The Impact of COVID-19 on Inclusive Education at the European Level

Literature Review

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

Literature Review

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This literature review aims to map evidence and identify acknowledged ways in which COVID-19 has impacted on education in general and inclusive education in particular at European and national levels. The intention is to provide a comprehensive overview of key messages for member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency). It will also inform possible future Agency work on this topic.

Several questions guide the review:

- What information is available about COVID-19's impact on education? How are the topics framed in international, European and national documents?

- How have education stakeholders adapted to the needs and context of vulnerable learners (e.g. change in teaching methods; governments and private sector providing accessible devices and connectivity)?

- What evidence from European countries can support future decision-making and collaboration with various stakeholders?

- How can European countries learn and collaborate to minimise the effects of the current education crisis on vulnerable learners?

In total, 250 documents were reviewed, including international and national guidelines, policy briefs, white papers, political declarations, reports based on quantitative and qualitative surveys, academic papers, blog articles, online databases, portals and webinars. The documents covered the period March–December 2020. They were analysed using a **grounded approach**. This means that general ideas, recommendations and explanations were grounded in, or emerged from, 'data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 2).

Two phases of analysis identified four main thematic areas:

- Global and European education

- Governance of inclusive education

- Transformation of education

- Learners' voices and families' efforts.

Each thematic area developed into a specific section of the review. Lessons learned and future directions for action in inclusive education were identified from the documents reviewed in each thematic area.

The review's findings focus on:

1. COVID-19's impact on the co-ordination of inclusive education at the European level

Limited initial guidance on inclusive education at European level was available. COVID-19 was considered both a challenge and an opportunity to review and implement more inclusive legislation, policies and actions in education across Europe. A 'build back better' message linked to education is predominant. Equality and inclusion are its core values.

2. COVID-19's impact on the governance of inclusive education at national level

Evidence showed that all European countries took measures to ensure the continuity of education during the pandemic. However, these measures were sometimes inadequate, and limited guidance was available for inclusion in education. Recommendations from various stakeholders highlighted the need to replace the initial compensatory response to the crisis with more preventive policies based on cross-sectoral collaborations.

3. COVID-19's impact and the transformation of inclusive education

Remote, digital education was the preferred first response to the COVID-19 crisis in all European countries. Vulnerable learners were already at greater risk of learning loss and were more affected by the digital divide. Existing recommendations focus on the need for co-ordination and remediation measures to reduce learning loss. More preventive measures are also recommended for accessibility of learning and quality in education.

4. COVID-19's impact on vulnerable learners and their families

Limited support for vulnerable children and their families was available across European countries. The crisis affected multiple dimensions of children's well-being. Children's voices were seldom heard in public debates about education. The analysed documents recommend more collaboration between schools, parents and vulnerable learners. Policy-makers worldwide made preserving children's well-being a priority in their action. These measures are expected to be developed further.

Based on these findings, the review recommends further directions for Agency work:

- Focus on and monitor future developments in priority topics, such as learning loss, cross-sectoral partnerships, remote digital education, and children's well-being.

- Additional monitoring, based on the framework of four thematic areas developed in the review. As the situation is dynamic and changing, new priorities may appear. A follow-up will be needed to highlight new interests and topics on the agenda of inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- More systematic information collection and coherent presentation of evidence and measures on inclusive education practice during COVID-19 times in Europe.

- Use the current document as a living document to build on. The literature review offers a base framework that can be transformed over time, according to future Agency work on the topic. Key resources could be collected together in one place for the reference of all Agency members.

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 (WHO, 2020a). On 11 March 2020, the WHO upgraded the COVID-19 outbreak to a global pandemic (WHO, 2020b).

At the end of 2020, school closures were still affecting approximately 139,000,000 learners enrolled in pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels of education (International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 0 to 3), as well as at tertiary education levels (ISCED levels 5 to 8) (UNESCO, 2020a).

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted a pre-existing crisis in education. It made inequalities more visible (UNESCO, 2021a), and became a reason for systemic change in education worldwide (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis, 1999). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis explained the meaning and importance of systemic change in education to promote more inclusive approaches:

> … methodological and organizational changes made in response to pupils experiencing barriers to their learning are, under certain conditions, likely to benefit all children, thus linking together the pursuit of equity and excellence. It involves a continuous process of school improvement aimed at using available resources, particularly human resources, in order to support the participation and learning of all pupils within a local community. In this way, those pupils seen as having special needs come to be regarded as the stimulus that can encourage developments towards a much richer overall educational environment (1999, p. 106).

To achieve educational change, 'a debate on purpose and outcomes involving all stakeholders, including learners and families' is also required (European Agency, 2013, p. 22).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational change focused on emergency responses to the crisis, through various modes of emergency remote schooling (Vuorikari, Velicu, Chaudron, Cachia and Di Gioia, 2020) or other preparedness measures inspired by the field of Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2020a; 2020b). Then, calls were made for more permanent action, involving the development of prevention-based policy approaches (Watkins, Donnelly and Meijer, forthcoming).

1.1. Aims and questions the review addresses

Since the beginning of the crisis, multiple documents at international, European and national levels have mentioned and analysed COVID-19's impact on education. However, the common messages in the documents have to be further explored and better explained.

Despite the multiplicity of sources, there is an urgent need for information and evidence on effective measures to improve policy, school activities and vulnerable learners'

learning and life experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. The official documents included in this literature review acknowledged the need to strengthen inclusive education support and practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. New assessment reports and tools, opportunities for exchange and co-ordination at European level are still to be developed.

This literature review aims to map evidence and identify COVID-19's acknowledged impacts on education in general and inclusive education in particular at European and national levels. The intention is to provide a comprehensive overview of key messages for Agency member countries and to inform future Agency work. The review aims to provide useful insights for European policy-makers – national, state or local education authorities, or leaders of education networks – and support their responses and intervention in relation to the on-going crisis.

Co-operation between education leaders could be a strategy to respond to and face the current crisis in education. One of the 'first and simplest' forms of co-operation in education (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 4) is to exchange knowledge on practices and lessons learned at the level of each school, community or country.

Access to information and evidence is essential for change, development and improvement in all education systems (Ramberg and Watkins, 2020) and supports the decisions and actions of policy-makers in inclusive education. 'There is widespread awareness that evidenced-based policy-making is critical for the long-term development of inclusive education systems' (Watkins and Ebersold, 2016, p. 229).

This review is linked to the Agency's intention to conduct a longer-term project investigation about COVID-19's impact on inclusive education at the European level. It aims to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected inclusive education systems in Europe, and how improved co-ordination at European level can 'build back better'.

Several questions guide the review:

- What information is available about COVID-19's impact on education? How are the topics framed in international, European and national documents?

- How have education stakeholders adapted to the needs and context of vulnerable learners (e.g. change in teaching methods; governments and private sector providing accessible devices and connectivity)?

- What evidence from European countries can support future decision-making and collaboration with the various stakeholders?

- How can European countries learn and collaborate to minimise the effects of the current education crisis on vulnerable learners?

COVID-19 has affected all stakeholders, all levels of education and all countries around the world. In particular, the current review focuses on the European situation. It aims to:

- identify relevant documents at international, European and national levels;

- determine themes related to COVID-19's impact on education in Europe;

- highlight lessons already learned, that are shown in the responses to the crisis;

- summarise future directions for action, as suggested by the analysed information.

Evidence about lessons learned and recommendations for future actions could potentially inform several levels relevant to public action:

- the international and European level, where country representatives can find guidance, but also meet and exchange practices;

- the national level, where a deeper understanding of governance measures during the crisis is needed;

- the school level, where challenges to education need to be better systematised;

- the level of learners and families, where the rights to education and civic participation are under threat.

The levels are not isolated, and the stakeholders directly or indirectly communicate with each other. For instance, decisions at national level have an impact on school organisation, while learners and families can formulate recommendations for policy-making processes. These dimensions resonate with the 'Ecosystem of Support for Inclusive Education' model (European Agency, 2017a; 2017b), which allows for better understanding of the processes and interactions that promote or challenge progress in inclusive education.

> This model was originally developed within the Agency's Inclusive Early Childhood Education project … It sets out the main structures and processes that affect learning and achievement. It highlights the inter-connections between national policy and the processes and structures at all other levels. It may be used to reflect on how wider policy supports local and school practice (European Agency, 2017b, p. 4).

In accordance with previous Agency work (e.g. European Agency, 2009; 2017c), the review pays attention to:

- inputs to education systems, such as the transformation of resources and funding, emergency teacher training, and adjustments to existing curricula;

- processes within education systems, such as the transformation of procedures, the transition to digital classrooms and learning, the transformation of teaching strategies, and co-operation between teachers;

- outputs, or the consequences of the inputs and processes in education, e.g. school attendance and achievements, participation in learning-related decisions, and the transformation of learners' well-being.

1.2. Review structure

The review is divided into eight sections and additional information:

- This section 1 introduces the reasons for the review and the essential line of argument. It also clarifies specific terms used in the review.

- Section 2 explains the methodology and analysis criteria used for the review.

- Sections 3–6 summarise COVID-19's impact on four areas where educational change is at work. Each of these sections embeds the findings and recommendations of the considered sources, and the identification of key learning points for future work about COVID-19's impact on inclusive education in European countries.

  - Section 3 focuses on a transnational vision of COVID-19's impact on education in general and inclusive education in particular. It examines common responses and recommendations for action worldwide and in Europe.

  - Section 4 explores the national responses to the crisis and the challenges or innovations in the governance of (inclusive) education.

  - Section 5 addresses new vulnerabilities, tensions and solutions linked to the current transformations of (inclusive) education.

  - Section 6 investigates the impact of the crisis on the well-being of learners and their families, and focuses on the democratic and social functions of education.

- Section 7 summarises the lessons learned and the recommendations made in the reviewed literature for future actions related to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on inclusive education. It links and compares information available in sections 3–6.

- Section 8 highlights emerging issues for possible future Agency work on this topic.

- The References include the documents that support evidence and in-depth analysis in the literature review.

- The Bibliography contains the complete list of 250 documents collected for the literature review.

- The Annex lists a number of operational definitions used in the literature review.

2. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodology used to identify and further analyse the international, European and national documents considered in the literature review.

2.1. Search criteria overview

Documents linked to COVID-19's impact on inclusive education and general education produced between March and December 2020 were identified for review.

The search process took place at several levels and involved protocol-driven or recommendation-based collection techniques. It included:

- an online search of the websites of major international bodies: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, etc.;

- systematic monitoring of new policy and academic publications (based on newsletters, webinar resource sharing and other online updates), given the contemporary period covered;

- an online search of the websites of major academic journals specialising in education, inclusive education or special educational needs;

- a search through 'snowball methods', such as 'pursuing references of references and electronic citation' tracking. These are especially 'powerful for identifying high quality sources' that may not necessarily be accessible through a primary search (Greenhalgh and Peacock, 2005);

- personal knowledge and suggestions from within the Agency.

Basic keywords and search syntaxes, such as 'COVID-19 AND education', 'COVID-19 AND inclusion' and 'COVID-19 AND inclusive education', were used for the protocol-driven collection steps.

The collected documents were 'cleaned' based on a first screening, mainly at the level of titles and abstracts. Duplications were deleted, along with documents that had limited information relevant to the research question. Documents with national, European or international coverage of COVID-19's impact on (inclusive) education were considered in the corpus, while documents focusing on very local aspects, without evidence potential, were eliminated.

The major portals of the international organisations offered some challenges, as they include exhaustive information. Each portal was considered as an item/document within the final list of documents, as each could include general relevant information. Relevant documents collected from these portals were considered as separate items.

The data collection included several categories of documents: international and national guidelines, policy briefs, white papers, political declarations, reports based on quantitative and qualitative surveys, academic papers (both journal articles and research reports), blog

articles, online databases and major portals, and webinars. The documents have various formats: PDF, Word, online pages, audio files, and video files. The main categories of sources that produced these documents are international organisations (e.g. UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe), civil society organisations (including disabled people's organisations), universities and academic journals.

The process identified 250 documents, which gave a first general overview of the coverage of COVID-19's impact on (inclusive) education at the national, European and international levels. The complete list of these documents is available in the [Bibliography](#).

The documents' contents were further analysed for the report.

2.2. Analysis and synthesis

Analysis is understood as a systematic process of examining and arranging collected documents and information to increase understanding of a specific topic. The analysis process for the current review is based on a 'grounded approach', which was initially defined as 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 2). In other words, general ideas, recommendations and explanations that will inform future work and decisions are grounded in – or emerge from – previously collected data.

