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Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People After Covid-19

Editors
Spyros Themelis and Angela Tuck

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Academic Editors
Spyros Themelis (University of East Anglia)
Angela Tuck (Pakefield High School)

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Editorial

Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People After Covid-19

Spyros Themelis [1,*] and Angela Tuck [2]

[1] School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, UK
[2] Pakefield High School, UK

* Corresponding author (s.themelis@uea.ac.uk)

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Abstract
Although the exact impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the inclusion of vulnerable children and young people—nationally and internationally—is unknown, historical failures to address the link between poverty and low educational outcomes have reversed any progress hitherto achieved. This thematic issue speaks to the challenges faced by, and promises of inclusion made to, children and young people in the most vulnerable circumstances: It brings together a set of articles that detail the challenges educators, educational institutions, and students faced during the pandemic, while also discussing innovative approaches to include pupils in mainstream education and help them make progress against the odds. The pandemic has been an opportunity for both learning and unlocking potentialities toward innovative solutions. Taking stock of these solutions is important in preparing and strengthening schools, educators, and students to face the post-pandemic era that is dawning, for public education systems need not only be seen as sites of frustration and challenge, but also as sites of promise and possibility.

Keywords
Covid-19; educational inclusion; pandemic; social disadvantage; vulnerable children; young people

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People after Covid-19" edited by Spyros Themelis (University of East Anglia) and Angela Tuck (Pakefield High School).

1. Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People Revisited

The overall impact of the pandemic on educational inequalities and the inclusion of vulnerable children and young people nationally and internationally is hard to gauge. However, in all certainty, "an even greater chasm between those attending outstanding schools, and who have access to parental resources, and those who are not so lucky" has emerged (Eyles et al., 2020, p. 6). It is, therefore, apropos to ask how wide that "chasm" was before the start of the pandemic, and how much wider it has grown. According to a UK-derived estimate, if things kept moving at the rate of pace before Covid-19 struck, it would take 560 years for the "disadvantage gap" to close (Hutchinson et al., 2019). In the pre-pandemic era, "pupil engagement and disadvantaged pupil engagement were both lower in the most deprived schools. Teachers in the most deprived schools were in contact with fewer pupils" (NFER, 2020, p. 4). At the earlier stages of the pandemic, some commentators expressed fears that school closures could amplify the existing attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers among primary school children by 36%, by September 2020 (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). Notwithstanding the accuracy of this estimate, the data collected since then offer some justification for the feared increase in the pertinent gap. According to a recent report:

> By January 2021, 84% of teachers felt the pandemic would cause the attainment gap between the most

> and least disadvantaged to widen in their school (whereas it was 76% in November), with a third believing this gap would be "substantial" (33%, up from 28% in November). Teachers serving the most disadvantaged schools were most concerned about the attainment gap. (Teacher Tapp as cited in Howard et al., 2021)

During the pandemic, families from disadvantaged backgrounds faced even bigger challenges in providing their offspring with adequate resources to support homeschooling or providing sufficient space for study at home (Auriemma & Iannaccone, 2020; Reimer et al., 2020). There is growing evidence that the pandemic has augmented the gulf between affluent and disadvantaged students with repercussions that will be felt for many decades to come.

However, the pandemic does not and cannot account for historical failures to address the link between poverty and low educational outcomes. For example, those with low educational attainment were almost five times more likely to be in poverty than their counterparts with a high level of education (Serafino & Tonkin, 2014). The pandemic seems to have solidified and entrenched such differentials. There is little doubt that the effect of the latter will mar educational and socio-economic outcomes in the long-term and a big loss in educational opportunities and skills is expected until around 2080, which will also have a knock-on effect on poverty (The DELVE Initiative, 2020).

While the inclusion of the most marginalised children and young people was long overdue before the pandemic, it should become a top national and international priority after it. Including the most vulnerable and marginalised has beneficial implications for their life chances both in terms of increased educational opportunities, but also in terms of "health, well-being, and quality of life" (Filia et al., 2018, p. 183). Conversely, the socioeconomic consequences caused by educational and social exclusion adversely affect wider society by way of an additional financial burden and lack of social cohesion. In response to this, efforts for inclusion in education have led to a "deficit approach to education provision" where schools "target their resources towards identifying and 'fixing' students to improve performance scores" (Larsen et al., 2019, p. 1050). We argue that this is a flawed model of inclusion, both in theory and practice, and it does not lead to actual inclusion. This thematic issue speaks to the challenges and promises of inclusion of the most vulnerable children and young people. It discusses some innovative approaches to include pupils in mainstream education and help them make progress against the odds.

2. From Pandemic Fixing to Pandemic Learning

When the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic spread and societies locked down, education in many countries moved online. As McNair et al. (2022) discuss in this volume, this reality immediately highlighted inconsistencies in access to education as governments and other stakeholders explored different ways to enable young people to participate in remote learning. In a comparative study that included Brazil, Eswatini, South Africa, and Scotland, the authors found that the pandemic was the catalyst for eroding or even ignoring children's rights and that violence and poverty threatened the protection of their basic rights, which goes against the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

This revised perspective on inclusion demonstrated a piecemeal problem-solving approach, which failed to consider wider issues, such as wellbeing and belongingness. For example, Szelei et al.'s (2022) findings from a comparative study on six European countries (including Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK), showed that the pandemic did not alter the experiences of belonging for migrant students, probably because they were already exposed to disruption in their education. It also showed that belonging is not homogenous, but a dynamic and changing experience for migrant students.

