Exploring the impact of Covid19 school closures among working-class high-school students in Madrid and Barcelona by migration status and gender[8]

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Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic and social life of children and adolescents continues to be of concern because of the serious consequences it may have for an entire generation of students, especially for those who were in more vulnerable situations for different reasons, particularly for third country national students. Paradoxically, since the beginning of the closure and when schools reopened for face-to-face classes intermittently, the specific needs of this group of students and the effects of academic and social isolation as possible aggravating risk factors have been absent from the public debate on education in the pandemic, beyond general mentions of family impoverishment and the digital divide. Nor have issues that were already alarming been addressed, such as the differences between the school attachment of boys and girls, which intersect with the former ones. This paper presents some of the findings and conclusions of a prospective study within the project IntegratED. Promoting Meaningful Integration of Third-Country Nationals' Children to Education (776143-EU-AMIF). Drawing on interviews with the teaching staff of eight secondary schools in Madrid and Barcelona in autumn 2020, we focus on the impact of the pandemic and school closure on these students from a comparative approach of schools, national origin, and gender, in the larger context of the transformations, readjustments and consequences experienced by all students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Keywords

School closures, educational inequality, immigrant students, Covid19, gender.

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1. Introduction

This article presents some results from an emergency study on the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on third country national students in Spain, within an InteRED larger project that was interrupted by the confinement (*IntegratED. Promoting Meaningful Integration of Third-Country Nationals Children to Education,* 776143-EU-AMIF). The aim of the study was to explore and analyse the impact of the pandemic and the confinement caused by Covid-19 on high-school students born outside of the European Union, as well as to identify appropriate educational responses to the social and health crisis.

The UNHCR and UNESCO highlighted from the first months of the pandemic that the closure of schools because of confinement would have a serious impact on the education of foreign students who had arrived in the schools in recent years, also affecting their integration process. It did not seem that the conditions for the 2020-21 school year were likely to reverse this. To avoid irreparable setbacks and improve the living conditions of pupils in vulnerable situations, organisations and agencies also took the issue into consideration. In the report Impact of the *COVID*-19 *Crisis* on the *Right* to *Education; Concerns, Challenges* and *Opportunities* (UNHRC, 2020) – for instance, the United Nations Special Delegation on the Right to Education noted that the Covid-19 crisis had revealed the lack of preparedness on the part of governments, non-governmental agencies and educational institutions to deal with it and to ensure student learning in a context that imposed non-formal education, despite the innovative measures they were forced to adopt.

Such concerns emerged in many places, and since the beginning of the confinement several research groups, especially those working in the field of education inequalities and migrations, began to carry out prospective studies. Preliminary results of studies carried out in the first months of the pandemic highlighted the state of shock in which teachers were drowned by their lack of digital skills and the need to acquire them in just a few days. This is the case of what has been observed by various researchers gathered by the network *Learning for Citizenship. Supporting Migrant Students through the Pandemic*, created to exchange observations from different countries (United Kingdom, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain). For example, in the United Kingdom, the compilation of emergency reports by Manzoni and D'Angelo (2021) pointed to a greater impact of confinement among pupils from migrant and refugee families in the educational, linguistic and social areas. Expert panels, organised by the NALDIC association of multilingualism and education practitioners and researchers and the Bell Foundation in April and May 2020, provided guidance on how to support students with English learning, and free online resources were created in several languages to facilitate support for families and teachers to help students.

In the case of Spain, researchers expressed similar concerns and pointed to the risk of educational inequalities getting worse (see RASE special issue coordinated by Beltrán and Venegas, 2020). Bonal and González (2021) also referred to the opportunity in that exceptional situation to gauge the impact of the cultural and social capital of families and the differential role of schools, especially in terms of the digital divide. Cabrera (2020) reviewed the relationship between the differential implementation of online learning and the increase in inequality of educational opportunities. Some warned, however, of the need to move away from the miserabilist and deficit approach projected onto families when assessing the effects of the pandemic. This was the case, for instance, of Martín Criado (2020) on the classist assumption that families with fewer resources would manage the stress generated by the pandemic less well, recalling that the limitations in terms of resources or family level of education bear no relation to their concern, interest, or effort in their children's schooling. Carrasco in *El Diario de la Educación*, 6/05/2020 (Carrasco, 2020) observed, as a positive counterpoint, how the opportunity had been used to forge a more personalised link between the tutor teachers and

their students in the virtual sphere in some cases, in a follow-up carried out in the first months of confinement in a group of schools affected by the disruption of a project on the risk of early school leaving.

