Learning Loss in Kerala: Exploring the Reality of Academic Decline Among Today's Students

Mohammed Razin Rafeeq c.k

Abstract—**The COVID-19 pandemic caused one of the greatest disruptions to education, resulting in significant learning loss among school students. This study, titled "Learning Loss in Kerala: Exploring the Reality of Academic Decline Among School Students," investigates the long-term effects of the pandemic on students' academic performance, learning habits, and motivation in Kerala. The research aims to identify the major factors contributing to learning loss and explore possible strategies for academic recovery.**

The study was conducted using a qualitative survey approach involving Grade 10 students from Malabar International School. Data were collected through open-ended interviews, allowing students to freely express their experiences, challenges, and opinions regarding their learning after the pandemic.

The findings revealed that many students continue to experience difficulty concentrating during lessons, reduced motivation to study, and a noticeable decline in academic skills, particularly in mathematics and reading. Excessive use of social media and digital devices emerged as one of the most common factors affecting students' attention and study habits. The study also found that many students believe current teaching methods require improvement to better support post-pandemic learning recovery.

The findings highlight the urgent need for effective educational interventions, improved teaching strategies, and responsible digital media usage to help students recover from learning loss. Strengthening classroom engagement, providing targeted academic support, and encouraging active learning can contribute to rebuilding students' academic confidence and improving educational outcomes in Kerala.

Index Terms—**Learning Loss, Kerala, COVID-19, Academic Decline, School Students, Educational Recovery, social media, Learning Outcomes**

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented disruption in global education, forcing a rapid transition to digital learning platforms. While online schooling maintained academic continuity, its long-term psychological and behavioral consequences are only now becoming fully apparent. In Kerala, a region historically celebrated for its high educational indices, secondary school students have exhibited a noticeable post-pandemic "learning loss." This phenomenon is characterized by diminished academic engagement, reduced cognitive stamina, and structural difficulties in traditional classroom environments. Understanding the underlying drivers of this decline—particularly the intersection of digital media saturation, altered cognitive habits, and classroom interpersonal dynamics is essential for fostering academic recovery. This study investigates the qualitative realities of post-pandemic learning loss by examining the lived experiences of secondary school students. By analyzing firsthand student perspectives, this paper aims to identify how external digital distractions and internal educational environment factors collectively influence student concentration, academic motivation, and overall learning retention.

II. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of five Grade 10 students from Malabar International School in Kerala. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, specifically targeting individuals who exhibited a distinct post-pandemic contrast in academic behavior: they were recognized as high-performing and engaged prior to the lockdowns but demonstrated a significant decline in grades and focus in the post-pandemic era. To maintain strict confidentiality and protect student privacy, pseudonyms (Student 1 through Student 5) are utilized throughout this report.

Tools (Instruments)

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher, comprising five core open-ended questions designed to let participants speak freely about their habits, distractions, and challenges.

The standardized questions were as follows:

1. What is the biggest problem you face in learning or studying today?
2. When you are in class, what usually makes it hard for you to concentrate?
3. What makes you feel interested and motivated to learn?
4. How do mobile phones, social media, or games affect your studies?
5. If you could change one thing in your school or classroom to help you learn better, what would it be?

A smartphone audio recorder and field notebooks served as secondary tools to ensure the precise preservation of qualitative responses during the dialogue.

Procedure

Administrative and ethical clearance was formally requested from the school principal, Mr. Riyasuddin. Upon reviewing the research objectives, the principal facilitated access to five Grade 10 students matching the study's inclusion criteria. Data collection occurred through individual, face-to-face open interviews conducted in a quiet, private room containing only the researcher and the respective student. This arrangement provided a comfortable, distraction-free environment to encourage authentic disclosure. Each session lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. The qualitative responses were subsequently transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

III. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed critical insights into the modern realities of learning loss. The findings indicate that academic decline is deeply tied to digital time distortion, evolving multi-sensory expectations, and the emotional environment of the classroom. Table 1 provides a structured overview of the core qualitative themes and illustrative verbatim responses collected from the participants.

