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The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture

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Expert report

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Inclusive education

1. The COVID-19 crisis increased inequalities in access to quality education

1. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed existing inequalities in access to quality education and exacerbated these inequalities. Several studies done during this period² show that certain categories of students were excluded from the education process, not being able to join their peers in online classes. This was generally associated with lack of access to the necessary devices or with a lack of access to the internet. In the case of certain remote communities, whole schools or classes were affected.

2. Available statistics on this matter are often incomplete because they do not take into account aspects related to the quality of the teaching and learning process.

3. Thus, having access to a device connected to the internet does not mean the same thing for all. There is a great difference between children having their own computer connected to the internet, and those who can borrow their parents' phone for a few hours per day. There are many cases of families with disadvantaged backgrounds, having many children at home with limited access to parents' phones that can hardly be made available for online learning. The low quality of the internet connection sometimes represents an additional barrier to effective learning.

4. The quality of the home environment also plays a key role in the effectiveness of online learning. Privacy during connections and good conditions for individual study are not available in many cases for students from disadvantaged families. The background seen in the cameras during the online classes may also reinforce a feeling of inferiority.

2. Overwhelming burden on the families of children with special needs

5. Another key factor affecting the quality of education during school lockdowns refers to the possibility or ability of parents to support their children in learning. This is especially important for lower ages and for children with various types of learning difficulties and special needs who cannot attend alone online lessons or organise their learning without support.

6. Parents of children with special needs were faced with significant challenges during this period, for which they were often unprepared and without necessary support. Many cases have been reported of regression in terms of competences, due to the loss of connection with the school. Parents were left to address alone the complex needs for care, learning and emotional support for their children with special needs. In families with

¹ All opinions expressed in this text are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of Europe.

² Studies published at national level in various countries, by the European Commission, OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, Save the Children, Caritas, etc. The comments made in the first two sections of this document are also based on internal reports of the project INSCHOOL – Making a difference for Roma children, implemented by the Council of Europe (<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/inclusive-education-for-roma-children>).

more children, this was often accompanied by limited attention given to the other children, with negative consequences for wellbeing and for learning.

3. Non-inclusive responses considered acceptable in emergency

7. The response of the education systems, schools and teachers to these challenges has been diverse, with some of the more difficult situations confronting schools that are least equipped and prepared to address them.

8. Teachers struggling to adapt to distance learning chose in many instances to consider mostly the situation of those students who had the technology and the conditions for learning and simply ignored the needs of those who did not and who were not able to comply with general requirements. Even teachers who in the past had made efforts to adapt their teaching to the diversity in their classes, now felt compelled to prioritise and accept that some students remain out of contact.

9. Certain groups, especially Roma and migrants, were significantly more affected during this period. In both cases it is common that socio-economic disadvantages combine with lesser possibilities of parents to support learning. Additionally, there is societal racism, amplified in this period by frequent negative portrayals in the mass-media and on social media. Subtle racist attitudes and behaviours manifest more easily in situations of strain such as the pandemic, even for students who are able to go to school, for example in the context of sanitary requirements to maintain physical distance and avoid contact or exchange objects. Such discrimination does not only affect migrants from outside Europe, but also European citizens residing in other countries on the continent. Leaving the children with learning difficulties and the children with special educational needs in general outside of the school education process was also considered acceptable under the circumstances of the pandemic in many cases.

4. Efforts of teachers and schools to address challenges

10. There were also many examples of specific and adapted support provided and additional efforts made by teachers and schools. These include:

- adapting the online teaching methods, the learning assignments and the way they are communicated, in such a manner as to make them accessible to a larger number of students;
- distributing printed materials and homework to students without online access;
- providing digital devices and/or free access to internet to students with disadvantaged backgrounds;
- keeping school premises partially open for students who lack a proper learning environment at home;
- providing adapted learning resources to be used with family support or for self-learning.

11. However, such responses from within the education systems were generated according to the perceived reasonable possibilities, not according to the actual needs incurred for equal access to education to be provided. Moreover, this did not solve the more complex and subtle effects of exclusion, which may produce significant negative long-term consequences, including the feeling of being disconnected from class peers, negative image and self-image, frustration, and even pressure towards dropping out of school early.

5. Mobilising support for students through partnerships

12. In addition to what could be done with the existing resources made available to schools and through the efforts of teachers, there are numerous examples of situations where access to education was significantly improved through an explicit partnership with families and the cooperation with other relevant stakeholders.