The media paid attention during the months of confinement to what had been pointed out for years by the research on the inequalities of early school leaving. However, although they focused mainly on the issue of connectivity, Internet access and uses of digital resources or, in other words, the digital divide, the specific situation of learners with a migrant background was only tangentially mentioned as part of the general situation of learners. It was naturally assumed that in the case of immigrant students the same inequalities detected would be exacerbated: higher poverty, more affected by the digital divide, fewer academic and cultural resources in families.

González and Bonal in *Diari de l'Educació*, 6/05/2021 (González and Bonal, 2021) concluded, drawing on results of a telephone survey carried out in Catalonia in April and May 2020, that lower connectivity was directly related with lower socio-economic status of families. They also pointed out that 18% of the most vulnerable students did not connect to online classes, compared to 2.8% of all students. Furthermore, only 3 % of students were able to connect to the Internet only via mobile phones, compared to 8.7% of the most vulnerable ones. In an attempt to alleviate disparities in families' access to the Internet and to the devices needed to do it, the Ministry of Education and the departments of education in the regional governments announced the purchase of 500,000 tablets and computers for the students most affected by the digital divide (Aunión and Romero, El País, 6/9/2020). But almost half a year later, these devices had not reached their beneficiaries, and the press reported that they were "lost in the middle of a bureaucratic labyrinth" (Aunión and Romero, El País, 6/9/2020).

Another aspect unpacked by the pandemic was the damage caused by a decade of budget cuts in education after the 2008 economic crisis. Crónica Global (Cañizares, 13/11/2020) reported at the end of 2020 that the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalan regional government) invests only 2.8% of GDP in education although the Catalan Education Law stipulates that it should be 6 %. These cuts have undoubtedly conditioned the digitisation of education. In the last 10 years, the Government has cut 700 million euros in education. Currently, only 300 of the 2,987 schools in Catalonia have adequate fibre-optic width, while 1,230 public schools out of 2,800 do not have LAN-wifi. In the rest of Spain, budget cuts in education have been close to 10 billion euros in recent years (Aunión and Romero, El País, 6/9/2020). All the education experts consulted by the journal agreed on the serious consequences of the cuts in education investment.

Before the pandemic began, therefore, the economic situation of the poorest families combined with the effects of budgetary cuts in education had already had a severe impact on the most vulnerable students. On 23 June 2020, a press release by UNESCO of their *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education* warned of the increased impact of the confinement among female students, children with disabilities, the economically disadvantaged, and migrant and minority groups.

However, the media focus on immigration during the pandemic has revolved around labour conditions and migrants being overrepresented in many essential jobs, the need to regularize undocumented migrants, changes in the flow of arrivals or economic remittances to countries of origin. The children of immigrants have received virtually no media attention. Even more shocking is the fact that neither did the central, nor the regional, education authorities in charge of responding to the educational emergency. No mention to specific difficulties and measures during confinement, and immigrant students subsumed in the category of those affected by fewer economic resources and cultural capital of families in general. Likewise, there was no media interest in the differential impact of the conditions of online schooling and confinement among girls and boys.

Between 2020 and 2021, rapid research projects on the impact of Covid-19 on students multiplied, but the focus on and the knowledge about those with a migrant background were still scarce. Less attention was paid to the situation

of recently arrived students, many of which still with a curricular gap and less knowledge of the languages of tuition when the school closures began (in the case of Catalonia, both Catalan and Spanish), even though before the pandemic huge education inequalities between students of national origin and students with a migrant background had been clearly identified. In 2019, the rate of Early Leaving of Education and Training (ELET) in Spain – that is, the share of young people between 18 to 24 without post-compulsory education who are not studying to attain it – was 18%: still the second highest in the European Union, only after Malta. Moreover, Spain leads the greatest polarization by national origin and sex in the ELET rate: among the young women born in Spain or of Spanish nationality the rate is around 10%, while among men of the same age group born abroad or of non-EU nationalities this rate is four times higher. Among young people born in Spain in this age group, the ELET rate among boys doubles that of girls. Although data by income is not available in official statistics, the RESL.eu study on early school leaving in Europe was able to identify large differences by type of school according to social composition of the student body in the rate of lower secondary education achievement and the risk of early school leaving (Carrasco et al., 2018b). The other side of the coin was that, with data from the 2017-18 academic year, the same study identified that, once the lower secondary diploma was obtained, the percentage of students of Spanish nationality who did not remain in education (58.6%) was higher than that of students of non-EU nationalities (50.5%), despite the greatest difficulties encountered to complete it successfully (Carrasco et al., 2018b). Moreover, the educational aspirations of students with a migrant background as well as those of their families play a very important role as protective factors against school leaving in socioeconomic circumstances like those of their national peers (Carrasco et al., 2018a). Given these and other data revealing the uniqueness of the education processes of students with a migrant background it is important to investigate more in depth what schooling in conditions of confinement and closure of schools have been for these students, paying attention to the similarities but also to specificities.

