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# The impact of COVID-19 on the education of disadvantaged children and the socio-economic consequences thereof

*Executive summary*

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NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training. The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESET II (2015-2018), NESSE (2007-2010) and NESET (2011-2014). The Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) is responsible for the administration of the NESET network. For any inquiries, please contact us at: [info-neset@ppmi.lt](mailto:info-neset@ppmi.lt).

**ABOUT EENEE**

EENEE is an advisory network of experts working on economics of education and training. The establishment of the network was initiated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture and is funded by the Erasmus+ Programme. PPMI is responsible for the coordination of the EENEE network. More information on EENEE and its deliverables can be found on the network's website [www.eenee.eu](http://www.eenee.eu). For any inquiries, please contact us at: [eenee@ppmi.lt](mailto:eenee@ppmi.lt).

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## Executive summary

Full and partial school closures, as well as the introduction of full-time distance learning during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, were unforeseen and unexpected phenomena across Europe. Despite existing transformations towards digitalisation and the use of digital tools in education, the pandemic demonstrated that curricula, pedagogies, and the capacities of actors in education were insufficiently prepared for an abrupt and unplanned switch to entirely remote education.

The switch to online education affected children's learning processes differently, depending on their individual educational needs and vulnerabilities. The interplay between vulnerability and resilience during the COVID-19 school closures has influenced the extent to which the educational progress of disadvantaged children is disproportionately affected, compared with that of their peers.

### Aims

The aim of the report is to present the ways in which the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic affected learning progress among disadvantaged children in school education, and to determine how the conditions that arose have impacted learning loss, delay and inequality. The report presents recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders in education to mitigate the widening of learning inequalities in the post-COVID landscape, and to stimulate the learning progress of disadvantaged children.

In particular, the report focuses on three groups of disadvantaged children, namely: 1) children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities in mainstream education; 2) children from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and 3) children with a refugee or migrant background.

### Methodology

The report is based primarily on a review of secondary data. The authors began by gathering together the available literature on the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged groups of children in particular. In instances where such information was not yet available, the authors analysed the specific vulnerabilities of various groups of children, as well as analysing the impact school closures had on educational processes and the quality of education. They subsequently assessed how these changes in education affect the vulnerabilities that had been identified.

Initially, the research focused on the academic literature on educational progress and inequality in education, as well as on vulnerabilities and resilience in education. The authors then went on to explore reports and literature on the general effects of COVID-19 on education across Europe. In this regard, the report co-authored by Loes van der Graaf on 'Education and Youth in Post-COVID-19 Europe' (Van der Graaf, Siarova, Dunajeva, & Bankauskaite, 2021) served as a starting point. Lastly, where available, the authors used country-level reports, surveys, and related materials to gather the perspectives of teachers, school staff and other stakeholders.

In its analysis, the report focuses on the different (but often interlinked) consequences of the pandemic on education and progress in education, summarised using the term 'learning disruptions'. In this paper, learning disruptions may include (or be caused by):

- *Delays in learning*: This refers to the inability of children to reach the educational objectives of a year, due to reduced teaching and learning hours. This may be caused by slow and/or inefficient switches from face-to-face to distance education.

- *Learning loss*: The term 'learning loss' refers to any specific or general loss of knowledge and skills or to reversals in academic progress, most commonly due to extended gaps or discontinuities in a student's education.<sup>1</sup>
- *Learning inequality*: This refers to the lower achievement or lower levels of access to and participation in education by some groups of children in comparison to others.

## Effects of COVID-19 on educational progress of disadvantaged children

Different groups of learners were affected unequally by school closures. The resulting additional challenges to learning equality added to existing inequalities in education systems. The report approaches the distribution of the effects of school closures on the education of disadvantaged learners through the concepts of **vulnerability and resilience**. Both vulnerabilities and resilience are subdivided into personal (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity), contextual (e.g. the intended or unintended results of a policy), and situational (e.g. based on particular life events, such as the pandemic). The people concerned tend to be affected by a number of different factors and categories of vulnerability and/or resilience at the same time, exacerbating or mitigating their situation.

