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Commentary

A Commentary on the Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Youth After Covid-19

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Abstract

This is a commentary on the articles published in this issue, which are devoted to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational inclusion prospects of vulnerable children and young people. The articles presented in the thematic issue are especially focused on case studies at either national or international comparative levels. Their findings, in general, are in line with existing research, which was initiated during the first stages of the pandemic, and demonstrate the pandemic's adverse effects on existing disadvantaged health, educational, and social conditions. However, they raise interesting issues about promising methods and practices, as well as possible empowering tools that emerged through the use of ICTs and the implementation of various social policy measures through various digital platforms. They also point out the intersectionality of various factors generating or reinforcing social inclusion, something that has to be taken into account, not only by researchers, social welfare officials, and state agents, but also by activists and NGOs who work in the field.

Keywords

children; comparative studies; educational inclusion; pandemic; social exclusion; social inclusion; social inequalities; vulnerable youth

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People after Covid-19” edited by Spyros Themelis (University of East Anglia) and Angela Tuck (Pakefield High School).

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1. Introduction

Among the fears expressed in early studies of the pandemic's consequences were those about its economic impact across the globe and those relating to the pandemic's adverse effects on existing disadvantages in health and educational and social conditions, especially considering one's family background, teaching environment, or specific individual characteristics (gender, cognitive development, learning disabilities, physical and mental health, etc.; see Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Psacharopoulos et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020).

Those fears came true when more advanced and comparative studies have been carried out by individual researchers or international organizations (Carretero Gomez et al., 2021; Flor et al., 2022; Reimers, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). The consequences of the pandemic, two

years after its outbreak, have been, so far, diverse and multidimensional. Social cohesion, as well as individual rights of children and young people, especially of the most vulnerable segments of society, have been gravely hit. The pandemic (and essentially policy responses to it) has affected poverty levels worldwide, unemployment rates and related benefits, types of employment, insurance schemes, career development, stress levels related to the work environment, welfare arrangements, access to the labor market for disabled persons and discrimination based on age and gender, emphasizing inequalities at work, etc. (Caselli et al., 2022; Chtouris & Zissi, 2020; Decerf et al., 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020; Wong et al., 2022). It has also negatively influenced family relationships and exacerbated gender-based violence (Albanesi & Kim, 2021; Piquero et al., 2021). Access to education as a “universal right” has been gravely curtailed since it has been documented that full-time distance

education (or “remote education”), “with the current state of infrastructure and accessibility of equipment[,] would aggravate existing inequalities” (Carretero Gomez et al., 2021, p. 5).

2. The Thematic Issue

This issue is devoted to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational inclusion prospects of vulnerable children and young people. If we understand “inclusion” as “an overarching principle and a process whereby all students are provided with equal opportunities to participation and educational achievement” (Szelei et al., 2022, p. 173), then the picture sketched in the presented studies is worrisome, but not catastrophic or irreversible. The findings of the articles are in line with the existing research that was initiated during the first stages of the pandemic, which stressed the dangers of children and young people having their learning and well-being significantly compromised after the introduction of severe measures to stop the spread of the pandemic. Nevertheless, they add invaluable pieces to the “puzzle” of the risks to social inclusion globally at the later stages of the pandemic—no matter how premature the adjective “later” might sound.

McNair et al. (2022) present the findings of a multi-country project that outlines national and local responses to the pandemic, the relevant measures against it, and their lasting consequences for children in early childhood. It constitutes a comprehensive report of four countries that faced particularly high rates of infection by Covid-19 during the first waves of the pandemic and highlights the importance of taking into account not only macro-economic factors, that is, international structures of political, economic, and health planning (e.g., the WHO and its affiliated state agencies), but mainly the historical, social, and cultural contexts at stake in examining and assessing social policy at a national, regional, and local level. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of conjectural elements in policy-making, such as the political commitment (or lack thereof) of certain governments—for example, that of Brazil (for more on the case of Brazil and its federal government’s policy response regarding access to schooling during the pandemic see also Costin & Coutinho, 2022).

