The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education:

Winners and losers of the (post-pandemic educational landscape)

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Abstract

The Covid-19 educational crisis deeply affected almost 90% of the world's students population. This situation might continue in the foreseeable future. This article identifies the main ways in which students and teachers were negatively affected by this unexpected life-threatening situation and how online education was used to allow schools to continue their education process remotely. While considering the limitations and advantages of online education during Covid-19 crisis, the paper exposes the groups of students who are likely to be more affected by this extended crisis and finally reflects on what schools and universities should do to transform this crisis into an opportunity.

Key-words: Covid-19 educational crisis, remote education, online learning.

المقدمة

أثرت الأزمة التعليمية ل Covid- 19 بشكل كبير على ما يقرب من ٩٠٪ من طلاب العالم قد يستمر هذا الوضع في المستقبل المنظور. تحدد هذه المقالة الطرق الرئيسية التي تأثر بها الطلاب والاساتذة سلبًا بهذا الوضع غير المتوقع الذي يهدد الحياة وكيف تم استخدام التعليم الالكتروني للسماح للمدارس بمواصلة عملية التعليم عن بُعد. أثناء النظر في قيود ومزايا التعليم الالكتروني خلال أزمة Covid-19 ، يكشف البحث مجموعات الطلاب الذين من المحتمل أن يكونوا أكثر تأثّرًا بهذه الأزمة الممتدة ويفكر أخيرًا في ما يجب على المدارس والجامعات فعله لتحويل هذه الأزمة إلى فرصة .

Covid-19 pandemic - its impact on society and education systems

2020 will probably remain in history as the year dominated by Covid-19, a lethal disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 (Dhawan, 2020: 1). Starting from December 2019, when the first Covid-19 infections were reported in the Wuhan region in China, the pandemic spread globally. By August 28, about 24,299,923 infections and 827,730 deaths were reported globally by the World Health Organisation (2020). This epidemic created an "unprecedented educational crisis". Approximately 1.5 billion students from 165 countries representing "87% of the world's student population" were affected by school closure (UNESCO cited by Prata- Linhares et al., 2020: 2).

Since March, Covid-19 related news dominated the mass-media agenda in most countries, and completely changed people's lives. Children, students, non-essential working people were imposed to stay for several weeks in lockdown and self-imposed quarantine. The second week of March 2020 seems to be the moment when "universities and schools across the world moved from face-to-face teaching to online" (Mutton, 2020: 2) replacing the traditional face-to-face teaching even if they do not have the necessary infrastructure.

For many students, parents and teachers, the academic year 2019/2020 ended in very awkward circumstances deepening the class, racial and ethnic cleavages pre-existent in most educational systems. Most students, especially those from primary schools and those from final years, might be, on the long term, deeply affected by the abrupt interruption of school and the shift in learning and educational content delivery. This might result in lowering their educational outcomes.

Even now, in September 2020, it is unclear to what extent the new academic year(s) will be affected by Covid-19. From the pedagogical perspective, it is interesting to analyse retrospectively how the schools and teachers adapted their teaching style to remote teaching. Similarly, the preparations performed by school for the new academic year, which might be entirely dominated by Covid-19 can be of pedagogical interest. This article is interested in analysing both aspects, retrospectively, revealing how Covid-19 affected education and, prospectively, what might happen next. After considering the benefits and limitations of online education, the study will try to highlight who might be the winners and losers of this global education crisis in a (post-)pandemic educational landscape.

The negative impact of Covid-19 on education outcomes and students' mental health

Any crisis, even more a global one that affected everyone around us, can affect students emotionally and mentally. Their school results, social integration and life chances can be impacted by their schooling process and exam experiences. For example, in the United Kingdom, the educational gap between working-class and middle-class students seems to be heightened during this pandemic. In a survey realised by Sutton Trust on a sample of 6,500 teachers, it was revealed that privately educated students are "twice as likely to receive daily online lessons". 51% of students in private primary school and 57% in private secondary schools benefited from daily online lessons compared with only 19% of students from primary

and 22% from secondary state-funded schools. While in most deprived areas, only 23% of teachers from state school had access to an online platform for teaching, 37% of the teachers in affluent areas have access. On the other hand, 60% of teachers in private schools had access to the necessary online teaching platforms (Hall, 2020).

