**Forum:** General Assembly 2

**Issue:** Addressing the impact of the pandemic on education and ensuring equitable access to education in the post-pandemic world

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges in the field of education, disrupting traditional learning methods and exacerbating existing inequalities. At the peak of the pandemic, more than 188 countries, including 91% of enrolled learners worldwide, closed their schools to try to contain the spread of the virus. (OECD, 2020) As schools were forced to shift to remote learning environments, disparities arose in students’ access to technology and resources. Lower-income children and households from marginalized backgrounds were disproportionately affected, as they struggled to find the resources needed to continue their learning. This was especially evident in students from low-income backgrounds, students from ethnic minorities and indigenous backgrounds, LGBT students, and students with special education needs or learning disabilities. Dropout rates increased throughout schools. For example, figures from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) shows an increase of 9% in college dropout rates across the U.S. as compared to previous years. This has led to considerable student learning loss. The impact of this is severe, as it is closely correlated with reduced job prospects and earning potential, which limits economic growth and perpetuates a negative cycle of poverty.

Thus, in the post pandemic world, the need arises for countries to create comprehensive frameworks to ensure equitable access to education. This can involve potential measures that support the education of disadvantaged youth, abolishing barriers to education, providing mental health support to students and staff, and investing in additional teacher training. Key aspects to consider include bridging the pre-existing digital divide to ensure infrastructure and internet connectivity are effectively allocated to disadvantaged students, making efforts to provide catch-up programs and additional support to help students regain lost learning, and filling knowledge and skill gaps caused by extended school closures. Finally, solutions should address potential mental health support services to help students and educators with the emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic.

Definition of Key Terms

Learning Loss

This refers to declines in educational progress or achievements due to school closures, educational disruptions, or difficulties with remote learning during the pandemic.

Digital Divide

This refers to the disparity between students in terms of access to resources and digital technologies that are crucial for successful learning during the pandemic.

Equity in Education

This is the principle of ensuring fairness and equity in global educational systems, which means students should have equal access to resources, opportunities and support regardless of their socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, or disability.

Distance Learning

An educational approach where students participate in remote learning through digital platforms. They are not physically present in a traditional classroom setting. Instead, technology is used to facilitate teaching and learning.

Educational Disruptions

This refers to disruptions in the education system’s regular functioning. It can take form as school closures, shutdowns, etc. Educational disruptions can occur due to a variety of reasons such as public health crises or other unforeseen circumstances.

Background

History of the pandemic and education

A general overview of COVID-19

On December 31, 2019, the first coronavirus case was reported by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in Hubei, China. This virus was later identified as SARS-CoV-2, otherwise known as COVID-19. In January of the next year, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency Of International Concern. After spanning 114 countries in the time span of 3 months, the World Health Organization officially announced COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. (Tadesse and Muluye, 2020) Global vaccination efforts continued amidst new variants, as nations established recovery funds. In May of 2023, most nations began to ease their restrictions, cautiously reopening their economies. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022) This included the U.S., which ended its vaccine mandate for international visitors. Other nations like Japan followed by dropping proof of vaccine or negative pre-arrival testing requirements by late April. However, a few Asian countries like the Philipines maintained their restrictions, while China reopened only partially. (Whitmore, 2023)

***COVID-19 and education***

By mid April of 2020, 191 countries had shut down their primary and secondary schools to try and stop the spread of COVID-19. (McKinsey and Company, 2020) UNESCO reported that an estimate 87% of the world’s student population, and over 1.5 billion students, were affected by such school closures. (UNESCO, 2020) In August 2020, some nations began the new academic year with a mix of in-person, hybrid and remote learning models. In March 2021, a number of schools reopened with safety measures. After concern of student mental health growing throughout June, vaccination campaigns began to prioritize teachers and school faculty. (Blad, 2020) In November, UNESCO warned of a global learning crisis, where millions of students will inevitably fall behind due to disruptions caused by the pandemic. (UNESCO, 2020) Between 2021 and 2023, schools and universities across the world gradually returned to pre-pandemic learning, although some changes in teaching methods remained. For example, exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) remained optional, while some teachers still used new digital technologies to offer more interactive experiences for students. (Ratten, 2023)

Differences in education

Some schools shifted to online learning relatively successfully by quickly implementing student support services and staff training. However, others were constrained by a lack of access to technology and resources and struggled. Some schools in extremely disadvantaged areas lacked the basic digital infrastructure to even switch to remote learning, and learning shut down altogether.