This literature review analysed the collected documents during two phases. In the first phase of the analysis:

- All the collected documents were organised and coded, according to the information they included, in Zotero. Zotero is a free reference management software that helps to manage bibliographic data and research materials.

- The codes – or categories – were based on the words and phrases used in the documents, but also on themes of interest formulated by Agency country representatives: actions for inclusive education and learners with special educational needs, accessible digital education, lessons learned, cross-sectoral collaboration, learners' views (children's voices), social and mental health effects on learners, academic impact.

- Categories were refined when slight differences between them were identified.

- Based on the initial categories, and following a 'saturation' criterion (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 61), a framework specific to the topic developed. This allowed better organisation and summary of the documents and findings.

  Data saturation refers to the point in the research process when no new information is discovered in data analysis, and this redundancy signals to researchers that data collection may cease (Faulkner and Trotter, 2017).

- Evidence and findings from 250 documents were organised under four key topic areas, which sections 3 to 6 of this report explore (some of the documents covered multiple topic areas):

  - Global and European education (37 items/documents)

- Governance of inclusive education (96 items/documents)

- Transformation of education (121 items/documents)

- Learners' voices and families' efforts (62 items/documents).

In the second phase of the analysis:

- Documents were assessed and marked as being of low, medium or high relevance to the review.

- The relevance level depended on the following criteria:

    - Documents included data from surveys at national, European and international levels

    - Documents were produced by international organisations and had a strong summarising potential and impact on further policy decisions at international or country levels

    - Documents were used as reference documents by policy-makers at European and country levels

    - Documents had a main focus on inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic

    - Documents referred to the compulsory education systems in Agency member countries.

- Approximately 70 documents were identified using these criteria. They were actively used and are directly quoted in the review. The References list them.

The advantage of the 'grounded approach' is its dynamic dimension. Established categories and subcategories can change when new materials are collected. The current review offers a base framework that can be transformed over time, according to future Agency work on the topic.

3. GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN EDUCATION CO-ORDINATION

This section focuses on the lessons learned about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education at European level. First, it connects the European situation to dynamics identified worldwide. Then, it adopts a temporal perspective and shows how European institutions and countries adapted to the new circumstances. It continues by showing how challenges can be transformed into opportunities for the European Union (EU) to redefine its priorities for quality inclusive education. Finally, it highlights new European contributions to support equity in education.

3.1. Worldwide responses to the COVID-19 crisis in education

3.1.1. A 'build back better' perspective

The COVID-19 crisis is multi-layered. 'The pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis' (United Nations, 2020a, p. 1). It has affected individuals, families and societies. Many discourses underline how the crisis has highlighted existing vulnerabilities, and see it as an occasion to remake or reimagine better societies.

A 'build back better' perspective and programme for action is apparent throughout the declarations, documents and recommendations. Fragmented approaches, focusing on individual countries or domains, are not expected to succeed. Joint action at health, socio-economic, humanitarian or human rights levels is expected: 'Coming out of this crisis will require a whole-of-society, whole-of-government and whole-of-the-world approach driven by compassion and solidarity' (ibid., p. 1).

International and European organisations see the crisis as an opportunity to address previously vulnerable policies and actions, by maintaining the existing guidance of the Sustainable Development Agenda (United Nations, 2020a). However, the crisis might also have a **regressive impact** on the progress of the United Nations (UN)'s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): health and well-being are affected (SDG 3), a global economic recession might increase inequalities and poverty (SDG 1) and food insecurity (SDG 2), environmental sustainability is endangered (SDGs 7–9 and 11–15), and inclusive and equitable access to education is limited (SDG 4).

> The aim of SDG 4 – to achieve inclusive and equitable access to education – also looks likely to be missed, with a projection that more than 200 million children will still be out of education by 2030. Most of the world's children have been deprived of formal education during the COVID-19 outbreak – a legacy that could threaten the SDGs' underlying ambition to leave no one behind (Lancet Public Health, 2020).

3.1.2. Responses to a regressive impact

Realigning all countries' national priorities, long-term co-operation and accelerated actions are recommended to counteract the dangers linked to the COVID-19 crisis. Equality and inclusion emerge as main values to rebuild a better world. For António Guterres, UN Secretary-General:

> Everything we do during and after this crisis [COVID-19] must be with a strong focus on building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global challenges we face (United Nations, 2020b).

All the international organisations examined in this literature review have produced guidelines on the possible responses to the COVID-19 crisis or have formulated recommendations for country governments. Measures for vulnerable or disadvantaged learners and schools, inclusive education and pedagogical practices are included in a limited manner. Section 4.1.2 provides a more detailed list of these resources.

3.1.3. Key points

- A 'build back better' perspective and programme for action is common to the majority of discourses.

- The recommendation for joint action to 'build back better', and implicitly for a whole-system approach, is a response to evidence on existing fragmented or isolated country responses to the crisis.

- Equality and inclusion are core values of the 'build back better' approach.

- COVID-19 is both a challenge and an opportunity for inclusive education worldwide: previous SDG progress might have been halted, but the crisis could encourage a review of non-inclusive policies and actions.

- International organisations initially offered limited guidance on actions for vulnerable learners and inclusive education.

3.2. Initial European reactions and responses

3.2.1. Emergency measures for disadvantaged learners and inclusive education

At the European level, countries implemented several emergency measures in response to COVID-19 as early as March 2020 (Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020). These included initial actions for learners with special educational needs and inclusive education. Analysis of the available evidence allows a summary of responses:

- Psychological counselling for vulnerable learners, parents and/or teachers (Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia)

- Measures to compensate for learning disadvantages: lack of technological infrastructure, language barriers, skills gaps, learning support; specific financial resources for computers and digital material for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark,

Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)

- Measures for social support and to reduce the social gap: free meals for disadvantaged children (Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal)

- Schools and social care centres open or accessible to learners with special educational needs (Belgium, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia)

- Socio-educational services and home services for learners with disabilities and special educational needs (Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal)

- Recommendation for teachers to adapt pedagogies, design online classes that were accessible to learners with special educational needs, or improve communication with families (Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia)

- Guidelines on teaching disadvantaged children; support and counselling on inclusive education (Slovakia).

However, these initial measures were not very structured and focused on local or national necessities. International collaboration or reference to international standards or recommendations was absent.

3.2.2. A common direction for education and democracy

In October 2020, Ministers of Education in EU Member States reaffirmed their intention to reinforce the right to education in times of crisis. They showed a common direction in education and democracy to face the COVID-19 crisis.

The right to education is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (Protocol 1, Article 2) and in articles 7, 10, 15 and 17 of the European Social Charter (Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 2020). The right to education is directly linked to quality education, which should seek to be inclusive (Council of Europe, 2012). Education appears as support for the continuity and unity of democracies in the face of various crises. Investment in education is therefore seen as investment in democracy at a European level and a recognition of human dignity and human rights (Council of Europe, 2020a).

Education is the basis of tomorrow's societies. The Council of Europe member states:

> Further reaffirm the determination not to allow the health crisis to turn into a crisis of democracy, and underline that education is key to this endeavour to make our societies sustainable and resilient (Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 2020, p. 2).

They also acknowledge common patterns of action and the intervention of various stakeholders across Europe to respond to the new crisis. European policy-makers:

> Express gratitude to and appreciation of the way in which education systems and institutions as well as teachers, administrative and other education staff, leaders of schools and higher education institutions, students, and parents responded to the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe in the first half of 2020.

Recognize that the speedy response was all the more impressive as the COVID-19 pandemic presented an emergency situation that could not be foreseen and for which reliable plans could not be laid (ibid.).

Acknowledgment of longstanding weaknesses in education systems and willingness to draw lessons from past experiences are the basis for common future action. This action includes:

- attention to teacher education and openness to participation of various stakeholders:

  In this context, we underline the importance of integrating the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic in the pre- and in-service education of our teachers, taking into consideration the voice of parents and families as well as of civil society (ibid., p. 4).

- adopting whole-school approaches:

  Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic will encompass whole school, whole institution, and whole system approaches. It will emphasize the need for cooperation between all stakeholders as well as across and between countries and education systems. We recognize, in particular, the crucial role of teachers (ibid.).

- acknowledging co-operation between education institutions, public authorities and private providers to transform online and blended education towards more stable forms of learning.

A focus on social inclusion and education for learners with special educational needs is a key component of future quality education:

  This recommendation underlines that social inclusion must be an integral part of our understanding of quality education. Ensuring equal opportunities to education requires a systemic response within our education systems.

  The COVID crisis underscores the need for education systems and institutions to reassess and review the way in which they teach, and students learn, including how they provide education for students with special needs. While this will require them to take account of the experience of the immediate COVID response, permanent adaptations cannot copy emergency measures (ibid., p. 6)

The Council of Europe is asked to:

  Develop guidelines and materials that will help education systems and institutions ensure the right to quality education also for vulnerable students, adapted to both the 'new normal' and preparing for future crises.

  In cooperation with member States, ensure greater visibility for key messages on inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education for decision-makers,

school leaders, teacher educators and teachers from the Council's rich acquis in this area, including through the [platform](#) of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education (ibid., p. 10).

Action to mitigate COVID-19's impact on education and democratic citizenship includes *A Roadmap for Action on the Council of Europe education response to COVID-19* from October 2020 (Council of Europe, 2020a).

Following the initial COVID-19 outbreak, policies and practices related to quality inclusive education remain a major component of the Council of Europe '[Better Education for Better Democracies](#)' education programme. Inclusion is mentioned next to other key notions such as the 'right to education', 'democracy' and 'sustainable and resilient societies'.

> The Education programme is the Council of Europe's main instrument for ensuring the right to education, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter, and for developing a culture of democracy, human rights and the rule of law through education. In addition, the Education programme contributes to the implementation of conventions and the work of Council of Europe bodies in other areas in so far as these address education issues (ibid., p. 29).

In the Roadmap, the Council of Europe defines five directions for future action:

- Strengthening democracy through education
- Innovating the ways in which we learn and teach
- Assessing and recognising qualifications
- Working with others
- Ensuring the right to education for the most vulnerable students (Council of Europe, 2020a).

In particular, 'ensuring the right to education for the most vulnerable students' focuses on actions for quality and inclusive education:

> - supporting member States in developing and implementing inclusive education policies that ensure quality education provision to all learners, on-line and in person;
>
> - continuing its holistic approach, combining targeted support to vulnerable groups while convincing the 'majority' of the benefits of inclusiveness and diversity in schools and communities;
>
> - developing and delivering teacher training programmes to enhance teachers' competences in child and youth-centred teaching and learning;
>
> - developing programmes and tools for parents to enable them to provide education support to their children;

- promoting the integration of digital citizenship education and media literacy in school curricula;

- facilitating the sharing of best practices in the field of inclusive education through its inter-governmental bodies and the co-operation and capacity building programme (ibid., p. 26).

3.2.3. Key points

- Unstructured measures for vulnerable learners and inclusive education were available across European countries at the beginning of the crisis.

- European collaboration on a common response for inclusive education could not be identified.

- There is a common willingness to learn from past experience to shape future quality education, especially in the case of social inclusion and learners with special educational needs.

- European resources and guidelines for action aim to mitigate COVID-19's impact on education and democratic citizenship, therefore recognising the right to education for all learners regardless of their levels of need and vulnerability.

3.3. Challenges and opportunities for the European Union

3.3.1. Redefining policy co-operation at European level

The Council of the European Union underlines collaboration between Member States in the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> … there has been a remarkable collaboration between Member States, who have shown solidarity and mutual support in a time of crisis by regularly exchanging information on their national situations, challenges, envisaged or already implemented measures and plans, as well as, where possible, openly sharing educational resources (2020, p. 3).

The EU, however, only plays a 'supporting and coordinating role' for policy change; 'education policy is the exclusive competence of the Member States' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 3).

European agencies and networks followed the developments related to COVID-19's impact on education in European countries. In addition, 'video-conferences between education ministers have enabled them to discuss the issues and learn from each other's best practices' (Bassot, 2020, p. 8).

Toolkits and support for policy co-operation have been encouraged and shared at European level (Council of the European Union, 2020). A system of more structured 'exchange of good practices' for policy-makers in education, with a specific focus on inclusive and equitable practices, will be a next step (Council of Europe, 2020b).

