#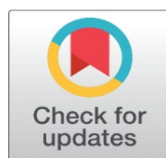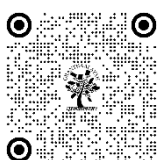 MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN HYBRID LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN 2023: ADDRESSING POST-PANDEMIC STUDENT AND EDUCATOR WELL-BEING

Banti Dutta [1]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Laluk College, Assam, India

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the widespread adoption of hybrid learning models, reshaping educational practices in ways that continue to affect students and educators in 2023. While hybrid environments offer flexibility and increased accessibility, they also introduce unique stressors that contribute to mental health challenges, including digital fatigue, isolation, and blurred boundaries between academic and personal life. This study examines the mental health implications of hybrid learning for both students and educators, with particular attention to the effectiveness of institutional support systems. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document review to capture lived experiences and perceptions of well-being. Thematic analysis revealed several recurring challenges: students reported difficulties with motivation, belonging, and equitable access to digital resources, while educators highlighted increased workload, technological anxiety, and emotional labor. Although institutions expanded online counseling and wellness initiatives, these supports were found to be inconsistent and disproportionately student-focused. The findings underscore the need for holistic and sustainable approaches to mental health that integrate systemic support for both students and educators. Ultimately, the study concludes that prioritizing well-being is essential for the long-term success and equity of hybrid learning environments.

**Keywords:** Hybrid Learning, Mental Health, Post-Pandemic Education, Student Well-Being, Educator Well-Being, Support Systems, Qualitative Research

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped global education systems, accelerating the adoption of online and hybrid learning models at an unprecedented pace. While these models created opportunities for flexibility and accessibility, they also introduced new challenges for students and educators alike. The rapid transition away from traditional in-person learning disrupted established support structures, heightened feelings of isolation, and amplified stress associated with digital learning environments. In 2023, as hybrid learning has become a normalized feature of many educational institutions, the need to address the mental health implications of this shift has become increasingly urgent. Hybrid learning, although positioned as a solution to the disruptions of the pandemic, remains a complex educational model that requires deeper investigation of its impact on well-being.

Mental health concerns among students and educators were already on the rise before the pandemic, with issues such as academic pressure, workload imbalance, and limited institutional support contributing to stress, anxiety, and burnout. The pandemic, however, intensified these challenges by creating prolonged uncertainty and social disconnection. Hybrid learning environments, while designed to combine the best of in-person and online instruction, have not fully resolved these issues. Instead, they often blur boundaries between personal and academic life, create unequal access to digital resources, and demand constant adaptation to changing modes of delivery. For students, these

challenges manifest in feelings of academic disengagement, digital fatigue, and reduced social connectedness. For educators, they emerge as increased workloads, technological anxieties, and the expectation of providing both pedagogical and emotional support to learners.

Despite these challenges, hybrid learning also presents opportunities for reimagining mental health support systems in education. Many institutions have expanded online counseling services, peer-support programs, and wellness initiatives in response to post-pandemic needs. Digital platforms have facilitated access to teletherapy and mental health resources, making support more flexible and, in some cases, more accessible than before. However, questions remain regarding the inclusivity, effectiveness, and sustainability of these measures, especially for marginalized or underserved populations who may face additional barriers in hybrid environments. Furthermore, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on students, leaving the mental health experiences of educators relatively underexplored. This imbalance underscores the importance of adopting a more holistic perspective that recognizes the interdependent well-being of both students and educators in hybrid learning contexts.

