

Editorial

## Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People After Covid-19

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Submitted: 4 April 2022 | Published: 19 May 2022

### Abstract

Although the exact impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the inclusion of vulnerable children and young people—nationally and internationally—is unknown, historical failures to address the link between poverty and low educational outcomes have reversed any progress hitherto achieved. This thematic issue speaks to the challenges faced by, and promises of inclusion made to, children and young people in the most vulnerable circumstances: It brings together a set of articles that detail the challenges educators, educational institutions, and students faced during the pandemic, while also discussing innovative approaches to include pupils in mainstream education and help them make progress against the odds. The pandemic has been an opportunity for both learning and unlocking potentialities toward innovative solutions. Taking stock of these solutions is important in preparing and strengthening schools, educators, and students to face the post-pandemic era that is dawning, for public education systems need not only be seen as sites of frustration and challenge, but also as sites of promise and possibility.

### Keywords

Covid-19; educational inclusion; pandemic; social disadvantage; vulnerable children; young people

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People after Covid-19” edited by Spyros Themelis (University of East Anglia) and Angela Tuck (Pakefield High School).

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### 1. Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People Revisited

The overall impact of the pandemic on educational inequalities and the inclusion of vulnerable children and young people nationally and internationally is hard to gauge. However, in all certainty, “an even greater chasm between those attending outstanding schools, and who have access to parental resources, and those who are not so lucky” has emerged (Eyles et al., 2020, p. 6). It is, therefore, apropos to ask how wide that “chasm” was before the start of the pandemic, and how much wider it has grown. According to a UK-derived estimate, if things kept moving at the rate of pace before Covid-19 struck, it would take 560 years for the “disadvantage gap” to close (Hutchinson et al., 2019). In the pre-pandemic era,

“pupil engagement and disadvantaged pupil engagement were both lower in the most deprived schools. Teachers in the most deprived schools were in contact with fewer pupils” (NFER, 2020, p. 4). At the earlier stages of the pandemic, some commentators expressed fears that school closures could amplify the existing attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers among primary school children by 36%, by September 2020 (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). Notwithstanding the accuracy of this estimate, the data collected since then offer some justification for the feared increase in the pertinent gap. According to a recent report:

By January 2021, 84% of teachers felt the pandemic would cause the attainment gap between the most

and least disadvantaged to widen in their school (whereas it was 76% in November), with a third believing this gap would be “substantial” (33%, up from 28% in November). Teachers serving the most disadvantaged schools were most concerned about the attainment gap. (Teacher Tapp as cited in Howard et al., 2021)

During the pandemic, families from disadvantaged backgrounds faced even bigger challenges in providing their offspring with adequate resources to support home-schooling or providing sufficient space for study at home (Auriemma & Iannaccone, 2020; Reimer et al., 2020). There is growing evidence that the pandemic has augmented the gulf between affluent and disadvantaged students with repercussions that will be felt for many decades to come.

However, the pandemic does not and cannot account for historical failures to address the link between poverty and low educational outcomes. For example, those with low educational attainment were almost five times more likely to be in poverty than their counterparts with a high level of education (Serafino & Tonkin, 2014). The pandemic seems to have solidified and entrenched such differentials. There is little doubt that the effect of the latter will mar educational and socio-economic outcomes in the long-term and a big loss in educational opportunities and skills is expected until around 2080, which will also have a knock-on effect on poverty (The DELVE Initiative, 2020).

While the inclusion of the most marginalised children and young people was long overdue before the pandemic, it should become a top national and international priority after it. Including the most vulnerable and marginalised has beneficial implications for their life chances both in terms of increased educational opportunities, but also in terms of “health, well-being, and quality of life” (Filia et al., 2018, p. 183). Conversely, the socioeconomic consequences caused by educational and social exclusion adversely affect wider society by way of an additional financial burden and lack of social cohesion. In response to this, efforts for inclusion in education have led to a “deficit approach to education provision” where schools “target their resources towards identifying and ‘fixing’ students to improve performance scores” (Larsen et al., 2019, p. 1050). We argue that this is a flawed model of inclusion, both in theory and practice, and it does not lead to actual inclusion. This thematic issue speaks to the challenges and promises of inclusion of the most vulnerable children and young people. It discusses some innovative approaches to include pupils in mainstream education and help them make progress against the odds.

## 2. From Pandemic Fixing to Pandemic Learning

When the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic spread and societies locked down, education in many countries

moved online. As McNair et al. (2022) discuss in this volume, this reality immediately highlighted inconsistencies in access to education as governments and other stakeholders explored different ways to enable young people to participate in remote learning. In a comparative study that included Brazil, Eswatini, South Africa, and Scotland, the authors found that the pandemic was the catalyst for eroding or even ignoring children’s rights and that violence and poverty threatened the protection of their basic rights, which goes against the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

This revised perspective on inclusion demonstrated a piecemeal problem-solving approach, which failed to consider wider issues, such as wellbeing and belongingness. For example, Szelei et al.’s (2022) findings from a comparative study on six European countries (including Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK), showed that the pandemic did not alter the experiences of belonging for migrant students, probably because they were already exposed to disruption in their education. It also showed that belonging is not homogenous, but a dynamic and changing experience for migrant students.

With online access, it seemed that vulnerable, previously more excluded young people became included. However, it was soon realised that they lacked previous experience with the social rules around remote participation in online activities and lack of access to the “code” of appropriate use and online safety, as Platero and López-Sáez (2022) discuss. Therefore, they became vulnerable to a widening gap and the risk of becoming even more excluded (Colombo & Santagati, 2022).

However, other contexts provide respite from an approach to online learning that, at best, could be described as troubleshooting. In their article, McNair et al. (2022) argue that, even though the pandemic “spotlighted” inequalities that already existed, schools and teachers were quick to identify and implement innovative practices to reduce the immediate gaps. Ebubedike et al. (2022) highlight how a well-tested approach, namely education delivered by radio school in local languages in Northern Nigeria, has proved successful in terms of uptake. The use of a young person’s first language, even when alongside the “host” language (“translanguaging”), facilitates active participation and has previously been upheld as exemplary practice for inclusion (DeNicolò, 2019).

Colombo and Santagati (2022, p. 195) discuss how relationships were built with some particularly vulnerable young people and their families as teachers made contact in a “customized, emphatic, and more attentive manner.” In other contexts, stakeholders reviewed accessibility and took action to redress it where it was lacking. It also led to a re-evaluation of the parameters within which inclusion operates and made us reimagine what inclusive education could look like. There is hope that the lessons from the pandemic will lead to more meaningful inclusion in the future.

Addressing the needs of vulnerable children and young people needs to move beyond deficit and one-size-fits-all approaches. As Platero and López-Sáez (2022) conclude in relation to the needs of LGBTQ+ young people in Spain, interventions need to be nuanced to address their intersectional characteristics and the particular type of violence they experience. Educational institutions need to work with the social networks of these people and the applications they use on their devices if they are to effectively support them.

The pandemic has been an opportunity for learning and unlocking potentialities for innovative solutions. More importantly, it has also been a springboard for the coming together of school communities and educational stakeholders to achieve commonly upheld targets (Colombo et al., in press). Teacher upskilling, not least in the use of technology, needs to be seen as a welcome opportunity to extend its benefits for the continuing support vulnerable groups will need also after the pandemic. As Vegas and Winthrop (2020) argue “strong and inclusive public education systems are essential to the short—and long-term recovery of society and that there is an opportunity to leapfrog toward powered-up schools.” It is also time to envision public education systems emerging from the pandemic stronger than ever before.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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