A unified system to monitor the efficiency of various policy measures and COVID-19's impact on learners is also needed. As such, and with a focus on digital learning, the European Parliament:

> Calls on the Commission to collect, assess and publish data from across the Member States on the pandemic's impact on learners' participation in distance education, with a particular focus on where they could not participate due to a lack of digital means; calls on the Commission, furthermore, to collect data on teachers' digital skills across Member States (2020, p. 4).

These considerations refer to education in general; policy co-operation in the area of inclusive education could not be specifically identified in the analysed European documents.

3.3.2. Limited policy actions for disadvantaged learners

In October 2020, discrepancies in national responses to COVID-19 crisis at EU level were still evident. Inequalities affected disadvantaged learners at several levels:

> … up to 32 % of pupils without access to education for several months in some Member States; … for many learners, this lack of access stemmed from an absence of digital equipment, inadequate digital skills or pre-existing disadvantage; … even where learners had access to digital education, they still often had to learn without teacher, peer or home support and sometimes in an unstable home environment (European Parliament, 2020, p. 2).

The Education and Training Monitor 2020 (European Commission, 2020a) does not provide direct analysis of the link between COVID-19 and inclusion or inclusive education strategies. However, an analysis of the Monitor's country evidence on general education highlights COVID-19's impact on disadvantaged learners across Europe. Analysis of the evidence available for this review shows that:

- The COVID-19 crisis increased the education gap between learners from wealthier backgrounds and those from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds (Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Spain).

- Improving access to digital skills, technologies and education became an urgent need or a priority for most countries and learners. European countries had more or less rapid responses to the need to develop digital education (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain).

- The COVID-19 crisis delayed on-going legislative initiatives and curriculum reforms for learners with special educational needs (Belgium, Malta).

3.3.3. Opportunities for the European Union

Some sources consider that COVID-19's impact on education can become an opportunity for the EU. Immediate action to respond to COVID-19 at European level could be systematised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The impact of the pandemic on education (Bassot, 2020, pp. 8–9)

(Potential) impact	Opportunity for the EU
(Partial) Closure of early childhood education, schools, universities and vocational education and training institutes, with some gradual and partial reopening later. Use of remote tools to compensate	Update aspects of formal education to 21st century. Develop more mature use of technology, review curricula and bridge non-formal, informal and formal learning within life-wide and lifelong frameworks. Protect apprentices and trainees in VET. Develop emergency remote teaching models.
Suspension of on-site adult education, with some providers potentially unable to survive the impact of closure	Develop support for adult educators and providers and a safety net for small-scale, grassroots adult education initiatives that reach the disadvantaged.
Suspension of face-to-face guidance and counselling in many Member States	Improve easy, up-to-date information for services on skills needs, education and employment opportunities. Train staff in alternative ways to reach end-users.
Special measures to reorganise exams and admit students to the next level	Reflect on the adequacy of current models of assessment and reconsider role of continuous and formative assessments.
Obligation on parents or guardians of young children to provide non-stop care and support the continuation of lessons from home	Build on home-school communication and cooperation. Support learning by low-skilled parents, and resources to give parents the ability to support children's education and internet safety, while maintaining their own resilience.
Obligation upon inadequately trained teachers to improvise a sudden shift to online teaching, exposing them to increased stress and even censure	Provide teachers with training options to add online tools to their repertoires. Encourage teachers' networks to reflect on their practices together and share experiences and resources. Consider providing technical support staff.
Students' lost access to resources such as library equipment, computers, school meals and gyms	Ensure access to safe public recreational spaces for children; access to books and digital tools at home; make schools more permeable to the local community.
Effective remote learning depended on family resources and measures for special educational needs, increasing inequalities. Risk of increased numbers of early school leavers and young people not in education or training (NEETs)	Focus on a child guarantee to combat poverty. Place greater emphasis on study skills, digital literacy and critical thinking skills. Design tools for special educational needs. Offer greater autonomy to students who struggled at school but thrived on remote learning. Strengthen policies to lessen early leaver and NEET numbers.
Initial stranding of mobility students	Develop protocols for emergencies.

3.3.3. Key points

- Policy actions for disadvantaged learners were not always co-ordinated.

- The COVID-19 crisis delayed legislative initiatives and curriculum reforms for learners with special educational needs.

- Common responses across European countries show an initial concern with reducing the education gap for disadvantaged learners and improving access to digital technologies and skills.

- The crisis can be transformed into an opportunity to examine ineffective policy measures.

3.4. European Union contributions to support equity in education and combat new vulnerabilities

COVID-19 can be seen as an opportunity to build back a better world for children and future generations (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020). The European Parliament considers that:

> … the primary lesson to be learnt from the crisis is that inclusion and equal opportunities, both in terms of access and quality, must be placed at the heart of the Union's future education and training policies (2020, p. 5).

Several European measures and initiatives work to support equity in education and to combat new vulnerabilities.

3.4.1. European Union programmes to support investment in education and training

As the pandemic points to another financial crisis, 'greater coherence between the invitation to investment in education and optimisation measures' is needed (Bassot, 2020, p. 9). Tools to cover gaps in education at a general level within the EU include the European Social Fund Plus (which will become ESF+ under the 2021–2027 multi-annual financial framework), the European Investment Fund, Digital Europe, the Connecting Europe Facility, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+.

The European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027, adopted in late 2020, prioritises education and training for the digital age (European Commission, 2020b). It aims to address the challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis and on-going digital transformations in education (European Distance and E-Learning Network, 2020).

At the same time, the Council of the European Union invites the European Commission to increase attention to inclusion and equal opportunities in its upcoming strategies:

> When developing the European Education Area, together with the post-2020 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, the new Digital Education Action Plan and the updated Skills Agenda, take into account the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis regarding the digital transformation of education and training systems, paying special attention to quality and societal challenges such as ensuring inclusion, providing equal

opportunities, promoting cohesion and combating disinformation (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 11).

3.4.2. European Child Guarantee

In 2015, the European Parliament called for a child guarantee to tackle child poverty in the EU in a sustainable way and to strengthen the relationship between education and health (Chircop, 2020). As a result, the European Commission:

> … announced a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee for 2021, which will be one measure of the comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and will form part of the Commission's intention for a corresponding Action Plan to be presented by early 2021 (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2020, p. 4).

The Child Guarantee will act on access to free healthcare, free education, affordable early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

3.4.3. Key points

- Greater coherence is needed at European level between investment in education and co-ordinated, non-overlapping measures.
- Digital education became a priority in the new EU education programme.
- The EU started to develop new frameworks to combat child poverty and to promote free education for all learners.

4. GOVERNANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: LESSONS LEARNED FOR NECESSARY FUTURE CHANGES

While section 3 explored the transnational level of the COVID-19 crisis in education, this section focuses on national dimensions of responses and lessons learned by authorities and other stakeholders. First, it discusses the new forms of assessment and accountability in times of crisis. Second, it redefines funding solutions in the COVID-19 crisis and highlights the urgent need to support vulnerable learners. Third, it introduces possible support for schools from public authorities. Finally, the need for cross-sectoral collaboration provides a major response to build back school systems more successfully.

4.1. COVID-19 and education: assessment and accountability in times of crisis

Governments' actions at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis were perceived as very limited, as an OECD survey from March 2020 states:

> When asked what has the government or network of schools done to date to support the ongoing academic instruction of students, a large percentage indicate 'nothing', followed by providing encouragement to schools to use online resources (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 11).

However, later European documents and reports showed a high level of cross-national action by European governments to respond to the new crisis in education for all learners (Council of the European Union, 2020).

Assessment of the situation was a priority for multiple stakeholders, both at international and national levels. Assessment initiatives aimed to inform policy, practice and research. Surveys of educational needs and policy responses took place broadly. However, no systematised overview – such as a database – of these surveys is available at the European level and sometimes not even at country level. Some surveys focusing entirely on inclusive education and practices were identified and organised in a list for the current review (see section 10.2: List of surveys on COVID-19's impact on education).

4.1.1. National assessment of post-COVID-19 education in Europe

Several national quantitative surveys or qualitative studies about COVID-19's impact on (inclusive) education systems and learners in various European countries were identified (the Bibliography and list of surveys provide a complete list). They were initiated by academic representatives, disabled people's organisations and civil society organisations. They aimed to show the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as parents, learners, school staff and school leaders, but also to collect evidence and encourage data-informed discussions between families, schools and authorities. In some cases, education authorities re-used the survey findings for further action (Huber and Helm, 2020).

Evidence of authorities' accountability measures for education in general and inclusive education in particular after COVID-19 is still limited or inconsistent (Joynes and Gibbs, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a). Education authorities in Central and Eastern Europe have, for instance, tried to estimate learners' participation in remote learning. They used learning platforms and registration systems for families, learners and teachers (e.g. in Montenegro) and telephone interviews with schools (e.g. in Czech Republic and Estonia).

Surveys and reports from disabled people's organisations, however, aim to make authorities more accountable for their actions related to inclusive education and other measures for vulnerable learners (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2020; Inclusion Europe, 2020).

The evidence collected on lessons learned in education since the beginning of COVID-19 is based on **progress** and **action**, rather than on **impact** and **outcome** of the new policies and education strategies (Joynes and Gibbs, 2020).

International organisations provided support to collect national data to help policy-makers in their decisions about education in general.

4.1.2. International assessment and accountability of post-COVID-19 education

International organisations developed multiple surveys to assess the needs to address during the COVID-19 pandemic. These surveys also provided the first answers and evidence to use in response strategies to the crisis.

For instance, in March 2020, the OECD surveyed 98 countries about their general education. Questions about disadvantaged learners and schools were limited. Several recommendations referred to measures that could help a rapid response to the crisis in education:

- Create a committee representing multiple stakeholders, including teachers, families and learners

- Define the main principles that will guide time and funding resources

- Co-ordinate with health authorities

- Re-prioritise curriculum goals

- Identify adequate means of education delivery and of communication or collaboration among learners and teachers

- (Re)define teachers' roles and support to learners, in particular the most adapted support to vulnerable learners

- Create mechanisms to support teachers' development

- Define appropriate learner assessment

- Assist schools in their communication with learners and families

- Develop a communication plan about the new education strategies and their dissemination through various channels (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

The UN prepared multiple [policy briefs](). Education is one of the thematic areas, following the idea that 'Solid science, reliable data, and analysis are critical for policy- and decision-making, especially for the tough choices required during a pandemic' (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2).

Additionally, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics initiated partnerships with UN Member States to collect new data to measure COVID-19's impact in the short, medium and long term. This data can help governments minimise the impact of the crisis on national education systems (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, 2020).

Several online knowledge hubs assessed COVID-19's impact on education worldwide and provided useful resources for future action:

- [UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response]() resource hub
- [UNICEF COVID-19 resource hub]()
- [Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)]() COVID-19 resource hub
- [ReliefWeb COVID-19 resource hub]()
- Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report [World Education blog]()
- Wikipedia page on the [coronavirus impact on education]()
- [World Bank COVID-19 Remote Learning]() resource hub.

4.1.3. Key points

- Evidence is available on the increased need to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 to inform policy decisions. Evaluation of COVID-19's impact is also needed to monitor the right to education for vulnerable learners.
- A systematic overview of country survey results is not available.
- Evidence on authorities' accountability measures for education in general and inclusive education in particular after COVID-19 is still limited.
- Surveys by civil society organisations make public authorities more accountable for their (lack of) action.
- International organisations offer rich resources, evidence for action and policy recommendations for European countries.

4.2. Financing and provision

4.2.1. Limited evidence on COVID-19's impact on inclusive education funding

The identified documents mainly cover non-European countries and education funding in general.

> … government spending growth will also slow and, in some cases, turn negative. … In … high-income countries, education spending is forecast to decline in real terms along with overall government spending (Al-Samarrai, 2020, p. 4).

Forecasts predict that the pandemic will lead to slower growth in government spending in the coming year. If the share of government spending devoted to education were to remain unchanged, education spending would continue to grow but at significantly lower rates than before the pandemic (OECD, 2020a, p. 311).

A predicted cut in public expenditure in education will inevitably affect education, including inclusive education. In September 2020, UNESCO estimated that at least US$ 210 billion would be cut from education budgets worldwide in 2021 (Right to Education Initiative, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has also increased the cost of achieving SDG 4 by 2030:

> There is a US$148 billion annual financing gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4 from now until 2030. Additional costs due to COVID-19 related school closures risk increasing this financing gap by up to one-third, or US$30 to US$45 billion. But investing now in remedial and re-enrolment programmes could reduce this additional cost by as much as 75% (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 1).

