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Education in a Changing World: The impact of global realities on the prospects and experiences of educational research

A Policy Analysis on the Situation of Inclusive Education in Times of Crisis

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has had significant consequences for all children and their families. It is to assume that the pandemic affected everyone to a different extent. The situation of those who were already disadvantaged – such as students with disabilities, families with low socioeconomic status, or refugee children – got more aggravated (UNICEF, 2020). Thus, the pandemic has had devastating impacts on children who were disproportionately at risk of social exclusion and deprivation of basic needs. In line with that, the well-being of people with disabilities has been identified as being at greater risk due to the pandemic and especially the associated measures by several studies (Biewer et al, 2020; De Nardi & Phillips, 2021). An example of that is the situation of students with disabilities who got introduced to further vulnerabilities due to severe measures and isolation. Among the abrupt measures taken to stop the spreading of the virus was shutting down schools. This affected 80% of students worldwide and raised concerns about the social and emotional well-being of school-aged children (European Agency, 2020). Prolonged school closures resulted in interruption of physical or cognitive therapy, professional coaching, leisure activities, a safe suitable learning environment, or personal assistance. Apart from that, individualized education plans got disrupted and monitoring for students with special education needs failed. This forced parents to take over several responsibilities, which overwhelmed them and introduced an additional stress factor (Nelson, 2020). This influenced the cycle of the precarity of disability and disadvantages by which many families are affected.

The measures introduced to tackle COVID-19 by the state often affected educational settings for students with disabilities in different and sometimes drastic ways. This can be illustrated by the fact that some specialized school settings remained open, even during ‘hard’ lockdown periods. Considered a core component of humanitarian response, inclusive education constitutes an important institution that offers a protective learning environment and normalcy for children with disabilities (Embury, Clarke & Weber 2019; Save the Children 2020; UNICEF 2017; World Bank 2020). However, state efforts to alleviate the effects of a stressed school system during pandemic through technology and online education solutions have not considered the needs of all children. The newly introduced alternative means of learning failed to include the majority of students, disregarding the needs of those with special education needs in particular.

This study reports on the interim findings of the research project “COV_enable: Reimagining Vulnerabilities in Times of Crisis” (P 34641, Austrian Science Fund, FWF). The project monitors the changes that the concept of ‘vulnerability’ has undergone through the pandemic at different levels such as policy-making, expert, practitioner, or individual levels. People who are considered vulnerable are disproportionately exposed to risk. However, dynamics causing vulnerability can change in times of crisis. Depending on – among other factors – the policy response, a person not considered vulnerable at the onset of a pandemic can become vulnerable. Hence, political decision-making, measures communicated and measures implemented had an impact on the school operation, which are within the scope of this project.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

This paper aims to present the project’s research agenda, the underlying urge, and need for such a project as well as the interim findings derived from policy analysis. The project conducts analyses at several levels such as policy making, operating level (schools), expert level (education experts, teachers, school administrators), and individual level (students in inclusive classroom settings). The overall aim is to use the results to inform the co-creation of a framework for inclusive crisis management.

The project findings will be based on policy-making levels (1) and expert and individualized perspectives (2). In this paper, the interim findings of the first phase will be presented.

1. The policy on pandemic-related measures on the school situation of students from different educational settings in Greater Vienna (COVID-19 school regulations and decrees) was analyzed. The policy analysis has been conducted in line with a critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer 2001).

2. Further findings presented will be based on materials that students with disabilities or affected by socio-emotional stressors created and submitted themselves or in cooperation with the researchers. These materials are video diaries, audio recordings, short texts, and photos, that give insights into students’ perspectives on the current situation, as well as interviews about the last years during COVID-19. Different age groups between 6-18 years and different school types (special schools and integrative or inclusive school settings) are part of the qualitative data collection. Data analysis of students’ contributions and qualitative interviews follow the grounded theory method. Additionally, interviews with teachers, school administrations, and the Local School Board were conducted and analyzed through documentary analysis (Nohl, 2010).

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

In this paper, the interim findings of policy analysis will be presented. Those provide insights into how different groups of students are addressed and framed as vulnerable in policy documents, regulations, and official guidelines published by the Federal Ministry of Education, and Board of Education at the state level and which measures are taken as a reaction. Those measures show a balance between the risks of spreading the virus and the impact on education and students’ well-being. Moreover, the epidemiological risk of schools as institutions is highlighted. While discourse analysis shows, that students with insufficient learning conditions at home, students with psycho-social problems, as well as students with different first languages than the language of instruction (in Austria mostly German) are

addressed as particularly vulnerable, students with disabilities or special educational needs are rarely mentioned. Throughout the documents, the assumed negative impact on the learning performances of some groups of students is not consistent. Predominantly, neither those inconsistencies nor why some students are considered as vulnerable while others are not entirely comprehensible. References to students with disabilities mostly remain related to the exemptions from COVID-19 measures, such as prevention regimes in schools (e.g. testing and mandatory face masks in school buildings). Further, the differing regulations on school closures for specialized schools, mainly occurring in the first year of the pandemic, point to underlying assumptions of vulnerabilities.

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