The vulnerability factors identified relate, for example, to limited or no access to digital devices and digital skills, a lack of study space, poor socioeconomic background and low levels of education among parents, being a migrant or refugee, having a learning disability, lack of parental engagement, parents working away from home, poor school performance during lockdown and others. Resilience factors include high levels of parental and student engagement, high performance at school and teacher qualification, as well as interventions by governments and NGOs, among others.

This study confirmed the strong interplay of factors in resilience and vulnerability in the context of COVID-19 school closures. No person is affected by only one factor or dimension of resilience or vulnerability, but rather by a particular constellation of personal, contextual and situational vulnerabilities or resilience factors. A number of the vulnerabilities and resilience factors identified – particularly those on a personal and contextual level – existed before COVID-19, but their impact on the education of the affected learners has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Situational vulnerabilities and resilience factors are a direct result of COVID-19 school closures, or responses to them; they may lead to new vulnerabilities or resilience factors, and some of them affect all learners in a similar way. The identification of vulnerabilities can enable measures aimed at reducing or mitigating certain factors in order to limit their negative effects on the education of disadvantaged learners. The identification of resilience factors can enable measures to capitalise on these.

The technological features and tools of existing education platforms can render them inaccessible for **children with disabilities and SEN in mainstream education**. Insufficient personal support was given to children with special needs by teachers during the pandemic, mostly due to their increased workload. Teachers felt that during the shift to online learning, the needs of children (emotional, social, and behavioural) were insufficiently met. Many studies have also indicated a decrease in the well-being of children with special needs and disabilities in mainstream education; for example, due to a lack of socialisation, as well as due to a lack of routine and structure.

While it is expected that face-to-face education will continue, the use of digital tools in the classroom will only expand. Therefore, stakeholders at EU and national level should consider carefully to what extent their digital education strategies and action plans consider and are inclusive of children with special needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition as used by <https://www.edglossary.org/>

The present study reveals the disproportionate risk of learning disruptions among **children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds**. Their vulnerability relates to insufficient support at home (in terms of direct support for their learning, as well as insufficient learning resources or learning environment, and in relation to their parents' personal and academic backgrounds). These learning inequalities had already been recognised before the pandemic, and have subsequently increased.

Support for at-risk children during school closures cannot therefore stop at the provision of laptops or other ICT tools alone. Attention should be paid to a child's overall home situation and how this affects their learning; however, this places tremendous pressure on teachers, who are tasked with identifying a child's learning environment at home.

**Children with a migrant background** can suffer disadvantages in education due to language barriers and/or the socio-economic status of their parents. They often face difficulties in accessing online learning structures due to limited technological skills and/or access to technological devices and the internet. Refugees in reception centres and refugees on the move are severely affected by these barriers, as are many Roma learners. It is further noted that the virtual teaching tools available are not fully suited to non-native speakers and their parents. Refugee, migrant and ethnic minority parents often have limited capacities to support their children's education at home, especially during periods of home-schooling.

### **Socio-economic consequences of the gaps in learning progress**

In the longer term, gaps in learning progress can affect how children progress in their adult life, both economically (e.g. lower income) and socially (e.g. social exclusion). Several types of **economic losses** are associated with learning losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that have different time dimensions:

- A short-term loss measured in terms of the potential reduced annual earnings of one learner affected by school closures
- A long-term loss in terms of reduced economic benefits over the affected student's lifetime
- An aggregate long-term global loss relating to all students in the affected cohort

The estimated economic costs of COVID-19 are substantial, running to trillions of US dollars for a given country. Vulnerable groups – however these are defined – tend to bear a disproportionately higher economic loss relative to less vulnerable groups in the population.