This results in a double disadvantage faced by students from more impoverished households. In addition to their lack of educational resources at home, these pupils are "less likely to be able to access online classes" increasing their achievement gap with negative consequences on their education (Barlow, 2020). The resources gap between private and state school, but also between middle-class and poor families, was also signalled in Brasil. Although 79.9% of Brazilians have internet access, this is done mainly via mobile phones as only 48% of families have access to a computer (Prata- Linhares et al. 2020: 3). In Ontario, Canada, the restricted bandwidth service, and cellular service in remote areas are also indicated as a gap which limited the access of the indigenous population to education during this educational crisis (Nuland et al., 2020: 4).

In addition to the quality of teaching, schools are dealing with mental problems and students' anxieties. A study realised by **Young Minds** Foundation identified that 74% of the investigated teachers consider that extended schools' closure and lack of structure and routine by students can negatively affect their mental health. Spending too much time in "unsuitable home environments throughout the lockdown period" and the lack of pastoral support and counselling represent a significant risk for students in deprived social environments (Young Minds, 2020).

The lockdown changed dramatically the way teachers and students interact. The "remote teaching and supervision" raised complex problems (Flores, Gago, 2020: 8) such as privacy, and safeguarding or lack of internet access in student's household. Grappling with such issues conducted to a reshape of traditional teaching roles and practices and to a "reinvention of education, in a way never seen before" (Prata-Linhares et al. 2020: 9). Although school management has access to a contingency plan for unpredicted situations, most schools around the globe were utterly unprepared for this education crisis (Donitsa-Schmidt, Ramot, 2020). Teachers and schools were forced to create innovative ad-hoc solutions suitable for each student and the contexts they were dealing with. Moreover, in the perspective of the next academic year, schools need to be prepared for similar situations.

Online learning - a panacea of Covid-19 crisis

Disregarding the extra-curricular problems faced by teachers in most countries, schools overall relied on Internet access to perform their daily activities remotely until the end of academic year 2019/2020. Internet usage in teaching might have advantages and disadvantages we will enumerate below. However, it is not entirely exaggerated to consider remote learning as a "panacea for the crisis" as it helped educational institutions to adopt the "lucrative side of online teaching and learning" (Dhawan, 2020: 2). As the physical premises of schools were not accessible, the Internet proved to be the only possible solution for continuing the education of students. For teachers in primary and secondary schools, the large scale adoption of the Internet was a surprise. Nonetheless, the usage of the online educational platform has a long history being used mainly in tertiary education.

Since the first "documented example of a completely online educational program" offered by the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in 1982, online education has experienced accelerated growth (Atchley, Wingenbach, 2011: 2). In 2007, approximately twenty per cent of US students declared they were enrolled in at least an online course (Kabo, 2009: 92). The proportion of those using online learning increased progressively from 2007 to 2020, mainly for adult learning. While ten years ago, the online learning capability of universities was considered a competitive edge (Kabo, 2009: 95) in 2020 most major universities have MOOC programmes which are delivered globally through specialised platforms such as Coursera, edX or future Learn.

On the other hand, primary and secondary school relied almost entirely on face-to-face education. However, in some countries, previous experiences of remote education existed before when natural disasters made schools temporarily inaccessible. A report of "Save the Children" organisation showed that between 2009 and 2019 there were at least fourteen situations when calamities forced some regions or countries to use online education. Earthquakes in Italy (2009), Papua New Guinea (2018) and Indonesia (2018), floods in Pakistan (2010), Nepal (2015), Nepal, Banghladesh and India (2017), tropical storms in

Philipines (2011 and 2013), hurricanes in the United States (2017), typhoons in China (2019) and Japan (2019) forced schools to use remote learning(Dhawan, 2020: 9). Due to fires and natural disasters, many schools in California were temporarily closed over the last years for a couple of weeks (Quezada, Talbot, Quezada-Parker, 2020: 2).