With online access, it seemed that vulnerable, previously more excluded young people became included. However, it was soon realised that they lacked previous experience with the social rules around remote participation in online activities and lack of access to the "code" of appropriate use and online safety, as Platero and López-Sáez (2022) discuss. Therefore, they became vulnerable to a widening gap and the risk of becoming even more excluded (Colombo & Santagati, 2022).

However, other contexts provide respite from an approach to online learning that, at best, could be described as troubleshooting. In their article, McNair et al. (2022) argue that, even though the pandemic "spotlighted'' inequalities that already existed, schools and teachers were quick to identify and implement innovative practices to reduce the immediate gaps. Ebubedike et al. (2022) highlight how a well-tested approach, namely education delivered by radio school in local languages in Northern Nigeria, has proved successful in terms of uptake. The use of a young person's first language, even when alongside the "host" language ("translanguaging"), facilitates active participation and has previously been upheld as exemplary practice for inclusion (DeNicolo, 2019).

Colombo and Santagati (2022, p. 195) discuss how relationships were built with some particularly vulnerable young people and their families as teachers made contact in a "customized, emphatic, and more attentive manner." In other contexts, stakeholders reviewed accessibility and took action to redress it where it was lacking. It also led to a re-evaluation of the parameters within which inclusion operates and made us reimagine what inclusive education could look like. There is hope that the lessons from the pandemic will lead to more meaningful inclusion in the future.

Addressing the needs of vulnerable children and young people needs to move beyond deficit and one-size-fits-all approaches. As Platero and López-Sáez (2022) conclude in relation to the needs of LGBTQ+ young people in Spain, interventions need to be nuanced to address their intersectional characteristics and the particular type of violence they experience. Educational institutions need to work with the social networks of these people and the applications they use on their devices if they are to effectively support them.

The pandemic has been an opportunity for learning and unlocking potentialities for innovative solutions. More importantly, it has also been a springboard for the coming together of school communities and educational stakeholders to achieve commonly upheld targets (Colombo et al., in press). Teacher upskilling, not least in the use of technology, needs to be seen as a welcome opportunity to extend its benefits for the continuing support vulnerable groups will need also after the pandemic. As Vegas and Winthrop (2020) argue "strong and inclusive public education systems are essential to the short—and long-term recovery of society and that there is an opportunity to leapfrog toward powered-up schools.'' It is also time to envision public education systems emerging from the pandemic stronger than ever before.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Spyros Themelis is an associate professor of education at the University of East Anglia. He has published the monograph *Social Change and Education in Greece* (Palgrave, 2013) and several papers in international journals. His latest book is *Critical Reflections on the Language of Neoliberalism in Education: Dangerous Words and Discourses of Possibility* (Routledge, 2021).

Angela Tuck is an associate assistant head (SENDCo) at Pakefield High School. She completed an Education doctorate at the University of East Anglia. Her research focused on the inclusion of a small group of Traveller young people from an educational perspective, but also as a socio-cultural process. She contributed a chapter on social inclusion in *Critical Reflections on the Language of Neoliberalism in Education: Dangerous Words and Discourses of Possibility* (Routledge, 2021).

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Article

The Impact of the Covid-19 Global Health Pandemic in Early Childhood Education Within Four Countries

Lynn McNair [1,*], John Ravenscroft [1], Irene Rizzini [2], Kay Tisdall [1], Linda Biersteker [3], Fortunate Shabalala [4], S'lungile K. Thwala [5], Clement N. Dlamini [6], Malcolm Bush [2], Malibongwe Gwele [3], and Lizette Berry [3]

[1] Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, UK
[2] CIESPI, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
[3] Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Cape Town, South Africa
[4] Department of Community Health Nursing Science, University of Eswatini, Eswatini
[5] Department of Educational Foundations and Management, University of Eswatini, Eswatini
[6] Centre for Community Services, University of Eswatini, Eswatini

* Corresponding author (lynn.mcnair@ed.ac.uk)

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Abstract
The recent Covid-19 global health pandemic has negatively affected the political and economic development of communities around the world. This article shares the lessons from our multi-country project Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts (UKRI GCRF) on how children in communities in Brazil, Eswatini, South Africa, and Scotland have experienced the effects of the pandemic. This article benefits from having co-authors from various countries, bringing their own located knowledge to considerations of children's rights and early childhood education in the wake of the pandemic. The authors discuss different perspectives on children's human rights within historical, social, and cultural contexts and, by doing so, will discuss how the global pandemic has placed a spotlight on the previous inequalities within early years education and how the disparity of those with capital (economic and social) have led to an even greater disproportion of children needing health and educational support.

Keywords
children's rights; Covid-19; early childhood; sustainable development goals

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1. Introduction

Cameron and Moss (2020, p. xv; see also Bambra et al., 2020) articulate an increasingly common narrative on the Covid-19 pandemic and the policy responses to it:

> Covid-19 swept across continents and countries, leaving disruption, suffering and death in its wake, compelling governments to take in unprecedented steps to try to contain and suppress this plaque, placing populations under lockdown and mobilising resources that would have seemed unimaginable a few weeks earlier. Covid-19 has also mercilessly exposed the flaws of the societies it has ravaged: the inequalities and injustices, as the poor, the precarious and other vulnerable groups have suffered the most; the neglect of public services and the undermining of welfare states that have weakened the capacity to resist; and the erosion of values necessary for effective collective action—equality, democracy, solidarity…countless acts of individual and community kindness and care.

