The impact of the COVID-19 crisis: is online teaching increasing inequality and decreasing well-being for children?

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge to countries worldwide. With the emerging need for "social distancing", in the span of weeks, schools around the world had to find ways to carry out most of their activities online. Amidst this challenging time, the ySKILLS project conducted interviews with 34 experts from the educational field and the labour market from six European countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal). In this blog post, Verónica Donoso and Nike Retzmann summarise the experts' views about how the pandemic is affecting children's engagement with digital technologies and they voiced their concerns about increasing inequalities and decreasing well-being.

Social inequalities are still a reality in Europe

> *This crisis has made it clear that some students are having problems, they are being left behind (Education expert, Estonia).*

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that even in the richest EU countries, social and digital inequalities persist. As some of the interviewed experts noted, some schools were well equipped with the necessary infrastructure, devices and human capital, while others had been entirely unprepared to cope with the challenge of offering digital education. Equally, not all students have had sufficient access to digital equipment or a reliable internet connection at home. Although local initiatives were launched in some countries to provide children with the required digital devices, some students faced great difficulties to access and to deal with online educational resources and were, therefore, likely to suffer learning losses. One expert from Italy pointed out that *"not in every case the distance learning was offered in the best of environments. You always need to engage with connectivity problems, device problems and everything."*

Lacking access to technologies was not the only obstacle to education during the COVID-19 pandemic: lacking access to an education expert was also a factor.

> *In many cases, parents have become teachers. Although not everyone can teach, many responsibilities and tasks are imposed on parents (Education expert, Portugal)*

Another expert from Poland commented that *"in addition to understanding the material, [parents] had to develop ways to improve regularity and planning of work of their children. They had to take care of their mental hygiene"*. Unfortunately, in many situations, children may be unable to learn due to skills gaps among their teachers or a lack of parental support. As a recent UN policy brief describes "in most European countries, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to lack reading opportunities, a quiet room, and parental support during school closure". Moreover, important inequalities exist in how parents support their children's development with digital technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected children's well-being

> *It is visible how much the kids need support, how much they want to* see and talk *to each other […]. We observe elevated stress and anxiety levels in both students and parents* (Education expert, Poland)

It became clear during our interviews that as new digital challenges emerged, students did not only have to quickly acquire new knowledge and skills, but they also had to spend considerable time in front of screens to do schoolwork and to socialise with their peers. An education expert from Estonia reflected that nowadays students must learn to "self-regulate" their time between their sessions on social media, chatting with their friends and doing schoolwork.

Children are forced to spend many hours a day in front of their screens. (Education expert, Portugal)

Despite increased time on social media, interviewees mentioned that children missed the physical contact with their peers. An education expert from Poland noted that they saw many students requesting consultations with teachers or school psychologists because of increased anxiety or stress levels: *"Remote learning has increased the number of informal contacts. There are numerous consultations with teachers, psychologists, parents – definitely more than normally […]. This is a paradoxical effect – the desire for constant contact has increased. It shows how important the care and pedagogic functions of the school are."*

The transition to digital environment has also posed new challenges for many teachers. According to the experts, teachers have been overwhelmed with the task of providing remote learning opportunities to their students. Many had to learn to use new digital tools in a couple of days as well as rethinking their teaching methodologies, as expressed by this Italian expert: *"About 70-75% of teachers didn't know how to [teach their students online]. […]. And so, they connected to their students through video calls. But they didn't know the right approach because they thought that it was only a way to move school from class to video calls"* (Education expert, Italy)

Despite these challenges, a Portuguese expert highlighted that

This crisis showed the inequality of means in the area of education, but also the resilience to respond, in a short period of time, to the difficulties reported by schools. (Education expert, Portugal)

The COVID-19 crisis: a wake-up call for governments and education stakeholders

While the pandemic is still ongoing and we cannot yet fully assess the impact it will have, these expert interviews have already provided us with some important indications. For instance, the pandemic has emphasised the need to further invest in the development of digital skills for *all* citizens. While awareness of its importance has grown among teachers as well as policymakers, there remains work to be done to ensure that the problems brought to light are properly addressed. Clearly, more professional development opportunities focused on digital technologies and digital literacy for teachers need to be created. However, considering that globally, 72 per cent of school children who do not have access to remote learning live in their countries' poorest households, developing strategies and solutions targeted at these children and their families so that they can continue to learn in today's challenging environment remains a top priority. Equally important is to continue investing in efforts to increase children's well-being.

This crisis will be an opportunity to increase the training effort, to combine and expand programs based on digital skills, and to build partnerships between institutions with the capacity for these collective interests of their own individual strategies. (Labour market expert, Portugal)

The COVID-19 pandemic has called attention to the interconnectedness of different sectors of society, all affected by the extraordinary situation. Especially in view of an impending economic crisis, any successful attempt to improve digital skills on a broad scale will have to build on strong cooperation and a coordinated strategy of the various stakeholders involved, instead of allowing the system to be further fragmented. This requires that the education sector, the private sector, governments and civil society work together to ensure that everyone is equipped not only with the necessary skills but also the means to cope with this transition.

Notes

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