The documents collected for this literature review scarcely mention COVID-19's impact on inclusive education funding. It is common knowledge that education budgets will 'grow but at lower rates'. The austerity policies and measures that followed the 2008 financial crash cannot be considered possible solutions for the future, as they led to significant health and social crises in Europe (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020).

4.2.2. Emergency funding measures at European level

Some emergency funding measures were available in European countries early in the COVID-19 crisis. Countries faced difficult decisions on how to allocate education support, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (UNESCO, 2021a). The Slovenian government, for instance, decided to:

- support vulnerable tertiary students without pension and disability insurance;
- co-finance the publication of bilingual textbooks and e-materials in minority languages (Italian, Hungarian and Roma);
- ensure access to distance education for disadvantaged learners (European Commission, 2020a).

The Italian government increased the emergency education funds to include vulnerable groups in distance learning activities. Extended contracts with third sector associations ensured socio-educational services and home support for learners with disabilities (Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020).

4.2.3. Recommendations from civil society organisations

Major international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Plan International and World Vision, expressed their fears of amplified education gaps due to lack of funding. Progress made towards achieving SDG 4 before the COVID-19 crisis was at risk of being undone (Right to Education Initiative, 2020).

A call to action from 190 civil society organisations made recommendations about the funding of general education. However, it also stressed the need to 'build back better' and to ensure that education budgets prioritise inclusion, equity and transformation:

> Covid-19 could exacerbate these existing inequalities or could be used as a pivotal turning point where a gender and inclusion lens is applied to all aspects of education, including planning, budgeting and expenditure – to advance equality and inclusion in access, retention and achievement at all levels. A focus on equity and inclusion is central to effective education spending (ActionAid, 2020).

Other disadvantaged learner groups need funding support, including girls and learners from the most disadvantaged communities. In relation to this, Save the Children issued a recommendation to policy-makers:

> Agree, implement and fund a global COVID-19 education action plan, ensuring that a coordinated global education response keeps learning alive, supports every child to return to school when it is safe to do so, and builds back better and more resilient education systems. The plan should be available on a public website, with progress tracked and reported on regularly.

> … National governments should produce and implement fully funded, national COVID-19 education response and recovery plans, with targeted action to ensure that girls and the most marginalised children are able to keep learning through distance learning initiatives and return to school (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, pp. 9–10).

Funding is not enough; increased transparency and accountability are also key to more efficient spending for learners from disadvantaged communities:

> Civil society actors can play a crucial role in tracking budgets, making sure that money allocated arrives and decisions are made transparently at the appropriate level. Strengthening civil society voices – and the political space for those voices to be heard – is essential (ActionAid, 2020, p. 3).

The COVID-19 crisis is seen as an opportunity for public-private partnerships and to use international resources and contributions to 'expand rather than displace sustainable domestic financing' (ibid.).

4.2.4. Future scenarios on funding for disadvantaged learners

The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (UNESCO, 2020b) encourages governments to take early action and therefore follow a preventive approach. It suggests governments and education ministries could address four main dimensions in their funding decisions linked to schools' physical re-opening. This is especially the case in low- and lower-middle-income countries where the need to open schools is greater than in other countries worldwide. By adopting early funding and investment in education for the most disadvantaged learners and schools, worse outcomes can be avoided later.

The four dimensions are:

- Invest in **remediation**. Remediation can address learning loss, particularly in the case of disadvantaged learners. However, costs for remedial classes are:

  … assumed to be five times higher than the general unit cost of remediation. Remediation costs therefore depend on the length of school closures and the share of marginalized students involved (ibid., p. 4).

- Design and implement **re-enrolment** strategies for learners at risk of drop-out. This entails costs for 'national campaigns and incentives targeted at encouraging marginalized students to return to school', but also funding for teachers to 'maintain the pupil/teacher ratio at target levels' (ibid.).

- Fund **second-chance education solutions**, in line with SDG 4 aims, particularly for out-of-school learners. However, encouraging efforts to re-enrol learners at risk of drop-out remains the priority.

- Invest in **school infrastructure**, in line with new public health recommendations.

Other external factors can affect possible funding, such as epidemiological developments that keep schools closed for longer periods and the economic impact of lockdowns and further recessions. However, ministries of education have less control over these things (UNESCO, 2020b).

4.2.5. Key points

- There is limited evidence on COVID-19's impact on the funding of inclusive education.

- Austerity policies are not recommended for inclusive education funding.

- Emergency funding measures for disadvantaged learners were available in a limited number of European countries.

- Civil society organisations formulated recommendations to ensure education budgets that prioritise inclusion, equity and transformation.

- Funding is not enough; increased transparency and accountability are key to more efficient spending for disadvantaged learners.

- The crisis could be an opportunity for new public-private partnerships that support more sustainable domestic financing.

- Early funding and investment in education can prevent further inequalities.

- Funding for vulnerable learners could be made available at four levels: remediation, re-enrolment, second-chance solutions and school infrastructure.

4.3. Helping schools to mitigate inequalities

4.3.1. Various guidelines

Most European countries took immediate measures to ensure continuity of teaching and learning after the physical school closures. Authorities issued guidelines and recommendations to schools, emphasising access to education content for all learners (UNESCO, 2021a). They also developed national websites for online and distance learning during school closures (School Education Gateway, 2020).

Ministries of education worldwide received some criticism at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, as the initial guidelines for education in general were not 'anchored in the realities of schools' (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020b, p. 11). Rather, successful actions were bottom-up initiatives, as shown in Hungary in March 2020:

> Teaching has been shifted to digital. The government tries to give support for this to schools/teachers but most of the initiatives seem to be bottom up. One witnesses a remarkable dynamism and activity in many schools (ibid., p. 12).

Many recommendations to schools for education processes as a whole, without a specific focus on inclusive education, included:

- the need to develop a 'plan for continuity of operations', with authorities providing examples of other school plans;
- identifying alternative channels for food distribution, if available;
- developing 'alternative forms of provision', as in the case of mental health supports;
- developing daily communication with each learner, teacher and school staff member (ibid., pp. 5–6).

There is limited information on public guidelines, online resources or websites related to inclusive education.

In Portugal, the authorities reacted a few days after the school closures by adopting and implementing several measures: a website to support schools, guidance for distance learning, organisation of school support teams and free meal distribution. Initiatives also targeted at-risk learners, such as:

- an awareness and prevention campaign for Roma communities: 'For You, For All, Stay at Home!';
- general guidelines to protect children and young people in COVID-19 times;
- guidelines for good practice in online education in an emergency context for deaf learners;
- a strategy to monitor and support vulnerable learners, which was put in place after schools re-opened (OECD, 2020b).

4.3.2. School closure and re-opening strategies

From mid-March until May or June 2020, all European countries except Sweden suspended in-person contact in school at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Dumbrava, 2020). Most countries worldwide had government directives forbidding learners to attend in-person classes.

School closure has a direct impact on teachers, learners and their families. However, it also has major economic and societal consequences that will become clear in time. In public discourse and debates, several issues were linked to school closure. These included student debt, digital learning, internet access, food and accommodation, childcare, healthcare, mental and emotional well-being, and services for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were affected to a higher degree (UNESCO, 2020a).

According to the analysed documents, equity and inclusion should be taken into account in re-opening strategies that include hybrid models and intermittent school closures. Placing vulnerable learners in a hybrid strategy (e.g. by prioritising them for in-person school attendance while other learners attend only for core subjects) is essential (OECD, 2020c).

Drop-out rates tend to rise after periods of school closure, according to lessons learned from previous health crises, such as Ebola. Refugee girls are at higher risk of drop-out, as they have to assume new roles as carers in their families (Chircop, 2020). Vulnerable learners may never return to the education system, which results in 'reduced overall human capital for the economies of the countries in which they work and live' (United Nations, 2020c, p. 15).

In Belgium (Flemish Community), various surveys indicated that the learners who were most difficult to reach during the school closures, despite efforts, included socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable learners and learners who speak another language at home. COVID-19 disruptions also affected the educational performance of learners with migrant backgrounds in Denmark (European Commission, 2020a). In Norway, schools stayed open to vulnerable learners during the first lockdown in March 2020 (OECD, 2020b).

Re-opening education settings can be an opportunity to increase collaboration between education ministries and other stakeholders. In Malta, the ministry and stakeholders discussed a framework for re-opening schools. The framework examines 'health and safety, information, development and training, the need for quality education, the need for education to reach every student, and the necessary financing' (European Commission, 2020a, p. 224).

UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, World Food Programme and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published a *Framework for reopening schools* (2020a) and added a supplement in September 2020 (2020b). The *Framework* sets out six key dimensions to assess school readiness for re-opening and to inform further planning: policy, financing, safe operations, learning, reaching the most marginalised, and well-being or protection. Policy considerations and financial requirements are essential to support these dimensions (ibid., 2020a).

Lessons started to emerge on what worked and what did not in school re-opening worldwide. Some referred to learners' well-being and protection and measures for the most marginalised learners:

- Early and regular communication and support to teachers, parents, and students can help address concerns, surface innovations, and ensure a safe, widely accepted reopening

- (Re-)establishing regular and safe delivery of services such as vaccines and school feeding can help bring children back to school and limit secondary impacts of pandemic.

- Additional education funding can effectively be targeted to schools and communities hit hardest.

- Specific measures can help to support girls' and other vulnerable groups' return to school.

- Critical communications and outreach can be diversified by making them available in relevant languages and accessible formats.

- Specific provisions are needed for vulnerable staff and students (ibid., 2020b, pp. 4–5).

4.3.3. Support for teachers

The collected documents often mentioned support measures for schools, learners and their families. Teachers were expected to work to ensure education continuity (UNESCO, 2021a) and to adapt to the 'new normal'. However, there is limited evidence on COVID-19's impact on teachers and their well-being.

Teachers from all forms of education expressed concerns about their lack of knowledge and skills to implement online learning. They also had to deal with restricted access to technology and official guidelines with limited relevance to the new challenges (UNESCO, 2020c).

> A study of about 1,000 primary school teachers in Poland found that 85% had no experience with distance learning before the pandemic outbreak, and 52% reported some difficulty using digital tools. In addition, 36% indicated that lack of equipment among students impeded distance education (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 146).

In particular cases at the beginning of the crisis, teachers were supported in their practices with:

- 'material banks and lists for teaching', e.g. in Finland (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 14);

- information or guidelines – produced by universities – on how to use specific digital tools, e.g. in France;

- direct advice on the websites of the ministries of education (ibid.);
- 'in-service training or online consultations on remote learning', e.g. in Lithuania (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 144).

Possible challenges identified in the collected material are that only teachers who are already motivated would use the resources and that teachers' increased workload could be a barrier to other activities. In particular cases, teachers provided informal training to each other by sharing their practices (UNESCO, 2021a). Evidence focused on inclusive education dimensions was not identified in the material collected for this review.

Selected recommendations from international organisations point to more specific measures for teachers' well-being (European Parliament, 2020). They also highlight the need for training on inclusive education and accessibility in teachers' education. For instance, Save the Children recommends providing:

> … continuous professional development and financial support to teachers including support for wellbeing, mental health and psychosocial support so that they can adapt to new circumstances in schools as part of the frontline response and recovery, and to adapt to supporting distance learning when some schools remain closed or have to close again (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, p. 10).

The OECD urges support for and by teachers in education in general and in inclusive education in particular. Stronger support from education authorities is needed, along with more accessible resources (OECD, 2020c).

4.3.4. Support for vulnerable and disadvantaged schools

Prior to COVID-19, socio-economically disadvantaged schools received less guidance and could apply fewer practices linked to the use of digital devices in teaching and learning than more advantaged schools (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Self-directedness is also important to cope with the crisis:

> An important lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that schools and students who are more self-directed in their own teaching and learning often do better in both normal and crisis situations, than those who haven't learned to do so. Self-directedness strengthens student engagement, brings about authentic learning and helps schools respond better to emerging inequalities (Sahlberg, 2021, p. 7).

Several measures in European countries supported vulnerable and disadvantaged schools. For instance, Belgium (Flemish Community) provided additional funding (EUR 17 million) to enable socio-economically disadvantaged schools to hire more teachers for individualised support and remediation (European Commission, 2020a).

