

# **A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE BENEFITS, CONCERNS AND PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE EDUCATION FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN**

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## **Overview of Research**

The main aim of this research is to explore aspects of online learning for primary school children through a comparison of online educational courses with traditional teaching methods. The specific objectives of the research include the examination of communication, interaction and socialisation in online course work as well as an investigation of children's attitudes to online learning.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

A qualitative case study was designed to evaluate the aims and objectives outlined. The core research question was formulated as follows: "What benefits, problems and concerns does online education hold for primary school children?". The research was conducted in a large co-educational school with the fourth class having an age range of nine to ten years. As the class was large (40 pupils) it was decided that a smaller sample would be appropriate for the case study. Four groups of eight were selected and each of the groups was introduced to both a traditional in-class course and in turn the corresponding online course, in the areas of English, History, Geography and Science. Data collection, interviewing, observation and document analysis were all used throughout the period of study for purposes of triangulating findings. Ethical considerations were taken into account and permission was sought from parents or guardians of the children in the study.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

The case study examines the experience of primary school children using online courses compared to that of traditional classroom courses. The findings in this research suggest that children in these settings can communicate effectively, with children possessing proficiency with keyboard skills having more expressive and lengthy conversations. It is argued that the anonymous or virtual nature of online environments liberate some children, who might normally be less vocal, to voice their opinions. According to responses in interviews, successful interactions among children did not appear to be affected by the lack of face-to-face contact or body language cues, and social interaction (or social presence) increased with comments relating how much easier it was to make friends online. A caveat to this, reported in the study, is the greater likelihood of participants in online course environments to say harmful things to other participants. The online presence of a

course instructor served to improve peer-to-peer interactions. Synchronous (or real time) group discussions were preferred by participants, but it is interesting to note asynchronous (or delayed) conversations were interpreted by the author as richer in quality. In terms of achievements the findings suggest that participants performed as well in online courses as those in traditional classroom based courses, with writing skills being equal in both – in contrast with previous research findings identified in the literature arguing a general improvement in writing skills among online course participants. The positive attitudes of participants to learning in structured online courses were also noteworthy.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that there is need for fundamental change in regard to the current curriculum. It recommends greater integration of Information and Communication Technology into the primary curriculum and suggests that digital literacy should be considered a primary learning objective in schools, requiring continuing professional development and capital investment on the part of our education stakeholders. Further research into online education for primary school children is recommended as are its possible benefits for homeschooled children or children unable to attend school for long periods due to illness.