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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

COVID-19 is an Amplifier of Social Inequalities Structural Violence against Students with Special Learning Needs and Low Socio-Economic Status

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Abstract

In the year 2019, the curtain has risen, setting the stage for a pandemic which has since been infecting millions and millions of individuals around the world, thereby affecting, disrupting, and intensifying our reliance on technology in a techno-driven era. Schooling mode has coped with the situation and switched from a traditional, in-person one to an online, virtual one. While our reliance on technology did not begin from there, the pandemic has transformed the reliance on technology into a necessity even for students. Learning disparities amongst students from different socio-economic statuses resulted from resources and access disparities have never been more conspicuously amplified before. Not every family has the financial resources to support the hardware and the soft skills required for 'online/homeschooling'; additionally, these drastic changes occurred so rapidly that online learning is still a new concept to many students in various educational contexts. Despite how emergency remote teaching has seemingly enabled the continuation of schooling and countered the disruption of teaching and learning, the inconvenient truth is that students' learning, particularly those coming from multiple intersectionalities: special educational needs and from low-income families, has been seriously jeopardised. This paper uses Foucauldian theory of power and resistance as well as agency to explore how the pandemic has contextualised social exclusion faced by students with special educational needs who also belong in the group of lower socio-economic statuses. The significance of the study lies in how it applies the classic yet timely theory of Foucault's power and resistance and aims to dissect the social inequalities that are hidden beneath emergency remote teaching. The second key finding is showing how the aids and assistance given by non-profit organisations are often an ostensible reinforcement of social injustice, as society is under the misguided zeal that certain social groups have received help, where in fact, the learning of students belonging in those hidden groups are not being taken care of and in some cases, are even jeopardised.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought disjuncture to our lives in ways that were unimaginable before they took place [1]. These changes have occurred on different levels, in terms of international relations and within
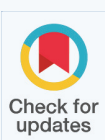
countries and communities; with changes in border policies and the implementation of social distancing, naturally, communications and interactions between humans have also gone through fundamental changes. Amongst these changes, schools have been affected drastically, not only have the learning modes of students been altered, but the shift from traditional learning classrooms to compulsory and unavoidable online learning has also unintendedly and inevitably intensified the differences between students' access to resources, an uncontrollable factor that is directly related to students' socio-economic statuses. Access to resources and access to education is the basic right of every student, however, only having access to that does not guarantee quality education. The pandemic has undoubtedly widened the disparities of students from different SES. In fact, it has been revealed in both the media and from researchers that the huge income gap has become an amplified, if not determinant, factor that determines the learning outcomes of students under the pandemic [2,3]. In addition, quality education has become more dispersed since the attention from institutions has been placed on providing financial and material aids in helping students acquire the hardware needed for online learning; but many of the other needs have been neglected.

While schools and educators actively seek ways such as blended learning and distance learning to enable the continuation of teaching and learning, perhaps it is also necessary for us to consider the social inequalities that students are exposed to, as well as the structural violence that the underprivileged students currently suffer from. The concept of structural violence is defined by Edward Said as "violence exerted systematically", in which individuals belonging in a shared social order are inescapably affected [4]. We are used to taking dominant social values and social facts for granted; the pandemic, however, has acted as an amplifier of social inequities that we were originally less aware of, bringing our attention to the structural violence that society has imposed on students [5]. Using the concept of Foucault's power and resistance, this paper discusses why the elevated awareness of social inequalities has counterproductively added to the inequalities per se.

Accelerator disguised as an equaliser

The pandemic has brought challenges to educational contexts in a global level [3], phrased the pandemic as an "equaliser" that neutralises the differences that exist across regions and amongst students, however, this paper argues that pandemic as an equaliser is only a facade. On the surface, the Internet and online applications have enabled the continuation of learning despite suspension of in-person schooling; the more disturbing truth is that emergent remote teaching has simply brought forward and snowballed the learning disparities resulted from resources disparities. Many non-profit making organisations and the media have organised campaigns and published a variety of documents that specifically aims to provide assistance to the poor and students with special educational needs (for example: Save the Children, 2019; Jockey Club Autism Network, 2020; Society of Community Organisation, The News Lens, 2021, etc.). However, while these institutions come with good intentions, they have also contributed to the politicisation of the formation of knowledge and the normalisation and governance of well-being and health [6]. Most importantly, the attention that these reports and the media have given to the specific social groups have counterproductively and inevitably magnified the social exclusion faced by these students.

