
Supporting migrant students through the pandemic and beyond – Introduction to the special issue

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The impact of Covid-19 on migrant and refugee students

The lockdowns and school 'closures' in response to the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic have caused major disruptions to the lives and educational experiences of everyone. As documented by a Eurydice (2022) report, many schools across Europe were "ill-prepared for this unprecedented situation", with staff having to adapt rapidly to distance teaching and, at least initially, students having to rely on their own resources. Thus, the impact of the pandemic and related lockdowns has not been the same for all, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have faced disproportionate difficulties and widening educational gaps. In fact, since the first lockdowns of Spring 2020, distance learning has proved to be a multiplier of educational inequalities, at the intersection of class, gender, (dis)ability, ethnicity and migration status (Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2021). Despite the best efforts of individual teachers, the state of prolonged disruption into which schools were drawn made it more likely for those already overlooked by national policies or local interventions to fall behind even further.

Whilst the first few months of the pandemic have been marked by unprecedented acts

of community solidarity, we have also witnessed a reinforcement of divisions within and between societies. Exceptional measures have been put in place by governments across the whole of Europe, but some people seem to have been largely forgotten. Among these are students from migrant and refugee families, and particularly newly arrived migrants.

The public discourses around education and the pandemic hardly mention the experience of migrant people. Once again, migration figured largely as a thing to stop (or control ever more tightly); even as a potential source of viral contagion. Pro-migration stances have concentrated on the role of foreign workers within the economy (with many of them being 'key workers') and on the need to offer them a more stable legal status and to ensure they can access health-care and welfare support (Reid *et al.*, 2021). These are of course fundamental issues that required – and in many cases still require – radical interventions. However, discussion of them has largely ignored the broader issues faced by migrant families; and particularly the right of their children to access education.

As we know from previous research, migrant and refugee students tend to be less familiar with the educational system and life in the host countries; and they often face challenges due to language barriers, limited resources and their traumatic personal experiences of immigration (Jalušič and Bajt, 2022). Targeted resources and interventions can be scarce, and constant changes to policy and funding frameworks make it difficult to sustain successful approaches. At the same time, the diversification and social stratification of many local settings requires interventions which identify such complexities and reject blanket approaches aiming at fixing ‘problems’ rather than recognising the individual needs of young people.

Moreover, for migrant students (and their families), schools represent not only spaces where knowledge and skills are acquired, but also crucial places for language acquisition and for integrating into the local community. For economically vulnerable migrant families, schools are often the first port of call to access information about public services and welfare support. Such scenario adds to the problems that have crystallised across Europe over the past few years. Whilst, on the one hand, many countries and regions have accumulated experiences of good practice, on the other,

the volatility of their social and political contexts has posed continuous challenges. Among these, the emergence of new forms of nationalism, the hardening of migration policies and the redefinition of boundaries between and within national spaces, risk placing schools at the centre of controversies and contestations. Too often the presence of migrant students and families is seen as a potential burden rather than an opportunity for local administrators, school principals and local families who stress the negative impact of migrant pupils on the educational success of their children

All this raises issues for educators and policy makers, not only in terms of supporting migrant students’ attainment, but also in terms of emotional support and ensuring that young people are not victims of discrimination and racism and that they can develop as full, active and accepted citizens within their communities (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; Schaeffer, 2019). Thus, developing opportunities for joined-up thinking among scholars, practitioners and policy makers becomes a key priority. Whilst some of the challenges are country-specific, much can be learned from international exchange of research and practice.

About this special issue

This special issue stems from ‘Learning from Citizenship’¹, an initiative to contribute to the development of international collaborations on “good practice of inclusion, engagement, practical and emotional support for migrant and refugee students”. The network was kick-started in 2019 by the University of Nottingham (UK), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) and the University of Turin (Italy). The first major activity originally planned should

have been a conference at the University of Nottingham in 2020, co-funded by the Social Policy Association (SPA). Because of the lockdown, that ‘in person’ event – like many others – had to be postponed. Eventually, the conference was re-focused on the impact of Covid-19 on migrant students and took place one year later as an online international event, bringing together scholars and practitioners from various European countries who have been working and continue to work on Education research and practical interventions.

