

Research Note:

COVID-19 and Risks for Disadvantaged Students: A Media Coverage Analysis from a Cultural Psychology Perspective

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The health and social crisis caused by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had an especially strong impact on the academic prospects the most vulnerable populations in society. This paper focuses on the consequences of the current crisis in terms of their potential to negatively impact school disengagement and early school leaving rates. First, the author reviews the causes of early school leaving, divided into exogenous and endogenous factors. Second, the key findings of a media coverage analysis are presented. This analysis focuses on key educational aspects and consequences related to the COVID-19 crisis and the potential impact on disengagement, early school leaving and educational inequality gaps. Lastly, in the light of those consequences, a sociocultural model of behaviour is suggested as a useful lens to envision solutions.

Key words: Early school leaving, school dropout, educational inequality gaps, coronavirus disease, COVID-19

Introduction

The recent global public health and social crisis caused by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had an enormous impact globally, including on the educational domain. Due to the closure of education facilities, billions of children and students had to continue their studies from home (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). This produced many challenges, though these challenges differed depending on the societal context. In Europe, countries such as Spain and Italy, two of the most affected countries, were confronted with far-reaching consequences for their students. Prior to the current crisis both countries had already struggled with problems such as early school leaving (ESL)¹ and inequality gaps regarding access to education (European Statistical Office, 2019). Though the numbers are still unclear, the potential to boost ESL numbers is significant. As Álvaro Ferrer (Advocacy Advisor of Education for Save the Children – Spain) has stated: “The health crisis can turn into an educational crisis” (cited in Chiappe, 2020).

The present article focuses on media coverage of key educational aspects and consequences related to the COVID-19 crisis, especially its potential impact on ESL and educational inequality gaps. First, I briefly review ESL determinants, followed by examining key aspects of recent media coverage. In addition to outlining the aforementioned, I use a cultural-psychological lens to reflect on the potential consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for the most underserved communities across Europa, as well as possible tools to address the crisis.

Early School Leaving (ESL) Determinants

One can categorize ESL determinants in terms of *endogenous* factors and *exogenous* factors (Romero-Sánchez & Hernández-Pedreño, 2019, p. 268). *Endogenous* factors directly relate to the student (i.e. internal causes) and are related to demographics, attitudes and behaviours. These can be subdivided into personal and relational aspects. Personal aspects relate to the individual (e.g. capacities, motivation,

¹ ESL is defined as the action of leaving “education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational education and training” (European Commission, 2011).

aspirations and personal effort). The relational dimension refers to a student's support networks (e.g. family and peer support and influence)

Exogenous factors, according to Romero-Sánchez & Hernandez-Pedreño (idib) relate to external influences and do not depend on individual characteristics or his/her relations. Exogenous factors can be subdivided into structural and institutional aspects. The former refer to sociocultural aspects such as political and economic conditions and access to the job market. The latter refer to aspects such as the educational system, educational institutions, and educational policies. Included would also be teacher attitudes, expectations and attributions.

These categorizations will help frame the findings of my empirical study and provide a tool to explore possible intervention possibilities.

Coronavirus health and social crisis: the consequences on education

In general, ESL and social disadvantage have been strongly linked. Sometimes ESL being a cause of, or an indicator of, disadvantaged conditions for the most undeserved communities (Vallejo & Dooly, 2013). Such communities tend to experience systemic exclusion at different levels: for instance economic, access to the labour market, health, and housing (see e.g. Hernández-Pedreño, 2010). Similarly, there are indications that these communities are being disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus health and social crisis (Lee & Morling, 2020). In addition to having more limited access to health provision, educational access has also been impacted (Moya et al., 2020). There are initial indications that the closure of schools across Europe and elsewhere has exacerbated already existing educational inequities. While some students have managed to continue part of their studies at home through on-line learning, receiving sufficient support and resources from teachers, schools and educational authorities, wide spectrum of educational contexts in Europe and elsewhere. In general, it can be stated that the already most underserved communities, often with limited social capital, have received (sometimes far) less support and fewer materials (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020). Despite the efforts to provide families