Since disadvantages and social exclusion are often multifactorial [7,8], it is not uncommon for students with special educational needs to face intersectionalities of inequalities and exclusion. The pandemic has contextualised the social exclusion faced by students with special educational needs who also belong in the group of lower socio-economic statuses. These students have limited access to resources such as private professional help and private tutorial classes; in some cases, the students' families cannot even afford the hardware required for proper online classes, such as laptop, stable network, etc. [9]. Assistance has been provided by the government in some jurisdictions, institutions like the education departments and schools have also provided financial resources in helping students in acquiring the equipment that they need [10]. However, these are only the basic needs for online learning to be possible, as assistance has ceased at the material level, often, students' well-being is neglected. Their other needs such as online pedagogies that are specific to their special learning conditions; their psychological needs of coping with the drastic changes between in-person and online classes; and the changes that occur when facing the loss of in-person social interactions, etc. [11] These needs are clouded by institutions' efforts that focus on alleviating the seemingly more urging inequalities and multiple deprivation that students

from lower socio-economic statuses and students with special educational needs are forced to face, such as the lack of computers and stable network. On one hand, the pandemic might arguably appear to be an equaliser for all students regardless of their demographic backgrounds and/or learning needs, as it is a health crisis that occurs globally and every student despite the educational context is thrown into such a scenario. On the other hand, the pandemic is indeed an amplifier that brings social injustice under the spotlight on two levels: first, resources deprivation as a result of low socio-economic status which leads to learning deprivation of students belonging in that social group; and second, the aids provided by institutions have clouded the other more pressing needs of students, such as motivation, socio-emotional needs, etc.; as high effectiveness of online learning is achieved by multiple factors, and equipment is only one of the very basic ones. This paper elucidates how the needs of these underprivileged students are tended to only on the surface, and at the same time, how their well-being is being disciplined and governed in the discourse and disguise of social justice.

Literature Review

Power: Students as both subject and object

Foucault discussed power as a concept that needs to be understood through the consideration of resistance that exists amongst individuals in different fields [12,13]. The relationship of power is "an action upon an action", it is "a mode of direction which does not act directly and immediately on others" (Foucault, 1982, p.789). Power is an intertwinement with subject, while subject is closely linked with the process of objectification, power can be understood as the process of turning subject into object per se. There are three ways of objectification according to Foucault (1982), the first way is the mode of inquiry, the second way is the dividing practices, and the third way is how individuals turn themselves into subjects in the identification of one's relations to structures. These three dimensions of objectification are found in the discourse of students from lower socio-economic status who at the same time have special educational needs. Mode of inquiry refers to the production of objective knowledge; when we consider students with special educational needs, their special needs are often medicalised, rarely are the perspectives and voices of students taken into account [14-16]. Our knowledge about these students and the learning needs of them are often constructed through professionalisation, the conditions and needs of these students are discussed from a medical point of view, as if the students equate the special learning needs. The second level of objectification lies in how the process itself is based heavily on the normalisation of how a 'proper student' ought to behave in the classroom.