The same conclusions are reached by Szelei et al. (2022) in their comparative, longitudinal study, which was based on quantitative data gathered from 751 migrant students in secondary schools in six European countries. In line with other comparative studies across the globe about migrant students’ educational disadvantages (Devine, 2009; OECD, 2018; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020), this article points to the “learning loss” and “increased inequities” linked to the barriers of online teaching and distance learning for migrants. The authors focused on one rather underexplored dimension of migrant students’ disadvantages during the pandemic, that of “school belonging.”

Their findings suggest that the sense of school belonging for migrant students decreased over time, but this change was not statistically significant, something that is attributed (by the authors) to the fact that “interrupted schooling was not necessarily a new phenomenon for many migrant students” and some of them “may develop and sustain school belonging in ways that might not necessarily require a continuous physical presence on school sites” (Szelei et al., 2022, p. 179). The study, despite its methodological limitations, raises important questions for future investigations on the interplay of school structures, economic environment, migration policies, on the one hand, and school culture, professional practices, level of family and general social support, and individual characteristics, on the other.

Colombo and Santagati (2022) examined the pandemic’s effects on the learning experiences of secondary school students with disabilities in Italy. The two authors, through the administration of a web questionnaire submitted to a non-probabilistic sample of nearly 150 primary and secondary school teachers, conclude that, although the teachers recognized a general deterioration (“retrocession,” as they describe it) of teaching and learning conditions during the pandemic, at the same time highlight very positive trends through the innovative use of ICTs. This is attributed to the fact that, despite the numerous problems and barriers that distance learning generated for students with disabilities, very often it facilitated the intensity and quality of daily contact and inter-personal interaction between teachers and school students. In that sense, “retrocession” was balanced by “improvement” on certain dimensions of social inclusion.

Another study that stressed the promising developments and initiatives during the school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is the one carried out by Ebubedike et al. (2022), who focused on “remote learning” in disadvantaged communities in Nigeria. These are affected by an intersection of factors related to social exclusion, such as geographical isolation, armed conflict, linguistic diversity, economic inequalities, extreme poverty, religious discrimination, wide gender violence, and high rates of Covid-19 infection. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and local learning facilitators, the case study highlights plans to use a traditional means of communication (radio transmission and creation of listening groups) as an ingenious and powerful tool for breaking down barriers to remote learning in marginalized settings, where there is no access to the internet or mobile devices. The article raises issues not only of a political nature but also of a pedagogical one, in the sense that a new approach to *collaborative learning* has been promoted and offered valuable and tangible results.

Platero and López-Sáez (2022) focus on problems of social discrimination and exclusion faced by the LGBTQ+ community(-ties) and suggest that social networks, although very important for LGBTQ+ youth during the pandemic (in the sense that they helped them

explore their identities), could also be a source of violence, especially for the non-binary part of this broader community. Findings like these should be corroborated through cross-sectional and/or longitudinal comparative studies, which will be able to explore the rather alarming suggestions of previous studies in Spain that the LGBTQ+ community is being repeatedly discriminated against on the basis of their alleged “potential to spread the coronavirus,” something that sounds ominous for 21st-century European societies and their laudable records of legislation for the protection and promotion of human rights.

3. Conclusions

What the articles in this thematic issue of *Social Inclusion* suggest is that uniform, “one-size-fits-all” measures such as those taken by various governments across the globe might significantly undermine commitments towards children’s and young adults’ rights, with the subtlety of all problems being that *there is no recognition* of their abilities to contribute to discussions on the pandemic or make meaningful decisions about their lives (see McNair et al., 2022), something that poses a new dilemma concerning the very core of our purportedly democratic societies. In that sense, what the authors acknowledge is a retrenchment of policies concerning children’s and young adults’ rights globally, something that seems to bring us back to a previous stage of human development. At the same time, however, they raise interesting issues about positive trends that became evident during the pandemic, as well as possible empowering tools that emerged through the use of ICTs in a period when social distancing was obligatory. They also point out the intersectionality of various factors generating or reinforcing social inclusion, something that has to be taken into account, not only by researchers, social welfare officials, and state agents, but also by activists and NGOs who work in the field.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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