In completely altered educational circumstances where everyday contacts and direct sociability were suppressed and lacking as an essential learning context, the research from which this article arises set out to explore the impact of school experiences characterised by isolation and detachment of learning from school engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004), the key protective factor against early school leaving.

2. Aims and methodology

The main objective of this study has been to identify the problems faced by students with an immigrant background because of the Covid19 school closures and intermittent resuming of schooling in comparison with Spanish students. Although the results are limited in scope and are based exclusively on the perspectives of the teachers interviewed, they can reveal phenomena and trends of what has happened elsewhere, and complement the outcomes of extensive, quantitative research conducted on the basis of the following questions:

1. How have the schools dealt with the situation created by Covid-19 and with students with a migrant background, especially with those who had arrived in the previous years?

2. What impact has it had on the learning and schooling of students, in general, by migration status and sex?

3. What are the expectations to deal with the impact already observed?

To answer these questions and to identify, analyse and understand the most relevant aspects of the Covid-19 impact on the schools' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and key data collected from each school on students' migrant status, family languages, curricular mismatch, specific aspects of different migration flows and countries of origin, as well as support available to students with disadvantages, with a gender perspective applied throughout.

The research was focused on Madrid and Barcelona, the wealthiest urban areas, and the main destinations of immigration in Spain, which had already started to increase again between 2016 and 2019. The fieldwork was carried out in a purposive sample of eight public and state-subsidised schools with a high presence of students of immigrant origin, located in low-income neighbourhoods, in which both the InteRED team in Madrid and the team from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona were working when the pandemic broke out.

Table I. Characteristics of the 8 schools in Madrid and Barcelona.

City	School	Ownership	Digital teaching development
Madrid	M1	Subsidized	Implementation and preparation of teachers prior to the pandemic; full class schedule replicated online.
Madrid	M2	Subsidized	Implementation and teacher training prior to the pandemic; independent students' work.
Madrid	M3	Subsidized	Implementation and preparation of teachers prior to the pandemic; 60% of students without adequate devices.
Madrid	M4	Public	Low implementation until the pandemic; rapid teacher training during first weeks; few cases of teachers with no digital training.
Barcelona	B1	Public	Partial implementation prior to the pandemic; diverging reactions among teachers; daily online tutoring, students' independent work (partially).
Barcelona	B2	Public	Implementation and resources 90% of students in school prior to the pandemic; daily tutoring, students' independent work.
Barcelona	B3	Public	Partial implementation prior to the pandemic; accelerated and thorough adaptation.
Barcelona	B4	Subsidized	Preparation and training of teachers during the first weeks of the pandemic; full class schedule replicated on line.

The main source of data comes from 20 semi-structured online interviews, 3 individual and 5 group interviews face-to-face, supported by a questionnaire administered to the schools to identify their most relevant characteristics concerning school population, organisation, resources, teaching staff and environment. The interviews were conducted with school management staff, who were responsible for interviewing families, managing resources and support services, and dealing with the competent administration. Interviews were also carried out with teachers with specific tasks related to recently arrived immigrant students, such as teachers who have been responsible for newcomers' classes in Madrid and Barcelona, or general support teachers in schools where these resources have been lost due to budgetary restrictions. The online interviews were carried out using the Zoom digital platform and recorded for further analysis with NVivo11 software.

The results are presented in a realistic narrative style to enhance the teacher's accounts of their lived experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), based on significant and recurrent discursive positions identified in relation to the overarching questions, following a process of iterative analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Schools and teaching staff: between professionalism, vocation, and social commitment.

The interviews revealed that the families found in the teaching staff the only point of support from the administration, being the main social reference point for immigrant families, with the smallest support network in Spain. The fact that schooling was firstly non-attendance-based, and later semi-attendance-based, aggravated the sense of frustration of the family's migration project due to the difficulties in accessing school, a key institution for the optimal integration of their children. This was especially significant in the case of Catalonia due to the lack of daily contact with the language of tuition and, in those cases with a curricular gap, in the process of compensation measures before the pandemic.