from the most undeserved communities with resources to continue the education of their children (Save the Children, 2020), such families find it more difficult to engage and continue with online learning (Torres-Menárguez, 2020). Efforts across Europe to reduce ESL rates and mitigate inequality gaps continue (European Commission)², but the ongoing crisis and its aftermath can significantly derail European ESL targets and efforts to address educational inequalities³. Given the novelty of the COVID-19 crisis, and its ongoing nature, there is limited scientific evidence relating to educational processes and outcomes. The present analysis therefore explores, through media coverage (i.e. newspapers, blog articles, interview reports, etc.), some of the evidence and narratives recently emerging, especially as these relate to the intersection of the COVID-19 crisis, educational opportunity and underserved communities.

The analysis

During the period April 2020 to July 2020 the author followed the media in multiple languages⁴. Much of the content related to Spain, Italy and France (due to the major impact that COVID-19 has had there), while some media information was more general in character, referring to international findings and analysis from NGO's and IGO's. The material was obtained through an extensive Google search throughout the research period, using key words related to COVID-19, and also educational disadvantage. This process led to a large pool of articles that in some way discussed the impact of COVID-19 on education. A selection was made of twenty-six media-related articles, including online newspapers, blogs of opinion, reports and articles from NGOs and IGOs and interview reports that went beyond more simplistic statements and commentary.

² <https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/school/early-school-leaving>

³ the Europe 2020 strategy target is to reduce ESL rate to below 10% - European Semester Thematic Factsheet (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/european-semester_thematic-factsheet_early-school-leavers_en_0.pdf)

⁴ English, Italian, Spanish and French.

Findings: Impact of COVID-19 on the educational prospect

The analysis of the media sample revealed the following key aspects of the consequences of COVID-19 on the educational realm:

Discontinued Education

One of the first measures to be taken to stop the spreading of the virus was the closing of schools ⁵. Media reports mentioned claims by authorities and schools that they intended to have school students continue their education from home, but noted that the evidence indicated that this was, for the most part, slow to develop. These reports mentioned that students across Europe (and elsewhere) were not being provided with the same quality and amount of education they would have received through in-person classes. The slowing of the pace and amount (and in some cases a complete interruption) of learning was deemed to have important repercussions not only for the short term but also for the medium and long-term. It was also pointed out that that it was the most disadvantaged students who were most at risk to be impacted (Torres-Menárguez, 2020). A key reason mentioned was that they had less opportunities to offset learning challenges through non-school related means. This included, for instance, less access to private teachers and tutors, challenges in meeting the needs of special education children, poorer connectivity, home environments that are less conducive to studying (smaller and less quiet spaces), as well as poorer literacy skills among parents, which can make it more difficult to follow school assignments remotely ⁶.

One long term long-term consequence mentioned was the anticipated limitation of social mobility and exacerbation of inequality gaps due to the circumstance that students were receiving less

⁵ In France it was announced that schools would close the 16th of March, partially reopening on May 11th and opening with limitations on the 22nd of June. In Italy schools closed on 5th of March and expected to open on the 14th of September 2020; In Spain schools closed the 12th of March, partially reopened the 8th of June and expected to open in September 2020. Any significant second wave would postpone reopening.

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

knowledge that could help them take advantage of future opportunities (e.g. access to higher education and the labor market). For instance, the Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI)⁷ pointed to the risk of lower salaries among today's students when they reach the age of 30 or 40. In brief, there was a recognition that interrupted education would increase the achievement gap between students from disadvantaged and more advantaged families.

Unprepared parents and the digital divide

The closing of schools has required parents to collaborate more closely with teachers and assist their children at home with learning. This is not an easy task for many parents. Early reports noted that for the most disadvantaged families, parents already had less developed relations (before the pandemic) with the school and often lacked the educational capital to aid their children with school work (UNESCO)⁸. They also had less access to digital resources. Existing educational inequities were thus being exacerbated by uneven access to resources such as laptops, internet and general knowledge regarding the use of such resources. The digital divide, already a cause for concern, together with limited knowledge of specific subject areas, and in some cases a lack of language proficiency (a reality for some migrant families) was identified as a serious challenge (Ferragioni, 2020). Several media reports noted that families with more than one child attending school were further challenged because they needed to facilitate the learning of multiple children in often cramped spaces. This situation, it was reported, negatively impacted the productivity of the parents, causing additional stress and the risk of developing mental health issues (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2020). Already unsafe family environments became more unsafe (schools are the safest place to be for some children). It was mentioned that family dynamics also had an impact. Those families more accustomed to spending their free time watching television and less accustomed to organizing interactive and cognitively stimulating activities found it more difficult,