*Public versus private schools*

A noticeable difference arose between the quality of remote learning for public and private schools. In many countries, private schools had better access to educational materials, digital technology, and student support. In 2020, 58% of private school principals reported that their students had internet service, while only 4% of public school principals reported the same. (Modan, 2022)

*Developed versus undeveloped countries*

This situation was most dire in developing countries that lacked internet connectivity, educational resources, and information technology. Some were able to adapt and deliver classes through radio, televisions, and other popular online platforms. However, the problem still remained that lower-income families did not have access to these technological devices, which created a large barrier to education. (Tadesse and Muluye, 2020) As schools in rural areas shut down, child marriages increased by as much as 13% in some regions, and more boys were forced to enter the workforce prematurely. (Sultana et al, 2022)

Disadvantaged and marginalized students

*Students of color*

A McKinsey & Company report on the 2021-2022 school year shows that while white students lost four to eight months of learning, the education gap widens disproportionately for students of color, who lost six to twelve months. (Dorn et al, 2020) Black students in particular were hit the hardest, as they were more likely to have inadequate access to technology, which led to significant losses in learning. (Scott, 2023) Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated preexisting systemic inequalities in education. Students of color were more likely to be enrolled in underfunded schools, which could not provide them with the necessary support and resources during remote learning. Moreover, they were more likely to come from lower income households, who faced additional challenges such as a lack of access to healthcare and economic hardships, which may impact their ability to engage and learn effectively.

***LBTQ students***

Remote learning was closely associated with rising rates of depression, anxiety and self-harm for LGBTQ students, who lost their school-based support systems and affirming networks. Due to remote learning, these students were more likely to face bullying and harassment from their peers and families, which may have lead to a decreased motivation to learn. (Lurye and Camera, 2022)

***Indigenous students***

According to studies, 89% of indigenous learners report experiencing mental strain due to the pandemic. Aside from increased rates of anxiety and depression, they also faced tangible challenges related to remote learning requirements. Around 25% did not have internet access and 16% did not have access to a computer. Before the pandemic, these students relied on on-campus resources and spaces like computer labs and campus wifi to study. These challenges affected their ability and motivation to learn. (Indspire, n.d)

Challenges for Educators

Due to the pandemic, educators also faced challenges such as decreased mental wellness, being more prone to stress and burnout, and anxiety over not being able to support their students effectively. Some challenges teachers face include grade inflation due to remote learning and being unable to supervise testing to prevent cheating. This has led to considerable impacts on teachers’ grading, assessment and evaluation of their students, contributing to their stress and anxiety. This has all led to concerns about a possible increase in teacher turnover rates and shortages. (Zamarro et al, 2021)

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO recognizes the impact of the pandemic on global education and is strongly committed to ensure equitable access to education. Its concern stems from its commitment to human rights and equal opportunities. Some of the affirmative actions it has taken include the establishment of the Global Education Coalition, which is a new model for international cooperation dealing with the after effects of the pandemic, and its high level ministerial meetings, which mobilized educational ministers to face challenges brought by COVID-19. (UNESCO, 2023) UNESCO has enabled 1 million learners to gain access to cost free supplemental instruction and supported 5 million girls in 20 countries in their education.