Once the confinement began, virtual classes were the main possibility for all students to follow the year. The relationship of schools and families with the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the digital sphere is the first element in shaping the digital education experiences of students during confinement, regardless of their national origin. It is worth noting that the knowledge and use of digital tools and devices is not uncommon for some immigrant families because it allows them to keep in contact with their relatives in the countries of origin.

Confinement encountered a significant diversity in terms of the schools' relationship with ICT, regardless of their ownership, location, or social composition. Some schools were already working in the digital environment, with integrated projects combining face-to-face and virtual classes. The pedagogical coordinator at B2 school highlighted that "*this saved us the first few weeks and allowed us to spend time preparing for the second phase of confinement in order to make progress in our subjects. Our students are already used to working weekly with Google Classroom assignments in all subjects, but this was the management team's decision with the school autonomy programme two years ago! It's just a coincidence that we chose to be trained in ICT!*"

In contrast, in other schools the digital competences of teachers and students had not been developed. The head of studies at B1 school, a highly complex school in Barcelona, regretted that "*our pupils don't even know how to write an email, and many of the new teachers who come every year have no training or declare themselves to be objectors to ICT, it was unthinkable to consider it as a school, and now…*". These differences between schools are the result of political decisions. The Department of Education in Catalonia had transferred the school digitalisation decision to the management teams of each school creating therefore huge inequalities between them, some left with no maintenance of hardware and not even adequate infrastructure, resulting in a clear inequity that affects the most vulnerable students.

The M1, M2 and M3 state-subsidised schools had already made use of digital tools by March 2020.

M3 school head teacher stated that both teachers and students "[have] *their account and work in the Google environment*", using Chrome-

books for some time, with specific training in digital skills. Another situation was experienced by the school M4, where "*a few days before* [the confinement] *there was a meeting to give basic notions of virtual classrooms*", as one of its teachers explained. This basic training was given by the school's technology teachers because the administration did not offer them this type of training although they were even advised not to use any non-institutional platforms. However, the EducaMadrid platform did not work properly until after Easter and, only then, began to offer resources to deal with the situation. But according to this teacher of the M4 school, a member of the management team, the biggest problem was the students' lack of access to electronic devices and network connectivity. The Community of Madrid sent tablets on loan for students in year 4 of lower secondary (ESO) and baccalaureate year 2, but the devices for years 1, 2 and 3 of ESO and baccalaureate year 1 never arrived. She herself assisted 189 families who lacked connectivity. This personalised care was also implemented in the B1 school, a small school in a neighbourhood strongly hit by the successive crises. This school head teacher, also a woman, was approached by mothers looking for all kinds of guidance in the face of the closure of all the services and the collapse of those that were still open due to the increasing needs of the population served.

It was the schools, both the subsidised M1 and M2 and the public B2 and B3, which provided their students with the necessary electronic devices, either thanks to the parents' associations (M1) or to the school's social fund (M2). In these schools, both active and retired teachers were asked to provide and help obtain resources and donations for scholarships or to advance the payment of devices, and even for food and clothing for the students' families. The B3 school mobilised the network of organisations, shops, and businesses in the neighbourhood to raise funds and obtain 40 tablets for pupils without any devices at home, but also for the purchase of food for some families, which was distributed from the school itself. In front of the emergency and the impossibility of having other resources, it was the teachers, regardless of the type of school, who made the greatest effort to solve the problems they encountered. Most of the examples coincide and the scope of the students attended to is important in all schools. The teaching staff mobilised themselves by providing grants for Internet connections, crowdfunding campaigns, by approaching other families in the school, friends or relatives who could donated computers for some pupils who did not have one, taking them personally door to door. In some schools, the management teams and other teachers also followed up and accompanied the families. For example, school M3 maintained almost daily contact with almost all families through social networks in order to prevent students from disengaging from the school.

In the schools of the sample, serving low-income areas where immigrant students are over-represented, the adaptation of teaching to the situation of confinement was only part of the unplanned tasks performed by teachers. According to the M1 school headteacher, they "*have received many congratulations from the families. They are happy because everything has been done with our only available means since the teachers were already working digitally before*".

