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Research Article

The New Covid-19 Wave and the Psychological Distress Among Senior High School Students in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the psychological experiences of Senior High School students and their coping strategies in selected Senior High Schools in Ghana in the wake of the third wave of Covid-19. Data for the study were purposely collected from 20 respondents using a semi-structured interview guide and analysed thematically. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of students in Senior High Schools are confused and have a feeling of anxiety whilst on campus in the wake of the third wave of Covid-19. It was further established that Senior High School students cope by building relationships with their teachers and as well with their colleagues in school and adherence to state laid down protocols. The contribution of Guidance and Counselling units in the schools played a great role in helping students cope psychologically.

Keywords: *Psychological, Covid-19, third-wave, coping strategies*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused havoc on education systems globally affecting more than 1.6 billion students in more than 200 countries (UNESCO, 2020). According to UNESCO, the COVID-19 outbreak has forced countries to close schools nationwide, disrupting the educational process which has impacted over 94% of the world's student population. This has resulted in major changes to every aspect of our lives. Social segregation and movement restrictions have significantly affected conventional educational approaches,

significantly disrupting schools (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). School reopening for most students, educators, staff, and school administrators, COVID-19 raises concerns related to danger, safety, and the need for protection (Shepherd, Evans, Gupta, McDonough, Doyle-Baker, Belton, Karmali, Pawer, Hadly, Pike, Adams, Babul, Yeates, Kopala-Sibley, Schneider, Cowle, Fuselli, Emery, & Black, 2021).

So far, statistics indicate that children under the age of 18 account for approximately 8.5 percent of recorded cases, with fewer fatalities than other age groups and often moderate

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illness. Cases of serious sickness, on the other hand, have been recorded (Fura & Negash, 2020). The author indicated that pre-existing medical problems, as in adults, have been proposed as a risk factor for children's severe illness and intensive care admissions. The decision to send a child to school is based on their health, the current transmission of COVID-19 in their community, and the protective measures in place at the school and community to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission. While current data indicates that children have a lower overall risk of serious illness than adults, specific measures may be taken to reduce the risk of infection among children, and the advantages of returning to school should also be addressed (Shepherd, 2021).

Individuals with underlying illnesses such as chronic respiratory illness, including moderate-to-severe asthma, obesity, diabetes, or cancer are at a greater risk of acquiring severe disease and death than people without other health problems, according to current research (Fura & Negash, 2020). This seems to be true for adolescents as well, although further research is required. When it was taught that all was becoming normal, then came the second wave and then the third wave, which is more dangerous than the first and second.

National school closures were imposed after the epidemic, and children were ordered to remain at home. Following the easing of restrictions, the difficulty that arose was introducing many new standards established as operational protocols. Several scholars have published numerous papers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic. In a variety of methods, they shared their work on teaching and learning. Numerous schools, colleges and universities have ceased offering face-to-face instruction. In the midst of this came a letter from the ministry of Ghana Education Service communicating dates of reopening secondary schools for almost all tracks.

In Ghana, the pandemic's impact on children's access and quality of education is most acutely felt through the tracking closure of schools that lack adequate alternative education services accessible to all children throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education (2020), around 9,253,063 learners

in pre-primary through secondary education were impacted. The Ministry of Education replaced the traditional school system with distance learning programmes. However, these services are not distributed equally, as children without access to televisions, mobile devices, or the internet (14-17 percent of school-aged children) and service stations such as postal offices used to receive remote learning materials were denied any form of education. Children spent an average of 5.9 hours per week on education, compared to the 7-8 hours per day recommended. Due to a lack of support from teachers and schools, as well as a lack of motivation, only 32% of households with a school-aged child receive communication from the child's school (UNICEF, 2020).

Boys and girls were vulnerable to gendered traditional roles in the household due to disruptions in learning, schooling, and exam schedules, an unsuitable learning environment at home (Adangabe Gideon, Inkoom & Dogbey, 2021) and a lack of access to distance learning materials (e.g., no access to ICT) (e.g., increased involvement in child labour for boys, and child-care and early marriage for girls).