⁷ <https://www.oei.es/Educacion/Noticia/oei-analiza-como-afectara-el-cierre-colegios-coronavirus>

⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

according to these reports, to engage with remote academic activities. Those families that spent more time engaging their children in activities such as reading books and on-line learning (e.g. for school projects), found home schooling somewhat less challenging (Torres-Menárguez, 2020)

Teachers under pressure

Media reports noted that since the current crisis unfolded rapidly, as did the measures that needed to be taken, schools needed to change their routines almost immediately, and in unprecedented ways. Without few or none reopening dates in sight, teachers were confronted with many challenges. The existing syllabi and teaching approaches needed to be adapted very quickly and without sufficient experience or support in order to completely move to a distance learning approach. Additionally, some teachers also had a role beyond just teaching the subject matter. These teachers were involved in supporting students and their families who needed extra (learning material and socio-emotional related) attention. This suddenly had to be done remotely in situations where there was often a lack of digital and technological material resources and knowledge. Media reports noted how teachers had to dedicate extra time instructing families how to support their children's learning, while some teachers had their own children at home. In many underserved communities and schools, teacher preparation was less developed and there were limited material resources. This meant, according to the media reports, that these schools and teachers lacked key resources (training, preparation, availability of digital platforms, etc.) to embrace a distance learning approach.

Growth of the ongoing segregation of people with special educational needs

The media also reported on the impact of COVID-19 for children with special education needs (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2020). Many school students and families that depend on special programs and need extra attention can only receive those on school premises. This was becoming almost impossible according to these reports. Since parents (and the schools) did not have

the proper training to move support and assistance on-line, children with special needs fell further behind and already existing segregation increased.

Further essential learning

Schools play a pivotal role in the development of social, emotional and intellectual skills, which are supposed to help students become socially competent (Morales, 2020). The socio-emotional learning that takes place in the school helps students develop “patience, perseverance and the ability to figure out the future consequences of one’s behavior” (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2020), essential characteristics for a student’s future. Schools in some countries also provide free meals and language learning opportunities (critical for some immigrant children). The COVID-19 crisis removed such support.

Growing concern for disengagement and increasing Early School Leaving

Media reports pointed to the fact that from the very beginning of the school shutdowns, which started in March 2020, many students across Europe missed their online school activities for a number of reasons (e.g. lack of digital resources). In some cases, they and their families completely disappeared off the radar (and as of July 2020 continue to be absent; Bennhold, 2020). The evidence reported in the media and other resources included in this study, pointed to the circumstance that those who had disappeared from the educational radar were more likely to come from underserved schools and communities. Mention was made the potential consequences: a growing inequality gap in education, a further loss of motivation among populations already struggling economically, increased stress in the home and community, and a disconnection to the school that can lead to school disengagement and drop out (Martín, 2020). It was pointed out that this is more likely to impact the already most disadvantaged students (Chiappe, 2020). They and their families do not only have less resources than middle class families during the pandemic; they have less resources to reengage and catch up once schools start to reopen and get back to their normal routines.

Another reason was mentioned by educational researcher Philippe Meirieu (cited in Drevet, 2020), who made reference to the importance of the *collective*. The collective can be understood as the cooperative and in person union between teachers, peers and students. This is something that online education cannot offer as not all students can connect in the same manner (i.e. some connect through e-learning platforms, others through radio or WhatsApp, etc.). Despite the multiple efforts from the institutions and authorities, this seems to be an issue with many inherent difficulties; a teacher from Lisbon (personal communication) highlighted “some students just have abandoned the school by not participating in the school's e-learning. Police have been informed about this and went to their homes making them understand the importance of keeping the school contact [...] Some teachers are very disappointed with this situation and are thinking of giving up teaching”.

