

Education and inequality in Greece during Covid- 19. What school should do next?

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Abstract: On March 11th2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 pandemic. Even if this pandemic is temporary, it has brought about permanent changes and a huge disruption to all spheres of human life, including education. In response to school closures, ministries of education worldwide recommended the use of distance learning programs and open educational applications and platforms that schools and teachers could use to reach learners remotely and limit the disruption of education. However, as many other countries worldwide, the challenge of distance learning in Greece, has led to worsen educational inequality. Questions about how to reopen schools safely and under which conditions are at the forefront of decision making.

Keywords: education, Covid- 19, inequality, Greece.

Introduction

As a consequence of Covid -19 several countries ordered a general lockdown, including schools. According to UNESCO¹, over 1.2 billion students affected by school closures, representing around 73% of the total of enrolled students worldwide. However, most education systems were not ready for the world of digital education (Schleicher, 2020²). Although teachers and other education personnel have been working hard to support their students, it seems that many countries are still far from using best practices for online learning (Milligan, 2020; Lehmann, 2020b). With schools closures and the divides in distance learning, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates indicated that 86 per cent of primary school-age children in low human development countries are currently not getting an education, leading to global levels not seen since the 1980s, compared to just 20 per cent in countries with very high human development.³

Particularly, European education systems went into the Covid-19 crisis weakened by a decade of budget cuts and austerity (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2020⁴). Eurydice’s 2019 report on Digital Education in Schools revealed significant gaps in teaching

¹<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

²https://hundred-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/report/file/15/hundred_spotlight_covid-19_digital.pdf

³https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/COVID19_Human_development_on_course_to_decline_for_the_first_time_since_1990.html

⁴<https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/policy-issues/covid-19/3792-campaign-week-2020-investineducation>

and assessing digital competences across Europe that seemed to imply action for years to come⁵. It seems that Covid-19 crisis strikes at a point when most education systems are not ready for the world of digital learning opportunities. Remote teaching raised some pressing issues regarding equality and inclusion since not all students had access to quality equipment and connectivity at home (ETUCE, 2020). Although findings from this research are sparse, there is some evidence to suggest that lower socioeconomic status (SES) children may be particularly impacted by school closures and the subsequent loss in instructional time that results. Thus, it is possible that lower SES children may be more adversely affected by Covid-19 compared to their higher SES peers, particularly if their schools provide less resources and their families engage in less active home schooling. Indeed, it is possible that higher SES children may actually benefit from home schooling if their parents have higher levels of education and more motivation to invest in their child (Doyle, 2020). Inequalities in children’s outcomes may arise when a family’s ability to invest in their children is hampered by monetary (Becker, 1965) or cognitive (Mani et al. 2013) constraints, or the stress that accompanies poverty and other anxious situations (Lupien et al. 2001). Parents from lower SES backgrounds often spend less time investing in their children’s education (Del Bono *et al.*, 2016; Guryan et al., 2008) and they finally provide less stimulating learning materials and learning experiences to their children (Bradley *et al.*, 1989; Miller *et al.*, 2014). Although schools do not fully close socioeconomic gaps in children’s skills, they are effective in reducing the magnitude⁶, something that is not possible to be achieved when schools are closed.

Although temporary school closures during crises are not new, UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay said, “The global scale and speed of the current educational disruption is unparalleled and, if prolonged, could threaten the right to education.”⁷ Due to pandemic, equity is being challenged in many countries worldwide and OHCHR underlines that the pandemic crisis has raised more concerns about a potential erosion of human rights now and post-crisis⁸.