4.3.5. Key points

- Initial guidelines and resources were not anchored in school realities.

- Limited information is available on public guidelines, online resources or websites related to inclusive education.

- Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were more affected by the school closures.

- There is a risk of increased drop-out rates due to the crisis and school closures.

- Measures, such as keeping schools open for vulnerable learners, might help reduce the number of learners at risk of drop-out.

- A European framework for re-opening schools could not be identified.

- Teachers received limited or no support for the new forms of remote education.

- Evidence of support for teachers to implement inclusive remote learning pedagogies or educational practices could not be identified.

- Some countries provided additional funds for schools in more disadvantaged areas.

4.4. Holistic approach to education and cross-sectoral collaboration

4.4.1. Cross-sectoral collaboration for more adapted responses to the COVID-19 crisis

Several European and international organisations expressed the need for a holistic approach to education in response to the COVID-19 crisis. A holistic approach addresses children and young people's learning, social and emotional needs in an interconnected, rather than a separate, way (Cerna, 2020; WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020; Council of Europe, 2020a). To succeed, a holistic approach requires co-ordinated action and collaboration from stakeholders representing various sectors working for children and young people's well-being:

> Considerable joint efforts by school leaders, teachers, parents, students, educational and health care professionals, and communities will be needed to (re-)create schools as safe, supportive and inclusive places for all students (Cerna, 2020).

The OECD (2020c) identified policy areas for a holistic approach and examples of country initiatives during school closures:

- Equitable and inclusive access to good learning conditions

- Equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources, e.g. educational television and radio programmes; free access to online learning platforms

- Information in different languages for learners and their families, e.g. letters to parents about school closures; communication with Roma families with the help of civil society organisations

- Meeting socio-emotional needs, e.g. online counselling services; virtual meetings between newcomers

- Equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable learners

- Support for and by teachers, e.g. guidelines and free online teaching resources

- Support for immigrant/refugee learners through WhatsApp groups.

Partnerships between stakeholders are essential to provide more holistic responses to the crisis. They rely on both horizontal and vertical collaborations for better governance:

- Collaborations between ministries of health and education

- Collaborations between ministries of education and teachers' unions or civil society organisations

- On-going communication between school staff, learners and their families (OECD, 2020c).

Evidence from several European countries indicates the existence of partnerships that support learners with special educational needs. These partnerships were mainly initiated and co-ordinated by education authorities:

- In Ireland, several categories of stakeholders were involved in decision-making after the emergence of COVID-19, particularly around the topic of secondary-level state examinations. The group also provided guidance on support for learner well-being and minimising the pandemic's impact on vulnerable people (European Commission, 2020a).

- At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, Luxembourg worked to ensure support for children with special educational needs and their families. Competence centres provided support for distance learning, while local social services monitored vulnerable families (Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020).

- In Portugal, collaboration enabled quick contact and remote education for learners in March 2020. However, communication with socio-economically disadvantaged learners was a challenge. The education authorities created a network of partner institutions to meet this challenge (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

- In Slovenia, the education authorities provided guidelines and the National Institute for Education offered assistance to learners with special educational needs. The Slovenian Education Network provided 'additional guidance for teachers and professionals supporting individualized education plans' (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 143).

- In Slovakia, the National Institute for Education collaborated with social workers and community centres and 'provided online support to professional staff to help reach Roma students and their parents' (ibid., p. 144).

4.4.2. The COVID-19 crisis as a reason for new partnerships in education

Multi-level and cross-sectoral partnerships appeared or intensified during the COVID-19 crisis. Traditional partnerships in education in general and inclusive education in particular involved communication between schools and local or national education authorities, or communication between schools and health and care professionals.

With the increase in remote and digital learning needs, the COVID-19 crisis showed the importance of partnerships with the private sector for information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. These partnerships facilitated access to communications infrastructure and to internet or mobile data, but also to necessary materials for (disadvantaged) schools and learners (Joynes and Gibbs, 2020). Partnerships for pedagogical adaptation and use of new educational technologies still need to be developed, particularly for learners with special educational needs.

4.4.3. Further recommendations for cross-sectoral collaborations

Cross-sectoral collaboration in response to the COVID-19 crisis might represent a main ingredient for 'building back better', especially in education for vulnerable learners.

Several documents recommended collaborations with disabled people's organisations or civil society organisations for common responses to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic at a global level (European Disability Forum, 2020; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020; ActionAid, 2020). The possible support of disabled people's organisations and other civil society organisations could supplement limited public provision.

In one of its reports, for instance, Save the Children recommends paying particular attention to both education and safety aspects:

> Implementing specific strategies to support marginalised children, especially children with disabilities to return to school while giving particular attention to safety and protection concerns. This should include:
>
> - Continuous teacher skills development on inclusive education, special pedagogy and accessible learning materials.
>
> - Work in partnership with representative organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to better understand barriers to learning and the reasons for possible drop-out, identification of children with disabilities not being supported in learning from home and creation of parent support groups.
>
> - Disaggregating disability data using UNICEF Child Functioning modules or other approved tools to understand the proportion of learners with disability in order to track dropout rates disaggregated by disability and take follow-up action, as children return to school (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, p. 11).

4.4.4. Key points

- Cross-sectoral intervention, particularly for vulnerable learners, is needed for more adapted responses to the crisis.

- The crisis determined new forms of partnerships in education for disadvantaged learners.

- International organisations recommend prioritising support strategies for marginalised learners.

5. TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION

This section seeks to highlight new opportunities and limitations for inclusive education. It does so by identifying specific transformations of education systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Topics include learning loss and the redefinition of learners' vulnerabilities; transformed curricula, assessment and learner progress; the implications of remote and digital learning for disadvantaged learners; and adapted responses to reduce the new digital divide.

5.1. Acknowledgment of learning loss

5.1.1. Severe learning loss for vulnerable learners

Learning loss can be a consequence of less time spent in learning (Lavy, 2015). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, studies on the effects of 'summer learning loss' (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay and Greathouse, 1996) showed delays in learning compared to continuous study, as well as the loss of previously acquired knowledge and skills:

> A review of research on summer learning loss in the United States, demonstrates that during the summer vacation students lose the equivalent of one month of academic year learning, the loss is greater in math than in reading, and the loss increases with grade. The loss is also greater for lower income students (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 4).

According to the World Bank, approximately 6.8 million children and young people in primary and secondary education are at risk of drop-out (Azevedo, Hasan, Goldemberg, Iqbal and Geven, 2020). UNESCO (2020b) estimated 11 million children worldwide may not return to school after the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered to be the most severe disruption to the world's education in history, 'threatening a loss of learning for an entire generation of students, and erasing decades of progress' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 2). During the COVID-19 crisis, learning loss may be substantial for most learners (Müller and Goldenberg, 2020), but particularly severe for vulnerable learners who also lack quality home support or access to extra-curricular activities (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Learners from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds were hard to reach during the COVID-19 school closures, meaning they could not access available support and provision (European Commission, 2020a). Learning loss is increased for categories of learners already at risk, such as young women and girls living in poverty, those with disabilities and those in rural locations. They are more likely to leave school as they have to provide care and domestic work at home (UN Women, 2020). Consequences of learning loss or learning gaps can affect learners throughout their entire lives (European Commission, 2020c; Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

At European level, few estimates of vulnerable learners' participation in remote education are available. Information from countries in Central and Eastern Europe shows the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on learners with disabilities and Roma learners. For

instance, an estimated 20% of learners with disabilities in Bulgaria 'did not receive additional support needed for education continuity' and about 30% of Roma learners in Croatia did not access remote learning (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 144).

5.1.2. Action to reduce learning gaps and learning loss

Several measures can address learning gaps. The aim is to ensure education continuity by developing alternative strategies and ways of learning and teaching (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). The OECD suggests, for instance, action on:

- summer schools;

- accelerated education programmes;

- universal design curricula;

- after-school tutoring and study classes;

- informal learning (2020c).

Co-operation between school leaders also appears as a suitable strategy to address school issues during the pandemic. An accessible way to co-operate is by exchanging knowledge on methods that protect educational opportunities (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

5.1.3. Key points

- Learning loss risks are higher for already-vulnerable learners than for other categories of learners, as they do not have home support or are hard to reach.

- The consequences of COVID-19 could affect learners for their whole lives.

- Estimates show reduced participation in remote education for learners with disabilities, learners belonging to ethnic minorities and other vulnerable learners.

- Co-ordination, knowledge exchange, remediation measures and universal design curricula could help reduce learning gaps.

5.2. Impact on curricula, assessment and learner progress

5.2.1. The need to redefine curricula, assessment and learner progress

The COVID-19 crisis in education affected traditional pedagogy and assessment practices, as well as learners' progress in particular cases. It caused more infrequent lessons and incomplete curriculum coverage compared to the pre-COVID-19 period (UNESCO, 2020b).

The first worldwide government responses to the crisis focused on the creation or adaptation of online platforms and websites as main teaching and learning resources. Radio broadcasts, podcasts and television programmes allowed learners to follow instruction for specific subjects. However, governments and ministries of education did not establish priorities regarding which curriculum areas to teach first (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, alternative approaches and adapted methods of learner assessment have been considered the norm in education, particularly in Central

and Eastern European countries. The transformation of traditional and regular education imposed by the new pandemic conditions brought about more inclusive practices:

- Education authorities encouraged teachers and schools to assess learning achievements from before COVID-19. Formative assessment, however, was a more adapted solution for all learners in the current situation.

- Academic learning was still present, but the need to consider socio-emotional dimensions in learning increased (UNESCO, 2021a).

Evidence from several countries shows inclusive practices being adapted to all learners during the COVID-19 crisis:

> The Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia encouraged teachers to use formative assessment instead of numerical grading and concentrate on providing feedback and psychological support, even if that compromised academic knowledge and curriculum content coverage. End-of-year evaluations were to be based mostly on student performance before remote learning began (ibid., p. 147).

As a less expected outcome, evidence shows that learners who had difficulties in school environments seemed to adapt better to remote learning (Chircop, 2020). In Sweden, pupils with learning issues improved their achievements, possibly due to a more individualised approach and the absence of distractions (European Commission, 2020a).

Definitions of learner educational progress under COVID-19 conditions are dynamic. Available home resources, such as technology or parental support, played a role in learner outcomes in terms of emotional well-being, learning effort and learning achievements. However, in a study of approximately 8,000 learners in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, educational achievements appeared to be more directly related to learners' self-regulation skills and access to quality teaching (Huber and Helm, 2020).

5.2.2. Recommendation for educational practices during COVID-19

In its *Roadmap for Action* against COVID-19's impact on education, the Council of Europe recommends innovation, adaptation and support for policy-makers and schools facing the new realities. The adaptation of existing teaching and learning practices is therefore essential:

> In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of public authorities will comprise a responsibility for ensuring the right to education by inciting schools and institutions to adapt their teaching and learning to new circumstances, by supporting them in this endeavour and by developing the frameworks that will maintain education provision in areas that are particularly affected by the economic and societal consequences of the pandemic (Council of Europe, 2020a, p. 8).

Several international organisations recommend adapting provision and action to the needs of vulnerable learners, as distance learning is even more challenging for them:

- A more engaging curriculum for learners with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

- Subtitles and remote live captioning for learners with hearing impairments

- Digital textbooks or special software for learners with dyslexia

- Educational learning materials for the parents and communities of learners with autism

- Teaching assistants to support individual learners with their lessons (Cerna, 2020; Chircop, 2020).

5.2.3. Key points

- Governments worldwide focused on the physical and digital infrastructure of learning. Additional measures are needed to improve the learning process.

- Alternative approaches and methods in learner assessment allowed adaptation to the 'new normal', a term which the analysed literature uses often. The changed conditions brought the emergence of more inclusive practices.

- Adapted provision and action are recommended for vulnerable learners, as distance education is more challenging in their case.

5.3. Remote and distance learning

European countries showed commitment and resilience, while ensuring education continuity through remote learning modalities (UNESCO, 2021a). The COVID-19 crisis allowed previously underexplored resources, such as existing online learning platforms, to be re-used and developed (Bassot, 2020).

5.3.1. Online distance learning as a global solution

Distance learning programmes and open educational materials were among the first recommendations to compensate for the first school closure period in early 2020 (UNESCO, 2020d). New innovative solutions sometimes appeared, and some systems opted for hybrid forms of education – in-person and distance – when possible.

