

THE EFFECTS OF THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON A MALTESE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Article for TESS

On the last day of the calendar year 2019, in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China, a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown aetiology was reported and subsequently referred to as Coronavirus 2 or COVID-19. Within a very short time span, this disease started to spread not just outside of China, but across the globe, leading the WHO to declare a state of pandemic situation on Wednesday 11th March 2020 (WHO, 2020). The first case was detected on our shores on the 7th March 2020 and on Thursday 12th March, the decision to close all schools on the island was taken.

As part of my Masters' degree study in educational leadership and management with the University of Derby, I pursued my dissertation study on a qualitative analysis of the effects of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic on a secondary school in Malta. The advent of the pandemic in March 2020 on our islands, like on the rest of the world, had a major effect on educational institutions, which led to the closure of schools and the eventual resorting to online teaching. This created havoc among all educational stakeholders since urgent decisions had to be taken in order to safeguard everyone's well-being while striving to retain a sense of continuity in the educational sphere.

The principal scope of this study was to analyse, from a teacher's point of view, the effects that this situation had on teaching and learning on a particular secondary school between March and June 2020. Thus, a number of teachers were interviewed in order to assess the impact of the pandemic from their perspective while seeking to elicit learning experiences from an otherwise dire situation. Besides analysing the effects of the pandemic on the educational sector, this dissertation sought to prioritise the support needed by students who were mostly affected by the pandemic due to their personal circumstances in order to help them pursue their studies without further inhibitions.

Finally, this study also considered how the benefits of online teaching could be reaped in order to consolidate the use of technology in the educational sphere, particularly in the event of any similar situations that the world might face in the future.

The aim of this study was to shed more light on the impact that the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic had on a Maltese secondary school. This discussion sought to highlight the main effects experienced by the participants in this study. It also showed how this period proved to be very challenging for educators mainly due to the fact that they had not been prepared or trained to switch to online learning. Furthermore, the mantra of social distancing and the lack of human interaction between staff members and in the classroom was a hindrance towards a complete educational experience. These changes in teaching and learning, mainly the switch to remote learning, also hindered the students' educational experiences, especially those who were frequently absent from lessons throughout the period discussed in this study. Therefore, despite the advantages of online learning, the dissertation's conclusions clearly showed that the school authorities need to make sure that no student is left behind and to help those who missed out, recover what was lost in order to resume their educational journey together with their peers.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to TESS for granting me a scholarship to carry out my masters' degree study and gave me the opportunity to delve deeper into the topic of my dissertation, which apart from being interesting in its own merits, suggested various actions that could be take in our local scenario as a way forward once the pandemic will be part of our history.

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