It is important to remember that all this had an impact on the teachers, because they could not carry out their work properly and because they could not solve the problems of the students with the greatest needs – without guidance, teaching materials, or specific resources from the administration to attend to them; and while they were suffering, as citizens, the same health problems in their families, economic uncertainty, and the effects of school confinement as the rest of society. The most recurrent and coinciding remark on the attention given to immigrant students is the feeling that they have not been able to reach their needs, and even less those of students who had arrived in recent years and were in the process of learning the language, beyond the general "shock response" that they were able to organize.

3.2 Technology and confinement: the relationship with ICT at school and in the family

In a very short time, teachers and schools adapted their teaching to the digital context, using all the strategies at their disposal to ensure that students were not left behind, but they opted for very different strategies. The headteacher of school M1 explained that "*teaching was done through presentations, Google Classroom, forms…*", replicating the standard timetable. The M2 school used the school website, where the newcomers' class teacher uploaded YouTube videos focusing "*on the essential and initial aspects of the language distributed in various sections: communication, mathematics, reading…*". This was the way students had access to the content at any time, as they often accessed the Internet through devices used by other family members to study or work. Mobile phones have also played an important role, being used to send pictures of homework, or even going as far as teaching "*with phone calls with the child writing down while the teacher was explaining*", achieving a "personal and individualised contact so that they could feel they were not left behind as they could have been", as reported by the M3 school, something that also happened in B1 and B3 schools.

Problems around internet access or availability of devices persisted in the 2020-21 school year. The M1 or M4 schools adopted a sort of blended teaching, and the M3 center started a project to finance the acquisition of 30 computers for use by students in ESO year 4 who did not have any and who could attend this way. Instead of intermittent attendance, immigrant students in the newcomers' class of M2 school could attend classes in person during the 2020-21 academic year since they needed face-to-face classes to learn the language and integrate into the school atmosphere.

The situation of the family and its relationship with ICT accounted for a large part of the problems faced by schools, stemming from precariousness and the lack of digital resources. School B3 found higher ICT skills among immigrant students, especially from India and Pakistan, due to usual contact with relatives in their countries of origin. At the same time, as the headteacher of M1 school explained, many families, especially immigrant ones, found themselves in situations of higher job and salary insecurity, which meant worse conditions of connectivity, less mobile data, and less availability of devices for their children. The schools tried to provide these students with even basic school materials that they lacked, while in wealthier areas one student could have more than one last generation devices, big differences that were pointed out by B2 schoolteachers.

In cases where mobile data were the only connection available, they were all consumed at the beginning of the month. The mobile phone was the last option. Teachers at M3 school, with 60% of students without computers, said that "*in secondary school we wanted everyone to be connected, to keep up with the classes a bit…. We saw that it was impossible. Most of them have mobile phones but many don't even have a connection. So we worked a bit using WhatsApp (…) We have a high percentage of students without a computer, and most of them were simply using their mobile phones. It was very difficult and expensive to work. Despite this, there were students who were very virtuous with their mobile phones and were able to get things done*". The same happened in the case of the M4 school, which encountered many limitations in carrying out with virtual teaching through this device. In some cases, they handed out basic stationary material to around 30 families in a school, some of whom were immigrants, but many were Roma families, both in La Mina (Barcelona) and in Cañada Real (Madrid). Many of these families did not have any digital literacy or used email, which also was excluding them from the virtual parents' meetings and chats.

M3 schoolteachers also mentioned the difficulty for non-digitally literate families to enrol their children online for the following school year and criticised the added problems of bureaucracy in the administration. But teachers were also able to see families from another perspective. As a teacher from the same school explained, "*during the confinement, we have seen that families do care about their children's studies. We made it a point to contact the families once a week. Staying at home, we*

saw that they cared, and we saw that they wanted their children to work. They wanted them to be there, they were looking for ways of helping, within their possibilities, in their studies. More families now want to be on the school council, as if thanking for the accompaniment and offering their participation. It has changed the relationship and they value it positively. The relationship between family and school has been taken to better level because they have reached out to them, whether it is to give them milk or whatever. They have felt listened to and cared for". In almost all the schools in Madrid and Barcelona, this positive aspect was highlighted, confirming from new positions the importance of emotional school engagement as a key factor for student retention in the education system.

3.3 ICT, gender and school: digital leisure interference among boys and further follow-up among girls

The relationship of schools and families with ICT, and the economic situation of the latter, played a major role in the development of education activity during confinement. But so did the students' previous relationship with ICT concerning digital leisure and the consumption of audiovisual products. At this point, the differential audio-visual socialisation of adolescents and young people according to gender has become clear. Several studies (e.g. Viñals Blanco, Abad Galzacorta and Aguilar Gutiérrez, 2014; Pibernat Vila, 2019) have shown that boys play video games much more than girls. Virtual social networks are also one of the main forms of communication and leisure among girls and, to a lesser extent, among boys.

