**What does research tell us about the impact of remote learning on mental health and well-being ?**

There is no doubt that we are currently living in unprecedented times, coping with lockdowns and living in tiers, forms of isolation that are alien to mankind and unnatural. In an effort to maintain learner engagement online learning has been adapted globally.

In this short paper I will explore links between loneliness and mental wellbeing and the impact that access to a wireless device can make.

I will now move on to discuss loneliness and depression drawing on the work of Renoylds, M and Wieczorek, T et al.

Reynolds, M (2021) reports that there are clear links between loneliness and poor mental wellbeing and that those with poor social connections are 50% more likely to be adversely affected. Interestingly he postulates that young people aged 16 – 25 are more likely to be affected by isolation and thus poor mental wellbeing. Wieczorek, T. et al 2021 agrees that young University students are impacted by the lack of structure, producing less work and experiencing symptoms of depression.

However, Lynch, K (1999) asserts that collaborative learning where all parties are engaged in the learning process provides a positive and less lonely learning experience and is more successful. Furthermore, she alludes that online learning is empowering to learners who will need to manage time and resources to participate but recognises that those who are materially impoverished may not be able to participate, thus widening the education gap.

The subject of disadvantage is drawn upon by Van Dijk (2005) who states that over 1000000 people in Scotland are not connected to the internet and that uptake in the 10% most deprived areas is 53% compared with 81% in the least deprived areas. He continues to postulate that lack of connectivity is generally accepted in rural areas but is seen as a position of standing in urban areas, resulting in stigma for those who can’t participate.

To get some context in my own work setting as a Development Officer with a mental health project, I conducted a short survey with a focus group. This group of 5 learners, meet once per week for an hour to take part in a quiz and sometimes bingo. Three of these learners also host other online activities which include guitar lessons and knit and natter. During the discussion the group shared that these activities keep people connected, give a routine and that their mental health had improved through taking part. This was also a theme shared in Connecting Scotland evaluations. The group agreed that since receiving devices from Connecting Scotland they felt more confident accessing online activities which included support services. This ethos of shared equity echoes the work of Finch, K 1999 as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Whilst the group were very positive about their experiences, it was widely recognised that there were huge barriers to participation which included lack of equipment, lack of knowledge and lack of confidence appearing on video.

In May 2020 the Scottish Government pledged to address the digital divide by launching the Connecting Scotland initiative. However, criticism has been levelled that it will not be effective for the following reasons. Firstly, phase 1 is aimed at those shielding (mainly elderly) or those with severe ailments and could potentially be awarding devices to people who could afford to buy. Secondly, the distribution process is managed by local Authorities and third party agencies, creating exclusion for those not associated with community groups. Thirdly, there are 25000 devices available for school children and some 250000 children in receipt of school meals indicating that there are still vast gaps in provision. Halliday, A. Digital Exclusion in Scotland, 2020.

When asked about the correlation between online activities and their mental wellbeing, the group’s responses were positive. Some quotes were

“Helped keep my mood up” “gave me something to look forward to” “tutoring gives me a sense of worth” “kept us together” “Good to meet with other people” “Makes my day -bit of excitement” The group also shared that although online wasn’t the same as in person meetings, they agreed it was “better than nothing”. Healthy Minds focus Group 30th March 2021.

When discussing the future of online learning, the group felt that there was still a role for it going forward and listed some of the advantages as, not travelling in poor weather conditions, overcomes childcare issues etc. This was echoed in a recent Aberdeen City CLD strategy session whereby family learning were experiencing unprecedented levels of attendance.

In this short piece of research, I have outlined the correlation between digital connectivity, poverty and mental wellbeing and demonstrated that despite Government intervention there will continue to be a divide for those marginalised individuals. I can assert that online learning which is delivered in a collaborated approach has a positive impact on mental wellbeing for those fortunate enough to have access to devices and connectivity. However, without substantial investment there will be a bias towards those who are digitally agile in both skills and hardware.

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