13. Better results were obtained in cases where schools established a systematic and adapted communication with the parents of children with special needs. For teachers, this implied switching from their usual role of working directly with children to the new role of designing adapted and personalised learning paths for the children with special needs and instructing the parents, and/or other adults volunteering to support, in working with the children. Ensuring a two-way communication, supporting parents to also provide feedback on the progress made by children has proven to be essential for the effectiveness of such cooperation.

14. There are also good examples of schools which managed to provide appropriate support for students who need it and for engaging in a systematic and explicit process of promoting inclusion by using existing local community resources. Such cooperation takes various forms, including:

- Cooperation with NGOs, for example NGOs specialised in working with children with specific needs, or NGOs that can prepare online or offline activities to respond to the need for contact and socialisation of children, while complying with safety requirements. Indeed, during school closure, children missed not just formal learning, but also informal contacts during breaks, before or after lessons, or during other school activities, that provide opportunities for interaction and satisfy their need to be together and feel part of the school community. Although challenging, such adapted and inclusive activities, carried out by NGOs in partnership with the school, were very much appreciated by participants;
- Establishment of informal groups of volunteers that can provide adapted support to parents and children. Some of the most successful such experiences were those in which volunteers were properly guided and prepared, while teachers focused more on the design of appropriate educational interventions and on ensuring that the needs of all students are considered. However, this kind of external support should not be seen as a discharge of responsibility on the side of the school, but a complement to the school commitment for inclusion. It also needs to consider safety and ethical aspects, both during online and during direct interactions. Groups of local volunteers could also provide valuable assistance to children from migrant families, where family members had difficulties in supporting learning due to the language barrier;
- Peer support groups among parents, helping each other with ideas and resources, while also providing psychological support and the feeling of not being alone and facing challenges together;
- Cooperation with psychologists and various other relevant categories of professionals who can offer pro bono support, counselling or advice to parents or children;
- Assistance pro bono provided by IT specialists or simply people with advanced digital skills for exploring new ways of using technology, or innovative applications and adapt the technology for use by children with various special needs.
- Setting-up a school-based or local support group consisting of various stakeholders ready to assist the schools in responding to the challenges they face in providing inclusive education.

6. A wider focus on competences and inclusion beside knowledge acquisition

15. Despite public statements made at the Council of Europe level,³ public declarations of education officials in various countries expressed prevailing concern for the loss of content matter during the COVID-19 crisis. This reveals an implicit focus on knowledge acquisition. However, the pandemic emphasised once again that school is not just a place where you acquire knowledge, but also a place of interaction and of socialisation, which equips students with the competences they need for a life in democratic and culturally diverse societies, as individuals, as professionals and as citizens. It is now more obvious than before the pandemic that school can either take an explicit responsibility in promoting the values of equality, human dignity and human rights, or even unwillingly contribute to reproducing structural social inequalities.

16. Quality education must be inclusive.⁴ The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFDCDC)⁵ also explicitly promotes an inclusive approach to education. The RFDCDC has proved to be very relevant in addressing various challenges that our societies are facing, and this is valid also for the response of education systems to the COVID-19 pandemic and its follow-up. The RFDCDC, built around a model of competences including values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and critical understanding, can help to understand and address the current and future needs of students, parents, and teachers.

17. For example, developing self-efficacy is especially important to overcome a negative self-image, that may lead to lower school achievement and even dropping out of school. Moreover, developing empathy, communication and cooperation skills and civic mindedness, can enhance the motivation and ability of children belonging to more privileged groups to relate to their peers that need additional support and provide such support themselves. For both categories, valuing human dignity and human rights, together with a critical understanding of social inequalities, would be essential to develop a rights-based approach as part of inclusive education.

³ The education response to the COVID crisis. Political declaration of the Informal Conference of Ministers of Education organised under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 29 October 2020.

⁴ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education.

⁵ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

7. Supporting teachers to promote inclusive, competence-based education

18. Such an analysis which is based on the RFCDC, can also provide indications about what teachers need to do, what type of training and support teachers are needed and how the whole community could mobilise to support schools. To respond effectively and appropriately to the current challenges, to develop the competences of learners and to promote inclusive education, teachers also need to be supported in acknowledging, developing, and using their own competences for democratic culture.

