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

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## **Austrian Education Policy in the Context of COVID-19 - Students with Disabilities' and Teachers' Perspectives on the Pandemic**

The impact of COVID-19 on school systems around the world was and is unprecedented – at the height of the pandemic in 2020, 91% of students worldwide found themselves in unusual learning environment due to school closures or distance learning (OECD, 2020). School closures due to COVID-19 as well as pandemic-related regulations and measures in schools (e.g., face masks, distance learning) have a tremendous impact on all students (e.g., social isolation, physical and emotional challenges; European Agency, 2021), but especially on the most vulnerable among them, which include students with disabilities (OECD, 2020). In countries all over the world, limited additional support was provided for vulnerable children and their families during the precarious time of school closures or distance learning. The crisis not only impacted the academic situation of these students, but also multiple dimensions of their well-being. In the discourse about education in times of a pandemic, students', especially those being part of vulnerable groups, were rarely given the opportunity to speak up (European Agency, 2021).

However, not only students but also teachers were and are affected by the COVID-19-measures and restrictions. The lack of personal contact with students due to distance learning made an individual approach to the students' needs difficult, especially with regard to at-risk students such as students with special needs and/or disabilities (Woltran et al., 2021). Due to great uncertainties during this new situation, there was also an increased strain on teachers due to a massive increase in workload caused by the changeover to distance learning and the increased stress level (Woltran et al., 2021).

This study is part of the research project 'COV\_enable: Re-Imagining vulnerabilities in times of crises' (P 34641, Austrian Science Fund, FWF). The research project addresses the question which normative concepts and discourses underlie the classification of persons as vulnerable and what determines whether someone is classified as vulnerable or experiences vulnerability. In addition to health-related aspects, other factors such as isolation, external determination, discrimination or social disadvantage can impact and reinforce vulnerability. Besides questioning those normative concepts and discourses, the project focuses on how this vulnerability is perceived by those affected by it – on the one hand by students, on the

other by professionals (e.g. teachers, school principals, school quality managers, education authority.) Especially in times of crises it is essential to take a closer look at the effects of measures on precisely these groups that either classify as vulnerable by policy makers or affected by measures to an above-average extent. Therefore, the project focuses on effects and implementation of policies and regulations in everyday school life referring to teachers' and students' perspectives. The project aims to give space to the voices of vulnerable groups to be heard and thereby subsequently contributes to the European discourse on inclusive education in times of crises. This is in order to improve how to manage the current crisis and be better prepared for future ones, especially in terms of inclusive approaches. Thus, the focus of this paper is particularly not on the meta-level analysis of national laws and decrees, but on the micro-level in the area of the individual teacher and student level.

### **Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used**

The project covers expert and policy-making level as well as individualized perspectives. The policy-level is analysed following critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer 2001). In this paper presentation, we draw our focus on preliminary findings concerning individualized perspectives. Data collection includes interviews with teachers, students and other persons in the field of education as well as materials that students created and submitted themselves or in cooperation with the researchers, such as video diaries, audio recordings, short texts and photos. Students with disabilities and/or special educational needs at the age between 6-18 years were included, covering different school types of the Austrian school systems including special schools, integrative or inclusive school settings. As the pandemic progressed during the first data collection phase (starting in September 2021), pandemic-related measures impacted empirical research in several ways. Researchers – as well as other external persons – were not permitted to enter schools for longer time periods. Struggling with the pandemic and their school performance, the willingness and possibilities of students to take part in a study – as extra-curricular activity – were reduced. Being limited to remote contact, building the necessary relationships between researchers and students was aggravated, especially when working with younger children or students with profound special educational needs. How to deal with the situation of doing participatory research in times of a pandemic became one of the key questions of the whole project for the researchers. One main obstacle was that students who are most vulnerable became difficult to reach for the research team during distance learning-periods or when schools were closed for external persons. Additionally, our agreed arrangements regarding the collection of data could not be met and this led to great uncertainty on both sides (researchers and participants). This theme of uncertainty and changing dynamics has affected other research as well, and thus the unpredictability of COVID-19 determinations has made it one of the main tasks of researchers to constantly adapt ways to interact with participants (Nind et al., 2021). A more flexible approach thereby became necessary in this project, in particular for students who needed assistance creating and submitting their contributions. Therefore, some data collection was conducted, e.g. via remote communication or using the photovoice method (Butschi & Hedderich 2021).

The overall research design and steps in analysis of qualitative interviews as well as students' contributions follows grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2014).

## Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The pandemic and related measures to contain the spreading of the virus impacted schools and everyone concerned severely. First results of interviews show that resilience of students, anxieties about the COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties on self-organization in distance learning are important topics for teachers. They highlight the social aspects of school and how pandemic measures impacted class communities. School is not only a place of learning, but also makes up an essential part of social life of students. Interview analysis points out effects on psychological well-being, risks for students with pre-existing conditions and the situation of students with disabilities. It is to be highlighted, that not all students with disabilities experienced disadvantages during distance learning – the interviews indicate that some even benefited during those time periods, e.g. through free time management, more individual support from teachers.

Initial insights into data of students' perspectives show diverse experiences during the pandemic. Looking back on the previous and present situation, the younger children in our study predominantly were not preoccupied with the pandemic as such but preferred talking about other activities of their daily lives. One of the main topics concerning COVID-19 measures were social contacts, like not seeing family members (e.g., grandparents) for a longer time period or missing their friends during school closures. Some students reported being annoyed by regulations at school (e.g., face masks, prohibition of contact to other classes in the same school or the omission of practical subjects) and that they miss going on excursions like before the pandemic. While some students preferred going to school, some enjoyed staying at home with their family in distance learning. Data of students in secondary school (age 15-18) gave first insights in how vulnerability is experienced by being more affected by pandemic-related measures, e.g. due to pre-existing medical conditions.

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