Given these complexities, a deeper exploration of how individuals experience mental health within hybrid learning systems is essential. This study seeks to investigate the lived realities of students and educators in 2023, focusing on their perceptions of mental health challenges and the support systems available to them. By employing a qualitative methodology, this research aims to go beyond surface-level descriptions and capture the nuanced, context-rich narratives that reveal how well-being is shaped by hybrid education. In doing so, it will provide insight into coping strategies, institutional practices, and cultural dimensions of mental health that quantitative data alone cannot fully capture.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both policy and practice. For educational institutions, findings can guide the design of more responsive and inclusive mental health frameworks that integrate seamlessly with hybrid learning structures. For educators and students, this research highlights the importance of creating communities of care and resilience that extend beyond formal counseling services. More broadly, the study contributes to the growing body of post-pandemic scholarship that emphasizes well-being as a critical component of educational success. Ultimately, addressing mental health in hybrid learning environments is not an ancillary concern but a foundational requirement for building sustainable, equitable, and effective education systems in the years ahead.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW
## 2.1. PRE-PANDEMIC MENTAL HEALTH IN EDUCATION

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges in educational contexts were well-documented. Students frequently reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression linked to academic competition, financial constraints, and career uncertainties (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Auerbach et al., 2018). Similarly, educators were identified as an at-risk group for stress and burnout due to workload intensity, role ambiguity, and limited institutional support (Kyriacou, 2001; Herman et al., 2018). While counseling centers, peer mentoring programs, and wellness services existed, they were often underutilized because of stigma, inadequate funding, and accessibility barriers (Reavley & Jorm, 2010). This pre-pandemic context demonstrates that the pandemic did not generate mental health crises in education but significantly amplified existing vulnerabilities.

## 2.2. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic triggered unprecedented disruption in education worldwide, with the sudden shift to remote learning bringing new psychosocial stressors. For students, isolation from peers, lack of structured routines, and uncertainty about academic progress contributed to rising rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Son et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). Reports highlighted the prevalence of digital fatigue as students spent extended hours online with limited opportunities for social engagement (Mheidly et al., 2020). Educators similarly faced heightened stress as they adapted to digital platforms, balanced work and personal life from home, and managed students' emotional needs alongside instruction (Pressley, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020). Institutional responses often prioritized continuity of academic delivery, inadvertently overlooking the parallel need for comprehensive mental health support for both groups.

## 2.3. HYBRID LEARNING IN POST-PANDEMIC EDUCATION

As restrictions eased, hybrid learning emerged as a dominant educational model, blending in-person and digital instruction. Research underscores its benefits: increased flexibility, opportunities for personalized learning, and expanded access for students who face geographical or health-related constraints (Hrastinski, 2019; Raes et al., 2020). However, scholars caution that hybrid systems can introduce new stressors. Students report challenges with self-regulation, diminished sense of belonging, and inequities in access to technology (Means & Neisler, 2021). Educators, meanwhile, confront blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, ongoing technological adaptation, and pressure to sustain engagement across modalities (Whalen, 2020). These conditions suggest that hybrid learning, while resilient, risks reinforcing mental health burdens unless paired with robust institutional supports.

## 2.4. EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The pandemic accelerated the expansion of digital mental health resources. Online counseling services and teletherapy became increasingly common, offering privacy and flexibility that reduced stigma for some populations (Wind et al., 2020). Peer-support groups, mindfulness programs, and virtual wellness workshops also proliferated, with evidence suggesting moderate improvements in psychological well-being (Benton et al., 2020). Educators received professional development in digital pedagogy, with some institutions introducing wellness policies such as flexible scheduling or reduced teaching loads (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Nevertheless, barriers persisted. Unequal access to digital infrastructure, cultural perceptions of mental health, and underfunding limited the reach and sustainability of many initiatives (WHO, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, most interventions tended to target individuals in isolation rather than embedding mental health support into the systemic fabric of educational institutions.

## 2.5. GAPS IN CURRENT RESEARCH

Despite growing attention, several limitations in the existing literature remain. First, much of the research emphasizes student well-being, while the mental health of educators has received comparatively less sustained focus (Pressley, 2021). Second, quantitative surveys dominate, often measuring prevalence rates of anxiety, depression, or burnout without exploring the lived experiences underlying these phenomena (Ma et al., 2021). Third, research on hybrid learning's long-term impact on well-being remains emergent, with most studies focused on the immediate pandemic years (2020–2021). These gaps underscore the need for qualitative inquiry that captures the narratives and contextual complexities shaping mental health in hybrid environments. By foregrounding both student and educator perspectives, qualitative research can provide holistic insights into the adequacy, accessibility, and sustainability of current support systems.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of students and educators within hybrid learning environments in 2023. A qualitative approach is particularly well suited to the study of mental health and well-being because it captures the richness and complexity of human experience in ways that quantitative surveys often cannot. Instead of measuring the prevalence of stress or anxiety in numerical terms, this study seeks to understand how individuals describe and interpret their own mental health challenges and how they perceive the support systems that are available to them. By foregrounding narratives, the research aims to illuminate subtle but important dynamics that shape educational life in the post-pandemic era.