Table 1: Qualitative Matrix of Student Interview Responses and Extracted Themes

Core Research Focus	Identified Realities / Student Patterns	Key Verbatim Quotes from Participants
1. The Core Learning Problem	Universal inability to maintain focus; minds wandering due to an underlying digital restlessness and selective subject engagement.	"I can't focus; my mind is somewhere else." "Whenever I try to study, I can't focus... my mind won't be ready."
2. Classroom Concentration Barriers	Passive, monotone textbook reading by instructors; an aggressive or exclusionary classroom environment; intense anxiety regarding peer and teacher judgment.	"The main thing that makes it hard to concentrate is when teachers read from the book without energy... or just yapping." "If I just spoke a little, I would be sent out... Now, even when I see that person, I feel angry."
3. Triggers for Motivation	Empathy for parental sacrifice and a desire to secure their family's future comfort; multi-sensory visual learning aids; digital motivational speeches.	"My parents are sacrificing their dreams for us... thinking about this motivates me." "Visuals help me study longer, stay focused, and remember better."
4. Impact of Digital Media	Severe time distortion caused by mobile gaming and short-form video streaming; the illusion of "five more minutes" leading to prolonged study displacement.	"When I start playing games, time passes quickly and I forget to do my work." "A single notification distracts me... I tell myself only 5 minutes, but it turns into 1 or 2 hours."
5. Recommendations for Change	Call for sensory-based technology integration (projections, smart boards); training teachers in emotional gentleness; cultivating positive peer circles.	"Classes should also consider how students learn... Some by doing, most by watching visually." "Teachers should be fun rather than very strict and loud... take the class gently instead of shouting."

Primary Themes Extracted from the Data

Theme 1: The Digital Time-Distortion Trap and "Doom Scrolling"

A prominent finding across all participants was how technology actively sabotages self-study routines. Students reported that smartphones create a psychological loop where they intend to use the device productively (e.g., watching online classes or YouTube educational content) but are instantly derailed by notifications or algorithmic entertainment. Participants highlighted a severe distortion of time management when engaging with social media (specifically Instagram Reels and YouTube movie summaries) or mobile gaming. Students described a recurring cognitive failure where bargaining for "five more minutes" of screen time unpredictably stretches into multiple hours, completely displacing their study schedules.

Theme 2: The Breakdown of Traditional Pedagogy and Teacher-Student Dynamics

The data strongly indicated that the students' inability to concentrate in class is heavily tied to the teacher's delivery style and emotional approach. Students expressed extreme disengagement when teachers rely purely on reading aloud from textbooks without active enthusiasm. Furthermore, the traditional syllabus-bound lecture format was noted as tedious, with students explicitly requesting real-world stories, practical applications, and concepts outside the standard textbook framework. Critically, an aggressive classroom environment breeds severe academic anxiety for introverted students, causing them to mentally check out or completely forget information when tensed. Conversely, students noted that an emotionally gentle, encouraging, and interactive approach from a teacher instantly boosted their focus.

Theme 3: The "Parental Sacrifice" Catalyst and the Need for Multi-Sensory Learning

When analyzing what drives student motivation, two distinct factors emerged. Emotionally, the strongest psychological driver for these students was a profound sense of gratitude and responsibility toward their parents. The realization that their parents are sacrificing their own dreams serves as a primary anchor that forces them to want to achieve academic success (e.g., aiming for a "Full A+"). Systemically, the students overwhelmingly identified themselves as visual and experiential learners. They noted that their minds are no longer wired for passive listening; to retain information, they require smart boards, graphics, projections, and creative periods that allow them to present their own ideas rather than strictly sitting through consecutive core lectures.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative study offer a critical look into the post-pandemic learning landscape of 10th-grade students in Kerala. By analyzing the lived experiences of the participants, it becomes clear that "learning loss" is not merely an academic deficit, but a psychological and behavioral shift triggered by sudden digital dependency and outpaced traditional teaching methodologies.