Despite discrepancies due to countries' income and adequate provision (World Bank, 2020), online distance learning has been implemented worldwide (UNESCO, 2020a). Digital learning practices started to be used on a large scale, including low- and high-tech practices.

There is not yet enough evidence and data available to judge the effectiveness of distance and online learning for quality education opportunities. Further research is needed to look 'beyond "access" to remote learning' into what is actually done in terms of teaching and learning practices (Joynes and Gibbs, 2020). Additionally, public consultations showed parents, learners and educators overwhelmed by digital change (European Commission, 2020d).

At a global level, initial results show that the first distance learning solutions failed to reach millions of learners:

> … according to one estimate, based on a joint UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey, at least 463 million students in low- and middle-income countries were not reached at all, representing 31% of total students in the countries surveyed. Where distance learning exists in these countries, they reach at most 62% of learners in the case of television and 24% in online delivery (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 3).

All EU Member States implemented remote learning measures to replace ordinary presence in schools. This was initially a temporary procedure (European Commission, 2020c).

Limited evidence is available on measures to allow vulnerable learners to access distance learning in some European countries. For instance, the Croatian Ministry of Education recommended that pedagogical staff in schools design online classes adapted to children with special needs and disabilities (World Bank, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed disparities in the digital readiness of Irish schools and society: 39% of primary school head teachers reported difficulties in providing distance learning, particularly to vulnerable learners (Burke and Dempsey, 2020). In Italy, most schools were able to implement distance learning in a very short time. However, inclusion and quality education for vulnerable learners remain challenging (European Commission, 2020a).

Initial distance learning solutions were considered 'an imperfect substitute to face-to-face interactions between teachers and learners' (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 3). Despite this, many stakeholders still consider distance and online learning as key factors for transforming post-COVID-19 education. They also call for stronger guidance at the European level (European Commission, 2020d).

5.3.2. International recommendations

Ministries in Council of Europe member states underline the need for inclusive, high-quality education associated with blended and online learning practices. To ensure this, they recommend further investment in adapted infrastructure and in developing learners' and teachers' information technology competences and skills (Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 2020).

Several international organisations recommended adapting digital learning to all learners' needs and working towards more inclusive online education systems (European Disability Forum, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a; 2020b). For example, Save the Children recommended the following:

> Enable access to different learning resources, appropriate to the learners' needs and abilities, using different modalities whenever possible.

> Provide effective, flexible and inclusive distance learning programmes, and including printed learning materials, with a focus on reaching the most marginalised children (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, p. 10).

The Education Development Trust formulated several recommendations, based on a summary of worldwide country-level responses to the management of school closures in 2020, with a focus on the needs of disadvantaged learners and the role of technology:

- In seeking to provide for disadvantaged students during school closures, governments should begin by systematically auditing the 'digital divide' and design a distance learning regime that is fit for context.

- During the design and implementation of the distance learning regime, governments should prioritise the needs of highly vulnerable, disadvantaged students, such as children with disabilities.

- There is a need to ensure that the distance learning of disadvantaged students is properly monitored and that quality assurance mechanisms give a 'voice' to disadvantaged students and their families.

- Governments should take action to close the household-level technology gap between disadvantaged and more privileged students, while recognising that remote learning requires skilful teaching as well as appropriate technology.

- For disadvantaged students, access to online learning can be enhanced through effective public-private partnerships with technology companies.

- There is a need to providing role clarity for teachers and other professionals so that they understand their responsibilities for ensuring the learning continuity of disadvantaged students.

- Governments should build coalitions with parents or caregivers and non-government organisations to support continuity of learning for disadvantaged students (McAleavy, Joynes, Gibbs and Sims, 2020, pp. 1–3).

UNESCO also made early recommendations for distance learning that focused on inclusion mechanisms. The recommendations were intended for general education systems. They mainly referred to:

- choosing the most adapted technological solutions in accordance with local access to internet and teachers' or learners' digital skills, accompanied by the use of digital learning platforms, video lessons, massive open online courses (MOOCs), radio and TV content;

- including learners with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds in distance learning programmes, by re-distributing digital material that is already available in schools;

- protecting data privacy and data security;

- creating communities to minimise psycho-social challenges learners might face during isolation;

- planning related to learners' study schedules and specific needs;

- supporting teachers and parents to use digital tools;

- implementing blended learning, including both synchronous and asynchronous activities, aiming to avoid using too many applications and platforms;

- developing distance learning rules and monitoring learning processes (UNESCO, 2020e).

5.3.3. Key points

- Distance learning has been implemented worldwide and online learning was deployed on a large scale. Evidence of their effectiveness is not yet available.

- Some European countries supported accessible online learning for learners with special educational needs, but providing quality education for these learners remains challenging.

- Adapting digital learning to all learners' needs is a priority in many international recommendations.

5.4. Addressing the digital divide

5.4.1. Access to digital technologies and materials

Digital tools, online platforms and other educational media, such as television and radio, were the first solutions to ensure education continuity at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. However, these first responses did not mention inclusive education and previously disadvantaged learners (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). Fragmented evidence started to be collected later at European level (UNESCO, 2021a).

Common issues for all learners during school closures were access to ICT, internet connection, proximity to extra services, and access to meals (OECD, 2020b). Vulnerable learners were more affected than others. In Bulgaria, authorities estimated that '11% of students could not engage in learning due to lack of internet access or ICT equipment, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and Roma' (European Commission, 2020a, p. 37).

Learners with disabilities and disabled people's organisations reported difficulties related to online distance education. They mentioned:

> … the accessibility of technology and digital educational material; availability of assistive technology; technical support provided to students with disabilities and the teacher competence on disability and accessibility matters (European Commission, 2020e, p. 6).

In specific cases, and pre-COVID-19, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds might have had greater access to computers in their schools. However, inequitable distribution arises

when disadvantaged schools are closed, as their school computers are less likely to be portable (Chircop, 2020).

Only some European countries, such as Malta, provided free internet and computers so that disadvantaged children could continue their studies at home during the COVID-19 lockdown (European Commission, 2020a). In addition – and given their member countries' limited measures – some international organisations, such as the OECD, suggested more policy options for equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources (OECD, 2020c).

5.4.2. Inclusive digital practices and pedagogies

Policy measures limited to accessing online learning will not be enough to avoid the digital divide. New practices, guidelines and forms of assessment must also be developed:

> … online education can support learning for many students but needs to be carefully designed and individualized to not deepen inequality and social divides. The forced move to online learning may have been the catalyst to create a new, more effective hybrid model of educating students in the future. Not one single model for online learning will provide equitable educational opportunities for all and virtual learning cannot be seen as a cheap fix for the ongoing financial crisis in funding education (Kaden, 2020, p. 1).

5.4.3. Key points

- The digital divide particularly affects learners who were already vulnerable before the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional measures are needed to improve accessibility, the availability of assistive technologies and teachers' competences.

- More inclusive practices must be implemented to reduce the digital divide in education.

6. LEARNERS' VOICES AND FAMILIES' EFFORTS IN EDUCATION

This section focuses on three dimensions that can affect learners' progress in education (Ramberg and Watkins, 2020) and therefore make education systems less equitable and inclusive. The first dimension considers parents' transformed role during the pandemic and the policy measures to support them. The second dimension focuses on all learners' rights to education and participation in shaping their future. The third dimension is a major topic that needs future intervention: well-being and mental and emotional health as support for education continuity.

6.1. Parents' transformed role in education

6.1.1. Assessing COVID-19's impact on families

Research by Save the Children in 46 countries included 31,683 parents and caregivers and 13,477 children aged between 11 and 17. It found that:

> Two-thirds of parents and caregivers (67%) reported that their children had no contact at all with their teachers. A higher proportion of children with disabilities had contact with teachers than those without disabilities.

> Nearly three-quarters of children (74%) were reported by parents and caregivers to have access to some form of learning materials, meaning just over one in four children (26%) did not have access to any learning material at all. Children with disabilities and children of parent/caregiver respondents with disabilities were less likely to have access to learning materials than children with no disabilities or children of parent/caregiver respondents where no disability was reported. …

> Parents and caregivers were more likely to report feeling unable to support the learning of children with disabilities (38%) compared to parents and caregivers of children without disabilities (28%) (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, pp. 7–8).

Most parents had to take a more active role in their children's education, especially in the case of very young learners (Chircop, 2020).

A qualitative study in Kosovo on the level of inclusion of children with disabilities in education before and during the COVID-19 period shows how children's isolation also has a large impact on their parents:

> … during the pandemic period, home isolation, lack of socialization, changes in daily routines, and lack of services negatively affected the emotional states of children with disabilities, contributing to parental overload and stress (Hyseni Duraku and Nagavci, 2020, p. 1).

Families expressed concerns about their lack of experience in supporting their children with online distance learning, their access to technology and their economic limitations (UNESCO, 2020c). Families of children with disabilities became even more concerned due to limited – and sometimes completely absent – resources and support during the lockdown (European Disability Forum, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a).

In other cases, the language of instruction differed from the language spoken by families, which was a major barrier. For example, Russian-speaking parents in Estonia could not support their children who attended Estonian-speaking education settings (UNESCO, 2021a).

6.1.2. Recommendations on working with families

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, collaboration between schools and families was recommended at several levels:

> (1) supporting families in assisting their children, as well as helping schools understand family dynamics; (2) providing two-way communication through different channels; (3) encouraging families to volunteer in school activities to support their children; (4) learning at home; (5) involving parents in decision-making; and (6) cooperating with the community through coordinating resources and services among relevant parties (Hyseni Duraku and Nagavci, 2020, p. 34).

Frequent recommendations to support parents' involvement in their children's education were made after COVID-19 appeared. Parents' engagement in home-based education was considered essential, although it was recognised that 'many disadvantaged learners lack effective family support' (Joynes and Gibbs, 2020, p. 3).

In one of its recommendations for education in general, Save the Children stresses the role of interactions and play in education:

> Support parents' role in home learning through social and behaviour change communications and mental health and psychosocial support, to enable caregivers to increase interaction and play with children (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, p. 10).

It was also recommended that schools support families and prevent risks related to the use of digital tools and technologies:

> Schools should provide guidance to students and families about the safe use of screen time and online tools to preserve student well-being and mental health as well as provide protection from online threats to minors (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 6).

6.1.3. Evidence of measures encouraging communication between schools and families

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated existing problems, but in some cases it forced leaders in vulnerable and disadvantaged schools to improve communication with parents. This was the case in the Czech Republic, for example (European Commission, 2020a).

Some other countries, including Ireland and Slovakia, developed guidelines for schools and parents on how to better support their children in education and how to maintain their well-being. The guidelines included developing new routines and ways to explain and discuss COVID-19 with children.

To ensure inclusion, school health messages in Ireland were translated into 17 different languages (Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020).

6.1.4. Key points

- Learners with disabilities and other vulnerable learners received limited support from schools, which increased the pressure on parents.

- Children's isolation contributed to families' vulnerability.

- Parents received limited support, which increased their concerns.

- Increased collaboration between schools and parents is needed to ensure better learning experiences for vulnerable learners.

6.2. Children's rights and disability rights to education

6.2.1. The right to education

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) warned that COVID-19 had a great physical, emotional and psychological impact on children and called on countries to protect children's rights. The impact is even greater on already-vulnerable children. Several recommendations referred to:

- reflecting children's interests;

- children's rights to leisure and cultural activities;

- reducing the digital divide;

- access to nutritious food and healthcare;

- support for mental health;

- protecting children in vulnerable situations;

- children's contact with their families;

- children's access to accurate information about COVID-19;

- children's participation in decision-making processes about the pandemic (ibid.).

International organisations, civil society organisations and disabled people's organisations monitored whether the right to education of those with disabilities was being respected during the COVID-19 crisis:

> To reduce the impact of disruption in education, some States are adopting remote learning practices. In these cases, however, students with disabilities are facing barriers on account of the absence of required equipment, access to internet, accessible materials and support necessary to permit them to follow online school programs. As a result, many students with disabilities are being

left behind, particularly students with intellectual disabilities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020, p. 6).

> … too many disabled students who cannot access standard online learning opportunities with minimum adjustments are being denied their basic right to mainstream education (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2020, p. 7).

In specific cases, judicial action was taken against the lack of accessibility in remote and digital education. For instance, in Croatia, refugee learners and those belonging to national minorities faced language barriers which meant they did not receive appropriate education. National NGOs 'lodged a complaint for violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 144). However, evidence from elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe shows that online content was provided in minority languages, thereby respecting those learners' right to education (UNESCO, 2021a).

