

Executive summary

The lockdowns put in place to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the period March-June 2020 represented a sudden, dramatic and unexpected disruption to all components of social and economic life which affected the lives of children and their families and transformed the educational experience of children over a period of 2-3 months and, sometimes, more.

School systems had to rapidly improvise to ensure some continuity in the education of children and adapt their teaching methods to a situation in which, in the space of a day, education moved from the school to the home for most children and the mode of instruction shifted from face-to-face contact to remote learning.

The home and social environment of children was also affected in many ways, which, in their turn, affected the educational experience of children. In-person contact with people other than household members was severely restricted. The working arrangements of many parents changed, often dramatically. Many were laid-off on a temporary basis or had to work from home. In addition, parents faced a range of stresses associated with the pandemic: concerns for the health of themselves, family and friends, financial worries related to changed working arrangements, reduced interactions with friends, relatives and family, and the demands of home-based schooling and childcare.

This report offers an initial overview of the circumstances, nature and outcomes of the education of schoolchildren during the first wave of COVID-19 lockdowns. Its purpose is primarily descriptive: it presents information from high quality quantitative studies on the experience of learning during this period in order to ground the discussion of these issues in empirical examples.

Three interrelated topics are covered: the nature of the educational experience during lockdowns; the home environment; and the mental health and learning outcomes for children during this period. The data come primarily from 5 countries (France, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States) with additional information on some aspects for 6 additional countries (Australia, Belgium [Flanders], Canada, Finland, Italy and the Netherlands).

Schooling during lockdowns

The duration of school closures was between 0-19 weeks in OECD countries depending on the country and the level of schooling. Net of school holidays, closures meant the substitution of 4-9 weeks of face-to-face instruction with home-based learning in the majority of OECD countries.

Online tools and platforms represented the predominant modes of delivery of lessons and instructional material for students as well as for communication between teachers and students. Hardcopy or paper-based materials continued to be used. The use of live online classes or interactions with teachers was rather limited. Teachers may have placed more emphasis on preserving pupils' link with learning and reviewing content already covered earlier in the year than following the planned curriculum and introducing new content.

The time spent on schoolwork by children was about half of what they would have spent in classroom-based instruction in normal times and 10 to 20% of pupils may have undertaken no schoolwork at all.

Parents played an important role in supporting and supervising their children's education, particularly in the case of younger children. The average amount of time devoted by parents to supporting and supervising schoolwork was of relatively short duration and more time was spent on assisting younger than older children. While many parents felt comfortable in supporting their children's education at home, a large proportion did not – at least half, if not more, in the countries in which information is available.

Difficulties faced by children regarding education were of a psychological and social nature such as lack of motivation, loneliness, etc. Difficulties related to access to the technology needed to communicate digitally with schools and teachers and access to online educational resources were experienced by a significant minority of children even if most children in the countries for which data are available had access to Internet connections and the necessary devices to continue their schooling online.

The home environment

The period of confinement was a period of stress for many parents and adults more generally. The levels of anxiety experienced by adults increased considerably at the start of lockdowns and remained above pre-lockdown levels even after lockdowns had ended. Lockdowns and homeschooling created some conflicts and tensions in some households but, overall, the appreciation of the effect of lockdowns on family life was positive and relationships between parents and children were not unduly affected.

The chances of children either having contracted the COVID-19 virus themselves or living in a household in which their parents/guardians or siblings had been infected were generally low.

The proportion of adults working from home increased significantly and a considerable proportion of employed adults were temporarily inactive due to business closures or reductions in activity or lost their jobs. Financial stress was experienced by a minority of families, possibly reflecting the fact that considerable public support was available for both inactive workers and the unemployed in the countries for which data are available.

Many parents needed to reduce their working hours to accommodate the presence of children at home. Overall, most parents were able to manage to balance the competing demands of work and the care of and support for their children.

Outcomes

The psychological well-being of most children did not decline to any great extent during lockdown compared to the situation prior to lockdown. The proportion of school-age children experiencing serious or severe symptoms of mental or psychological disorders may have risen. However, the majority of school-age children, both before and during the period of lockdowns, did not display such symptoms.

Parents offer a mixed evaluation of the impact of lockdowns and school closures on children's development and learning. High levels of appreciation of the work of schools and teachers during school closures was accompanied by concerns regarding the effects of lockdowns and school closures on children's educational and social development. Many parents were concerned about lack of progress in some subjects and the possibility that their children were falling behind.

There is limited and conflicting evidence from standardised tests regarding students' learning progress during school closures compared to progress in "normal" conditions. The quality of the data varies somewhat, and the differences observed between the performance of students tested in 2020 or in early 2021 with students in the same year of school in previous years range from small increases to large falls.

At the very least, the available evidence suggests that it should not be automatically assumed that the school closures of March-June 2020 had a large negative impact on student progress and achievement.

The impact of social background

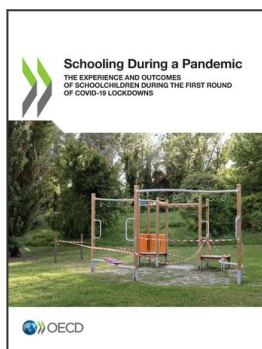
There is little doubt that the negative impact of the pandemic has been greater among disadvantaged populations.

Rates of infection and COVID-19-related deaths were higher in areas of low as opposed to high socio-economic status in England and France and among certain ethnic groups. At the same time, infection rates were positively related to education and higher among people at the top and bottom of the income distribution than in the middle.

Children from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds had greater difficulties than other children with access to the devices and connectivity necessary to continue their education at home. Students who dropped out of education during the period of lockdown appear more likely to come disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds and to have had a prior history of difficulties with schooling.

In the countries covered, there is little evidence of the socio-economic status of parents having an impact on the amount of time children spent on schoolwork or the amount of time parents spent assisting children: children from all backgrounds seem to have devoted more or less the same time to their schoolwork and to have received the same amount of parental assistance.

The evidence regarding the evolution of achievement gaps between children from different social backgrounds affected by lockdowns and school closures in 2020 compared to their peers in previous years is mixed. Both little change in the size of achievement gaps related to social background and significant growth have been found.



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