In efforts to address the pandemic, governments instituted policies to protect health and survival. These policy responses have shown the potential to "make the impossible possible," such as the rapid creation of viable vaccines, but also highlighted pervasive and longstanding problems made worse by a range of concerning inequalities. This narrative applies generally, but also particularly, to children. The health repercussions of Covid-19 were most directly felt by older adults and those with underlying health conditions, whereas younger children were less likely to fall ill due to Covid-19 (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2020). Furthermore, if they did, generally (but not always) children tended to have better health outcomes than adults (Irfan et al., 2021). Thus, it was the policy responses, as much as the virus itself, which have dramatically effected children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic radically restricted mobility, with almost every country requiring children to remain within their households during lockdowns; education and other services were either stopped or, if available, often only through online learning (OECD, 2020b). Children's human rights experts have been considerably concerned that various lockdown measures, developed as emergency responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, have had negative impacts on children: While the restrictions importantly sought to protect rights to health, survival, and development, other rights regarding nutrition and education (through online schooling for example) appeared to take a secondary role, leading to profound short- and long-term repercussions (Lundy et al., 2021; Peleg et al., 2021). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was justified, in its preamble, because children needed "special safeguards" and care, and because children were living in "exceptionally difficult conditions" who needed "special consideration." While its vulnerability basis can be critiqued, the UNCRC was framed and justified in having a particular convention for children because they were particularly vulnerable (Tisdall & Morrison, in press).

This article presents a multi-country analysis of how young children and their human rights have fared due to the pandemic and its responses. It draws from the project Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts (UKRI GCRF) and the partner countries of Brazil, Eswatini, Scotland (UK), and South Africa were used. These countries provide a diversity of perspectives in terms of their historical and cultural contexts; Brazil and South Africa are identified as upper-middle-income countries, Eswatini is classified as lower-middle-income, and Scotland is a high-income country (OECD, 2021). Furthermore, the UK being the state party for the UNCRC, Scotland has recently gone even further than the UK in legislation for domestic incorporation of the UNCRC. All four countries have certain key similarities in terms of articulated commitments to children's human rights, all have ratified the UNCRC, and have been actively and rapidly developing their early childhood policies. Pertinent for this article, they all faced particularly high rates of infection by Covid-19 during the first waves of the pandemic (OECD, 2020a).

The pandemic occurred during the research for the project when country teams were undertaking their policy and systems analysis for early childhood education at national and community case study levels. Drawing on frameworks developed by Kagan et al. (2016) and policy discourse analysis by Bacchi (2012), the teams were undertaking documentary analysis, selective stakeholder interviews, and analysed available statistical data. With this foundation of pre-pandemic analysis, the team were in the position to continue with their stakeholders at national and community levels to explore the implications of the pandemic and its policy responses for young children and their families, as these impact their early childhood education. Each country team has drawn upon available data sets and then applied and interpreted the data through the lens of the UNCRC. This article benefits from having co-authors from various countries, bringing their own located knowledge to considerations of children's rights and early childhood education in the wake of the pandemic. The authors discuss different perspectives on children's human rights within historical, social, and cultural contexts, with due consideration of power relations and their ensuing implementation through policies, practices, and service (Collins et al., 2021).

The article first outlines key elements of the children's human rights framework for early childhood. It then uses this framework to consider each country's policy responses to the pandemic and concludes by discussing common themes as we face continued uncertainty for both human rights and public health.

2. Children's Human Rights in Early Childhood

The UNCRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world. It brings together economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights, specified for children, and sets out the explicit rights that all children have to help fulfil their potential. These rights apply to all children under the age of 18. This is particularly important for early childhood education, as governments across the world are moving to compulsory pre-school and early education. The sustainable development goals (SDGs), following an internationally agreed agenda up to 2030, specify in target 4.2 that governments need to prioritise access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education for all children by 2030 (United Nations, 2016). With this international agenda, developing early childhood education in light of children's human rights has become a necessary yet challenging consideration.

There are four general principles of the UNCRC: article 2 (non-discrimination), article 3 (a child's bests interests must be a primary consideration), article 6 (survival, health and development), and article 12 (a child's right to

have their views be given due weight in all matters that affect them). Furthermore, several articles are particularly relevant to our work and the right to education on the basis of equal opportunity: Article 28 includes reaching a child's fullest potential; article 29 is the child's right to rest, leisure, and play; article 31 is the child's right to an adequate standard of living; article 27 is the child's right to safety and protection. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) issued a General Comment on early childhood that emphasises that young children are rights-holders and that their rights to education begin at birth.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) responded to the risks that the Covid-19 pandemic was posing to children's rights and issued 11 recommendations. The recommendations begin with the need to consider the "health, social, educational, economic and recreational impacts" (p. 1) of the pandemic on children's rights, and that restrictions of human rights should only be imposed when necessary and to the minimum extent possible. Special attention was needed in a number of areas, from ensuring that online learning does not increase existing inequalities, to a child's rights to recreation and outdoor activities, to nutritious food and protection. As evidence is accumulating on the impacts of the pandemic (and even more, the policy responses to the pandemic), it is increasingly evident how the resultant impacts have exacerbated existing inequalities due to such factors as gender, poverty and racism, as well as hastened other trends such as the growing risks of digital exclusion and poor mental health amongst children (Bambra et al., 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Below, each country context is considered in relation to the available evidence and implications for children's human rights.

2.1. Brazil

Brazil has longstanding and strong directives about the rights of children. These directives are contained in the country's 1988 Federal Constitution, the Statute on the Child and the Adolescent of 1990, and the 2015 New Law on Early Childhood, which in turn reflect the UNCRC. These instruments establish the absolute priority of children's needs, conceptualising children as "subjects of rights" who are entitled to rights. However, these directives are part of a country that previously suffered colonial rule followed by a military dictatorship. It was not until the 1988 Constitution that structures of democratic government were brought in. Vestiges of the former regimes have created serious doubts about the commitment to human rights, particularly as the government has recently declared itself against human rights principles. The authoritarian elements in the structure of current Brazilian governments date back to the colonial period of Portuguese rule (Chauí, 2013).