Students with special educational needs are assigned a medicalised, sick role within the school as an attempt to rationalise their unfittedness in the system. Binary division between the 'good and healthy' students, and the 'misbehaved and sick' students dominates societies' and teachers' knowledge about these students, at the same time, stereotyping them [6]. The third dimension of objectification is closely connected to the self-perception of these individuals. It has been revealed across research that the self-perception and self-esteem of students with special educational needs are often affected by inclusive education and integrated education settings, in which students might identify themselves as the 'special ones' especially when teachers are not experienced enough in managing learning differences in a non-discriminatory manner [17-19]. Scholars have revealed that students learning in an inclusive classroom have a distinct conception between 'us and them', since the differences between the "normal" students and the "special" ones are often unintendedly amplified by teachers' differentiated instructions, and/or the extra assistance given by special educational needs teachers [20-22]. Students often go through exclusion in the classroom and in school, while their academic learning is prioritised, their social needs are neglected or even ignored [23,24]. In other words, on one hand, students with special educational needs are treated as the subject, as individuals whose needs should be addressed to achieve education justice; on the other hand, these students are objectified in the process, and ironically, their needs are not fully addressed and such objectification often politicises society's knowledge towards them, thereby leading to the production of truth channelled by the exercise of power [6,25].

Resistance and 'symbolic control' under the pandemic

The pandemic has brought immense changes to schooling, online teaching has become the unavoidable means which enables continuity of students' learning. Since COVID-19 is a global health crisis which affects each and every individual, some

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believe that the pandemic acts as an equaliser which reduces discrepancies across countries, social class and race [3]. It is undeniable that the pandemic has brought by a new landscape to certain aspects of the lifeways that we are used to, but when considering students' learning from a micro-perspective, it is not hard to see that the pandemic is in fact an intensifier of social inequalities and even social exclusion observed in the regime of truth. First, online learning requires students to learn at home, it implies the requirement of stable access to the Internet and an area which is quiet and spacious enough to enable students to take online lessons [1-3]. Naturally, these two conditions might be quite difficult to meet for students coming from families with lower socio-economic statuses.

What is interesting is the mismatched follow-up actions taken by governments, education departments and schools to support these students. Taking Hong Kong as an example, the Education Bureau announced the provision of additional subsidies to schools for the extra expenditure for equipping students with electronic devices [26]. Although the biggest challenges faced by students are the availability of an appropriate learning environment, the focus has been placed on hardware support. Using Foucault's concept of social control and discipline, schooling is an important means of the exertion of power as well as the production of truth [6,27]; in-person schooling might have been suspended but discipline/control is still achieved through online teaching. On the other hand, the provision of subsidies and hardware allow fulfilment of the basic prerequisites of online schooling. As for the other needs of students, they are transferred back to the responsibilities of school teachers, thereby elucidating the reasons behind the Bureau's negligence towards the non-material needs of students. It is noteworthy that the announcement of compulsory online schooling and the act of granting monetary support for schools and students are itself an act of power exertion.

On the other hand, while online teaching and financial support have allowed for the expanded possibilities of social control amongst individuals regardless of these students' social class, such control is indeed merely symbolic owing to the change of power field between teachers and students exhibited in online learning. The change of field is most obvious between students and teachers, especially in the aspect of biopower. Students are expected to look like students by obeying certain school rules such as putting on their school uniforms, tying up their hair,

having their uniforms ironed, etc. and those who fail to do so are considered as rule-breakers, and that usually results in punishments such as deduction in grades or detention. The adoption of online learning still gives teachers the power to discipline their students' performances and behaviours in class, yet it is obvious that the change of field has simultaneously given students more power and resistance against the regime. For instance, although students are still required to put on their uniforms while learning at home, many would choose to put on only the parts that are shown in the camera. It has in fact been reported that schoolteachers have felt a loss of control and power over their students in online teaching during the pandemic, some teachers even encounter resistance from students when requiring them to turn on their cameras in the lessons [3,28]. Teachers have less control over their students in terms of biopower and disciplining their students. Control has gone through a change of field, seemingly more penetrating since it transcends space, yet such control is only symbolic and is evidenced in students' resistance.

