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How the pandemic impacted the (human) right to education – the Slovak case

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought learning into an unprecedented situation. Students shifted from schools to online teaching, teachers were forced to accommodate to new online teaching environments and use new digital tools. Many children and students did not have access to online teaching, which influenced the level of education, the quality of the graduates, and may have long-term effects on the economy in some states. Slovakia did not manage to adapt to the exceptional pandemic restrictions and the student population will suffer for a long time due to the limited access to education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is currently hitting all nations worldwide. The way and speed of how it spread, accompanied by the reaction of national and supranational authorities (mandatory quarantines, closed borders, closed schools - online education, reorganization of health care, etc.), changed the organisation of economic and social lives and further shifted the behaviour of both firms

and individuals significantly. In a situation, when quick, complex, and relevant results are required, this brief focus on identifying useful recommendations for policymakers in relation to the right to education.

The right to education

The almost immediate transition to the online environment had social implications, particularly in the context of ensuring continuous education at all levels (right to education), and for all actors involved in this area: state authorities, teachers and students. The effect of limiting the right to education has different social implications according to initial findings of UNESCO globally: 90 % of the student population (children and students) have been affected by the pandemic, which means 1.57 billions of young people in 190 countries. Approximately 70 % of children have been affected by the interruption of education and 40 % of children have had no access to physical activity and nutrition as granted by regular school education before the pandemic.¹ Even if this data covers exclusively primary and high school students, the number may be even higher if including university students as well.

¹ UNESCO (2020): "Education. From disruption to recovery." UNESCO, online:

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>, last accessed on 11 April 2021

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Access to education in Slovakia, students on the first place?

Based on the decision of calling the state of emergency in Slovakia, the Minister of Education issued methodical guidance on 12 March 2020, in relation to the interruption of regular teaching at all levels of education and its immediate shift to the online environment. No buffer period was allowed, which meant very little time to prepare for the shift from physical to online teaching environment, as had happened in other countries (Belgium, Bulgaria and Lithuania interrupted studies but left from 2 to 4 weeks both for students, parents and teachers to prepare for online education²). No one was ready for an immediate transition to online teaching.

In Slovakia, the management of educational policy in Spring 2020 was also affected by the change of government and Minister of Education. The educational system was facing several challenges as such, including low digitalisation, limited or no access to education for children and students from harder social environments and low support for teachers in online teaching. Even if the results from the first wave of the pandemic are available (Spring 2020) and findings could be implemented in strengthening systematic support of teachers and students, any concrete steps are implemented very slowly. This means, that even today, after the first year of the pandemic announcement by WHO, the right for education and access for the students' population to education as well as the protection of teachers and their support is extremely limited.

Based on the findings from the first wave of the pandemic in Slovakia, access to online learning was available for 81,5 % of students, while

18,5% had been taught offline (distance learning, home teaching, individual study) and an alarming 7,5 % of students were not taught from March to May 2020³. This means that almost 52 000 children were out of the educational system for 3 months. The number of those who had limited or no access to regular online teaching constitutes an alarming 26 %.

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Teachers: an essential part of educational systems

According to a survey conducted in the first wave of the pandemic in Slovakia, approximately 80 % of teachers argue that to have an adequate transformation to online teaching, they would need greater training, data support and public budget. However, digitalisation of the educational system has been pending for several years. The Institute for Educational Policy, which is the analytical unit of the Ministry of Education, identified 5 areas of recommendations to open schools and support for teachers and students in online teaching and in preparation for a new school year from September 2020. In two areas, no decisions or measures had been prepared. In one area, only 1 out of 4 recommendations were implemented and only in 2 areas there was a more significant move (manuals for the phases of pandemic and

² Ministry of Education (2020): "Initial Study of Measures adopted by schools in Europe." Slovakia, online: https://drive.google.com/file/d/19-Wv8Viv0zYTvyHB1VHSD86maOVNENGJ/view?fbclid=IwAR1DgMBXYt_LC5OFG2ox5iaeMnL_kSBNAVwls2LxvrGH6XrscV2C-xBxK_Q, last access on 12 April 2021