The following material comes from published sources and from the first two years of the four-year project on which this article is based. The latter is based on extensive interviews with key community people in the low-income community of Rocinha in Rio, community members of a project advisory committee, senior staff in kindergartens (*creches*) in that community, and an initial set of five interviews with parents who have children in *creches*. This section also draws on the team's ongoing involvement with the National Early Childhood Network, the premier early childhood network in Brazil with over 200 organisational members.

Covid-19 struck Brazil hard with almost 21 million confirmed cases and 580,000 deaths in a population of 214 million (Worldometers, 2021). Brazil has a public health system that covers 61% of the population, a wide distribution of public health clinics, and an excellent vaccine delivery system. However, the pandemic overwhelmed the system in many parts of the country and the national administration's refusal to respond to the crisis initially led to a crucial lack of vaccines. Brazilian data from March 2021 showed that 779 children up to the age of 12 died from Covid-19, 11,628 were hospitalised, and 2,907 required intensive care. Of these totals, 24% of the deaths and 22% of the hospitalisations occurred in the three months prior to May 2021 (Worldometers, 2021).

Brazil experienced the closure of a significant number of early childhood education centres (ECECs) with the pattern partly dependent on whether these were public, private, or non-profit. The interruption of in-person schooling robbed children of part of their protection network, their right to be safe and included. Time spent at home can increase family conflicts and long internet use enables child sexual grooming (Kloess et al., 2014). Early childhood educators are trained to notice adverse behaviour and report violence against children. Being cut off from those teachers and other families and friends adds to this separation from sources of help. Given the greater use of the internet by families in 2021, the 2014 finding is likely to hold even more strongly in the current situation where school closures and job loss put families increasingly together in isolation (UNICEF, 2020).

In 2020, Brazil experienced reports of violence against children and youths higher than in any year since 2013. There were 95,247 reports on the Disc 100, a public reporting system. The greater parts of the reports were about children aged five to nine with the main aggressors being fathers or mothers (Worldometers, 2021). By the end of 2020, 59.4% of the Brazilian population, or 124 million people, were encountering some degree of food insecurity. This particular indicator has been worsening since 2013 when just 22.6% of the population was in that situation (Galindo Neto et al., 2021).

Poverty rapidly increased because of unemployment. Many Brazilians became unemployed during the pandemic, with employment figures from 2020 showing record levels of unemployment and of so-called "discouraged workers." In the timespan between 2020 and ending in February 2021, the total number of people

unemployed in Brazil reached 14.4 million—an unemployment rate of 14.4%. The number of discouraged workers reached 5.9 million or 5.6% of the workforce (Alvarenga & Silveira, 2021). The increase in unemployment drove an increase in poverty. The national poverty grew from 24.8% in 2019 to 29.9% in 2021 (Worldometers, 2021). The federal government's response to the economic impacts of Covid in 2020 included the introduction of an emergency auxiliary aid, or the Corona Voucher of R$600 per person, payable to informal workers, low-income workers, micro-entrepreneurs, among others. But this program tapered off with reduced payments and, while 68.2 million people received the benefit in 2020, that figure shrank to 45.6 million in 2021 (Pires et al., 2021).

Sixty-one percent of respondents to a UNICEF study of children or youths said their family income had decreased by December 2020. Eight percent of all the respondents who had children under 18 years of age at home said that their children sometimes did not eat because money was lacking to buy food. This number reached 21% for families in economic classes D and E (UNICEF Brazil, 2021). These figures chart the path between adult unemployment, family poverty, and child poverty—and hence child development.

The project from which the article derives its data is being implemented in Rio (Porto, 2021). Given the failure of the Rio municipality to act early, local community groups responded by increasing their efforts to provide learning materials to children's homes by internet and help with food distribution. Local nonprofit organisations and individuals in slums assisted in these efforts. Our respondents pointed out that the particularly intense pressures on poor families merely exposed long-term pressures from poverty, violence, and inadequate services that pre-dated the pandemic. In this project, inclusion for early childhood is not just a matter of *being included* but ensuring there are sufficient early childhood resources to be *included in*.

Children have suffered from Covid-19 and the economic downturn very much, especially those in lower-income families. As CIESPI research on youth activists shows, they tend not to be heard by administrators and policymakers. The UNCRC's rights on children being heard are far from being a norm, but CIESPI research also shows that young children can be given a public voice (Rizzini et al., 2021). The Covid-19 crisis brought serious challenges for everyone and revealed longstanding challenges for children. But the disclosure of these long-term challenges may represent new opportunities for action.

This analysis of published and research evidence shows how Covid-19 has affected the wider meso- and exosystems of resources for early childhood education and also how children's rights have been significantly eroded as a consequence of these ever-limiting resources. Brazil is a country with substantial socio-economic inequalities, and the negative impacts of Covid-19 policy responses (and particularly the "lock-down" policies) have been particularly felt in more disadvantaged communities, with devastating effects for young children and their families. Considering the UN Committee's 11 recommendations on Covid-19 (UNICEF, 2020), there are major gaps in terms of children accessing basic services, food, and healthcare (recommendation 1, 4, 5), having alternative and creative solutions to enjoying rest and recreation (recommendation 2), very limited access to online learning at all (recommendation 3), faced particular risks of violence and abuse in their domestic settings (recommendation 6), and had virtually no opportunities for their participation rights to be realized (recommendation 11).