Interestingly, students whose families fail to provide the suitable learning environment, that is, those whose homes appear tiny and are rather noisy are the ones who are the most reluctant in turning on their cameras, another groups of students who are reluctant in doing so are those with lower learning motivation [29,30]. Ironically, these groups of students are the ones that schools find most difficult to exert control even during in person schooling; however, in person schooling still provides teachers an edge since students have to obey to school rules, yet online schooling has turned the learning climate upside down, in a sense that students with few learning motivation might learn less and less effectively while those who has always had higher learning motivation might learn even more effectively; thereby causing wider learning differences in the same class. It has been revealed in research that students with relatively weaker abilities, or those with special educational needs usually fall into the category of 'lower learning motivation', since they tend to experience more frustration academically [31-35]. The pandemic has amplified the inequalities faced by the weaker students, together with the issues of poverty and limited access to external and/or extra resources, these students are thrown into episodes of structural violence. In other words, students with special educational needs plus belonging in the lower socio-economic status face multiple deprivation,

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and the effects are intensified by the pandemic. At the same time, control and the relations of power have also gone through changes and transformations under the pandemic, schoolteachers can no longer be as certain regarding students' learning outcome; a form of symbolic control has emerged under such circumstances. Online learning might have transcended space and time, yet it seems that biopower and control have only been exercised to a certain, if not very limited, extent.

Dissecting the pandemic through pastoral power, agency and structural violence

Foucault describes pastoral power as a technique which is totalizing and individualizing by nature and is a form of power that has spread to the whole social body and is not limited to institutions [36]. The production of knowledge through pastoral power has two focused roles, the first concerns the population and the second concerns the individual (p.784). Since power does not exist by itself but within every relationship in an omnipresent manner, naturally, the pandemic has brought changes to the dynamic in classrooms. Student-teacher relationships have been discussed in the previous section using the concept of discipline and bio-power. This section aims to elucidate how production of knowledge is affected using the concept of pastoral power, the discussion will later on expand to the pathologies of power and structural violence.

The production of knowledge is heavily influenced by pastoral power, the pandemic has changed the ways humans communicate and interact completely; from social distancing to compulsory surgical masks-wearing policies, these regulations contribute to and act at the same time as reinforcements to our knowledge of health, hygiene and well-being. School suspension and the need for switching to online learning are accepted by the public as social facts with few, if not none, resistance, that was not sufficient enough to cease them from becoming part of our lived experiences despite the state of disequilibrium that we once were in especially during the beginning of the pandemic [1,37]. Social distancing is taken for granted as a rational response to the pandemic; at the same time, as the need to maintain schooling is also taken for granted as a social fact, pastoral power is evidenced in individuals' submission to the huge changes in terms of schooling and the mode of learning, thereby enabling the transformation and virality of online teaching across the globe. On an

individual level, some might encounter difficulties adjusting to the drastic changes involved, but these individuals are 'expected' by society to be able to keep up with those changes as soon as possible. Indeed, research has revealed that school teachers face extra anxieties and stress during the pandemic [38-40]. On one hand, they are expected to be expert learners who are assumed to possess the ability in adapting fast to environmental changes; on the other hand, these individuals do need time to adjust to the emergence of 'symbolic control' described in the previous section, as well as the acquisition of pedagogical skills required for online teaching.

As a matter of fact, other than teachers, pastoral power and power relations are also embedded in students' social relations with their peers. Since online learning requires certain hardwares such as an electronic device which has a camera and a microphone and the facilitation of conditions such as a quiet and spacious environment for students to learn properly, the effectiveness of learning has taken a new landscape in which one's socio-economic background has unignorable impact on students' learning which is much more direct and explicit than ever before. A number of studies have also identified the amplified effect of one's socio-economic background [41-43] under the pandemic. There is no doubt that class difference does play a part in one's learning, however, pastoral power might have prompted our knowledge and pursuit of knowledge on this matter at the basic level of identification, that is, it is widely agreed that class difference is a discourse which could reason for students' sub-par performances [44-48]. However, this is exactly where structural violence plays a role in the analysis; on one hand, the inequalities and suffering of students whose families could provide relatively limited resources have become perpetuate; on the other hand, these sufferings may be juxtapositioned through the reinforcement of society's knowledge towards the poor; it is when students' sub-par academic performances be presumed to be an outcome of poverty that students be further marginalised, ironically adding to the multiple deprivations that they face [49-51]. On top of placing poverty as the discourse, the special educational needs of students are often taken as a discourse as well in reasoning for their substandard academic performances. The pandemic has led to the necessity of online learning and has also acted as a "tangibilizer" that made the two discourses visualisable. Nevertheless, it is this tangibilizing effect that has "naturalised" these

individuals' sufferings as it "erases their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted and no one is held accountable except these individuals themselves" [52].