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a significant psychological influence on young people and adolescents, producing symptoms of sadness, anxiety, and stress in Senior high school students. According to Zhang, Ye, Fu, Yang, Luo, Yang and Tao (2020), because teenagers and adolescents are more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress, the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to be far greater than the impact on adults. Fura and Negash (2020) examined the lived experiences of people during Covid-19 using students who stayed at home in Woliso town; according to the results of the study, university students have been experiencing difficulties, and the COVID-19 has been impacting their psychological, social, and academic performance. Their findings further revealed that during the COVID-19 crisis, students used coping strategies such as cognitive-behavioural activities, seeking and providing social support, building positive relationships, and enhancing social connections with friends, family, professionals, or physically with people in need, mostly through social media. Coping techniques are

tactics that individuals use when they are stressed. Adolescents coped by employing a direct problem-solving approach, cognitive decision making, comprehension, and constructive cognitive restructuring (Adangabe, Dogbey, & Tigtig, 2021). Thus, the current study explored the psychological experiences of Senior High School students and how they cope in Senior Secondary Schools in Northern Ghana.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological design. This design was chosen primarily to explore the particular ways individuals negotiate meanings in their interaction with others and how they make sense of experiences (Leavy, 2017) especially in the wake of the third wave of Covid-19. Purposive sampling was employed in this study to assist the researchers in obtaining relevant feedback from participants. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to gather information from 50 respondents in three Senior High Schools from the Northern part of Ghana. All interviews were conducted at the agreed-upon time, based on the participant's availability and convenience. Before conducting the interviews, participants were contacted through the school heads to get their permission to participate or not and to explain the study's objective.

To ensure the anonymity of the participants' answers, both in transcribing and analysis of interview data, the individuals' real names were coded rather than utilized. Furthermore, the interview transcription was arranged in line with the two main themes on the psychological impact on their lives and how they cope in the wake of the third wave of the Covid-19 in Northern Ghana.

Findings and Discussion

The experiences of Senior High students in Northern Ghana in the wake of the third wave of COVID-19

When asked about how students feel being in school and hearing about how deadly the third wave of covid- 19 was, some had this to say;

"I don't even know what to do now; learning itself is a burden, and then you are

supposed to always be thinking about how to protect yourself"-SS1

"Hmm, it is very difficult when I am asked to comment on my encounter with covid-19. I have really lost total control of myself since the new wave of the Covid-19 begun. This is because all my attention has been turned to doing things to maintain the safety protocols instead of concentrating on my books." SS9

"We don't even know what will happen next, we can be asked to go home at any time, that makes me unstable in school"- SS15.

The above expressions from some of the students affirm the position of Fura and Negash (2020), that the COVID-19 has negatively impacted on psychological, social, and academic performance of adolescents. It could also be inferred from the majority of the respondents that they were anxious and, to a greater extent, academically, emotionally and psychologically unstable.

Coping strategies Senior High School students in Northern Ghana employ in the face of the third wave of COVID-19

When asked how Senior High School Students in Northern Ghana employ to cope with the third wave of Covid-19, majority had this to say;

"Since the new wave began, we have also tightened the strict observance and adherence of the Covid-19. The schools have enough safety protocols like tissue paper, sanitizer, liquid soap and thermometer guns are all available. We have now come to believe that without the strict adherence to the covid 19 safety protocols. For example, my nose mask has been on since morning because I don't want to remove it and get infected by someone" SS11

"We most often rely on the assurances of our teachers that we are safe"- SS18.

"The Guidance and Counselling coordinator usually goes round from class to class to update us on the situation and what to do"- SS12.

"Sometimes we laugh things over with our friends but always we are conscious of social distancing, because you can't tell who might infest you"- SS6.

On the issue of how Senior High School Students in Northern Ghana cope with the third wave of Covid-19, it could be observed from the above responses that, contrary to Adangabe, et al., (2021) that adolescents cope by employing a direct problem-solving approach, cognitive decision making, comprehension, and constructive cognitive restructuring this study revealed that students cope through relationship building and assurances from friends and teachers. Also, they adhere to lay down protocols enforced by school authorities.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that the majority of students in senior high schools are confused and have a feeling of anxiety whilst on campus in the wake of the third wave of Covid-19. It was further established that senior high school students cope by building relationships with their teachers and as well with their colleagues in school. Yet again, the contribution of Guidance and Counselling played a great role in how students coped in some secondary schools in Northern Ghana. The students also did indicate that the provision of personal protective equipment (PPEs) by the schools had enabled them to deal with the psychological effects of the new wave of the covid-19. This gave students some confidence and a psychological boost.

Recommendations

From findings of the study, it is recommended that;

- The Ghana Education Service should provide enough personal protective equipment (PPEs) to the schools to enable them to deal with the psychological effects of the new wave of the covid-19, that will go a long way to boost students' confidence psychologically.
- It is also recommended that the government makes teaching compulsorily virtual for all

secondary schools in other to reduce physical contact between students and teachers.

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