United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is deeply committed to providing equal access to education in the post pandemic world. It recognizes the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, amd how it hinders the Sustainable Development Goals. During the pandemic, UNICEF provided “water, sanitation, hygiene services and supplies” for 106 million people, including many children. This provided them with the basic necessities required to continue their learning. The organization also worked with COVAX to ensure equal vaccine distribution around the world, and reached over 130 million children through its social protection initiatives and cash transfers. (Thelwell, 2021)

United States of America (USA)

The USA is extremely concerned by and recognizes the importance of providing access to education in the post pandemic world, and the Biden Harris administration has taken measures. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) invested $130 billion in helping schools safety reopen, while also addressing the academic and mental health needs of students. This has increased the number of teachers and social workers, improved school environments, and helped several states return to pre-pandemic levels of achievement in math and literacy assessments. (U.S Department of Education, 2023)

United Kingdom (UK)

The UK is dedicated to keeping its schools open and ensuring equal opportunities for education both during and post pandemic. During the pandemic, England kept 71% of its schools open, which allowed more vulnerable pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to continue their education. It also allocated £37m to the Family Fund to help struggling households, thus increasing the motivation and ability of lower-income children to attend school. (Education Policy Institute, 2020)

People’s Republic of China (PRC)

The PRC is firmly committed to the safety of its students and educators in regards to the pandemic, and is focused on providing equal access to education. The PRC was one of the first countries to postpone all educational activities and switch to remote learning. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology launched an online portal for primary and secondary school students, which has helped millions with remote learning. Furthermore, it created plans to strengthen broadband coverage to ensure better access to the internet, and pledged to ensure universal access to quality education. The PRC has also subsidized students to gain access to equipment or pay for their internet. (Australian Government Department of Education, 2020)

Khan Academy

Khan Academy is an online learning nonprofit platform best known for its video tutorials. During the pandemic, usage of this platform has soared from 30 million minutes of learning per day to a peak of 92 million and an average of 75 million. Student and teacher registrations have increased almost six times, while parent registration increased ten to twenty times. Khan Academy has created detailed daily schedules and hosted webinars to aid students and parents during remote learning, and continues to play an important role in post pandemic education. (Anderson, 2020)

Timeline of Events

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| --- | --- |
| Date | Description of event |
| December 31st, 2019 | First case of what was later identified as SARS-CoV-2 is reported by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, it is alos known as COVID-19 |
| January 30th, 2020 | WHO declares COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency (PHE) of international concern |
| March 11th, 2020 | WHO declares COVID-19 as a pandemic |
| April, 2020 | 191 countries shut down primary and secondary school in response to the pandemic |
| August, 2020 | Certain countries adopt hybrid learning methods, while others remain online |
| March, 2021 | Many schools across the world reopen, however with adaptations such as mask requirements |
| May 5th, 2023 | WHO declares an end to the PHE for COVID-19 |

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

As this issue of post pandemic education is still relatively recent, there are some uncertainties about the success of previous attempts to resolve the issue, thus more monitoring is necessary to be conclusive regarding next steps.

In response to the educational inequalities faced, UNICEF, alongside other foundations, introduced the RAPID framework. RAPID stood for: Reach every child and keep them in school; Assess learning levels regularly; Prioritize teaching the fundamentals; Increase the efficiency of instruction, including through catch-up learning; and Develop psychosocial health and well being. This framework was primarly measured using UNICEF’s Pulse Survey and the Global Education Recovery Tracker (GERT) survey.

Firstly, countries implemented measures such as community mobilization campagins and financial support as to motivate school attendance. Specifically for countries such as the Dominican Republic and Peru, UNICEF aided in the use of an Early Warning app, this app tracked attendance rates of children in order to identify groups at risk of dropout. This identification system allowed then for targeted measures to be taken such as tutoring or specialized programs. The app proved to be successful, as a recorded 89% of the 428,000 students identified as those prone to dropout, continued studying. In places where an app was not accessible, other identification methods were in place.

In addition, learning levels were assessed, for school curriculumns to best reflect the needs of students, as well as overall make changes to support learning recovery. One of the main aspects of RAPID is increasing the efficiency of instruction, which relates to the provision of digital tools in places previously unaccesible. For example, in Bangladesh, schools were supported by UNICEF with the development of thousands of television, radio, and digital lessons, which were then distributed to students.

Overall the RAPID framework is one of the most prominent previous attempts to resolve the issue, with various evident achivements. Thus, components of the framework can be built on and improved to further compat the topic of equitable acess to education in a post-pandemic world.