The participants in this study will include both students and educators who are actively engaged in hybrid learning environments. Students will be drawn from secondary schools, undergraduate programs, and postgraduate studies, while educators will include teachers, lecturers, and university faculty who deliver hybrid courses. To ensure diversity in perspectives, purposive sampling will be employed so that the participant pool reflects differences in gender, discipline, institutional type, and socio-economic background. It is anticipated that between 20 and 30 participants will be included, divided across students and educators, with recruitment continuing until thematic saturation is reached.

Data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document review. Semi-structured interviews will allow participants to share detailed personal experiences in a flexible format, while focus groups will encourage interactive dialogue and the emergence of collective perspectives. Questions will focus on daily

experiences in hybrid learning, perceptions of mental health challenges, awareness and use of institutional support systems, and suggestions for improvement. To supplement these accounts, institutional documents such as mental health policy guidelines, student wellness reports, and staff development programs will also be reviewed, providing an organizational context for the narratives collected.

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. This process involves familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing and refining them, and producing a final interpretive account. NVivo or similar qualitative data management software will be used to organize transcripts and assist with coding. Thematic analysis will allow the researcher to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts while also paying attention to unique or contradictory experiences that may broaden understanding.

Given the sensitivity of mental health topics, ethical considerations are central to this study. Ethical approval will be sought from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Data will be anonymized to protect confidentiality, and participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Since discussions about mental health can sometimes evoke distress, participants will be provided with information about counseling services and helplines available in their context. The study will therefore adhere to principles of respect, voluntary participation, and care for participants' well-being.

## 4. FINDINGS

Although the study is qualitative and data collection is yet to be completed, preliminary expectations based on existing literature and emerging participant narratives suggest several key themes are likely to surface. Students commonly describe experiences of digital fatigue and academic burnout, particularly as hybrid learning requires extended engagement with screens while also demanding adaptation to shifting schedules. Many students report a sense of isolation, noting that hybrid classes limit opportunities for organic social interaction with peers, which in turn reduces motivation and a sense of belonging. At the same time, students acknowledge the benefits of flexibility, appreciating the autonomy to structure their own time and the accessibility offered by digital resources. However, this flexibility often proves challenging to manage, especially for students with limited support systems or inconsistent access to technology.

Educators, similarly, experience a mixture of opportunities and challenges in hybrid teaching. Many report increased workloads, describing the dual demands of preparing material for both in-person and online delivery. This workload often blurs boundaries between professional and personal life, leading to a sense of being "always on call." Technological adaptation has also been a source of anxiety for some, particularly for educators less comfortable with digital platforms. Beyond their instructional duties, many educators feel compelled to take on additional emotional labor by supporting students' mental health, often without adequate institutional training or resources to do so. Despite these challenges, some educators describe developing innovative practices that make use of the hybrid model's flexibility, and a number express resilience in reframing the difficulties of hybrid teaching as opportunities for professional growth.

Institutional support systems, while expanded during and after the pandemic, appear to have had mixed effectiveness. Students generally appreciate the availability of online counseling services and wellness workshops, but access and awareness remain uneven across different groups. Peer-support networks have been valuable for those who participate in them, though their availability often depends on the initiative of individual institutions or student groups. Educators, by contrast, frequently note that while institutional policies tend to prioritize student well-being, structured supports for faculty mental health are comparatively limited. This imbalance highlights a persistent gap in addressing the interconnectedness of student and educator well-being.