In relation to this, both in Madrid and in Barcelona, almost all the schools noticed important differences between boys and girls during the confinement. "*Boys got lost a lot with video games. (...) They spent more time on the computer because of video games. There have been families with boys who ran out of data much earlier because the boys went online playing video games*", explained a teacher at M4 school. In M3 school, a teacher interviewed said that "*during the confinement this was aggravated by being at home with more video games. They [boys] didn't attend online class because they were playing games. Girls did it*". This has been a general trend among boys regardless of migrant or socioeconomic status, type of school or urban area. The use of virtual social networks is also widespread among boys and girls, especially Instagram and Tik Tok. However, "*girls are more hooked on Insta[gram], even before the pandemic and as early as primary education*", said a teacher at M3 school, as did teachers in other schools, something that worsened during the confinement as well as in the 2020-21 school year. At the same time, the higher potential of the skills acquired in virtual social networks by girls compared to those of video games by boys was revealed when it came to transferring them to the management of learning in a virtual environment at school.

Teachers' interviews in all schools also concurred in the observation that girls followed the classes to a greater extent during the confinement, attending online classes more regularly. As a teacher from the M3 school said, "*one girl even went online from the Philippines to follow the classes (...) Girls in general are more hardworking, they make more of an effort, they take it more seriously. The boys are less so, they find it harder to adapt, they are very hooked on video games, which the girls are not*". From the M4 school, the teacher also explained that "*in general, what we have seen is that the girls have been more hard-working. In terms of passing grades, it has been equivalent, because during the confinement it was easier to pass. The problem is now [back to face-to-face learning]*", pointing to the consequences of confinement in the 2020-21 academic year. Boys, therefore, disengaged from the classes to a greater extent than girls. The director of the M1 school confirmed that this trend is widespread, irrespective of national origin. In all nationalities, "girls *are almost always better off, despite having to look after younger siblings on some occasions*". The ESO head of studies at B4 school, mostly with students of Latin American origin, explained that she had spoken to some mothers about this burden that works against girls, and that the mothers regretted it, while at the same time they naturalised it.

One school brought about an exception to this trend among girls. The management team

of public school M4 was concerned about the increasing number of cases of girls from Latin American leaving the school and dropping out before completing lower secondary. One of them said, "*we have had to make several referrals to the ASPA project [a social education project for youth at risk] with the feeling that some of them are connecting with Latin gangs; isolated cases, but that they have doubled in number. In the 25 years that I have worked as a teacher, I have come across 2 or 3 cases of students like this. Suddenly, in a single year, this year, I have 6 or 7. The ASPA educator relates it to COVID because of having been in complicated family situations during the confinement and of greater economic disadvantage, as if on returning from the confinement, when they started to free themselves in June and July, there had been an explosion.... [These are] very significant things. Girls of 13 or 14 who told their mother to give them permission to go and live with people of 18. It seemed to me to be an aggravation of the situation which, although still uncommon, is important because it has multiplied. Just like the addiction to video games*".

This and other accounts point to the intensification of previous trends among both boys and girls, as well as in certain groups that share specific situations of family and community. Thus, instead of school disengagement related to confinement and virtual-only relationships, their relative flexibilization can also lead to disengagement from school, in the absence of preventive community intervention work with children and adolescents in the summer of 2020. This shortcoming was pointed out by most of the management teams interviewed.

3.4 Linguistic support, family monitoring and confinement among immigrant students

In general, the effects of confinement on students as a whole and among immigrant students in Spain do not appear to be very different, and reveal the same underlying problems, although in some cases they are accentuated by different educational and socio-economic causes. The sectors in which the adults in the families are employed and their working conditions are not a minor problem in this respect. As a teacher at the M4 school pointed out, "*[parents] often have less control over their children's timetables because of longer working hours. Above all, because they start working earlier and the children stay at home on their own. This is seen [here] more in Latin families, and there is a high percentage among the students in this school. Many of the demands come from children of immigrant origin, especially Latin American ones. But it is generalised, and it is more noticeable in relation to girls.*"