19. The Council of Europe has developed the RFCDC Teacher Self-Reflection Tool⁶ and new pedagogical resources, based on the RFCDC⁷ to be adapted and used online, in presence, or blended learning. The RFCDC Teacher Self-Reflection Tool is designed to support teachers in reflecting on their own competences, but also to support them in addressing with their pupils some complex and sensitive issues such as disinformation, bullying and discrimination. It also provides guidance, based on previous Council of Europe materials, for teaching controversial issues and for encouraging students to make their voice heard in the life of the school. The Council of Europe is also offering from the school year 2021-2022 a training package that can be used to deliver training for teachers at both European and national levels, based on the RFCDC and with a focus on promoting inclusive education.⁸

8. New education policies building on the lessons of the COVID-19 crisis

20. Considering the challenges described above and the framework and resources provided by the Council of Europe, there is also a lot that can be done at the level of each education system in order to respond to the current needs and to ensure equal access to quality education for all long term.

21. One lesson to draw from the current situation, refers to the way in which investment in technology is made. If in the past the tendency was to equip specific spaces in schools, such as computer labs, later expanded to equipping every classroom with internet-connected devices. It makes more sense now, from both an inclusive and a pragmatic perspective, to consider equipping learners with technology, instead of schools. This will likely be significantly facilitated by the expansion of broadband and 5G internet, as well as by the tendency to shift computing power from local devices to the online environment. Thus, the extensive use of cloud computing as a public service provided by the school, will enable all learners to have good quality access to information and connection with others at a reasonable cost, and also increase the quality of teaching and learning processes, whether they take place online or in presence.

22. The work of teachers, but equally the quality of the learning processes can be facilitated also by the development and maintenance of repositories of open educational resources, including resources easily accessible to all learners, also in minority languages where needed, as well as adapted resources that respond to a variety of specific needs that learners may have. Specific support services to learners with special needs can also be provided online and thus made accessible to places where until now they were not available.

23. A new, more inclusive approach will be needed also towards the curriculum. Instead of prescribing what learners are expected to know and be able to do, with a general approach, curriculum can be more effective if it allows teachers to take into account what students actually know and what they learn informally, while considering also the variety of situations and experiences they may have, in order to prevent exclusion. A possible approach could be to allow for a more flexible and open use of information that students find online, while focusing on the development of autonomous learning skills and critical thinking to enable them to make choices and understand the information they access.

24. The role of teachers needs to evolve beyond being perceived as a source of knowledge, towards becoming guides to help learners navigate with various sources of information, build values, socialise with peers and address social reality. Teachers need also to be better prepared to promote an inclusive approach and consider risks related to unwanted effects of labelling “students with special needs”, as well as those associated with subtle forms of institutional discrimination and interpersonal racism.⁹ The pre-service and in-service of teachers should focus on these aspects and adapted training and support can be built and offered based on the resources provided by the Council of Europe in relation to the RFCDC.

⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/-reflection-tool-for-teachers>.

⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/new-materials> and <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/current-projects>.

⁸ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/resources>.

⁹ This is further elaborated in a Position Paper on Access of Roma to quality inclusive education, to be published in 2021 by the Roma and Travellers Team of the Council of Europe (www.coe.int/roma).

25. The experience of the INSCHOOL project¹⁰ shows that schools already engaged in participatory processes to advance towards more inclusion were better equipped to respond to the needs of students at risk of exclusion and more resilient in adapting to the new context. They were supported by the project to adapt their institutional development plans and their activities to make a positive difference for all students, with special attention for Roma students. They were also provided with training and opportunities for peer exchange. Such an approach could be expanded and mainstreamed in education policies. Inclusion should also be mainstreamed as one of the features of a good school and reflected as such in the quality assurance procedures and the external evaluations of schools.

9. Conclusions

26. Ensuring equal access to quality education means that besides closing the gap in access to technology, which also brings the nowadays indispensable access to information, special attention is needed for an approach to learning that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills and includes all the competences for democratic culture. Specific attention is also necessary to more sensitive aspects of interpersonal and intergroup perceptions and relations to avoid discrimination. This can only happen if education policies are adjusted accordingly and if teachers, schools and other partners receive the proper support for accomplishing these tasks.

27. As suggested above, the partnerships that schools can develop with families, local community and various other relevant stakeholders enables the provision of very useful support to all students, including the most vulnerable, in times of crisis, but are also likely to increase the capacity of schools to ensure access to quality education for all children and address the specific needs of the children and families who need additional targeted support.

28. In this way, the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic will enable education systems and institutions in Europe to be more inclusive, better prepared to meet future crises as well as able to adjust and improve their functioning with a view to the longer-term societal evolution based on technological progress in the service of human dignity and human rights.

¹⁰ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/inclusive-education-for-roma-children>.