Aside from the consequences of the increased learning gap on personal income and country-level economic growth, the experiences from school closures – including disproportionate learning disruptions for disadvantaged children – have created new social realities and caused various other challenges that impact their **quality of life** and affect **societal cohesion**. These social and economic consequences will become visible in the upcoming years, as the 'COVID-19 generation' complete their education. Lifelong learning opportunities will also play an important role here.

Various connections have been found between education, income and social mobility. Learning disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a number of effects on the future social mobility of disadvantaged children. First, their chances of breaking the poverty cycle and gaining a higher socio-economic status for themselves have declined. Second, their potentially lower educational outcomes may impact the outcomes of their children. Third, the continuation of intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage and low

achievement among disadvantaged children causes a stagnation, or even an increase, in the share of families living in a socio-economically disadvantaged position.

A person's ability to participate in society refers primarily to their participation in the core institutions of society (e.g. family institutions, political institutions, educational institutions and religious institutions). Various studies report clear links between higher levels of educational achievement and increased participation in volunteering, political activities, community welfare and community leadership. Learning disruption among disadvantaged children can therefore strongly affect their involvement in the community and in society overall. Their lower participation in elections, protests and social networks hinders them from having their voices and concerns heard.

Various earlier studies have found a causal relationship between higher levels of education and higher levels of self-reported health, as well as lower morbidity rates. Enhanced physical well-being among persons with higher levels of education relates also to the healthier lifestyles adopted by more educated persons, facilitated by access to better information on managing their health, greater proficiency at integrating information into lifestyle decisions, and greater resources to engage in health-promoting activities. Aside from the impact learning disruptions have on children's ability to achieve physical well-being, the strain on health systems may increase, with a disproportionate increase in the need for health care among children from vulnerable backgrounds. This also raises questions regarding the affordability of health care and social protection for marginalised families.

## **Mitigation measures**

Future strategies must be designed to enable equal and equitable educational chances for all learners, during both regular schooling times and during crises. Such strategies should apply a forward-looking approach, rather than reacting in an isolated way. To allow for immediate responses as well as long-term solutions, strategies should be implemented according to different time dimensions: immediate, short-term, and medium/long-term. At the same time, future strategies should be implemented at the various levels relevant to the crisis response.

At the level of education systems, national strategies should aim to create social equity and should be based on principles that diminish the overall educational inequalities that have been exacerbated during times of crisis. Recognising education as a human right, states must take structural and institutional measures to ensure equal access and quality of education for all learners. At the same time, the principle of substantive equality must be applied, which requires the different treatment of disadvantaged learners through measures that remove the barriers that prevent them from achieving equal opportunities and outcomes. This requires, among other measures, the creation of policies and programmes that allow access for all learners to distance learning resources, as well as providing them with support to engage in online learning. The absence or insufficient availability of such measures constituted a major factor in the vulnerability of disadvantaged learners during school closures.

Education systems should also apply the principles of holistic and inclusive education. Such approaches not only help to foster equity in education (e.g. by addressing all of the needs of learners – learning, social and emotional), but also allow societies to respond more effectively to crises and to reduce the risk of future crises. Since positive student engagement and feelings of self-worth were identified as being relevant resilience factors for learners, measures should be implemented that motivate learners to actively engage with learning processes, and which strengthen their self-confidence.

At the level of families, their core position in educational processes (especially during times when schools are closed) must be recognised and taken into account by any crisis-related education measures. It is necessary to empower parents to engage with the education of their children, even if their own educational level is not high. Programmes of parental guidance and support are necessary, particularly with regard to parents' digital literacy, access to tools and resources, language competences for non-native speakers, and general knowledge about the respective national education system and school processes.

At the level of collaborations, multi-agency partnerships are required at national as well as international level to respond to the immediate crisis, as well as develop long-term solutions. Partnerships at national level should include teachers, parents, learners and other relevant members of the educational community. Governments should further work in partnership with health and community organisations, social work agencies and other support services to generate joint solutions.