6.2.2. Participation in education responses

Children's voices are hardly heard in the educational responses to the crisis:

> Amongst our children's participation and rights network colleagues who responded to the survey, 70% could not identify a single COVID-19 related children's participation initiative (local or national).

> The other 30% of respondents indicated children's participation activities which were underway, but none had yet led to governmental action, beyond the provision of information to children. Examples gathered to date involve children's participation in:
>
> • Receiving, designing and sharing information
>
> • Contributing ideas to shape services, for example alternative care and inclusive education
>
> • Developing national, organisational and family capacities by critiquing current practice (Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, 2020, pp. 2–3).

Recommendations to listen to all stakeholders' voices in education decisions intensified during the COVID-19 crisis. The Council of Europe recommended more active participation of learners and families, next to other categories of stakeholders, in developing education policy:

> The role of stakeholders, including staff, students and parents as well as civil society in the development of education policy and practice must be strengthened and given greater recognition, nationally as well as in local communities (Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 2020, p. 5).

Families and learners could bring new perspectives and determine more adapted solutions to current realities. For instance, an OECD recommendation from spring 2020 underlines the need for a committee or task force to find responses to the new crisis:

> To the extent possible ensure those in the task force represent different constituents in the education system or school network and bring important and diverse perspectives to inform their work, for example various departments curriculum [sic], teacher education, information technology, teacher representatives, parent representatives, students, representatives of industry when relevant (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 5).

International organisations recommend respecting children's rights by listening to their voices and encouraging their participation in public decisions:

> Children should understand what is happening and feel that they are taking part in the decisions that are being made in response to the pandemic (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020, p. 3).

> Country leaders should put child health and wellbeing at the centre of recovery plans, include experts in children's issues in the relevant task forces and legislative working groups, engage their ministries to work together for children, and ask children and adolescents what changes they would like to see (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020).

6.2.3. Key points

- Vulnerable learners face more frequent barriers to their right to education.
- Some measures were taken to respect vulnerable learners' rights, but judicial action from civil society organisations was still needed in specific cases.
- Children's and young people's voices were almost absent when formulating public responses to the crisis.

6.3. Well-being – mental and emotional health

6.3.1. Increased vulnerability for at-risk children

As early as April 2020, international actors were concerned about children's well-being worldwide:

> The Committee on the Rights of the Child expresses concern about the situation of children globally, particularly those in situations of vulnerability, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children are gravely affected physically, emotionally and psychologically, especially in countries that have declared states of emergencies and mandatory lockdowns (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020, p. 1).

In a study from the United States in November 2020, 80% of the surveyed learners in mainstream secondary education had experienced some negative impact on their mental

health due to the COVID-19 crisis. Twenty percent said their mental health had significantly worsened (Active Minds, 2020).

COVID-19 increases risk factors for child abuse and neglect (UNICEF, 2020c). Social isolation, stress, family violence, poorer mental health, lack of contact and access to social care services affect the well-being of all children and young people. However, the risks are highest for certain groups of children, such as those who are poor or in out-of-home care, those with disabilities and those from migrant families or from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds (OECD, 2020d; Chircop, 2020; Giannini and Grant Lewis, 2020).

Separation from caregivers is a factor for increased vulnerability of children. In past health-related disasters, up to 30% of children separated from their caregivers developed post-traumatic disorders (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020).

School closures also affect children's well-being, as the risk of poor nutrition among children increases (OECD, 2020d). The current crisis has wider social and mental health effects on learners, beyond the academic impact.

6.3.2. Making children's well-being a priority for policy action

The socio-emotional dimension is the most emphasised aspect of well-being in the available documents and recommendations for future action. Learners' socio-emotional well-being depends on measures to counteract both social isolation and one-way forms of knowledge transmission in education, which also suppress interaction between learners and teachers (UNESCO, 2021a).

Policy-makers in education can therefore act or have already acted on learners' well-being in several ways:

- providing individual psycho-social support: for example, in Bulgaria, families, learners and teachers could access a telephone hotline for psychological support (UNESCO, 2021a). In addition:

  … some countries put in place special support measures, for example Ireland, Croatia and Malta set up special forms of psychological support to pupils at risk of becoming disengaged (European Commission, 2020c, p. 11);

- adapting the curriculum to learners' needs: 'Belgium (French Community) decided not to provide new learning content to avoid inequalities' (ibid.);
- enabling teacher flexibility:

  As children suffer from isolation, exemptions from the obligation to follow the core curriculum would give teachers an opportunity to be flexible and adapt to students' needs (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 148);

- supporting teachers to address both learners' academic needs and well-being: online training, mentoring or coaching, transformation of initial teacher education in the longer term;
- improving communication and co-operation among learners (UNESCO, 2021a).

The OECD recommends prioritising the well-being of vulnerable learners. This could be by providing psychological support, increased social and emotional learning or better measurements of their sense of belonging (OECD, 2020c).

In the areas of mental health and psychosocial support and education, Save the Children makes the following recommendations:

> Work with schools to ensure that age-appropriate, gender-sensitive, inclusive, accessible messages on psychosocial wellbeing and stress prevention messages are conveyed to children and their caregivers in a way that reassures rather than distresses.

> Support schools to identify and refer children in high distress and/or showing signs of a mental health condition (Gordon and Burgess, 2020, p. 11).

The issue of children's and learners' well-being, reinforced by the school closure, was prominent in national debates and consultations. In Ireland, for example, it 'is likely to provide a rationale for reform in upper secondary education' (European Commission, 2020a). The Irish ministry's National Educational Psychological Service psychologists developed resources to help young people manage their well-being during the school closure: [Advice for young people while schools are closed](#); [Plan for the Day](#); [Relaxation Techniques](#) (Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020).

Mental health remains an issue at a global level for both children and adults. Governments are advised to reinforce mental health services and to protect the human rights and dignity of those already affected by mental health conditions. The UN defined three areas for action in country responses to mental health issues:

> 1) consciously including this issue in response plans taking a whole-of-society approach;

> 2) ensuring widespread availability of emergency mental health and psychosocial support;

> 3) building mental health services for the future, overcoming the long-standing underinvestment in this area (United Nations, 2020a, p. 25).

Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, suggests another solution to ensure learners' well-being, which is the re-opening of schools:

> Prolonged and repeated closures of education institutions are taking a rising psycho-social toll on students, increasing learning losses and the risk of dropping out, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable. Full school closures must therefore be a last resort and reopening them safely a priority (UNESCO, 2021b).

6.3.3. Key points

- Through school closures, the COVID-19 crisis affected children's well-being worldwide and increased the risk of abuse and violence.

- Children's well-being and measures to preserve their mental and emotional health should be a priority for all European policy-makers.

7. A SYNTHESIS OF KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The section provides a summary overview of key lessons learned during the crisis (with an **evidence** dimension) and key **recommendations** available and formulated in the analysed documents. It enables a better understanding of the links between the main findings of this literature review.

At the level of European co-ordination in education:

- Limited **evidence** is available on the initial measures and exchanges between countries. Initial guidance on inclusive education at EU level was also limited. Some sources mention aspects of inclusion, but no united perspective or platform for resources and information could be identified.

- Many **recommendations** are for urgent responses to vulnerable learners' needs, in line with the EU's focus on respecting all people's right to equitable and qualitative education. COVID-19 is considered both a challenge and an opportunity to review and implement more inclusive legislation, policies and actions in education across Europe. A 'build back better' message linked to education is predominant. Equality and inclusion are its core values.

At the level of country responses to the COVID-19 crisis in education:

- Available **evidence** shows the intervention of all categories of stakeholders for education continuity. There was a lack of co-ordination in initial actions, including authorities' inadequate responses to the realities of schools and disadvantaged learners. While multiple documents mention intermittent measures for vulnerable learners, there is limited evidence on funding or guidance for inclusion in education. School closures increase pre-existing inequalities, but are also an opportunity for new partnerships in (inclusive) education.

- National and international **recommendations** and interpretative analysis of the available documents indicate that all policy-makers could use previous expertise and key elements of inclusive education to address the needs of all learners. More structured assessment of COVID-19's impact on inclusive education across Europe is also recommended. New accountability measures are needed for the new policy measures. More prevention-based policies should replace the initial palliative response. The policies should be based on cross-sectoral collaborations.

Regarding the **transformation of (inclusive) education systems**:

- There is a range of **evidence** of measures for remote or digital learning. As an initial response to the COVID-19 crisis and school closures, countries developed or adapted technological infrastructure. Initial measures to support vulnerable learners focused on access to physical and digital tools, but no evidence on their effectiveness could be identified. A limited number of cases focus attention on more inclusive practices to address the 'new normal' in education.

- Available **recommendations** focus on missing aspects, such as more support for digital skills for learners with special educational needs. They also draw attention to learning loss and increased numbers of out-of-school learners, although no evidence of this was identified for this literature review. Limited evidence and recommendations were available on the transformation of inclusive pedagogies, curriculum, assessment and learners' progress.

  Recommendations linked to the transformation of inclusive education during COVID-19 focus on the need for co-ordination and remediation measures to reduce learning loss that might have long-term consequences. More preventive measures are also recommended for accessibility of learning and quality in education.

Related to **vulnerable learners' rights to education and participation**:

- The review identified **evidence** that significant gaps exist in the effectiveness of the EU's programme for education as support for future democratic societies. There are multiple examples of limited or absent access to education for vulnerable learners. Sometimes judicial action is needed to re-establish children's right to education.

  The crisis and subsequent school closures worldwide affected many aspects of children's well-being. Children's voices were seldom heard and they had limited participation in public debates. Listening to children's voices means accepting new perspectives that can inform the policy-making processes and education responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

- **Recommendations** in the analysed literature highlight the need for more collaboration between schools, parents and vulnerable learners. This can help to prevent the increased risk of violence towards disadvantaged children. Policy-makers worldwide prioritised actions to preserve children's well-being. These measures are expected to be developed further.

  Both evidence and recommendation documents show an on-going process of redefining traditional categories of vulnerability and well-being. New vulnerable categories tend to emerge in relation to transformed educational conditions. Mental and emotional health becomes a priority for all learners.

8. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is clear from the evidence that, during the COVID-19 crisis, the inclusive dimensions of education received less public attention than its more general or traditional dimensions. This is in line with pre-pandemic trends.

However, common themes appear across documents about all forms of education, inclusive or not: the need for European co-ordination, more holistic approaches, measures to alleviate or prevent learning loss, and learner well-being.

The literature review also highlighted that expertise and key elements associated with inclusive education could be a catalyst against COVID-19's negative impact on education systems.

The review's structure reflects the topics of interest identified in the collected documents. Not all topics received equal attention. Learning loss, cross-sectoral partnerships, remote digital education, and children's well-being can be considered priority topics in the collected literature.

The current review's findings could be a starting point for several areas of attention in future Agency work and discussions:

- Future work could further explore the priority topics already identified in the collected literature. Additional monitoring might also highlight new interests and topics related to inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The COVID-19 crisis has already started to change educational processes. Against this background, the transformation of the six principles of inclusive education systems, as identified in the Agency's position paper (European Agency, 2015a), would need to be further explored and promoted:

  - The raised achievement of learners under crisis conditions

  - Stakeholders' engagement for diversity

  - The availability of flexible continua of provision and resources that support the learning of all stakeholders at both individual and organisational levels

  - The use of more personalised approaches in education for all learners

  - The raised achievements, outcomes and outputs of inclusive education systems under crisis conditions

  - The development of inclusive systems and their stakeholders' participation under crisis conditions.

- Future work could focus on learners' voices, especially the voices of vulnerable learners and/or learners with special educational needs, in the debate on the most adapted responses to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The well-being of and support for teachers and other school staff do not emerge as priority areas in the collected literature. However, they are critical to enable teaching and learning to continue. Also, there is little evidence of teachers' voices

being heard in relation to COVID-19's impact on education. Future work could explore these dimensions.

- The collected literature talks about 'learning', 'learners' and 'teachers'. However, the teaching dimension is under-represented. Future Agency work could explore and/or promote inclusive teaching and pedagogical approaches during and after the pandemic. This could also include the potential of the universal approach to teaching and learning, and the new role that specialist staff might play for systemic change.