2.2. Eswatini

The emergence of Covid-19 has adversely affected every fibre of society in Eswatini, including children and the realisation of their rights in particular. Eswatini had its first Covid-19 case officially reported on 13 March 2020 (Dlamini, 2020; Pitikoe et al., 2020). Like other governments from around the world, the government of Eswatini implemented various public health measures, including mandatory lockdowns where all people were expected to stay home, closure of businesses and workplaces, the mandatory wearing of masks, and social distancing to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Only those classified as essential workers were allowed to travel under strict control measures such as travel permits. Employers implemented the "no work, no pay" rule and some downscaled their organisations and businesses, laying off employees. According to Eswatini census documentation (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2017), 59% of the 1.1. million people of Eswatini live below the national poverty line and 19% are experiencing multidimensional poverty. This proportion increased to 21% during the Covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2020) and children are the most affected: 56.5% are considered multidimensionally poor, with children in rural areas being more affected than those in urban areas (65% and 23%, respectively; see UNDP, 2020). The loss of or reduced income during Covid-19 forced many families to prioritise food over other needs as part of crisis-coping strategies. As families were ordered to stay indoors, "forced" to spent time together during lockdowns, there was a notable increase in anxiety and frustration among parents and children alike, increasing the risk for, and reports of, domestic violence (UNICEF, 2020; Xue et al., 2020).

Among other interventions for reducing human contact through social distancing was the indefinite closure of all learning institutions, including ECECs. It was estimated that school closures in March 2020 would affect about 377,935 learners in Eswatini (Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, 2019), thus deepening the gap in access and equality that already existed in education in the country (Motsa, 2021). This number, however, does not include children in ECECs because the Annual Education Census did not collect data on this sector of

education at the time, another serious gap in the education system in Eswatini. The hope was that the pandemic would ease soon and everything would go back to normal, which didn't prove to be the case. As time progressed under lockdown, learning institutions turned to media (television, radio, and newspaper) lessons and online teaching and learning (Daries & Valenuelam, 2020; Dlamini, 2020; Pitikoe et al., 2020). However, most students, particularly from public schools, poorer backgrounds, and rural settings, were unable to access any learning material through these media because they do not own a television, radio, or any equipment that could facilitate online teaching and learning, and cannot afford the newspaper every day, which resulted in an obvious breach for equal access to information (Pitikoe et al., 2020).

Besides the obvious challenges with media and/or online teaching and learning, teachers and students in preschools were particularly challenged. ECECs are largely play- and inquiry-based, and focus on social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learning most of all (Timmons et al., 2021), aspects that are difficult to teach via radio or online. This is also noted by Jalongo (2021), who states that young children in particular need to be actively involved with their environment, and the fact that many of them are not yet reading, writing, or adept at computer keyboards makes them the least well-suited group for online teaching and learning approaches. Worse still, the government of Eswatini did not provide any guidance or support to ECEC teachers and students on the implementation of classes under Covid-19, a point that is also made by UNESCO (2020) in their rapid survey on the impact of Covid-19 on early childhood education in Asia-Pacific and Sub-Sahara Africa: According to their report, while governments made plans not to forgo education and learning during Covid-19, ECECs have not been given as much attention compared to other levels of education, this despite acknowledging that education at all levels was and continues to be significantly affected by the pandemic.

Target 4.2 of the SDGs explicitly states the need by governments to prioritise access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education for all children by 2030 (United Nations, 2016). Evidence demonstrates that access to quality ECECs has a positive effect on future educational performance, as well as the physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological development of a child (Rao et al., 2017), with the ripple effect of a better economic outcome for the individual, family, and society. It is well documented that access to ECECs benefits both a child's early skill development and their physical and mental health long-term, their educational attainment and earnings (Barnett & Nores, 2015; Robson et al., 2020). It is therefore of great concern that the long-term effect of the disruption caused by Covid-19 to access and quality of ECECs may be a generation that lacks these early developmental milestones necessary for future achievements.

It must also be noted that, in Eswatini, some ECECs and schools are not only centres for teaching and learning, but also provide feeding schemes for students. With school closures, many children who depend on school meals for their daily nourishment were immediately thrown into hunger, worsening an already volatile situation among families who find it difficult to provide for their children. Whilst the government provided some relief in the form of food packages and emergency relief funds, these were poorly planned and coordinated, and thus did not reach most of the intended recipients. The relief was also a one-off, and thus not much of a help to families who continue to experience food insecurity.

Already through the examples of Brazil and Eswatini, we see how governments' responses to Covid-19 impact childrens' rights to education, food, and shelter. With alarming speed, the prioritisation of early years education diminished and it never became a core part of these governments' response to problems affecting children in areas of economic hardship. However, perhaps these two countries are not representative of the global influence of Covid-19, thus why we have deliberately identified two other countries to strengthen our case. In the following section, our colleagues in South Africa address if (and how) the government of another upper-middle-income country in Africa has prioritised access to quality early childhood development amidst the pandemic or, to the contrary, has contributed to the erosion of children's rights in the country.