Current disengagement patterns run the risk of impacting ESL: due to a loss of motivation, cognitive and competence levels disconnection to the school can take place (Martín, 2020). This, in turn, could exacerbate the inequality gap in education. Families that have less economic capital tend to have less resources to reengage and catch up if schools and governments lack adequate contingency plans.

A cultural psychology perspective

The current crisis indicates that access to a complete and quality education now faces an additional challenge. Though short, medium and long-term measures are being taken to counter the effects of the pandemic on educational prospects (Noorani & Crosier, 2020), it is necessary to take a "panoptic view" of the problem. Though various lenses can be utilized to analyse the nature of the challenges ahead, and their concomitant solutions, in terms of social and educational disparities, the author would like to invoke a social and cultural psychology perspective. A sociocultural model of behaviour can be instructive since it serves to integrate individual and structural models of behaviour when envisioning the prevention of the anticipated consequences of COVID-19 in the educational realm.

The sociocultural model of behaviour, proposed by Stephens et al., (2012), suggests a model that focuses on individual characteristics or attributes, which can be interpreted as *endogenous* factors (e.g. attitudes, skills and beliefs), as well as structural conditions (e.g. access to material resources), that can be identified as a key *exogenous* factor. Interventions that focus mostly on an individual model of behaviour (i.e. *exogenous* factors) can explain the issue of disparities in education by looking at individual characteristics (e.g. explaining academic achievement as a product of motivation and self-regulation). This model looks at interventions that aim to change the individual, for instance through education or training programs. On the other hand, interventions based on a structural model of behaviours (i.e. *exogenous* factors) can explain basically the same issue by looking at material resources or environmental conditions (e.g. academic achievement as a product of school conditions and resources). Structural interventions aim to restructure environments, by providing more resources and opportunities.

The two above-mentioned models are both valid but incomplete. The Sociocultural Self Model of Behaviour integrates both *exogenous* and *endogenous* factors and conceives them as dynamic and as influencing each other. This model is based on the core assumption of the field of cultural psychology: a cycle of mutual constitution of psychological tendencies and behaviours that are influenced by the larger sociocultural context and its structures, in turn influenced and changed by the same individuals and their characteristics (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

Based on the above model, countering the inequality gaps in education involves holistic interventions. Understanding inequality in education and implementing appropriate interventions, according to the Sociocultural Self Model, implies making sustainable changes at both the structural and individual levels. It is not enough to make a sustainable change to the *exogenous* factors, by providing access to quality education, material resources and/or training teachers, if the intervention does not also aim to influence the *endogenous* factors or individual characteristics, such as skills, knowledge and understanding of the self as a learner (Stephens et al., 2020, p. 15). It is necessary to adopt a holistic view that aims to tackle

school disengagement and ESL at its roots: reengaging students while schools are closed and working to avoid ESL as a medium-term and long-term consequence. It requires a comprehensive view of students as individuals (e.g. attention span, special educational needs, resilience, motivation, etc.) and the environment that the student operates in (e.g. access to digital resources, economic situation, family-related factors, school, etc.). Focusing on one or the other could work as a Band-Aid solution with the illusion of permanent change. Instead, it is essential to strive for sustainable solutions that foster changes on both the structural and individual levels.

Conclusions

The current study started as part of a larger international project that aims to counter ESL for students at risk of social exclusion. The ongoing situation, produced by the coronavirus disease, has brought to light structural issues that already existed, but are at risk of worsening. Unequal access to quality education, student disengagement and ESL are all of great concern.

The current analysis was based on media material and some initial reports, as it was the most accessible information at the time of writing. These initial insights can be of great benefit in exploring the initial impact of COVID-19 in the educational domain. A more in-depth analysis of school disengagement, ESL and COVID-19 will benefit from ongoing and more extensive research into dynamics of an ongoing health and social crisis. Though various models of analysis are worthwhile when envisioning ways to combat the negative educational consequences of COVID 19, a cultural psychological perspective can be especially useful since it integrates both an individual and structural understanding of challenges and potential solutions ahead.

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