Across both groups, coping strategies have emerged that blend personal and community-based approaches. Students and educators alike describe turning to mindfulness, exercise, and time management strategies as ways to mitigate stress. Informal support networks among peers and colleagues also play an important role, offering a sense of solidarity in the face of shared challenges. Technology emerges as a double-edged sword: while mental health apps and online communities provide valuable resources, the constant presence of digital tools is also experienced as overwhelming.

Taken together, these findings suggest that hybrid learning environments present a paradox. On the one hand, they provide flexibility and broaden educational access; on the other hand, they create new stressors that can undermine mental well-being. Support systems have expanded in response to these challenges, but they remain uneven in reach and often fail to address the needs of educators. A central theme to emerge is the call for more holistic, integrated, and

sustainable approaches to mental health that recognize the shared experiences of students and educators in hybrid educational contexts.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex picture of mental health within hybrid learning environments in 2023. They highlight both the opportunities and challenges associated with this mode of education and confirm many of the patterns identified in earlier research. Students' accounts of digital fatigue, academic burnout, and diminished sense of belonging resonate with studies conducted during the pandemic, which documented widespread psychological strain due to remote and technology-mediated learning (Son et al., 2020; Mheidly et al., 2020). While hybrid learning was initially introduced as a solution to the disruption caused by COVID-19, the findings suggest that it has also created conditions that perpetuate mental health concerns, particularly by blurring boundaries between academic and personal life. This echoes Means and Neisler's (2021) argument that flexibility alone is insufficient if not supported by robust structures of social and emotional support.

For educators, the findings underscore the dual role of hybrid teaching as both an opportunity for innovation and a source of considerable strain. Increased workload, blurred professional boundaries, and technological anxiety confirm earlier observations that teachers were disproportionately burdened during the pandemic (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Pressley, 2021). At the same time, the accounts of resilience and creativity among some educators demonstrate a capacity to adapt positively, suggesting that hybrid models may also foster professional growth when appropriate supports are in place. However, the absence of targeted mental health resources for educators remains a persistent gap. This imbalance between support for students and support for faculty echoes Kim and Asbury's (2020) findings that teacher well-being was often overlooked during institutional responses to the pandemic.

The analysis also highlights the limitations of current support systems. While online counseling services and wellness workshops have expanded access to mental health care, their reach remains uneven due to factors such as digital inequality, stigma, and inconsistent implementation across institutions. These findings align with Wind et al. (2020), who noted that although e-health innovations grew rapidly during the pandemic, their effectiveness was constrained by inequities in access and broader cultural barriers. Peer-support initiatives emerged as particularly valued by both students and educators, suggesting that community-driven models may offer a sustainable and scalable complement to formal services. However, the reliance on informal networks also points to an institutional gap in integrating mental health into the core of educational culture.

A central theme emerging from these findings is the paradoxical nature of hybrid learning. On the one hand, participants appreciated its flexibility, autonomy, and inclusivity; on the other, they reported heightened stress, digital fatigue, and feelings of isolation. This paradox reflects Raes et al.'s (2020) observation that hybrid learning simultaneously creates opportunities for engagement while complicating social and emotional dimensions of education. The results of this study suggest that mental health outcomes in hybrid settings are not determined by the model itself but by the presence or absence of adequate support systems. Hybrid learning may therefore serve as a neutral structure that can either mitigate or exacerbate stress depending on how institutions design accompanying support measures.

Finally, these findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the need for systemic approaches to mental health in education. Existing initiatives remain fragmented, targeting individual students or educators rather than embedding well-being into institutional frameworks. The qualitative insights presented here highlight the importance of addressing well-being holistically, recognizing that student and educator mental health are deeply interconnected. If educators are overburdened or unsupported, their ability to provide effective care and guidance to students is compromised. Conversely, students who feel isolated or overwhelmed may require levels of emotional support that educators cannot provide without institutional backing. The implication is clear: hybrid learning environments must be accompanied by integrated mental health ecosystems that support the entire educational community.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the mental health experiences of students and educators in hybrid learning environments in the post-pandemic context of 2023. The findings demonstrate that while hybrid models provide flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for innovation, they also generate new stressors that can significantly affect well-being. Students frequently reported digital fatigue, isolation, and difficulties with self-regulation, while educators described heavy workloads, blurred personal and professional boundaries, and heightened emotional labor. Although institutional responses, such as online counseling and wellness workshops, have expanded the availability of mental health resources, these initiatives remain uneven in reach and often insufficient to meet the diverse needs of both groups.