2.3. South Africa

Despite the advent of democracy in South Africa 26 years ago, gross inequality and structural poverty characterised along racial lines persist. The government has prioritised early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes as an avenue for reducing inequality by improving care, nutrition, and learning outcomes, especially for the most disadvantaged young children. However, most ECCE services are non-state, non-profit, and micro-social enterprises. A poverty-targeted state subsidy is available for non-profit programmes that meet rigorous standards, but it does not cover all costs and most programmes do not receive it. A substantial portion of the subsidy is allocated to food and nourishment, an important consideration as the under-five stunting rate in South Africa is 27% (National Department of Health et al., 2019). User fees are charged to support operational costs and therefore pose a barrier to enrolment and service quality for poor children. In 2019, 58% of under-4-year-olds in the country did not attend any ECCE programme (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic, a severe initial lockdown, and subsequent lockdowns intensified existing challenges and had a devastating impact on families and young children, especially for those already disadvantaged (Lake et al., 2021). A struggling economy contracted further, exacerbating poverty and food

insecurity, particularly for the most vulnerable sectors of society (Arndt et al., 2020). There were significant job losses, especially for low-wage workers (Fengler et al., 2021). State measures to alleviate shocks to the labour market did not include informal workers. The need for social relief increased dramatically during the Covid-19 crisis when families were unable to generate income or rely on their networks for support, and endured for longer than anticipated (van der Berg et al., 2021).

Access to preventive and promotive health services for young children reduced due to the re-prioritisation of public health services and fear of attending health facilities because of the risk of contracting Covid-19. Children's right to health was compromised as many children fell behind on routine care, including immunisations and growth monitoring and screening (Burger et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2021; Jensen & McKerrow, 2021). In 2020, a nationally-representative panel survey was undertaken; findings indicate that severe child hunger—a child experiencing hunger every day or almost every day in the week prior to the survey—persisted throughout the year, ranging from 24–30% (van der Berg et al., 2021). During lockdowns, the loss of daily meals for children attending ECCE programmes significantly affected their access to food and, essentially, their right to adequate nutritious food (UN Assembly, 1989, article 24; see also recommendation 4). State-subsidised ECCE programmes provide daily nutrition to about 626,000 poor children regarded as eligible based on their family's income (National Department of Social Development, 2020).

The already fragile early childhood sector was significantly affected by the pandemic. ECCE programmes experienced a mandatory four-month closure despite primary caregivers returning to work as lockdown restrictions eased (Wills et al., 2020). Re-opening was subject to stringent state-imposed safety standards, such as the use of personal protective equipment and reductions in attendance numbers. Many ECCE programmes could not afford to meet safety standards and were unable to continue staff contracts and sustain operational requirements (Wills et al., 2020). While these provisions were aimed at securing children's right to health and safety, they severely limited children's access to early development and education (SDG 4.2) and to adequate care and protection for those whose parents were employed (UN Assembly, 1989, article 18). Lower attendance due to caregivers' inability to pay user fees, fear of children becoming infected, and reduced capacity led to financial difficulty, loss of large numbers of trained and experienced ECCE practitioners, and permanent closure of several services (Wills et al., 2021). The introduction of state relief through an ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund package was significantly delayed, with applications starting in early 2021 (Republic of South Africa, 2021): too late for thousands of ECCE service providers unable to recover financially during 2020 and contributing to the curtailing of the attainment of SDG 4.2.

In a community setting in Cape Town, interviews as part of the UKRI GCRF project with selected community respondents (parents of young children and ECCE practitioners) indicated that the impacts of the pandemic manifested through loss of livelihoods, hunger, and loss of shelter as many residents were evicted when they could no longer afford rent. Deteriorating living conditions and increased isolation added to family depression and stress, placing young children at increased risk of harm. While ECCE programmes sent home learning materials for parents and kept in touch via digital platforms, not all parents had access to these and, even some who did, struggled due to low levels of literacy, exacerbating existing inequalities (Wills et al., 2021).

Once ECCE programmes re-opened, there were fewer spaces available for children or limited days of attendance. This left parents with childcare dilemmas if they needed to return to work on a full-time basis. Practitioners expressed concern that children would have been safer in an ECCE programme than unsupervised at home or on the streets. Adjusting to Covid-19 protocols resulted in limited delivery of the early years' curriculum, with certain activities barred due to the required use of sanitised materials and physical distancing, and the restriction of free play—important for the development of agency and social skills. These are likely to have long-term consequences for young children's wellbeing, social development, and educational progress.

The Covid-19 crisis significantly decreased the numbers of children attending ECCE programmes and disrupted the early learning and nutrition support provided through these programmes; ECCE programme attendance rates, at 13% for under-6-year-olds, was at a 20-year low during July–August 2020 (Wills et al., 2020). Consequently, many children's exposure to risks has been exacerbated by escalated poverty, violence, and food insecurity, compromising caregivers' physical and mental health and their capacity to provide responsive care for their young children (Timmons et al., 2021). Parents and caregivers have not received the necessary state support to enable them to adequately care for their young children and provide the basic conditions for children to develop and thrive (UN Assembly, 1989, articles 18 and 27).

Clearly, a common theme is emerging between the three countries reviewed so far, one where ECCE is being dramatically affected by government response, which again has widened the gap between those with resources and those without. But what of Scotland (UK), a country that is classified by the World Bank as being a high-income country? Would the ability to draw upon greater resources in terms of financial health enable a continuation of embedding the UNCRC?

2.4. Scotland

> It is the aspiration of the Scottish Government for Scotland to be the best place to grow up in.

> The objective of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is to make real this ambition by putting children and young people at the heart of planning and delivery of services and ensuring their rights are respected across the public sector. (Scottish Parliament, 2013, p. 1)

For almost a decade the Scottish government has placed significant emphasis on children's rights in terms of children influencing the construction and administration of policies and services (Scottish Government, 2014). The aspirations of the Scottish government, and children's rights activists, resulted in a politically powerful piece of children's legislation, the Children and Young Peoples (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government, 2014). This landmark legislation commences by setting out the duties of Scottish ministers in relation to the rights of children (Tisdall, 2015): "The Scottish Ministers must keep under consideration whether there are any steps which they could take which would or might secure better of further effect in Scotland of the UNCRC requirements" (Scottish Government, 2014, section 1). However, as said above, children's rights were easily side-lined when the pandemic crisis struck Scotland, and the ambition for Scottish children to be put at the heart of planning was not a consideration by Scottish ministers. What follows is a timeline that illustrates how quickly this "landmark" children's legislation was rendered archaic (Tisdall, 2015).

