COVID-19 and the growing digital divide in education

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Intro [00:00:02] Welcome to OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:00:06] The COVID-19 crisis has radically transformed how we live, how we work, how we learn. Thank goodness this hasn't meant that learning has stopped. Teachers, students and families have taken up digital tools en masse. But while remote learning has become a lifeline, it has also exposed underlying inequalities in access to digital resources like home computers, for example, and even simply access to a quiet place to study at home. And now, with confinement measures easing in a number of OECD countries, some students are returning to schools and to a new normal that will further transform learning. I'm Shane Maclachlan and you're listening to OECD Podcasts.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:00:51] I'm joined today by Tracey Burns, who's a senior analyst at the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. And today we're going to explore what this world that's being reshaped by COVID-19 means for education. So, welcome, Tracey. And thank you so much for joining us.

Tracey Burns [00:01:08] Thank you, Shane, it's a pleasure to be here.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:01:10] So let's just get straight into it. A lot of kids and young people in 170 different countries are stuck at home. Tracy, what would you say about education? Some are saying that education is kind of in lockdown, too. Can you give us an idea or a feel for the current situation?

Tracey Burns [00:01:27] Great question. I think it's quite clear that this is an unprecedented experience across the world, not just within OECD countries, but worldwide. And the numbers are changing daily. Just as we saw millions of students being affected in this week alone, UNESCO figures are showing that at the beginning of the week, there were 1.6 billion children that were affected by school closures. And right now, it's down to 1.2. And this is expected to keep dropping as countries start opening up their schools more and more. Those numbers will continue to keep dropping, hopefully as long as public health permits.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:02:00] You recently wrote in a OECD blog piece that disruption is the new normal. And you went on to say that this could last for at least the next 18 months, what this might look like and whether this crisis could help us revisit the organisation of learning in schools. And I'm keen to know about some of the factors that we would need to consider in this potential re-organisation.

Tracey Burns [00:02:25] So that's a tough question, actually. I mean, I think it's quite clear that school, as we know it, has stopped in most countries, although it's worth mentioning that not all schools are closed in all countries. So, some countries have kept their schools open. Sweden, for example, is the standard case. But also, schools have remained open for the most vulnerable. For example, in the UK or Norway, they've actually kept the schools open for the most marginalised children. But on the whole, I would say, yes, there's been massive, massive changes to schooling and learning. It has transferred fundamentally online where it's possible, where systems permit is. This is reflected by the challenges faced by many parents around the world and also teachers who are struggling in this new situation to, you know, with very little notice to kind of redo their curriculum or teaching methods or thinking what the best approaches to time scales right now. There's the immediate return to school. So, schools are starting to open their doors, more and more children are coming, etc. And that has its own set of concerns around hygiene, around trust, and

making parents feel that they can safely send their children to school, but also assessing possible learning losses and understanding what teachers should be doing. But then there's a second timescale, which is this idea of not only are we going to be moving to go back to school and kind of regain from this period and this sort of very acute crisis. But we'll be having to continuously think about planning for this new normal, which is the next 12 to 24 months.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:03:59] And of course, being stuck at home has meant that our livelihoods, our lives and our schools indeed are now on line and for some pretty much on the line. So, for those that can't go to work, obviously, everything's digital. What are some of the consequences of this for students, Tracy? And how can schools continue to reach out to involve all families? Even the hardest to reach?

Tracey Burns [00:04:22] One thing that's clear is if you don't have access to a digital device or know how to use it--and there are two parts to this: first, access; second, knowing how to use it--you are massively, massively disadvantaged. We do know from the latest PISA data in 2018 that 90% of students across the OECD said that they had access to a computer for school work. But there was a 17% difference between the students from advantaged homes and from disadvantaged. And of course, the question was asked pre-COVID-19, and was, do you have access theoretically to a computer which you might have to share with other siblings? Now the reality is that, as you mentioned for your family, you need in many cases a dedicated device per child, which is simply not possible for many, many families, and especially not the most vulnerable. So, one of the things that's been really interesting is looking at what countries have done to try and bridge this digital divide. New Zealand, for example, and also Mexico have put a lot of lessons and school courses on TV, which is a brilliant initiative because you're really reaching many, many more people and able to kind of encourage them and keep them active throughout the day with good television. Of course, if you have multiple children of different ages in the same home, you are not necessarily having different TV ads for each of them, but at least it's a little bit of help. Another thing that's being done is, of course, really helping and sort of reaching out to bring devices to children in need, children that don't have access and trying to understand how to keep them involved in their schoolwork while waiting for the devices or while they've just been given one. But of course, the concerns are really about the most vulnerable. We know that disadvantaged children are less likely to have not only access to the devices, but the skills to use them. And really key is that parents are less likely to have the skills to help their children. So, it's really a potentially very difficult situation for the most vulnerable children.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:06:22] And I can imagine, too, that as our lives are increasingly online, not just for children, we did quite a bit of work around protecting children online at the OECD, of course, but there are important risks there.

Tracey Burns [00:06:35] What's being talked about right now in a really sort of immediate way, is the worry of children being exposed to contact risks. So being approached by people with inappropriate content or by predators online and those kinds of things. I was listening to a podcast on this yesterday from France was do children know where to go? Do they actually know what to do if they've been approached? And in many cases, the answer is no. So, one question is knowing what to do. The countries and the system and organisations that are responsible for responding to these kinds of things are reporting a rise in tips and complaints from children and their parents. There's clearly more activity by potential predators or by potential people trying to look for those loopholes. And then there's another much more systematic risk, which is in the rush to go online a lot of schools and school systems didn't really have time to read through

all the privacy agreements on the protection of student data agreements. That comes when you sign up to a package.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:07:34] Indeed. Just to shift the conversation a bit, to talk a little bit about academic performance. You've spoken a little bit about our digital well-being. But we know that many countries have been on lockdown now for two months. Do you have any early evidence that this has an impact on the academic performance of students?

