the school closure increased the children's stress and emotional meltdowns, as one of the parents put it, '*everything happened very quickly and my son couldn't cope. He couldn't understand that he can't go to school. This resulted in an emotional breakdown that no one of us was able to prevent*' (In 22, mother).

In a similar vein, the children participants confirmed the parents' claims and reported how the school closure increased their loneliness, frustration, distress, and feelings of sadness. Although it seemed that the children participants have not fully developed appropriate comprehension and/or vocabulary to discuss their emotional experience, they succeeded in demonstrating their emotional instability.

I was upset all the time because I was lonely ... No one to talk to or to play with ... I love my siblings but they are different ... It is really difficult to stay without friends. (In 01, Children)

It felt like I'm punished and can't talk to anyone. Now, I don't have friends ... It is frustrating. (In 03, Children)

The sudden change influenced many individuals' emotional well-being, and parents of children with SEN were no exception. According to the parent participants, the pandemic had a '*negative impact on daily life and mental health*' (In 19, mother). However, most of those parents considered their children's social-emotional difficulties as major sources of disturbance. The participants argued that their children's situation increased their stress and '*emotional overwhelm*'. To this one of the parents reported:

It is very hard not to feel overwhelmed and emotional in such a situation ... it is not easy to see your son or daughter having an emotional meltdown; I was able to face many things but not this one ... I feel overwhelmed in a way that I'm losing my temper easily, I feel sad most of the time and, worst, I can't concentrate on one thing. (In 09, mother)

Furthermore, the school closure and the children's emotional difficulties had an adverse impact on the parents' self-image and emotional well-being. Participants in the study expressed their parent guilt for being unable to support their children with SEN in their education and to promote their well-being, as some parents emphasised,

The parent guilt rips me apart and eats away at me ... It is the source of my anxiety ... The schools were closed, and I couldn't assist my son to do some activities at home ... having to spread myself thinly whilst trying to work ... I failed in supporting him with his needs and I failed in taking care of my other children. (In 03, mother)

The Participants' Social Experience

In this section, data is reported from the parents and children to determine the influence of school closure on their social well-being. Although the participants on the whole demonstrated a negative social experience following the school closure, a variety of perspectives were expressed.

The parents emphasised the significance of social and peer support that the school affords. Some of those participants reported that the school is the only place, in their neighbourhood, where their children can develop their social skills and interact with other peers. Therefore, the children's daily interactions and social relationships were curtailed by the school closure. The loss of peer interactions, communication, and networking meant that there were no social support opportunities. Seven parent participants suggested a change in their children's social interactions. Furthermore, they indicated that their children's lockdown experience was characterised by an increase in social isolation and avoidance of social interactions with family members. For instance, one of the parents argued:

What scares me more is that my son became isolated by choice. He always suffered from social difficulties but it got worse with the pandemic Few weeks after the school closure he barricaded himself inside his room. (In 02, mother)

The participant's answer seemed to suggest that peer relations and social interactions were of major importance to children with SEN and that the school setting had a vital role in maintaining and supporting the social connectedness of the children. The participants flagged the peer separation as hindering the children's social experience. In most of the interviews, the participants proclaimed the importance of the school in promoting what they called '*a social life*'. According to the parent participants, the loss of schooling meant more than the loss of an educational setting. The school closure seemed to 'interrupt the children's social life' and to affect their 'social belonging' as revealed in the following comment:

The school was something that connects him to the external world and having friends there encouraged him to study and I think he was connected to the school and his friends . . . but after the school closure, he was just not willing to interact with us. His siblings are older than him and that's why he didn't get well with them. (In 23, mother)

Furthermore, the children's accounts corresponded with those of the parents. In this respect, the children participants reflected on how the school closure limited their daily interactions and social network. From their perspective, the pandemic prevented them from the social support embodied by the school in the form of peer relationships and trust, peer suggestions, advice, and help.

On a separate, but related note, it was evident in the words of a number of parents that the lockdown experience had a negative impact on their social well-being. Nevertheless, the parents did not identify any social difficulties related to school closure.

Children's Behaviour during School Closure

In addition to social isolation and loneliness, some parents claimed that the school closure had a devastating effect on their children's behaviour. Those parents argued that those behavioural difficulties were either 'new' or have 'increased' following the school closure.