The most specific problem for this segment of students during the confinement was the issue of language learning, a problem that students of Latin American origin do not have for school integration in Madrid although they do in Barcelona. The education needs of students who were supposed to learn Spanish during confinement were also affected, at risk of forgetting what they had learned. "*Some have lost Spanish completely. If they don't use it, it gets diluted*", according to a teacher at the M3 school. In the M2 school, the newcomers' class teacher elaborated material of his own for a virtual newcomers tuition to continue learning the language, previously ensuring that the conditions of connectivity and the possibilities of collaboration from families were adequate to follow the activities. He said "*What was especially important was to keep up the communicative aspect. They had two hours of online class every day, they connected with me, and we did it as a normal class, learning Spanish as a foreign language. The impact of the anomaly was minimised. They were not left without practising the language (...) There were communicative situations in which they had to participate continuously, and that was maintained. Although it is not the same, they all spoke and participated*" – he was adding that it turned out to be a good solution, even though they lacked socialisation in the school to improve practice in the natural surrounding as well as other skills. He also mentioned that the 2019-2021 academic year was especially problematic for newly arrived students because it had been the first one without further language support after spending time in the newcomers' class. "*For the pupils who have just left the newcomers' class (...) it has been a*

very serious impact. They want to move to the regular classroom. But it is an impact. They experienced two impacts in a row, going out to the regular classroom and then the confinement". For this reason, in the 2020-21 academic year, priority was given to the daily presence of these students over other combinations of intermittent presence that affected the rest of the students.

This was a very serious problem for immigrant students in Barcelona, with the added problem that exposure to the language of tuition, Catalan, is practically non-existent in the working-class neighbourhoods where these students live. The education administration did not design or provide any plan to address the basic language needs of immigrant students, either newly arrived or even in need of further learning support. Only one of the schools in Barcelona, school B3, had retained resources of support similar to the newcomers' class after the drastic cuts applied.

A teacher from school B3 reported the following: "*with other colleagues from other reception classrooms we have designed our own resources, but the means are very precarious, and there is no doubt that these students will experience a serious curricular gap, and in the long term this can lead to a higher disengagement among these students, although they are eager to learn and interact with people of their own age, which they have.... But it is inconceivable how they [the authorities] have left us*".

3.5 Internet and the impact of confinement: digital school bonds versus content

Language learning by immigrant students who have arrived in recent years illustrates well the effects of confinement on learning activities. Digital tools have maintained the students' school bonds but have not been useful for an adequate transmission and acquisition of content for which face-to-face contact is irreplaceable at these stages. The instructions given to teachers at the beginning consisted of assigning tasks but not advancing subject matter. The reduction in the content and knowledge transmitted is one of the greatest impacts of the pandemic and the confinement, confirmed by all interviewees, who acknowledged that the curricular contents equivalent to half a year were not taught. In the M2 school they acknowledged: "*Digitally they learnt a lot.... In terms of content, they learned less*". The head teacher of M1 school also explained that 5% of the student body "dropped out" completely: "*The impact has been huge (...) many pupils have not been able to connect, tutors have chased families, called social services when there was no way to reach families, a lot of work has been done to get students to connect and work. There have been pupils who have not joined in, or who have joined in and worked very little. There are children whose families can't help them, or don't know how to*". However, the B1 school pedagogical coordinator also commented that "*we have had surprises... students who you would not have imagined have responded well, and others who you expected to respond without problems have become disengaged... And it has not always had so much to do with their academic or social profile, or where they come from*". Many factors still need to be analysed in more depth to understand the complexity of experiences undergone by these adolescent students and the impact of the school closures and the confinement.

3.6 The 2020-21 academic year: new challenges in a new uncertainty

In the school year 2020-21 the teachers interviewed recognized that, rather than teaching content, they had to restore the working capacity of the students, who returned without having written texts and with poorer spelling due to the use of computer and mobile phone language. A teacher in school M4 described the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the school as a 10-year setback.

These effects have also been seen in the behaviour and habits of students, who became more addicted to video games and social networks, as we have pointed out earlier, which resulted in a lower tolerance for the routine of being in school. They came back "*without rules, without filters. Never at the beginning of a school year we have had to carry out as many interventions as in this school year. They come back with a great attachment to the*

networks, with a lot of aggressiveness derived from the networks or computer games, where they communicate and insult each other... We are absolutely scared. (...) They talk to teachers as if they were their parents, as they have not spoken in previous generations. Now they speak badly to parents and teachers", complained a teacher at the M2 school. The same was noted at school M4, where one of the teachers interviewed said that "*now, the boys more than the girls are finding it very difficult to get back into a routine of work. They are very sleepy, they don't come in good condition, they fall asleep in class, their eyes are closing. This is a problem that parents also tell us about. Now they have to keep to a timetable, especially the first- and second-year students. They are going to bed late because they are 'addicted' [to video games], and they must get up and maybe they come after sleeping for three or four hours (...) There is an increase in absenteeism, which is covered up with the issue of Covid-19, as if they were sick. But often they are in no condition to come to class after having slept so little. (...) [The situation of] all the students who were a bit lazy, with this issue, has become worse*".