Discussion

Structural violence- Power structure that dehumanises the invisible group of students

Structural violence is a concept coined by Galtung [53], it was used to describe a 'sinful social structure' that induces social inequality, such as poverty, racism and gender inequality. Structural violence is violence that is exerted through the system, in which people within the system contribute to it through obeying certain social order while others are suffering from the discomfort that are reinforced by the compliances. The social machinery of oppression is a result of joint consciousness in which individuals unknowingly contribute to, formulating a structure in which it is 'nobody's fault' (p.307). The effects of structural violence have long been recognised across research in the previous years, the violence on children in particular, is manifested in the unequal distribution of power and wealth within and between societies, in a sense that children who are born in families of low SES suffer mostly from the limited, if not lack of, resources on their intellectual, social, emotional development [54]. Students suffering from families in poverty even suffer from a destructive influence on their development. Previous research has pointed out that parents' decisions are heavily influenced by their purchasing power, and their decision-making abilities, and these are all highly connected to their educational background [55]. In other words, these students' learning capabilities are deprived from the beginning, harmed and impaired by lack of resources access. This is manifested on several levels--- first, equipment such as a proper working desk, electronic device and stable network. Second, the access to resources apart from school teachers, such as private tutorial lessons, and/or being able to afford online materials. Even if the open access movement has been ongoing, students might not have been aware of them, and the knowledge regarding these resources often come from their parents [56]. In other words, for those whose parents are ignorant about educational access and available and accessible learning resources, their learning progress will be significantly behind other students who are relatively privileged.

Structural violence is violence exerted from within the system; individuals belonging to a certain social order contribute to the exertion, the blame is equally distributed and is at the same time, shared by no one [49]. Apart from those living in poverty, students with special learning needs are also stigmatised and excluded by the uneven power distribution that exists within the system. The idea of aid and help is itself an exclusion exertion on groups of the underdogs- on the surface, these individuals receive help from the top dogs and 'organisations' devoted to assist their needs; but in fact, their agency is limited, and their individuality is replaced and overwhelmed by their 'needs'. The needs of the hidden group are often assumed and presumed, but then resources that target at their higher order thinking skills, or at ensuring their mastery of content knowledge in the syllabus are less tended to. To elaborate, students of low SES families are often provided with financial aid and/or the equipment required for online lessons to be possible. However, the aid usually stops at the material level, and their other needs are often ignored. Whilst the needs for other students, such as their mental health, and/or their socio-emotional development are either tended to by their own parents, who are relatively more educated than those of the other group; or are also ignored in the system as the attention is placed entirely on the underdogs, depending on the educational context [57].

Discrimination is strengthened through the structure; uneven power distribution is further reinforced in the process- thereby consequentially creating a classification of 'the disabled'; whilst resources such as social services and capital are still dominated and controlled by the dominate body. The violence exhibited here is symbolic, though it is less easily observable, it lies at the heart of all social relations and institutions; it is invisible violence that is experienced by the dominated group, which is also why in most cases, they are also the invisible group. The intersectional perspective of identity and the discrimination and oppression that comes from being a part of this group needs the connecting of individual lived experiences to the larger structures that concern privilege and oppression to be seen [58].