One of the parents, for instance, argued that not having access to the schools' playground, where the children used *'to release their energy'*, increased their *'aggressive behaviours'*. The following extracts demonstrate the parents' perspectives regarding these behavioural manifestations:

His behavioural problems have increased during the lockdown ... His bed is covered in ink pens and stampers. The wall ... is full of stampers ... the behavioural problems are affecting his mood and emotions ... his behaviour is both challenging and violent. (In 13, mother)

This is all new behaviour since lockdown ... He's been like a simmering volcano since then ... he can't go to school, he can't go out to play, he can't see his friends, and he can't attend his judo classes. Therefore, there is no way to get out frustration, anger, and meltdowns. (In 06, father)

The Participants' Learning Experience

The analysis of the parent participants' responses was pertinent and valuable in understanding their perspectives regarding their children's learning experience during the school closure. In their accounts of those experiences, the participants used terms such as *'problematic'*, *'challenging'*, and *'disappointing'*. Interestingly, the interviewees identified several major concerns, including a lack of educational resources, problems with technological equipment, issues with the internet connection, lack of learning motivation among children, and parents' academic level.

While his peers were taking advantage of the school closure to develop their reading and maths skills, he was not able to do anything because we didn't have a laptop at home and the internet connection was not stable ... It increased his anxiety ... he felt inferior to everyone. (In 23, mother)

Home-schooling my daughter was not even an option in our case due to the lack of resources. Also, the educational system has changed ... I tried to use their textbook to prepare some activities but I failed ... My daughter has special educational needs and I struggled to find a way of working things out. (In 18, mother)

Furthermore, the school provided equal learning opportunities to all the students. Therefore, the loss of schooling meant the loss of these opportunities. This view was echoed by some informants who reported that the school closure created learning inequalities. For instance, one of the parents argued, *"at least at the school, they had the same teacher, textbook, and learning materials"* (In 19, mother).

For a small number of participants, the school closure was an opportunity to develop their children's personal skills. The mentioned participants appeared to rely on educational apps and other resources in developing their children's life skills, self-confidence, and autonomous learning. Moreover, home learning and virtual support emerged in the discussion as a major booster to the parents and their children with SEN.

We did a bit of un-schooling and then we joined some groups and we learned how to work together in a stress-free environment. We have been making videos on how to do science experiments in the kitchen, my son has been directing, editing, and all the other pre and post-production stuff ... he has been calm and relaxed after this. (In 12, mother)

Other parents reported that education apps were very helpful in motivating their children and boosting their mental health, as one participant stated, *'we had to think less about the lessons and focus more on his skills and mental health ... I found different apps, which I downloaded whenever the internet connectivity allowed me to do so, very helpful'* (In 01, mother).

The above interview extracts demonstrate that parents who focused more on 'de-schooling' and finding different methods to engage their children were able to support the social and emotional well-being of their children with SEN. Virtual learning tools and platforms played a significant role in supporting the education of children with SEN during the pandemic as well as promoting their parents' mental health. Nevertheless, it is worth outlining that only a few parents claimed to have adequate access to those resources.

Child's New Routine

The children respondents identified several different issues that resulted from the school closure. Most of the participants indicated that the pandemic and its containment measures had a negative impact on their daily activities. A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst interviewees that the school closure caused disruption to their routines. The participants argued that the school routine was helpful in maintaining their self-confidence and promoting their well-being. Furthermore, the respondents reported that they struggled to find balance and cope with the new routine.

It was easier to get up in the morning with a schedule in mind ... but when the school closed I couldn't cope and it was extremely difficult to plan something ... I just felt incapable of coping ... I lacked the motivation and interest. (In 02, Children)

The participant's phrase *'with a schedule in mind'* encompassed their recognition of the stability and continuity that the school routine offered. The loss of the school routine decreased the participants' self-confidence, and their answers captured a sense of being incapable of accomplishing things.

The loss of schooling meant that day-to-day life was affected by the change. As a result, there were some suggestions that the routine disruption affected the participants' feeling of being in control. The feeling of being in control of daily activities symbolised positive social and emotional well-being. As one of the interviewees said, *'when you know what you have to do you feel happy and engaged'* (In 01, Children). In addition, the children's answers captured their recognition of the school routine as a vital factor in dealing with their special educational needs. For instance, one of the children participants asserted: *'going to school every day was of great help ... I was not feeling that I was entirely overtaken by my hyperactivity and reading difficulties'* (In 05, Children). The feeling of losing control over their daily routine and being overtaken by their difficulties increased the participants' emotional difficulties. These difficulties were encapsulated by one of the interviewees who argued that *'when you can't deal with the new change you feel sad and you start blaming yourself for everything'* (In 02, Children). This may suggest that although school routines can be challenging, they are crucial in promoting the well-being of the students.

Restarting All over Again

The school closure for a long period meant that the students lost their school relationships, engagement, and routine. Therefore, the discomfort with going back to school was captured in the participants' accounts. This theme emerged from the discussion to outline the participants' concerns regarding the school return. Some of those interviewed in the study suggested that they were not happy to go back to school as this meant they had to make new friends. The participants proclaimed that they lost their relationships and their social skills.