1. Education in Greece during covid-19

Greece's education system was designed around the principle of equality. Article 16 of the constitution guarantees that “*all Greek citizens have the right to free education at all levels in public educational institutions*” (Sintagma tis Elladas, art. 16, and p.29)⁹. However, as everywhere in the world, the pandemic forced the Greek public education system to deal with the challenge of home-schooling and educators were forced into teaching for a system that

⁵https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/digital-education-school-europe_en

⁶<http://publicpolicy.ie/papers/covid-19-exacerbating-educational-inequalities/>

⁷<https://en.unesco.org/news/290-million-students-out-school-due-covid-19-unesco-releases-first-global-numbers-and-mobilizes>

⁸https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/TB/COVID19/Compilation_statements.pdf

⁹<https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/8c3e9046-78fb-48f4-bd82-bbba28ca1ef5/SYNTAGMA.pdf>

they were not prepared. In Greece schools closed on 11th of March, although in some parts of the country the schools' closure has begun even earlier. With the arrival of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education issued instructions for the use of both asynchronous and synchronous teaching. Synchronous learning that is online or distance education that happens in real time and asynchronous learning that occurs through online channels without real-time interaction. Education television was also re-activated on March 30th for primary education. The government passed an emergency law¹⁰ regulating issues related to the education system's response.

As a result of Covid-19, school closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home in Greece, like other countries. However, several challenges had to be overcome along the way in Greece also. Network overload problems along with the fact that not all children and teachers had the appropriate equipment, were the first obstacles. According to OECD¹¹ data based on the 2018 PISA, 1 in 5 students attending the poorest quartile of Greek schools do not have access to a computer they can use for schoolwork, while 1 in 10 do not have access to the internet. More than 1 in 3 students attended schools whose head teachers maintained that their teachers did not have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction. Altogether 4 in 10 students attended schools whose head teachers acknowledged that an effective online learning support platform was not available.

In Greece, the burden of education fell largely on parents and families, although some households may lack the physical resources necessary to support their children's learning (computers etc.), while others may have time constraints, particularly if parents are engaged in essential services (eg. healthcare workers). Parents with literacy issues may also struggle to engage with the curriculum, while the heightened stress and health problems arising from Covid-19 may make it difficult for both parents and children to engage in schoolwork. In all cases, these issues may be more salient in lower SES households, as it was mentioned above. That is particularly concerning since in Greece 20% of the adult population refer no previous experience with computers (Eurostat, 2019).¹²

In addition regulation on live streaming which was passed by the Greek government raised for teachers and students anxiety about the possibility to expose themselves to potential online scrutiny. For that reason ETUCE reported on 8th May 2020 that the Greek Government bypassed social dialogue mechanisms and adopts regulation on live streaming delivery of lessons, which raised multiple difficulties to teachers and children as well¹³.

¹⁰https://www.esos.gr/sites/default/files/articles-legacy/pnp_68.pdf

¹¹https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126988-t631xsohs&title=A-framework-to-guide-an-education-response-to-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-of-2020

¹²https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tepsr_sp410&plugin=1

¹³<https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/news/3851-greece-greek-government-bypass-social-dialogue-mechanisms-and-adopts-regulation-on-live-streaming-delivery-of-lessons>

When considering the effects of pandemic crisis in Greece, we have also to take into account the fact that the debt crisis of previous years, led the educational system to become one of the most unequal in the development world.¹⁴ *“The economic crisis highlighted these inequalities mainly through the decline of the disposable household income and exacerbated the already crippled abilities of the education system due to the extensive cuts that took place during this time”* (Bazoti, 2020, p.1¹⁵).

2. What school should do next?

As a result of Covid-19, school closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home, and for the immediate future, the burden of education now falls largely on parents. However to ensure that pandemic, or other similar situations in the future, do not exacerbate educational inequalities further, it is important that resources are in place to support all families.¹⁶

Various actions were been taken at the country level worldwide to address the digital education divide. For example in Portugal to tackle the fact that not all students may have access to internet at home, the government suggested a partnership with the post office services to deliver working sheets to be done at home, while in Washington State, United States, the schools are not encouraged to provide online learning services unless equitable access is ensured¹⁷.

There is no doubt that policymakers face great difficulties and requests, since the educational enterprise is dependent on a health crisis that is changing every day since, education systems will have to be flexible to take into account the needs of learners and teachers in this global crisis.

Researchers¹⁸ have reached a consensus on that (Douglas N. Harris & Katharine O. Strunk., 2020). Moreover, UNESCO¹⁹, The Teacher Task Force and the International Labor Organization have released a toolkit to help school leaders support and protect teachers and education support staff in the return to school.