Tracey Burns [00:07:55] This is the biggest task that you just have when they go back to school is assessing the impact and trying to understand where students are in terms of lessons. One is whether or not they've followed their lessons appropriately, whether they're aligned with the current curriculum. I think in most cases the answer there's no real research that's been done on this. But I think it's pretty clear that students have not been able to follow as if there's not no change. So, there is a big expectation that there is a hit in learning loss. But then there's also the potential that students are actually sort of doing worse from before they went. So, they've actually lost ground from what they previously knew because they weren't motivated or they didn't keep active or they weren't able to build the knowledge that they even had previous to the break. Part of this is a huge concern around academic performance, but that's also tied again to emotional well-being, because learning requires you to be alert and happy and able to understand what's being taught to you and be engaged as a learner.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:08:57] That's a bit of a problem, isn't it? When most things are hands-on and they really do require the tools and so on in the school setting. The challenge is definitely there.

Tracey Burns [00:09:07] Well, when you're speaking to teachers, one thing that's really clear is a lot of them had to really adjust their expectations. So, moving online was not simply a different mode of delivery. It was sort of a fundamental different way of learning. And teachers felt immediately they had to adjust their way of teaching, but also their expectations, they had to reduce what they thought they could cover in a day. In many systems, this is an explicit instruction that you must reduce your expectations. You must cover less. In others, there is a real focus on the core subjects like maths or art or reading or science, and all the electives are pushed to the background. And in some cases, those electives have either been cancelled or they've really been transitioning to just really working with student well-being and comforting them, because this is actually a traumatic moment in their lives. Whether you're young or you're older, well, actually, it impacts all of us. And so, one of the questions is how do you actually keep people together during this period? I think it's quite clear that there's been a large effect. And one of the real questions is how are we going to actually recover from that in the best way possible?

Shayne Maclachlan [00:10:16] Safety is going to be a priority, it's going to be paramount in schools as we move forward. So, Tracy, can you give us an idea of some of the measures that authorities need to consider as they open the school gates?

Tracey Burns [00:10:30] Yes, and this is where we can really learn from countries that have already done this, because there are some that are sort of a month or a few weeks ahead of the others.

[00:10:39] And so one of the big things, of course, is just physical security, disinfecting the buildings, actually providing safe classrooms. Another one is that a lot of efforts to reduce and increase social distancing abilities. Having fewer students in classes, bigger spaces between the desks, more time for students to be on their own and not as close to their peers. Having teachers, for example, stay in a bubble with a particular set of students and not move between classrooms. Having students stay in one class the whole day instead of moving. Those kinds of things. And also, of course, thinking through how you do the lunch break. Do you stagger it at different times or do you keep the kids in their own rooms? There are different choices that systems are making, which are actually quite interesting because they're finding their own way forward in this, but they're all focussed on creating the safest environment possible and also, of course, building the trust and confidence of parents because they need to feel that they are comfortable sending their children back to school. And so, that's one of the big challenges, as well as not just keeping things safe and making sure that they're ready to go for children, but really convincing the parents and the teachers that these buildings are, in fact, safe and their health won't be compromised by going there.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:11:58] The last question today is really about the future and what we do from here. And I know we're not there yet, but I'm just keen to hear from you, Tracy, about how we can build resilient systems and schools that will be resistant to future shocks.

Tracey Burns [00:12:12] Well, that is the question, right? I mean, I think the thing is, is and this is one of the great difficulties of this moment is the global pandemic was one of the possible future shocks that we've been discussing for 30 years. You know, this was always one of the things that could come and disrupt everything. And despite the fact that it's been well-known as a potential shock, we all managed to still be struck by it. So, there's I think there's an issue around, you know, really thinking through how we can adapt and make things more resilient for the future. But then there's also the understanding that if push comes to shove, the sort of hard day to day realities often crowd out these ideas. So getting learning right now is more important for many people than really creating systems that can sort of survive different possible threats to the future. And I think we need to be really careful also on what we expect of education, because I'd say that we're expecting an enormous economic downturn. When we talk about how we can build up an education and learn from all the opportunities, and the crazy, wonderful innovations that we've seen across all the OECD countries, we're thinking, well, how can we carry that up or scale that out on a broader level? These things will cost money. What can we say has worked and what has worked well? In order to do that, we actually need evaluation and this will take some time. But once we've identified that, how can we build that into our system? How can we help teachers be ready to keep that going, to try these new roles, etc.? This whole experience, I think has for almost everyone really reminded us of the power of the physical world. We are a social species. When we have these discussions about, for example, moving learning online entirely, one of the real sort of reasons it doesn't always work is because, in fact, we like to be in class together or we like to think through how we can have a good time and laugh with our friends. Thinking about building systems for the future is going to be a lot about thinking economic trade-offs and spending priorities. But it also has to be very much about the human element of learning and education as we know it, as broadly defined education for academics, but also education for citizens. And I think that's one of the areas where we're expecting a lot of really interesting discussions in our countries. We're seeing it already. Countries are really embracing these kinds of challenges. And so, I'm looking forward to hearing what they decide.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:14:38] Tracy, thank you so much for joining us today, speaking with OECD Podcasts and sharing your knowledge and experience.

Tracey Burns [00:14:44] My pleasure.

Shayne Maclachlan [00:14:45] To learn more, use your online devices in whatever shape or form they might be and visit www.oecd.org/coronavirus. All of our policy papers, blogs, podcasts, videos and other media can be found there.

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