The Digital Aftermath and Attention Disruption

The results clearly indicate a severe "digital hangover" among students. The forced transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic granted students unrestricted access to smartphones. Post-pandemic, this has manifested as a chronic struggle with time distortion and algorithmic addiction, particularly through short-form media. The psychological phenomenon of "doom scrolling" creates an illusion of short-term relaxation while actively damaging the cognitive stamina required for deep, prolonged textbook study. The data shows that students are aware of this distraction but lack the self-regulation strategies to break the loop autonomously.

Re-evaluating Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogy

A vital insight from this study is the widening gap between student cognitive expectations and traditional teaching styles. Having spent formative academic years in a highly stimulating digital environment, contemporary students find passive, monotone textbook reading completely unengaging. The data heavily suggests that the teacher's emotional delivery and instructional methods directly dictate student retention and focus. Critically, the traditional practice of using strictness, public shaming, or exclusion as disciplinary tools appears entirely counterproductive. For introverted students, an aggressive classroom environment breeds severe academic anxiety, causing them to mentally detach from the subject entirely.

Conversely, an emotionally gentle approach combined with multi-sensory tools acts as a powerful catalyst for concentration.

Emotional Anchors and Environmental Support

Interestingly, despite severe digital distractions, the students retain a strong intrinsic desire to succeed, anchored deeply by empathy for their parents' hard work and financial sacrifices. This "parental sacrifice" motif serves as their primary psychological driver. Furthermore, the findings highlight that a student's success is highly dependent on an active ecosystem: they explicitly require external parental reinforcement to study and a positive, academically oriented friend circle to stay on track.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides deep, qualitative insights, it is subject to certain limitations. The sample size was limited to five Grade 10 students from a single institution (Malabar International School). Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all secondary school students across Kerala. Additionally, the study relies entirely on self-reported data from the students, which may be influenced by personal biases at the time of the interview. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating perspectives from parents and teachers to create a tri-dimensional understanding of post-pandemic learning loss, alongside investigating the long-term cognitive impacts of digital screen time on secondary school curricula.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to assess the effect of learning loss in school students in Kerala after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the effects of social media, teaching methods, and learning environment on it. The goal was to identify the reasons for the drop in students' performances in their studies and to determine how to help them in their learning recovery. The results show that the growing usage of social media has made it difficult for students to stay focused on their studies, because whenever they realize that they are supposed to study, they take their phones instead. That is why the students of today are sometimes unable to focus on one subject and study properly in the modern society.

The data obtained shows the need for both teachers and students to start taking initiative in learning improvement. Teachers need to realize the problems that the students encounter and learn to use more entertaining, interactive, and helpful teaching strategies. The students, for their part, should lower their social media use, be encouraged to study more efficiently, and learn to use active recall, in particular.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my mentor, Sinan, whose guidance was instrumental in the completion of this research paper. I am also deeply grateful to the Principal, Mr. Riyasuddin, for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research at the school; his support, particularly in facilitating the student interviews, was invaluable in achieving these results. Furthermore, I would like to thank Salahudheen for his constant motivation throughout the writing process, and extend my heartfelt thanks to Fasil for his practical assistance with various tasks at the school.

REFERENCES

[1] ASER Centre, "Annual status of education report (rural) 2014," 2015. [Online]. Available: http://www.asercentre.org/

[2] ASER Centre, "Annual status of education report (rural) 2018," 2019. [Online]. Available: http://www.asercentre.org/

[3] N. Kaur and J. Singh, "The digital shift in Indian education: Challenges and opportunities in the post-COVID era," Journal of Educational Technology, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 45–56, 2021.

[4] OECD, Combatting COVID-19 Learning Loss: Global Perspectives on Student Engagement and Academic Recovery. OECD Publishing, 2022.

[5] K. Subrahmanyam and P. Greenfield, "Online communication and adolescent relationships," The Future of Children, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 119–146, 2008, doi: 10.1353/foc.0.0006.

[6] UNESCO, Technology in Education: A Tool on Whose Terms? Global Education Monitoring Report. UNESCO Digital Library, 2023.

[7] P. Engzell, A. Frey, and M. D. Verhagen, "Learning loss due to school closures during

the COVID-19 pandemic," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol. 118, no. 17, Art. no. e2022376118, 2021, doi: 10.1073/pnas.2022376118.