In the M3 school they also observed this general deterioration, although they were able to retain a stronger school bond that keeps students coming to the school. "*They really wanted to go back to school. Now there is no absenteeism. They are happy at school even if they don't do anything. There are some kids who are 18 years old and prefer to be here because, perhaps, they don't have anything else to do outside*". In a similar way, a teacher from B1 school said that "*the administration is not aware of the conditions of the families and the needs of the students. I have students who are so eager to come to school that they come with borrowed masks! They pass them between different family members. The point is to be able to come*". It is worth remembering that, despite the fact that the use of masks is mandatory, the education administrations have not provided students or teachers with masks yet at the time of writing this article.

4. Some preliminary conclusions

This study aimed to contribute to understanding the impact of the pandemic and school closure on students from a qualitative and comparative approach by national origin and gender. From the experiences reported by the teachers interviewed, it seems clear that the use of digital tools to keep up with classes during the confinement did not serve to save the year, but rather to try to maintain a certain bond between the students and the school through the Internet, thus trying to cushion the impact of the confinement. It seems, therefore, that online education can hardly be taken as a substitute for face-to-face education at compulsory stages, and even less so among the most socially vulnerable and non-language proficient students, despite some unique strategies implemented on a voluntary basis. Nor does it seem appropriate to try to maintain the intensity and level of learning of face-to-face schooling in the virtual environment, reproducing the same intensity and level of learning as in face-to-face schooling, despite having a school routine may be beneficial in many respects, it requires constant supervision by the family, which is simply unrealistic. The testimony of school B4 is enlightening. According to the ESO coordinator: "*during the Easter holidays we started to adapt all the material to be able to teach classes in normal timetable, but via telematics, as we knew that the prestigious state schools were going to do, but it has been exhausting and frustrating for both teachers and students, and not only because of the more frequent precarious conditions of our students in terms of devices and connectivity*".

The months of confinement and the intermittent return to the classroom had a negative

impact on all students in the schools with the most socially vulnerable population and on immigrant students still in the process of learning the language(s) of tuition and/or dealing with their frequent curricular gap among those who have arrived in recent years. The consequences of what has been experienced during these two academic years seem likely to maintain the polarisation in the risk of early school leavers by origin among the cohorts concerned during secondary education. The same can be expected for the polarisation by gender.

The introduction of technology and digital tools in the teaching practices of schools prior to the pandemic had a great differential weight in their non-classroom training capacity and in the monitoring of students during confinement. However, the transmission of content was more difficult even in the best-prepared schools. And more than migration status, the impact of confinement had more to do with socio-economic vulnerability, i.e. access to devices and connectivity. Despite this, no plan could be identified to compensate for these gaps in teaching infrastructure; there were constant delays in the provision of materials, devices, and connectivity to the most vulnerable students between the confinement and the start of the following school year by the education administrations. Nor was any specific plan designed for newly arrived students.

One of the most relevant conclusions of this research was the finding that the differential relationship between boys and girls with technology and digital tools, despite their generational audio-visual socialisation (Pibernat Vila, 2019), also had a differential impact in following the year virtually during confinement, both among immigrant students and among national students. Disconnection from school by girls was lower, and the boys' higher use of the Internet for recreational purposes was identified, which accentuated their higher disconnection during the confinement and in the subsequent school year. This happened despite the fact that girls take on greater family burdens, which are increased by the exceptional conditions they have experienced.

Finally, a higher proportion of both Spanish and non-Spanish students were identified as being highly likely to have disengaged from schooling as part of the effect of isolation compared to previous years when this trend was beginning to decline. In the case of immigrant students in general, but more clearly in the Catalan school context, the risk of falling behind in education in the long term may have been significantly exacerbated by confinement. One of the biggest challenges will undoubtedly be to redouble efforts to successfully bring back into education that sector of the students that has already disengaged from the education system for almost two years.

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