On the 1st of March 2020, the first Covid-19 case was reported in Scotland. Around the same time, on the 11th of the same month, the first case of community transmission in Scotland, unrelated to contact or travel, was identified. Regrettably, on the 13th, the first death from Covid-19 was confirmed in Scotland. We should bear in mind that this is the first date by which children may have been affected, as many parents would have been forced to self-isolate, resulting in disruption from their previous routine. On 19 March 2020, the Scottish Government announced in parliament the closure of all schools and nurseries. Suddenly, children discovered that they could not return to nursery/school; this meant, for some children, that they would never return to the familiar environment as they transitioned to primary school. Despite the fact that Scotland was in the process of incorporating the UNCRC directly into domestic law, children had everything *done to* them, not *with them* (Adamson, 2021). As a result, there was no recognition of children's abilities to contribute to discussions on the pandemic or make meaningful decisions about their lives.

On 23 March 2020, the first daily briefing by the First Minister (FM) of Scotland and, concurrently, the UK prime minister, announced that people should only go out to buy food, to exercise once a day, or go to work if they could not work from home. This was the beginning of the true lockdown and was mirrored across much of Europe and, later, the world (Andrew et al., 2020). In Scotland, 36.4% of households live in flats (apartments; Scotland's Census, 2021). Many children had little or no access to green space during the first lockdown apart from their one opportunity for daily exercise (Fegert et al., 2020). Children who were living in poverty and/or disadvantage, classified as vulnerable, were able to access early learning childcare settings/schools (Howes et al., 2020). However, there remained inherent concern for the children's wellbeing. It is well publicised that child poverty is on the increase in Scotland, with 260,000 children living in poverty in 2019–2020 (Davidson, 2021).

Additionally, on 20 March 2020, all bars, restaurants, gyms, and other social venues across the country closed. Some parents found themselves out of work and/or were furloughed; this confinement to their homes meant different things to parents, some expressing concern (Pascal et al., 2020) and others viewing the situation positively.

In a matter of weeks, the experiences of every child had changed dramatically, as they could no longer socialise with peers at nursery, nor go outside for extended periods of time, see friends, visit a wider familial circle, nor enjoy a wide variety of social settings. Lockdown officially began on 24 March 2020 in Scotland. Most strikingly, there was an expectation that parents would become the teachers of their children and early years' practitioners and school teachers would virtually teach children.

On the 25th of the same month, childminders had to cease all provision, except for key worker families and vulnerable children. This, again, largely removed the childcare safety net that Scottish parents could rely on to balance work and family. This trend was codified on the 30th when the Scottish government issued guidance on the closure of daycare services and provided advice for schools and settings that are continuing to provide care for key workers' children and "vulnerable" children. Lastly, the end of the first lockdown period was signalled on 11 May 2020, when the Scottish government announced that citizens could go out more than once a day. Glorifying in the moment, many believed at the time that this would signify a return to normal life, with a promise soon after that early learning childcare settings and schools would re-open in August 2020. Some settings, which had been open all year offering a service for children of key workers and "vulnerable" children, returned to their former ways of working.

Children were invited back to early learning and childcare settings in "bubbles" of 33 children, which meant that nurseries had to split the environment and resources. Again, in some situations, children could see their friends over fences or boundaries, but could not actually play with them (Barba, 2020). However, on 18 August 2020, these barriers were lifted and children were able to return to the new normalcy.

When speaking to the Scottish Parliament, the FM recognised the crisis had a "profound impact on the health, economy and society, indeed our whole way of life" (Sturgeon, 2020).

We are still experiencing the challenges, albeit with more freedoms than 18 months ago, but settling pandemic babies into early years settings has demonstrated the effects of limited social interaction on the youngest community members, many of whom have not had the benefit of the support of the wider family network due to travel restrictions and concerns about elderly family members contracting the virus. No one knows, at this point, the full impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on children in Scotland—only time will tell.

3. Conclusions

It is clear from the four countries discussed in this article that similarities cut across them. The implementation of children's rights appears not to have stood up to the challenges of the Covid-19 epidemic. Decisions were being made about children's lives that affected them but did not involve any attempt to listen to them, respect their views, or invite them into decision-making processes. This seems to be the case no matter if the country is deemed by the World Bank as a high- or low-middle-income country. This article has also highlighted the further impact of the pandemic on those children living in the most deprived areas of the selected countries. The poverty gap appears to have widened between those families that have food and income security to those families that do not. Government responses have not been nearly adequate for young children, particularly those living in poor communities. We would like to suggest that more needs to be done in terms of securing children's rights as a foundation of government policy. Strongly adhering to target 4.2 of the SDGs would be a beginning. We should take this opportunity to reflect on what is happening to children's rights more generally, specifically to early years education, and consider ways in which to embed children's rights more securely into any government policy/guidance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Lynn McNair (PhD) is a lecturer in early childhood practice and Froebel/Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Lynn has 40 years of experience working in early years education and was awarded an OBE for services to early education in 2009. Lynn is a trained Froebelian, attaining her certificate at the Froebel Institute, Roehampton University, London. Lynn is the principal investigator in Froebelian Futures.

John Ravenscroft (PhD) is a professor of childhood visual impairment. John is director and head of the Scottish Sensory Centre and President of the International Council for Educators of Children With Visual Impairment Europe. He has written extensively about inclusion, disability studies, and, in particular, cerebral visual impairment.