Providing substantial additional recourses to prevent looming school budget cuts and implementing universal internet and computer access are more than necessary. Getting money to schools comes first because all the others depend significantly on it. Moreover all students must be able to access internet and computers, since a lack of these implements affected how school responded and how students experienced distance learning. E - Learning is only effective for teachers, students and their families when is combined with adequate electricity,

¹⁴<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34384671>

¹⁵https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/110_2020_-WORKING-PAPER-_Pery-Bazoti-.pdf

¹⁶<http://publicpolicy.ie/papers/covid-19-exacerbating-educational-inequalities/>

¹⁷<https://news.itu.int/covid-19-countries-addressing-digital-education-divide/>

¹⁸<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/07/28/7-research-based-recommendations-for-what-schools-should.html>

¹⁹https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/ttf_backtoschool_toolkit_for_school_leaders_0.pdf

internet connectivity, computers and tablets, and physical spaces to work. More traditional learning methods, via print, television, phone and radio, may offer more viable ways of helping teachers to continue to provide lessons, especially in the poorest countries.

Mental health and academic achievement are linked, research shows (Terada, 2020). According to recent research: *The COVID-19 pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems and lead to more cases among children and adolescents because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession* (Golberstein, Wen & Miller, 2020²⁰). After all, return-to-school responses should anticipate the psychological and socio-emotional impacts of the pandemic on teachers and learners. Student-support staff such as school counselors and social workers, will be crucial to schools’ efforts to care for children and for teachers as well, especially for those who have been most impacted by the pandemic. Teachers are the backbone of the educational system. As schools re open their role will be equally crucial. *Little attention has been given to providing teachers with adequate training on how to ensure that learning continues, or how to develop relevant, high-quality distance education packages*²¹ (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030). Educational policy makers must provide teachers with adequate professional support and training and to put equity at the heart of education support.

In Greece, educational policy makers have already planned educational programs for educators in distance learning²² in order teachers to be able to respond to these new educational challenges. Although policymakers is extremely important to make decisions about teachers that support pedagogical quality and equity also, as suggested above.

3. Conclusion

It is obvious that no one approach will suit all countries. ETUCE²³ calls on education authorities and governments to ensure the inclusion of all students and education staff in these crucial times, so that the Covid-19 outbreak does not magnify any existing social inequalities. ETUCE insists that issues regarding the accessibility of distance teaching and learning material, for teachers and students, must be addressed so that all education personnel and students are able to participate in quality education as required by their local circumstances. We must not allow anyone to be left behind because they do not have access to appropriate digital devices and online tools, not because they face specific individual or social barriers.²⁴ In general, successful remote or distance teaching depends heavily on parental monitoring and assistance – especially for younger learners. This

²⁰<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2764730>

²¹https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/migrate_default_content_files/ttf_covid19_call%20to%20action_27mar2020_1.pdf

²²<https://www.esos.gr/arthra/68847/eisagogiki-epimorfosi-gia-11500-ekpaideytikoys-protovathmias-kai-deyterovathmias>

²³<https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/policy-issues/covid-19/3745-covid-19-and-distance-teaching-must-not-widen-inequalities-in-education>

risks creating or widening inequalities in student outcomes, as not all have parents who will be able or available to fulfill that role effectively.

To meet the urgent need for education, UNESCO has launched a global partnership to support countries in scaling up their best distance learning practices and reaching children who are most at risk²⁵. Only with a concerted effort from parents, teachers, and social workers and mainly from politicians we can be sure that all children can have equal access to education.

Finding a way to enable *all* students is one of the top challenges facing school district leaders right now as education is the main vehicle for the promotion of social quality. For that to be achieved, we have to decide that we believe in equitable access in education for every child and then allocate the resources to support that.

The imposition of the measures and the use of distance education during pandemic was necessary. The aim of this article was to highlight the obligation of all those who participate in unprecedented educational conditions, to identify and highlight inequalities, but also to look forward to addressing them. Because inequality in times of crisis flourishes, transforms and dominates (Papakonstantinou, 2020)²⁶.

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²⁵<https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-rallies-international-organizations-civil-society-and-private-sector-partners-broad>

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