- This review mainly focused on compulsory education. Future work could explore COVID-19's impact on early childhood education and care, post-school education, and the difficulties for young people in transition phases of their education (such as entering school, entering secondary school, entering higher education or vocational training).

- The review showed the key role of non-state actors in education, with many initiatives that might contribute to future inclusive education issues. In line with this finding, future Agency work could explore the dynamics and transformation of cross-sectoral collaboration during and after the pandemic.

- Systematic collection of evidence on inclusive education practices and measures during COVID-19 is also needed, alongside a unique platform with resources to inform future decisions at country and European levels.

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10. BIBLIOGRAPHY – COMPLETE LIST OF RESOURCES

This section includes the complete list of the collected documents about COVID-19's impact on (inclusive) education at the European level. The information covers the period March–December 2020.

Documents that are cited directly in sections 1 to 8 and/or in the Annex are also listed in the References.

Documents with information on surveys, which are extracted from this general bibliography, are also listed separately in section 10.2.

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11. ANNEX: OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Table 2. Operational definitions used in the literature review

Term	Operational definition
Accountability	The fact or condition of being accountable; responsibility (Oxford Dictionaries, no date).
	In the field of education there are three main types of accountability system: (a) compliance with regulations, (b) adherence to professional norms, and (c) results driven. School accountability systems operate according to a set of principles and use a variety of implementation strategies (UNESCO Institute for Educational Planning, 2005, p. 1).
	Accountability can be defined as a process by which actors provide reasons for their actions against the backdrop of possible negative (or positive) consequences (Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012). The concept of accountability is particularly important in the context of decentralised education systems that encourage school autonomy, including decisions about the curriculum.
At-risk children	Children can be at risk of disadvantage because of their individual circumstances or because they, or their families belong to a group which is disadvantaged in society. These children may include those with disabilities, with mental health problems, in alternative care, at risk of neglect/abuse, undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers, those whose families live in poverty or are socially disadvantaged, those whose families have a migrant and/or second language background, those whose families have limited access to services, Roma and traveller children (European Commission, 2018a).
Blended learning	Blended learning is a pedagogical approach mixing face-to-face and online learning, with some element of learner control over time, place, path, and pace. An example of blended learning is the flipped classroom model, in which students view lecture material prior to class, then spend class time engaging in exercises under the supervision of the teacher (European Commission, 2020d, p. 94).
Children's rights to education	Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mentions:
	State Parties recognise the right of children to education … with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity (UN General Assembly, 1989).
Conceptual framework	A framework of theories, assumptions, principles and rules. It underpins a project's work and provides a 'shared vision' to guide project thinking, ensuring coherence and consistency.

Term	Operational definition
Cross-sectoral working	Cross-sectoral policies (e.g. for youth) should be: 'formulated and implemented with the participation of the authorities in charge of all important domains for the life of young people' (European Commission, 2018b, cited in European Agency, no date).
Digital divide in education	Digital divide refers to 'the gap between those who can benefit from digital technology and those who cannot' (Digital Divide Institute, 2015, cited in UNESCO IITE/European Agency, 2011, p. 101).
	The digital divide in formal schooling is not simply an equipment differential that can be overcome with further selective investments in hardware, software, and networking. Instead it derives from both within school and within home differences that extend to learning standards as well as support. Student self-learning ability, and in particular, student ability for independent learning, is an additional factor. National policies that attempt to close the digital divide for schooling must attend to all of these contributing factors to be successful (Venezky, 2000, p. 76).
Digital education	Digital education comprises two different but complementary perspectives: the pedagogical use of digital technologies to support and enhance teaching, learning and assessment and the development of digital competences by learners and education and training staff (European Commission, 2020d, p. 95).
Disability rights to education	The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) guaranteed the right to inclusive education but stopped short of precisely defining inclusion in education. The struggle of people with disabilities has shaped perspectives on inclusion in education.
	In 2016, General Comment No. 4 to CRPD Article 24 described inclusive education as involving 'a process … to provide all students … with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences' (UNESCO, 2020f, p. 4).

Term	Operational definition
Disadvantage / disadvantaged	Refers to those who are more likely to experience low levels of well-being (OECD, 2017). 'Disadvantaged youth' in many countries is used as an umbrella category which embraces all young people with fewer opportunities than their peers and in some countries other terms like youth-at-risk, vulnerable youth, disconnected youth or social excluded youth are preferred to describe social inequality among young people … Empirically, access to education and transitions in the life course are structured by categories of social inequality such as socio-economic status and class, gender and 'ethnicity'. These categories impact the educational and career options available for a young person in an inter-sectional way and lead to different forms of social inclusion and exclusion (GOETE, no date).
Disadvantaged schools	A socio-economically disadvantaged (advantaged) school is a school whose socio-economic profile (i.e. the average socio-economic status of the students in the school) is in the bottom (top) quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status amongst all schools in the relevant country/economy (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 20).
Distance learning	Distance learning can be understood as referring to 'methods of teaching that take place entirely outside of the classroom environment' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020, p. 2). In a broad sense, distance learning is a term often used synonymously with online learning, e-learning, distance education, correspondence education, external studies, flexible learning, and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Common features of any form of distance learning are: the teacher-learner separation by space or time, or both, and the use of media and technology to enable communication and exchange during the learning process despite this separation. This may be achieved through print-based learning materials, or one-way massive broadcasting (TV and radio programmes), or through web-based exchange using social media channels or learning platforms. Distance learning tends to require a high level of self-directed learning on the part of the learner, and study skills, which must be supported through new teaching, learning and guidance strategies (UNESCO, 2020b).
Formative assessment	Formative assessment puts the learner at the centre of the assessment process. It provides the basis for personalisation according to the learner's interests and aptitudes. Unlike summative assessment ('assessment of learning'), which has been traditionally linked to standardised, high-stakes tests and accountability, formative assessment can involve learners, enabling them to take a more active part in their learning. It is usually carried out in collaboration with others and can have substantial positive impacts on learner achievement.

Term	Operational definition
General education	In this review, 'general education' refers to all forms of education, which might be based on inclusive principles or not. General education might encompass mainstream education or inclusive education, but it has a broader meaning.
Inclusive education	Various definitions of 'inclusive education' are available. They depend most often on the context where they appeared (e.g. Florian 2014, Loreman et al. 2014). According to UNESCO (2020d), inclusive education has three main justifications: educational, social and economic.

UNESCO IBE (2008) states that inclusive education is:

> an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (p. 18).

The Agency's position is that inclusive education is a human-rights issue, and also a part of a wider societal process working towards more inclusive and equitable societies. International organisations (UNESCO, 2017, 2020d) and European Union organisations (Council of Europe, 2020b; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020) also argue this.

The Agency describes inclusive education as 'a systemic approach to providing high quality education in mainstream schools that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners from the school's local community' (European Agency, 2015b, p. 2).

> Inclusive education supposes a real change at both policy and practice levels regarding education. Learners are placed at the centre of a system that needs to be able to recognise, accept and respond to learner diversity. Inclusive education aims to respond to the principles of efficiency, equality and equity, where diversity is perceived as an asset. Learners also need to be prepared to engage in society, to access meaningful citizenship and to acknowledge the values of human rights, freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination (Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union (European Parliament) and European Agency, 2017, p. 6). |

Term	Operational definition
Inclusive pedagogy	Inclusive pedagogy refers to 'an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners, but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently' (Florian, 2014, p. 289). Inclusive pedagogy requires: 1. A shift in focus from one that is concerned with only those individuals who have been identified as having 'additional needs', to learning for all – the idea of everybody (not most and some); 2. Rejection of deterministic beliefs about ability (and the associated idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others); and 3. Ways of working with and through other adults that respect the dignity of learners as full members of the community of the classroom (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011, p. 818).
Out-of-school learners	The literature on national-level work shows that different terms are used across and within countries to refer to out-of-school: not enrolled, drop-out, early school leavers and not in education, employment or training (NEET) are some, but not all in evidence. In addition, there is ambiguity around the notion of 'absenteeism'. A learner's transition from being 'absent from school' to formally 'dropping-out' is rarely clearly defined in research or data collection. Within work linked to Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNESCO has developed the following working definitions for: • Out-of-school children: 'Children in the official primary school age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary school'; • Out-of-school adolescents and youth: 'Those of lower or upper secondary school age who are not enrolled in primary, secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary or tertiary education' (UNESCO, 2018, p. 356). Being considered out-of-school is most often linked to a learner's age in relation to compulsory education, and their access to, enrolment in and participation in some form of educational provision. The COVID-19 crisis in education will probably reshape the notions of 'out-of-school' and 'drop-out'. School closures, moves towards distance and blended teaching and learning methods and the rise in home schooling have implications for access to education and access to an inclusive education for a growing number of learners.

Term	Operational definition
Participation	UNICEF describes participation as: … an ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them, requiring information-sharing and dialogue between children/adolescents and adults based on mutual respect, and … [requiring] that full consideration of their views be given, taking into account the child's age and maturity (2013, p. 7). Like educational inclusion, participation is often seen as a human rights issue and an essential component of social justice (European Agency, 2011). In inclusive education, 'participation' includes – but is different from – other notions such as presence, placement and progress. [Presence] is about learners' access to and attendance within the education system. … [Placement] refers to where learners are placed within the education system, meaning to what extent they are enrolled and educated in inclusive or segregated settings. … [Participation] is about the quality of the learning experience from a learner perspective, and therefore it must incorporate the views of the learners themselves. … It relates to school-level process factors which facilitate or hinder a sense of belonging and a sense of autonomy to the learner, as well as a sense of a meaningful participation with peers of the same age. As such, participation mainly refers to processes at the meso (school or classroom) and micro (individual learner) levels. [Progress] refers to the results of participating in educational activities, the learning processes and outcomes across the curriculum and other outcomes such as school well-being, and what future opportunities this provides for the individual learner (Ramberg and Watkins, 2020, pp. 89–90).
Remote education	Method of delivery, which involves teaching and learning activities where educators and learners are not physically present in one location at the same time. In this case, learning happens away from the physical site of an educational provider with educators and learners using different means to connect and engage with a programme, course or educational activity. … remote education is used as a broad term which compromises, among others, the possibility to organise and deliver teaching and learning activities at distance (e.g. by using radio, TV or electronic resources) or online (e.g. requiring learners to use a connected device) (European Commission, 2020d, pp. 97–98).

Term	Operational definition
Vulnerability and vulnerable learners	According to SDG 4, target 4.5 on inclusion and equity:

> All people, irrespective of sex, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status, should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Vulnerable groups that require particular attention and targeted strategies include persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and the poor (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committees, no date).

Vulnerabilities have a dynamic dimension and can vary by place (Ainscow, 2005). Vulnerabilities can refer to poverty, ethnicity, disability and remoteness.

> … many types of vulnerability are not outwardly apparent … making it impossible to distinguish neatly between students with and without disabilities or special needs (UNESCO, 2020f, p. 66).

> Many countries identify specific groups as vulnerable in constitutions, social inclusion legislation, education legislation or documents directly related to inclusive education. The group most identified is people with disabilities, but women and girls, rural or remote populations and the poor are also commonly recognized. Few countries link recognition of specific groups with a mandate to collect data on their inclusion in education, however (UNESCO, 2020f, p. 67).

> Characteristics that expose individuals to risk do not affect everybody the same way. For instance, life at the intersections of disability with race, class, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity expression is more than the sum of each vulnerability (UNESCO, 2020f, p. 73). |

Term	Operational definition
Well-being and mental and emotional health	The notion of well-being incorporates a person's quality of life. It is, at the same time, a multidimensional concept (OECD, 2020e, p. 20) with a social and economic dimension, a psychological and mental health dimension, a philosophical dimension and an educational dimension (Mashford-Scott, Church and Taylor, 2012). It includes a sociological focus on external living conditions, a psychological and public health focus on person-related indicators, such as self-efficacy or self-esteem, and a focus on subjective experiences and subjective feelings of happiness or satisfaction.

Well-being is close to the notion of 'good life', which refers to a person's quality of life, and not the quantity of skills they have acquired. It is about enjoying 'being', judged by what it brings in the life of others, and the capacity to derive joy from life, which everyone can achieve (Kittay, 2019).

Well-being depends on culture, historical circumstances, socio-economic class and other variables, which illustrate the differences in how well-being is conceived. The notion of well-being has been reshaped during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to mental and emotional health, among other things.

In a rights-based approach, children can be active participants in defining their well-being and the ways to achieve it. |

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