## Conclusions and recommendations

During COVID-19-related school closures, disadvantaged learners have been subject to various personal, contextual and situational vulnerabilities. These generally relate to the transfer of teaching responsibilities during the pandemic, from the school to the family. Often, an individual learner is subject to a combination of several vulnerabilities, e.g. being a migrant, having low socio-economic status. Such vulnerabilities had already led to inequalities in education and society before the school closures, but were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Prior research has made abundantly clear that education is directly connected to the quality of various dimensions of life. Lower levels of educational achievement are therefore directly linked to a variety of challenges to an individual's full participation in society. Learning loss, delays in learning and decreases in achievement caused by school closures are expected to have a long-term impact on the children affected by them, particularly if these gaps in learning cannot be mitigated.

To mitigate these disruptions and learning loss, as well as the long-term socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, governments and educational stakeholders should implement both short-term and long-term measures. In the **short and medium term**, the main priority is to address gaps in the learning progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes the following necessary steps for policymakers and those involved in education management:

- Use national assessments and school-level assessments to measure the learning progress of all children, and compare such data with learning frameworks as well as with the achievements of previous classes that have completed the relevant grades.
- Consult with teachers, school staff and relevant stakeholder groups on the most suitable approaches for specific groups of children to catch up on their learning. The specific vulnerabilities and resilience factors of each group need to be taken into account in the design of these approaches.
- Design mechanisms to support teachers, parents and other stakeholders in providing individualised support to children who have suffered disproportionate disruption of their education progress.
- Create extensive 'lessons learned' sessions involving both policymakers and stakeholders, for the purposes of developing education risk plans and strategies that can provide holistic educational solutions in the event of possible future school closures.



- Implement holistic education models as a means of fostering equal opportunities and reducing existing inequalities in education, particularly to account for disproportionate disruptions in education during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Implement digital skills training for educators, learners and parents on an ongoing basis to ensure they remain up to date and prepared for digital learning in the event of school closures. Particular attention should be given to enhancing the digital skills of children at risk, children with SEN and children with a migrant background, including their parents and caregivers.
- Target the non-school vulnerability factors revealed in this report, which negatively impact education (e.g. the living conditions of migrants, refugees, minorities and disadvantaged learners, exposure to violence etc.)
- Enhance cooperation between schools and the parents/caregivers of disadvantaged children, to ensure their involvement in the learning process and, subsequently, their ability to provide learning support to their children.

However, for disadvantaged children in later stages of education, fewer opportunities may be available to catch up with their peers. Mitigation measures in this regard require the following **long-term approaches**:

- Review current lifelong learning and adult learning strategies, taking into consideration the results of national and school-level assessments, as well as the socio-economic consequences of disrupted learning. Identify the main areas in which disadvantaged children are most likely to lag behind later in life, due to their lower educational achievements.
- Strengthen lifelong learning and adult learning offers to address these gaps over the coming decades. Careers counsellors and school staff should actively think ahead about how disadvantaged children can continue learning after graduation.
- Develop joint strategies with educators, companies and vocational training providers to facilitate the transition to tertiary education for young people in graduation classes who have been affected by interruptions in their education due to school closures.
- Analyse in greater detail the advantages, good practices and resilience factors, such as the development of independent learning strategies, intensified family time, different approaches for online learning and other strategies that have evolved during the school closures, and identify how these can be beneficial for learning during normal school times and for building increased resilience among children.
- Educators as well as governments should strengthen their focus on skills training and the recognition of skills and on short-term learning opportunities. The talents of children and young adults must be recognised beyond school-level achievements. Recognising talents and skills will also enhance students' self-esteem and subsequent emotional well-being.
- Foster collaboration at all levels – local, regional, national and international – concerning good practices and preparedness in relation to responses to changed conditions, as well as long-term strategies for inclusive learning and teaching.

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