Going back to school after more than seven months felt awkward . . . I imagined that my peers would have changed the school or made new friends . . . I was just not willing to make new friends. (In 05, Children)

I asked myself what if my friends were no longer happy to play or study with me . . . It's been months and everyone has changed. It sounded like starting from zero. (In 01, Children)

These accounts highlight the school return as a new experience that stimulated the participants' social anxiety and fears of social rejection. The participants' answers echoed their uncertainty and lack of confidence. The participant's phrase '*starting from the zero*' indicated their perception of the school return as a new process that requires skills and efforts. Furthermore, the participants demonstrated their concerns regarding the consequences of the school closure on their learning. Some participants were predicting low grades, academic failure, and even school dropout.

I forgot many things and I'm scared that teachers won't take into consideration that I was not able to study at home . . . Thinking about repeating the year is stressing me. (In 04, Children)

I know I will fail . . . Some of my friends told me that they were using the internet to study, while I wasn't able to do that because I don't have a laptop. (In 01, Children)

Therefore, the school return triggered the students' fears of learning loss. In the last interview extract, the participant was trying to compare his situation to his friends'. This can be indicator of the participant's concern that the school closure would cause inequality and social gap in the school. Moreover, the participants' accounts echoed their stress and anxiety concerning the school return.

Taken together, these results suggest that the school plays a critical role in maintaining the students' well-being. The school is important for the stability of the student's academic and social life. The results in this paper indicate that the school closure in Algeria had a detrimental impact on the day-to-day life of children with SEN and their parents. The participants in the study reported negative experiences following the school closure.

Discussion

Research evidence demonstrated the vital role of a positive school environment in promoting the students' well-being (Littlecott et al., 2018). This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of children with SEN and their parents of the COVID-19 related school closure in Algeria. This study explored the impact of the school closure on those participants as they are likely to be at greater risk of experiencing social-emotional, and mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). The themes that

emerged from the data are displayed in the results section. First, themes related to the impacts of school closure on the emotional and social experiences of all the participants are presented. Next, themes concerning children's behaviour and learning experiences during the school closure, from the parents' perspectives, are outlined. Finally, the children's account of their daily routines and their concerns regarding the school return are revealed.

Loss of Schooling, Mental Health, and Social-Emotional Well-being

The school closure related difficulties were evident in the study findings. The findings from the parent and children participants confirm that children with SEN exhibited emotional and social difficulties following the school closure. Terms such as stress, frustration, and emotional overwhelm appeared in the discussion. These results corroborate previous findings wherein researchers reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and perceived stress on different subjects (Ahmed et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2020). Besides, in previous pandemics, children were reported developing mental health difficulties such as stress disorders, adjustment disorders, and grief (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Interestingly, the parents' accounts indicated that even the parents of children with SEN faced emotional difficulties. This aligns with research indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative influence on the parents' mood, mental well-being, and parenting behaviours (Janssen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Spinelli and colleagues (2020) suggested that the parents' perceptions of difficulty were associated with parents' and children's stress and psychological problems. This can suggest that the challenge of meeting the needs of children with SEN is greater (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code, & Toseeb, 2021) and can increase the parents' emotional difficulties. The loss of schooling, as a result, had detrimental impacts on the well-being of the children participants and their parents respectively.

The study findings unequivocally showed that children with SEN exhibited social difficulties following the school closure. As has been previously reported in the literature, the school environment is fundamental in cultivating the students' social environment and sense of belonging (Cemalcilar, 2010). In this paper, the parents proclaimed that the loss of schooling limited the social interactions of children with SEN and caused social difficulties such as social isolation. These findings were confirmed by the children participants who revealed a loss of their social relationships. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies showing that children with SEN experienced social difficulties during the pandemic. Although different studies have been conducted to explore the impacts of the pandemic, the social experience of children with SEN following the school closure is still insufficiently explored. This study suggests that school closure influenced the social well-being of students with SEN.

In addition, the findings indicate that the school closure resulted in children with SEN exhibiting behavioural difficulties. The findings show similar results to those found by Panda et al. (2021) showing that the behavioural state of most children was affected by the pandemic. Many of these challenging behaviours can be interpreted as an infective coping strategy for children. Having said that, many instances of behavioural difficulties can be a result of environmental factors such as limited social interaction (Ogundele, 2018).

Learning during School Closure and Returning to Schools

In keeping with the findings of Asbury et al. (2021), parents and children in our study reflected on the educational experience of children with SEN.