1 <https://learningforcitizenship.wordpress.com/>

Some of those conference contributions have been further developed and updated into the articles presented within. This introduction is followed by a theoretical contribution by **Luisa Conti** on the ‘systematic vulnerabilization of migrant students’ and on how a dialogic approach can clear the way for change. The article reflects on the position of structural disadvantage in which migrant children have been finding themselves well before 2020, but also examines how the pandemic has exacerbated the situation. As pointed out by Conti, understanding the source of structural inequalities and the mechanisms of its production is the first step in counteracting its reproduction.

Such conceptual framework is followed by a series of national and local case studies, which make the bulk of this special collection. Firstly, **Silvia Carrasco Pons** and **Marina Pibernat Vila** present some of the findings emerging from a study undertaken in the midst of the pandemic with staff of secondary schools in Madrid and Barcelona. The focus is on the impact of Covid-19 and school closures on these students within the larger context of the transformations and readjustments experienced by all students from disadvantaged socio-economic background. The project presents particularly interesting insights about the differential relationship with technology and digital tools between boys and girls – and how this affected the ability to engage with school during lockdowns.

The next article – by **Roberta Ricucci**, **Tanja Schroot** and **Pietro Cingolani** – is also informed by interviews with teacher and educators, and it explores one primary school and two middle schools in the city of Turin, in Northern Italy. This piece of empirical research contributes to our understanding of the heterogeneous effects of the pandemic and how these are mediated by social and economic capital as well as by the migration status of students and their families. In Italy, as in other countries, the sudden shift to online learning put at risk some of the earlier approaches made to support recently arrived migrant students – including those with limited language proficiency – and revealed the importance of multi-actor interventions.

The role of different actors – including schools, families but also the community sector – is further examined by **Alessio D’Angelo** and **Chiara Manzoni**, who have been looking at the impacts and responses to the pandemic in the United Kingdom. Informed by a review of evidence and insights from two parallel nation-wide studies, the article presents the wide range of local responses that took place since Spring 2020 and highlights the importance of considering these in relation to wider UK discourses and policies around migration and education. In this respect, the experience of the pandemic has also represented an opportunity to rethink education through community collaborations and practitioners’ networks.

The next article, by **Rachel Scott**, also uses the UK as a case study, but this time to focus on the specific issue of language and learning loss of pupils using English as Additional Language (EAL). The results of a large scale survey undertaken by the Bell Foundation – alongside evidence submitted by teachers during school closures in England – reveal a clear pattern of language loss across primary and secondary school students, with concerns being raised also with regard to the impact on personal confidence. Once again, there is a significant intersection between being of a migrant background and having other types of socio-economic disadvantage.

All this points to the need of targeted educational support, which is the issue examined in the final article in this collection. The case study examined by **Johannes Reitingger**, **Michael Holzmayer** and **Michelle Proyer** is that of young people affected by forced migration and who, at the time of the 2020 pandemic, were living and studying in Austria. Working alongside NGOs, the authors undertook interviews with service-providers and a survey with school teachers, confirming a general need to catch up in terms of digital support, but also the need to develop and maintain support with work beyond the pedagogical – including psychological and social work.

Taken in its entirety, this collection represents an important contribution to address a knowledge gap in academic research that, over

the three years since the peak of the pandemic, remains quite considerable. Some of the studies presented here were developed fairly quickly as a reaction to the pandemic itself – and in difficult circumstances for the researchers themselves – or represented a repurposing of ongoing research activities. Other examples of this were presented and discussed at the 2020 conference of ‘Leaning for Citizenship’². This is testament to the determination of the research community and of its ability to draw on long-established networks of collaborations with schools, public and third sector organisations to respond to unprecedented challenges at national and local level. Needless to say, there is still much need for more systematic,

comparative research both on the impact of the pandemic itself and on the long-term effects on the educational outcomes, school inclusion experiences and personal trajectories of those young people who first arrived in Europe around the start of this decade. Even more, there is a need for research that can place the experiences and voices of students and their families at the very centre of the discussion. As usual, this will need time and adequate resources – which, in turn, requires the recognition of the educational needs of migrant, refugees and other marginalised students as an important part of the research and policy agenda, for the benefit of the whole educational system. Also in this respect, the hope is that this special collection can contribute to raising awareness and encourage more people to take things forward.

² The conference programme is still available here: <https://learningforcitizenship.wordpress.com/2021/04/07/online-conference-supporting-migration-students-through-the-pandemic/>

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