

Reimers, F.M. (Eds.) (2022): *Primary and secondary education during Covid-19: disruptions to educational opportunity during a pandemic*

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The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 altered the lives of adults and children who experienced its direct and indirect effects differently depending on their own situation and the country they lived in (Engel de Abreu et al. 2021). Children's and adolescents' learning experiences were radically impacted by the distance education implemented to contain the spread of the virus, which, in turn, impaired academic achievement. The 2022 large-scale PISA assessment data of 175 million 15-year-old students in 72 countries, documents the detrimental effect the pandemic (OECD 2023). Jakubowski et al. (2024) found that their assessment scores declined and correlated with the length of school closures. Students living in countries where school closures were brief—generally high-income countries—lost an equivalent of 5 months of learning, those with average length closures lost 7 months and those with long closures lost 12 months. In countries with brief closures, the losses are larger for the lowest achieving students, frequently the disadvantaged students. By contrast, in countries with long closures, larger losses were recorded for higher achieving students. Socio-economic disparities remain and need to be addressed—the question remains how.

The volume, edited by Fernando M. Reimers and published in 2022, offers possible answers and contributes to our understanding of the complex ways in which various education systems dealt with the pandemic and examines the interplay of education, politics, economy and health. This understanding helps identify effective recovery measures and “build back better” (p. 475). The aim of the book is to help readers understand the varied ways in which education systems responded to the pandemic and the reasons why some countries managed to maintain educational opportunities while others failed, exacerbating inequalities. The volume outlines the

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short-term educational impact of the pandemic on learners, teachers and education systems in selected countries and explains learning loss on account of the alternative forms of education and the multilevel factors influencing their efficiency. The authors argue that all students have been impacted by remote education, but that the extent and depth of educational interruptions varied across countries and student populations, with disadvantaged students being hit disproportionately harder. Students' learning opportunities depended on access to materials as well as teacher and parent support. These, in turn, were influenced by individual and structural factors such as health, stress levels, financial and educational resources, national strategies and governance structures. They were also shaped by social and economic inequalities that pre-dated the pandemic and exacerbated its effect. Comprising of 17 chapters, the volume is unique in its comparative approach and the insights gained from international scholars and experts in education. Drawing on reports, surveys, interviews as well as policy documents gathered in 2020 and 2021, the authors present experiences of learners, educational actors, parents and government officials. While the book is based on scientific data, it is accessible to all readers owing to its style and the concise abstracts and graphics. An overview of the 17 chapters follows.

The introductory chapter describes the strategies of remote education that were rapidly deployed after March 2020, affecting 1.7 billion learners. Its effects on student engagement, learning and well-being varied considerably across and within countries, depending on structures, resources and health policies. For example, not all governments followed the WHO advice to encourage people to wear face masks or keep social distance, which resulted in the rapid spread of the virus. The same measures would lead to economic recession in some countries and resulted in a rise of negative feelings in many children. The following 15 chapters (with the exception of Chapter 15) zoom in on one country at a time and provide insights into the educational responses and unequal impact of the pandemic on four continents. Chapter 2 presents the ways in which organizations in Brazil promoted remote learning through TV, radio, and digital platforms in the absence of government leadership. By contrast, the central government in Chile (Chapter 3) was aware of the unequal opportunities in public and private schools and played an active role in implementing policies and providing digital devices. Chapter 4 presents the case of Finland where an equitable education system and digital infrastructure were in place and facilitated remote learning. Chapter 5 reports on governmental support in Japan which targeted social imbalances by providing financial support, distributing digital tools and installing high-speed IT networks in schools. This situation contrasted with Mexico (Chapter 6) where learning opportunities consisted of educational television and radio broadcasts that proved ineffective. Chapter 7 shows that even where digital infrastructures had been used in schools prior to the pandemic as in Norway, remote learning posed difficulties when teacher support was limited and when the government neither offered guidance to support learners nor acknowledged their unequal access. In Portugal (Chapter 8), by contrast, issues of equity and social justice featured in the policy discourse and were taken seriously by public authorities that made available platforms, websites or programs to support schools and students. Chapter 9 presents the case of Russia which had no national strategy and where disadvantaged students were especially impacted by unequal access to resources. The

pandemic helped raise awareness of educational inequalities. Singapore's successful response to the health and educational crises is described in Chapter 10. Evidence-based policies, the citizen's understanding of social responsibility as well as the trust in authorities allowed for quick and effective responses. Chapter 11 homes in on Spain's delay in acting. In the absence of a national strategy and the lack of consensus, instruction appeared to be improvised although teachers and school managers made considerable efforts to support learning. The South African educational system, presented in Chapter 12, is structurally fragile and could not successfully shift to remote instruction. Chapter 13 reports on learning opportunities and student outcomes in North America, demonstrating gaps in knowledge and skills while Chapter 14 examines issues in staff retention in Arizona. Learning achievements in France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the topic of Chapter 15. The authors show both small improvements and smaller or larger declines, depending on the country and highlighted the lower achievement of more disadvantaged students. The disproportionately negative effect of the pandemic on vulnerable groups and the learning disparities pre-dating the pandemic, are also discussed in Chapter 16. The final chapter shows the interplay of education, health, finance and politics, points out some positive findings and closes with challenges ahead.

This informative and original volume provides a comprehensive overview of the different ways in which education systems in four continents dealt with the pandemic. The authors, country experts, cover multiple themes including online and offline resources and access to these, learning opportunities and support, the effectiveness of the resources and support, child and teacher competences, growing inequity, and the involvement of the central government. Apart from identifying the complex and multilevel factors that decreased student outcomes and estimating learning losses, the experts show how the quality of remote instruction varied with teacher-student interactions and emphasize the salience of students' well-being. They thereby prepare the grounds for student well-being finding its place in today's educational discourse. In addition, the volume deepens the readers' understanding of education systems. The first and final chapters, in particular, are essential reading for policymakers, researchers and professionals as Reimers used the unique opportunity the pandemic threw up to examine just how embedded the education sector is in national and international contexts. He convincingly shows the complex ways in which politics, finance, health and education contribute to the reproduction of inequalities and calls for high-quality education for all students. The volume emphasizes the crucial role that education systems play in societies and their role in building an inclusive and sustainable world (p. 475). To all those wishing to understand the complex factors that impact education systems and the multi-layered ways in which education contributes to students' learning and achievement, and all those who aim and address issues of inequality, this book is indispensable.

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