On the one hand, some parents described their children's experiences as negative and identified several related concerns. Further, the parents demonstrated concerns regarding the learning inequalities associated with the school closure. The findings suggest that the school plays a pivotal role in providing equal opportunities to all the students. Conversely, some parents reported a positive learning experience owing to technological resources. Overall, the interview findings are in accordance with those reported by Thorell et al. (2021) suggesting that while many parents experienced negative home-schooling experiences, others reported positive experiences. The present study findings are consistent with concerns of other researchers, which call for improving educational and mental health services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Moreno et al., 2020).

On the other hand, children with SEN emphasised the adverse influence of the school closure on their daily routines. It was evident from the participants' accounts that the school routines played a fundamental role in maintaining stability and continuity. Everyday routines were shown as a supportive foundation for the well-being of children with mental difficulties and their families (Koome, Hocking, & Sutton, 2012). The study findings indicate that the loss of the routine affected the participants' self-confidence, sense of control, and functioning. This finding is consistent with that of O'Sullivan et al. (2021) suggesting that changes to routine negatively affected the mental health of children with SEN. Furthermore, the analysis of the children's interviews demonstrated their concerns regarding the school return. It was evident that the participant concerns were a result of disturbed peer relationships, disturbed learning, lack of mental health support, and lack of motivation and confidence. Interestingly, the participants' accounts alluded to their concerns regarding the socio-economic gap following the school closure. This may raise concerns regarding the economic gap and inequalities in society. This is congruent with Thorell et al. (2021) study, which suggests that the adverse effects of the educational experiences during the pandemic will likely contribute to increased inequalities.

Post-Pandemic Education

The themes raised in this study suggest a variety of perspectives, with different implications. The findings have considerable implications for the role of the school in promoting the mental health and well-being of children with SEN and their parents. Essentially, the findings encourage the strategy adopted by WHO, called 'health-promoting school', to support a positive school experience. This is mainly due to the fact that schools can be the best mental health strategy in many low- and medium-income countries (Panda et al., 2021). The most direct implications that arise from the findings are (i) the need to reinforce social-emotional well-being practices within the schools and (ii) to encourage home-school collaboration and parents' engagement. The findings indicate an urgent need for health authorities in Algeria to provide appropriate mental-health support to children with SEN.

Since the pandemic is very new, this research calls for further qualitative and quantitative research into mental health strategies and mental health interventions addressed to children with SEN, and which can be safely implemented in low resource countries. Interestingly, these interventions should aim to mitigate potential long-term adverse mental-health consequences. Future research might incorporate Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategies or explore virtual tools to support students' well-being. Moreover, future research could consider potential strategies and interventions that could maintain a safe and secure transition to schools following a period of absence due to illness or mental health difficulties.

The Study's Limitations

This study contributes to existing work on the mental health outcomes of the COVID-19 related containment measures by providing a deeper insight into the experiences of parents and children with SEN in Algeria. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. First, the study is limited in scope by some of its methodological choices in terms of population generalisability. Only one tool of data collection was implemented in the study. Further, the study is also limited by its non-probabilistic sampling choice and recruiting method. As outlined earlier, the use of Facebook to recruit participants may have led to an under-representation of different demographic subgroups in the study. Moreover, the sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. Given these limitations, we believe that this study provides a robust and 'thick' description of participants experiences which go beyond what a closed-answer survey can conclude. We believe that participants speaking from their own contextual perspective provides appropriate data.

Second, the study is somewhat limited by the data analysis method in terms of objectivity. It is necessary to recognise that the description of experiences can be potentially mistaken as it is based on different layers of interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Further, as children with SEN are different and they may have experienced different mental health difficulties, this study did not focus on disaggregating how school closure has affected different students with different disability diagnoses. It is suggested that a long-term mixed-methods study could result in more in-depth data regarding the subject matter. Overall, we believe that we have accurately conveyed the lived experiences of our participants in this specific study.

Conclusion

The educational challenges of the global pandemic allowed the world to see more clearly both the benefits and drawbacks of school as a place that supports a child's well-being. On one hand, the absence of schooling presented significant challenges and was detrimental to the social, emotional, and mental well-being of the children with SEN and their parents. On the other hand, the absence of schooling also allowed children and parents to experience learning without the pressure of curriculum, examinations, and developmental homogeneity that can often be the cause of mental health distress. However, this de-schooling of a child's learning is inherently inequitable as it relies on the time and resources that each parent is able to provide. This study suggests that the

path forward post-pandemic should recognise the power of schooling to provide an equitable and positive mental health experience for all children, while at the same time working to lessen the schooling practices that construct unnecessary and harmful mental health and well-being challenges.

Impact Statement

This study suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures, mainly school closure, affected the social-emotional well-being of children and their parents in Algeria. The paper values the voice of the participants by exploring their experiences and outlining how the school closure affected their well-being. This study suggests that the path forward after 2020 should recognise the power of schooling to provide an equitable and positive social-emotional experience for children with SEN.

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