

Education in Europe after the pandemic

Between opportunities and divides

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Predictions in education are hard to make because the educational field is exposed to forceful influences such as public expectations, political approaches, professional principles, institutional views and expert opinions. Moreover, the practices that we call educational are not the direct outcomes of these forces but the results of interpretations by practitioners operating in specific environments (colleges, schools, classrooms, etc). Here we choose to share our predictions for 2021 in several areas of education, offering both a positive and negative scenario. We hope that more systems will move towards the positive trends, but we predict a mix of both. The choice is now up to individual member states and how they wish to support the future of their societies. For us here at the SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education, the choice is clear.

Academic achievement

Positive scenario

After strong investment directed towards vulnerable communities through financial instruments that schools and school leaders are able to access and manage themselves, we will find that the learning gaps that might have occurred were significantly mitigated in the 2021 school year. This highlights the importance of bold political and financial leadership, and the recognition that teachers and leaders who have direct contact with learners are best placed to make rapid decisions about how to use investment for their communities with optimum effect.

Negative scenario

Long-standing differences in the learning achievements of vulnerable communities in comparison to other learners were further engrained at the end of the school year in 2020. Continued disruption to many school systems will put an extra strain on the educational attainment of these learners, among them those still in early childhood, those with learning needs and disabilities, migrant and refugee learners, those who do not speak the language of instruction,

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learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from vulnerable households with parents who are abusive and/or struggling with mental health issues. Depending on age and grade, many learners may struggle to catch up with what their peers are achieving within the period of formal education, particularly older learners in the 15+ age range who will have less opportunity for-intervention before they reach an age of independence.

Curriculum issues

Positive scenario

Although covering the curriculum has been challenging for many teachers in 2020, the familiarisation of practitioners with the new methods of delivery demanded by Covid-19 has allowed these practitioners to recognise new opportunities. Many schools have chosen to connect with other schools and classrooms from across Europe to increase citizen and civic learning in 2021. Furthermore, language exchanges and joint projects across a wide array of subjects with learners from all over the continent will promote teamwork, intercultural skills, and skills such as project and time management for older learners, in addition to meeting several curriculum priorities. This will foster a new way of learning, and the creation of European online schools where students from across the EU could learn together for several hours a week, eventually undertaking exchanges in different countries.

Negative scenario

Research from 2012 shows that while face-to-face teaching results in more time being spent with students than it would be for the same lesson online, online teaching requires much more preparation and organisation if it is to be pursued effectively. Anecdotal evidence from some schools also highlights that it is necessary to limit the curriculum in order to ensure that basic learning occurs. 'Extras' or individual-choice projects are therefore likely to be no longer possible in 2021.

Supporting non-formal education actors

Positive scenario

One major priority shared by parents, families, teachers and learners is the need to feel supported (both with workload and with mental health issues). Several non-formal educational actors have highlighted how community resource groups and outreach can approach this issue in innovative ways. We are happy to see governments funding the non-formal actors in 2021 to ensure that many groups, including newly arrived migrants, are able to access valuable peer and other support. It will also ensure that newly arrived migrants are able to access peer and social resources, including opportunities to speak and learn the language of instruction.

Negative scenario

Left struggling for funding and the ability to undertake their usual activities, many non-formal educational actors or other service providers turned to the telephone and other means of out-

reach during the 2020 school closures demanded by the pandemic. Overwhelmed by their workload and by their work being misunderstood by public authorities, these non-formal educational actors and other service providers have been underfunded for 2021 and will be even less available to provide for the vulnerable communities they serve. In particular, organisations will be missed that used to facilitate peer and community groups for refugees and newly arrived migrants to integrate better into society.

Educational policy and plan-designing processes

Positive scenario

The academic end of year multi-stakeholder meetings at national and local levels resulted in policymakers, teachers and school directors not only sharing their experience of reactions to the Covid-19 school closures in 2020 but also defining and highlighting the opportunities of this unique situation for 2021. The outcome is that the most urgent needs of teachers, students and families are being met with clear plans and positivity. In addition, the unique opportunities that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to our schools will be exploited, and all stakeholders will be able to reflect on this time knowing that they have achieved as much as is possible.

Negative scenario

A lack of forward-thinking, design-focused and inclusive assessment of each country's educational experience in 2020 has resulted in a lack of proactive plans to ensure that the most important needs of schools, educators, students, children and families are met, and that aspirations can be reached despite the uncertainty. Advantages of the school-closure situation were not recognised or used to improve school systems or to provide learning opportunities for learners.

Educational technology

Positive scenario

Brought into local and national stakeholder meetings and into contact with parents and students, educational technology companies moved their products to meet the needs of vulnerable families in 2020, and began to use more co-creative processes with teachers and learners in lower socio-economic and challenging areas in order to fill a gap in face-to-face time between learners and teachers during the pandemic. Bringing public and private spheres together in this way shows how individuals and groups can make a very significant impact when directed by strong leadership and facilitated in a forward-thinking process.

Negative scenario

With little incentive or connection to national education ministries, educational technology companies continued to market their offerings to students and families. While many of these

companies produce high-quality offerings at optimal prices, some still prey on low-income families that seek upward mobility, and the companies do not deliver on the promises they market. Others, producing higher-quality courses and apps priced themselves to be accessible only by wealthier parents and will thus increase the achievement gap in 2021.