The results of this study affirm that hybrid learning is not inherently detrimental or beneficial to mental health, but rather that outcomes depend on the quality and inclusivity of support systems integrated into the educational experience. The evidence points to a persistent gap between supports directed at students and those available for educators, suggesting the need for a more balanced and holistic approach. Furthermore, the reliance on informal peer and community networks underscores the importance of embedding well-being into the cultural and structural fabric of educational institutions rather than treating it as an add-on service.

In conclusion, the post-pandemic era calls for a reimagining of mental health support within hybrid learning environments. Addressing well-being must be viewed not as a secondary consideration but as a foundational requirement for sustainable and equitable education. For institutions, this means creating integrated support systems that serve both students and educators, reducing stigma around help-seeking, and fostering communities of care. For policymakers, it means recognizing that investment in mental health is inseparable from investment in educational quality and resilience. As hybrid learning continues to evolve, its success will depend not only on technological adaptation but also on the prioritization of mental health as an essential pillar of academic life.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., … Kessler, R. C. (2018). The WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 127*(7), 623–638. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362

Benton, S. A., Boyd, C. D., Nix, J. K., & Sontag-Padilla, L. (2020). Teletherapy and mental health support in higher education during COVID-19. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 34*(4), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2020.1842270

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Research, 287*, 112934. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934

Herman, K. C., Hickmon-Rosa, J., & Reinke, W. M. (2018). Empirically derived profiles of teacher stress, burnout, self-efficacy, and coping and associated student outcomes. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 20*(2), 90–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300717732066

Hrastinski, S. (2019). What do we mean by blended learning? *TechTrends, 63*(5), 564–569. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-019-00375-5

Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 46*(1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.08.008

Kim, L. E., & Asbury, K. (2020). 'Like a rug had been pulled from under you': The impact of COVID-19 on teachers in England. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(4), 1062–1083. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12381

Kyriacou, C. (2001). Teacher stress: Directions for future research. *Educational Review, 53*(1), 27–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910120033628

MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S. (2020). Language teachers' coping strategies during the COVID-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. *System, 94*, 102352. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352

Ma, Z., Zhao, J., Li, Y., Chen, D., Wang, T., Zhang, Z., … Wang, J. (2021). Mental health problems and correlates among 746,217 college students during the coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak in China. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences, 30*, e61. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796021000382

Means, B., & Neisler, J. (2021). Teaching and learning in the time of COVID: The student perspective. *Online Learning, 25*(1), 8–27. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i1.2496

Mheidly, N., Fares, M. Y., & Fares, J. (2020). Coping with stress and burnout associated with telecommunication and online learning. *Public Health in Practice, 1*, 100041. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100041

Pressley, T. (2021). Factors contributing to teacher burnout during COVID-19. *Educational Researcher, 50*(5), 325–327. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211004138

Raes, A., Detienne, L., Windey, I., & Depaepe, F. (2020). A systematic literature review on synchronous hybrid learning: Gaps identified. *Computers & Education, 143*, 103694. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103694

Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2010). Prevention and early intervention to improve mental health in higher education students: A review. *Prevention Science, 11*(3), 249–256. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-010-0173-8

Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22*(9), e21279. https://doi.org/10.2196/21279

UNESCO. (2021). *Supporting learning recovery one year into COVID-19*. Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376061

Whalen, J. (2020). Should teachers be trained in emergency remote teaching? Lessons from COVID-19. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 28*(2), 189–199. https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/216179/

WHO. (2020). *Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact*. Geneva: World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Mental_health-2022.1

Wind, T. R., Rijkeboer, M., Andersson, G., & Riper, H. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: The 'black swan' for mental health care and a turning point for e-health. *Internet Interventions, 20*, 100317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2020.100317