³ Ministry of Education and IVP (2020): "NUCEM survey of teachers experience in pandemic" (17 September 2020). Ministry of Education, online <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/17338.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3fgZSb81zyXT6JiOB-CQ8L-Bfif09LwEYKKyh8el7fLz-k81BNJB-tq4E>, last accessed 09 April 2021

support of teachers in quality of online and offline teaching improvement).⁴ The Slovak educational system in September 2020 was not prepared for the second wave of the pandemic and the closure of schools and the shift to online classes in mid-October for secondary education and high schools is lasting up to April 2021.

Re-opening schools is contingent upon the overall epidemiologic situation in the country. The perspective of opening schools became a limited reality for some primary schools and kindergarten at the beginning of March 2021, eased by the vaccination of teachers and school personnel. However, it has to be stressed that teachers and school personnel had not been considered as part of the strategic country infrastructure and they were not on top position for the vaccination plan (compared to Hungary, Poland or Italy⁵).

In its initial version of the vaccination plan, Slovakia did not prioritize teachers as an essential category and did not count them in the strategic infrastructure. After having access to a delivery of Astra Zeneca vaccine in February, in alignment with the intention to open schools for primary classes, teachers of primary and high schools were vaccinated on a voluntary basis.⁶ The school's non-academic personnel (such as personnel from the school canteen, the library or staff in school clubs) were added even later, after urgency from multiple directors of schools. The same opportunity was not provided to teachers at universities, who had to wait for the vaccination according to their age category.

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Conclusion

As the WHO warned, “without universal access to education and health services, the inequalities which have expanded even further during the pandemic will continue to grow. WHO recognizes the central role schools play in safeguarding student health and well-being”⁷. Policies in the area of education should focus on three fundamental pillars: grant safe access to education to children and students by re-opening the schools and receiving comprehensive support in their return; continue to build digital platforms for education, with special focus to make education accessible for those who are in need or recovering from a disease; and finally to empower teachers, granting competences and discretion about teaching methods, online techniques and digitalization of learning continuity, giving them advantages as a special category. This should also include prioritization of teachers in the vaccination plan on a systematic principle, rather than ad hoc involvement⁸, also at the level of university education and research. The well-educated, trained, innovative and sustainable community, adaptable also to pandemic restrictions impacting education should be a common goal for all countries and actors involved.

⁴ Ibid, NUCEM survey, 2020

⁵ UNESCO (2021): „Total duration of School closure“. UNESCO, online: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#durationschoolclosures>, last accessed 12 April 2021

⁶ Ministry of Education (2021): “Teachers vaccination announcement“, Ministry of Education,. Online: <https://www.minedu.sk/ockovanie-zamestnancov-skol-a-skolskych-zariadeni/>, last accessed 26 February 2021

⁷ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2021): “UNESCO global meeting of education ministers“ 30 March 2021. UNESCO, online: <https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-unesco->

[convenes-global-meeting-education-ministers-ensure-learning-continuity?mc_cid=7e6ce683448&mc_eid=0777b4a814](https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-unesco-convenes-global-meeting-education-ministers-ensure-learning-continuity?mc_cid=7e6ce683448&mc_eid=0777b4a814), last accessed 11 April 2021

⁸ According to international survey, only 17 out of 149 countries prioritizes teachers in the first phase of vaccination, another 20 countries involved them in the 2nd phase of vaccination. 56 countries do not prioritize teachers in national vaccine rollout plans. UNESCO (2021): “Where are teachers being prioritized in COVID-19 vaccination efforts?“ UNESCO, online: <https://en.unesco.org/news/where-are-teachers-being-prioritized-covid-19-vaccination-efforts>, last accessed 12 April 2021

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