But nobody would have ever imagined before March 2020 that almost 90% of students globally will rely on the Internet to continue their school activities (Kabo, 2009: 93). Moreover, all school closures mentioned above had a precise spatial and temporal boundary. At the same time, the Covid-19 educational crisis is something that might haunt the global economy and educational systems for years to come. At least, the academic year 2020/2021 will start under the auspices of Covid-19, and the main preoccupation of schools is how to conceal the spread of the virus while continuing as much as possible to deliver education to students.

Advantages and disadvantages of online teaching

When assessing online education as a replacement or complement for face-to-face learning, several limitations that threaten the quality of online teaching were identified. The curriculum cannot be transformed overnight into a suitable online content. Sometimes online education cannot be easily personalised and can include mediocre content. The lack of practical application of taught content, the absence of socialisation and human interaction within schools, can be a limit for students' education (Liguori & Winkler, 2020 cited in Dhawan, 2020). Many students and their families might lack the ability to use online platforms or not have access to the necessary technology (Dhawan, 2020: 4). For many students can be challenging to mix up their social, family and professional life in the same environment using the same online platforms. Switching between lesson time and interaction with friends without a break-time can be confusing not only for primary school students.

On the other hand, online education might be considered beneficial by some students exactly as some adults prefer remote working. The immediate consequence of online learning is the improvement of independent learning ability and the usage of multiple sources of information such as Youtube, Wikipedia or textbooks (George, 2020: 22).

Online learning has certain benefits that go beyond its immediate feasibility for teaching during Covid-19 pandemic. E-learning increases **accessibility** as educational content can be made accessible in remote areas. It increases **affordability** as it can be cheaper compared with "institution-based learning" and also involves lower costs for accommodation, transport, or living in a different country. Online learning offers **flexibility** as students can learn "from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, with any means" (Cojocariu et al., 2014 cited by Dhawan, 2020: 2). This feature suits better mature students or those who attend short term course or MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course). This can be transformed into a platform for **life-long learning** as companies, or people can use these platforms to reskill, upskill or re-qualify. Millennial students seem to be particularly attracted by online education, according to Fansury, Januarty and Syawal (2020: 9).

If students can find online learning beneficial, for teachers, it might be challenging as they were suddenly using a variety of online instruments they never used before. Learning management system for classroom management, chat and message for correspondence with students and colleagues, video conference, content maker, online assessment, video streaming and sharing (Atmojo, Nugroho, 2020) are such examples.

A survey applied in 2020 to 92 principals and 8,632 teachers from 23 Chinese provinces revealed that 65.2% of schools had adopted online teaching with the highest proportion above 77% in capitals of provinces. More than 70.5% of schools in the sample have adopted interactive Question and Answers and live streaming as a teaching method. In comparison "one-to-one online tutoring" was adopted only by 25.9% of schools. When asked what their preferred teaching approach is, 28.2% of Chinese teachers identified online interactive quizzes, 27.5% webcasting and on-demand video and 26.7% live streaming (Song, Wu, Zi, 2020: 2 - 3).

On the other hand, when asked about the difficulties of online teaching, 66.3% of principals declared it is challenging to deliver online learning. 48.9% complained about the "underdeveloped information infrastructure", 43.5% about the "tight schedule and heavy workload", and 38% the "lack of guidance and training" of staff. 29.3% also identified the lack of resources as a problem (Song, Wu, Zi, 2020: 8). 38.42% of Chinese teachers declared online teaching had positive outcomes while signalling the technical issues as the main impediment to teaching (Yang, 2020, 5-6).

Speaking about the challenges of online teaching, it should be first distinguished between asynchronous and synchronous online instruction. The first one, which implies that "learner(s) and instructor are separated by time and space" (Iloh, Tierney, 2014: 30) is suitable mainly for independent learners who can be self-motivated. Synchronous or virtual live teaching requires a "new and extended skills set" that teachers need (Moorhouse, 2020: 2) to provide a positive learning experience. They need not only the authority provided by their knowledge but also they need to build a relationship with students to keep them motivated (Robinson, Rusznyak, 2020: 4) and control the class during online live lessons.