Relevant past UN resolutions related to the topic of education:

* United Nations General Assembly resolution on education for all, 30/1/1998 (A/RES/52/84)
* The right to education, 18/06/2008 (A/HRC/RES/8/4)
* Education for sustainable development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainabile Development, 6/1/2022 (A/RES/76/209)

Possible Solutions

It is vital that a comprehensive and encompassing approach is taken to address the issue of inequitable education in a post-pandemic world and that the solutions focused on long-term measures. It should also be understood that while certain solutions can be broadly applicable, there are more educational disparities in certain areas than others, and thus, this should be reflected accordingly.

Undoubtedly, technology plays an immense role in education in the 21st century, and familiarity with digital tools is becoming an important skill, not only for education purposes but also to prepare students for a digitized future. The pandemic clearly demonstrated how the inequalities in access to digital resources and devices hinder learning, especially for LEDCs and marginalized groups. There are a variety of ways in which this can be acted opon, not only with the distribution of devices, but also support to educate effective use of technology. Investment in the skills of digital learning is essential not only for students but for teachers, too. Professional development programs and lessons for teachers can provide a means of improving teaching methods; thus, to achieve universal connectivity and lessen inequality, the gap in accessibility to adequate digital educational tools must be bridged. One of the main concerns of this issue is the need for more funding to assist in enhanced educational systems. For many LEDCs, the education path is not deemed obligatory, and insufficient government attention is a complication that further exacerbates the issue. Inadequate infrastructures, resources, and education limit educational opportunities and perpetuated cycles of poverty. Funding requires efforts from multiple stakeholders and can be worked towards through international cooperation and efficient resource management.

Furthermore, during online learning students stuggled with the limitations of remote education, resulting in them not being sufficiently prepared for upcoming grade levels. This brought up the need for educational systems to adapt to the new realities of education, through policy reform as well as updated curriculms. Schools may avoid traditional test-taking by introducing projects-based assessments, portfolios, or other flexible strategies. In terms of flexibility, educators may consider differentiating instructional methods depending on students needs, to have assignments cater to students varied learning styles. Alonside this, developing the teachings of skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communications skills assits in promoting deeper levels of conceptual understanding of topics, allowing for stronger foundations for students to move forward with. Revision and practice of previously learned topics should be promoted, to assist in long term retention of key lessons, and ensure fluency. Certain topics can be more efficiently instructed on, so that a wider variety of topics can be covered while focusing on the most necessary components. To add on, engagement of students has become more important than ever following the pandemic, and should be taken into account when developing lesson so students can experience a more collaborative and interactive approach to education.

Another solution involves the development of programs that support students in recoving lessons so as to reach the standard necessary. Certain catch-up methods such as tutoring, exteneded class times, summer programms, and more can be helpful in bridging the educational gaps resulting from the pandemic, however issues of accessibility would also need to be adressed.

Additionally, the struggle students faced with remote learning were not only in regards to academics, but also with social emotional well being. Mental health issues arose during the pandemic, and thus, well-being should be prioritized through the provision of counseling, integration of social-emotional topics into curriculums, and more.

Grade inflation during the pandemic should also be considered. Grade inflation refers to the grading of student’s work that is higher than what they deserve, and can be done both intentionally and unintentionally. This was seen during the pandemic, as schools were easing standards for what was acceptable to earn a higher grade. This results in numerous issues, such as higher competition, lowered academic quality, and an overall poor learning envionrnment. Overall, the addressing of this issue mainly involves the systematic changes needed from professors and administrators, as it should not be used as a way to validate a schools’s success, but instead grades should be reflective of a student’s ability. Adhering to a more standardized grading rubric, giving more qualitative feedback, as well as showing specific examples of work for each grade requirement may be useful in combating grade inflation.

Overall, alongside these possible solutions, there is an overarching need for education to be recognized as a human right to a greater extent. It is key that education is approached in a manner that allows for post-pandemic education to be more inclusive and ubiquitous; delegates should consider feasible solutions that view the issue holistically.

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