Learning gap and access to resources- Intersectionality, structural inequalities and digitisation

Intersectionality is a powerful tool for understanding, constructing and deconstructing the oppression faced by individuals who belong in multiple marginalised social groups. Students belonging to the

low SES social group, who at the same time belong in the group of 'special educational needs' face multiple layers of inequalities. On one hand, the pandemic has confined every student across educational contexts at home and shifted their learning modes forcefully into an online and digitalised version. On the other hand, this signifies that resources accessibility is directly connected to and is proportional to the educational background, socio-economic statuses of their parents. In other words, first, the learning needs of students in general are already jeopardised owing to the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching and how underprepared teachers could be particularly in educational settings where online teaching has not been included in teachers' training nor professional development yet [59]; second, the special learning needs of students, in particular, those from low SES and with special learning needs are ignored, and this hidden group of students has suffered from learning loss during emergency remote teaching [60,61].

The concept of digital structural violence is coined by a group of researchers from Oxford University [62]. Initially the term focuses on discussing the most marginalised group, whose needs are most ignored as they are also the group who suffer most under digital structural violence. The term discusses digital inequality, social exclusion from educational opportunities & technical developments in artificial intelligence that are resulting from the reliance on artificial intelligence in current and future learning systems. As pointed out in the research, inequalities are often reinforced and exacerbated by educational technologies [63]. When applied in the discussion of this paper, digital structural violence is less related to the algorithm done by artificial intelligence; however, educational opportunities of particular groups of students, especially those with special learning needs and low SES, are still deprived and under threat due to the reliance on technology in the education systems. As a matter of fact, other scholars such as Bailey and Burkell [64], have also explored similar concepts with the term 'tech-facilitated violence'. As a matter of fact, for students with special learning needs, the assistance they require could involve extra learning support from schools, speech therapists, pedagogies such as scaffolding, etc [65,66]. These are unfortunately irreplaceable by homeschooling especially when parents have not received formerly proper training. In other words, the deprived learning opportunities and halted learning progresses that these students face have become their realities, meanwhile, other students whose families can afford private tutorial classes and/or quality homeschooling, remain unaffected under suspension of in-person schooling, and in some cases, even obtained improved academic achievements, thereby widening the learning gap between these students even further [66,67]. Since the improvement and the loss of learning amongst students occur simultaneously; and in this case, it is a direct and cruel reflection and result of the resources that these students could have access to--- learning deprivation is in fact the brutal outcome of structural violence.

Conclusion

When considering the learning of students with special educational needs who at the same time come from families with lower socio-economic statuses, rather than misplacing these two characteristics of this group of students as the discourse of their suffering such as poor academic performances, it is important that we consider the structure of the educational system of the corresponding jurisdiction to avoid further imposition of structural violence on these students. For instance, one should look with critical eyes regarding the educational contexts, and one must ask ourselves a variety of questions when acting to reduce structural violence. To what extent is their lack of learning motivation related to their unsatisfactory academic performances? To what extent did students' socio-economic background contribute to their academic performances? As described by MacKenzie [27], "we must understand the 'grid' that operates across these domains, that governs them, as an object of analysis in its own right". The ability to do so is described by Foucault (1978) as autonomy, which is different from agency; in short, the former refers to one's ability to act and think outside social contexts; while the latter refers to the sense of self that exists within regimes of power and the production of knowledge [6,12]. While agency exists in individuals yet still confined within regimes, autonomy is the transcendence and liberation in acting outside the social contexts. "The philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state" [12]. This paper aims to provide the perspective of viewing the pandemic as an accelerator that has brought the inequalities that certain hidden groups of students are forced to face under circumstances that they have no control of. The discussion criticises the interesting phenomenon in which despite how societal systems

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and social welfares are already aware of the resource deprivation that students with low SES face and have acted on that accordingly, it does not really resolve the deeper and rooted problem of learning deprivation and even learning loss that some students have suffered in emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. This paper does not aim to oppose the reliance on technology in educational contexts, but it does ask that education policymakers to be aware of the learning loss and widened learning gap amongst students, when deciding how technology and artificial intelligence are going to be integrated in our future education system, as it is where the era is heading to.

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