What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the SERA Inclusive Education Network?

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The outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). It has affected societies and economies and it has challenged education around the globe. The virus has spread worldwide resulting in school closures and remote learning in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic. The World Bank (2020) estimated that 85 percent of the world's learners were out of school during the first wave. In many countries, schools have reopened; however, according to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, there are currently 1,048,817,181 affected learners worldwide.

The negative impact of COVID-19 on children and young people includes financial effects on children living in poverty (IPPR, 2020). Additionally, it has exacerbated inequalities faced by black and minority ethnic groups, girls, students with disabilities, and refugee and migrant children (Phoenix, 2020; Public Health England, 2020, RCPCH, 2020; UN, 2020) as many of them have been marginalised and deprived of social and emotional support offered by schools and additional services such as school meals or access to educational assistants (McCall, 2020).

Typical responses to the lack of face-to-face teaching during the COVID-19 crisis rely heavily on computers, tablets, virtual lessons, online portals and radio/TV lessons. While these are helpful options for students in many countries they are not workable options in other countries as the equipment may not be accessible to students with disabilities, complex learning needs and students from poorer households or remote areas. Additionally, it has been estimated that 43 percent of learners globally do not have household internet (UNESCO, 2020b). In half of 21 European countries examined, pupils in 4th grade from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were half as likely to have access to the internet as their more advantaged peers (European Commission, 2020). In Scotland, a survey of teachers showed that some of the main barriers faced by students are no access to technology at home and no internet connection (EIS, 2020). These challenges

highlight the importance of providing quality, low-cost, low-tech and/or no-tech solutions.

More than half of the teachers surveyed in Scotland did not believe that the needs of children with additional support needs (ASN) have been met, particularly those of children with emotional and social needs facing many challenges (EIS, 2020). While the participants reported positive experiences in the way their school responded to the challenges emerging such as the move to a blend of home learning and hub provision for different students, they nevertheless reported that keeping students engaged in their learning when working remotely, remained a significant issue.

Therefore, several questions can be raised:

- How do we ensure all children and young people feel included in learning?
- How do we ensure that all children and young people including more vulnerable young people and those experiencing disadvantage associated with poverty can receive appropriate support during this pandemic?
- How do schools adapt to keep children safe and learning?
- How do we take care of the health and well-being of children and teachers?
- How do we support teachers through the curriculum and learning?

This list is not exhaustive, but demonstrates some key themes that require further exploration.

The pandemic offers an opportunity to reflect and re-think how education, planning and teaching can be inclusive of all children and young people. Despite the challenges highlighted, the pandemic has also brought some innovative approaches in education including low-tech and no-tech solutions such as the use of radio and take-home packages with self-instructional print-based material, and high-tech solutions such as television and tablets (UN, 2020) that help many children continue their learning. Many governments responded quickly offering distance learning solutions (UNESCO, 2020a).

This crisis has highlighted the importance of learning and offering quality education adopting flexible approaches that are based on inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to teach diverse groups of students without marginalising, stigmatising or excluding them. The crisis can stimulate inclusive approaches and ways of thinking and working with children, young people and other professionals that challenge previous approaches and policies that are informed by deficit discourses. There are opportunities to put mechanisms in place so that schools are more inclusive than before the crisis. Finally, further opportunities can be created to involve more children and young people in decision making and

learning. International collaboration based on dialogue and opportunities to discuss and share expertise are important for the above to happen with the aim to create a more inclusive environment post-Covid. A collective dedication to human rights and commitment to the sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 (UN General Assembly, 2015) is needed to reduce inequalities and increase the number of children and young people that can access quality education worldwide. Multidisciplinary research on an international scale can examine children's and teachers' experiences with regards to inclusive practice, the impact of the pandemic in children's learning, schools' responses and opportunities.

The SERA Inclusive Education Network aims to provide a forum to support the development of inclusive practice by informing and influencing debates on current issues including the current crisis due to the pandemic. Teachers, student teachers, researchers and other professionals can connect, share their work, exchange ideas and learn from each other. We aim to continue to offer webinars and other opportunities to connect and interact developing a dialogue on inclusive education.

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