Online teaching in Covid-19 context

If there is a lesson to be learned so far from Covid-19 education crisis, this would be that mainstream teaching should be prepared for providing education under uncertainty. Teachers need to reinvent their manners of interacting with students. "Netiquette" and the "rules about being civil and respectful on the Internet" might replace what is traditionally defined as politeness. In addition to their usual understanding of students knowledge, teachers need to understand their functional digital skills, their students' willingness to engage in different forms of online interaction, and do not treat all student equally in terms of access to online classes. Additional support should be offered to students, and they should be encouraged to ask for online help (Scull et al., 2020).

As involvement in online lessons is conditioned by the bonding between teachers and students, schools should encourage students and families to ask for support beyond their tasks and assessments. Teachers, on the other hand, should encourage independent learning. Feelings of isolation are common for online learners. They might be even more exacerbated due to social distancing rules. Schools should provide opportunities for students to interact and "build quality relationships with and between students in the online environment". Finally, as the learning pace is different in online learning, teachers need to adjust their manner of offering feedback and their progression expectations (Scull et al., 2020: 8).

How might the Covid-19 education crisis transform education?

Educational systems are highly regulated and, to an extent, rigid structures that evolve slowly based on accumulated experience. The major challenge of teaching remotely during the Covid-19 education crisis is to reimagine teaching in the absence of elements that were providing power and authority to the teacher. During online classes, they need to control a group of students who are in their home environments relying purely on family support. Online, a teacher cannot rely on institutional plausibility structures such as school's traditions, uniform and institutional regulations.

As already mentioned, such a situation tends to favour the middle-class students or those who study in private schools where the cohorts of students are much smaller and easily manageable. Their families offer them access to more educational resources and support during online lesson. Although in general students from impoverished social backgrounds are more affected during a remote lesson, their families can potentially transform this situation into an advantage if they help their children adequately. So, the disadvantage of not studying at a private school can be diminished.

On a long term, 'virtualisation' of education (Velle et al., 2020) can become a valuable skill for any teacher or student for a "highly technological world" world in which remote working and usage of computers for work are essential (Kalloo, Mitchell, Kamalodeen, 2020: 9).

Although people prefer stability, learning to manage "volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity" will both both teachers and students to be "more adaptable, more flexible, and more creative than they have probably ever been expected to be" (Nuland et al., 2020: 8).

Even before Covid-19 crisis, universities developed such online or blended learning programmes either for their part-time students or for distance learning programmes. Such practices can represent examples to follow and generalise in the new pandemic context when face-to-face meetings should be restricted.

Considering in the past it was proven in a recessing economy the popularity of going back to study is increasing (Kabo, 2009: 93) in the following years, as an economic slowdown is inevitable, we can expect more and more students to prefer online learning to avoid the costs or potential risks associated with campus-based education or to re-qualify. This new appetite for remote learning can become an opportunity for universities who will be able to attract students from more countries who might never visit their

campus.

Any crisis creates many problems that disturb our lives but also opportunities. Most students and their families find the Covid-19 turmoil to be a disturbing situation. Fewer students enjoyed online learning, and the new learning paradigm suits them more than daily school attendance. For teachers, on the other hand, online teaching is definitely a challenge and a reinvention of their profession. Compared with institution-based education, remote teaching involves additional skills which help teachers to evolve and eventually obtain surprising results. Any school and teacher who is proactive and take advantage of the benefits of online education can transform this into an advantage and attract more students. For many universities or colleges who recruit students from local areas, this can be an opportunity for national or international expansion.

Considering there is not clear time-span until a vaccine will be found against SARS-CoV-2, is very possible that humanity might live in these uncertain conditions for more than one year. In such situations, educational institutions need to find the best way of incorporating online teaching into their own organisational culture so students and teachers will fully benefit from studying online.

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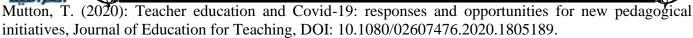Kubo, L (2009) 'The rise of online education: exploring the phenomenon', English 209 Final Research Paper,   Available   online: https://www.academia.edu/9459163/The_Rise_of_Online_Education_Exploring_the_Phenomenon [accessed July 1 2020].

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