Irene Rizzini is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and director of the Centro Internacional de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Infância (CIESPI) in the same institution. Professor Rizzini has published extensively on topics related to human rights and public policies, focusing on children and young people, on their family and community contexts, and has conducted research in collaboration with colleagues in several countries.

Kay Tisdall is a professor of childhood policy at the University of Edinburgh. She is part of the Childhood and Youth Studies at Moray House School of Education and Sport. Her policy, academic, and teaching work is centred around children's human rights. She is the principal investigator for the UKRI GCRF project: Safe, Inclusive and Participative Pedagogy: Early Childhood Education in Fragile Settings.

Linda Biersteker is a developmental psychologist and adult educator with extensive research, training, policy development, and programming experience in the early childhood development sector in South Africa and the African region. She works extensively with Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, and the Innovation Edge. Her current focus is on improving the quality of early learning programmes, measuring their effectiveness, and understanding how best to deliver safe, inclusive, and participatory learning and teaching for young children in difficult circumstances.

Fortunate Shabalala (PhD medical anthropology) is a senior lecturer at the University of Eswatini, Faculty of Health Sciences, where she is heading the Department of Community Health Nursing Science. In addition to her administrative duties, Dr. Shabalala teaches courses in mental health nursing, community health nursing, and health systems research. Her research examines structural drivers of HIV and gender-based violence among young people, in particular girls and women with disability, and students in institutions of higher learning in Eswatini, with a focus on the intersection between gender and socio-economic inequality. Dr. Shabalala's goal is to make a meaningful contribution towards the reduction of gender-based violence by influencing change in perceptions and practices of social norms that perpetuate gender and economic inequality. She is the founder and director of the Centre for Child and Adolescent Health Research and Counselling.

S'lungile K. Thwala (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the University of Eswatini in the Department of Educational Foundations and Management. She holds a PhD in psychology of education and a MEd in special educational needs. She has 23 years of teaching experience from primary to university level in Eswatini. She has published research articles in early childhood education, as well as special and inclusive education, in reputable local, national, and international journals. Her research interest is in inclusive education, psychosocial support, and resilience.

Clement N. Dlamini is the director of the Centre for Community Services and a social work lecturer at the University of Eswatini in the Department of Sociology and Social Work. He is the founding member and current president of the Monitoring & Evaluation Association of Swaziland (MEAS). He has a masters degree in social work from the Stephen F. Austin State University School of Social Work in Nacogdoches, Texas. He has competencies in HIV and AIDS training, program design and evaluation, participatory rural community development, community and health systems strengthening, community mobilization, and policy analysis. He has worked extensively in coordinating the Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS) NGO Training Institute Legacy Program and has participated in resource mobilization for development initiatives in Eswatini. He participates extensively in shaping international development discourse by writing and participating in international sustainable development platforms through blogs and opinion pieces. Clement sits in the First National Bank Eswatini Board Foundation as an external trustee and is a board member of Kwakha Indvodza Male Mentoring Organization in Eswatini.

Malcolm Bush was raised in a small town in the UK, graduated in modern history from the University of Oxford, completing a PhD in social policy at Northwestern University. He has been senior advisor to CIESPI since the 1980s. Research, policy, and advocacy interests include low-income children and families and community economic development. He has been a regular faculty member at major US universities. For 15 years he was president of Woodstock Institute, a US economic development think-and-do tank.

Malibongwe Gwele is a researcher at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. He has over 13 years of experience working in ECD research, focusing on applied and evaluation research projects. He has been involved in evidence-based research on early childhood care and education, as well as conducting evaluation research that seeks to measure outcomes of programmes and interventions for young children. His research interest is on ECD policy and programming and local and indigenous knowledge—perspectives and practices in the early years.

Lizette Berry has a background in social work, specialising in social policy and management. She has 20 years of experience in child policy research and has developed an interest in early care and development; her current research is focussed on parenting and early childhood development policy and interventions, as well as violence prevention interventions. Lizette's experience includes multi-country research collaborations, implementation research, and community engagement, which she considers integral to research and intervention development.

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Article

Migrant Students' Sense of Belonging and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Implications for Educational Inclusion

Nikolett Szelei [1,*], Ines Devlieger [1], An Verelst [1], Caroline Spaas [2], Signe Smith Jervelund [3], Nina Langer Primdahl [3], Morten Skovdal [3], Marianne Opaas [4], Natalie Durbeej [5], Fatumo Osman [5,6], Emma Soye [7], Hilde Colpin [8], Lucia De Haene [2], Sanni Aalto [9], Reeta Kankaanpää [9], Kirsi Peltonen [9,10,11], Arnfinn J. Andersen [4], Per Kristian Hilden [4], Charles Watters [7], and Ilse Derluyn [1]

[1] Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Ghent University, Belgium
[2] Parenting and Special Education Research Unit, KU Leuven, Belgium
[3] Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
[4] Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, Norway
[5] Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Uppsala University, Sweden
[6] School of Health and Welfare, Dalarna University, Sweden
[7] School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, UK
[8] School Psychology and Development in Context Research Unit, KU Leuven, Belgium
[9] Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland
[10] Department of Child Psychiatry, University of Turku, Finland
[11] INVEST Research Flagship Center, University of Turku, Finland

* Corresponding author (nikolett.szelei@ugent.be)

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Abstract
This article investigates school belonging among migrant students and how this changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on quantitative data gathered from 751 migrant students in secondary schools in six European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK), we examined the impact of Covid-19 school closures, social support, and post-traumatic stress symptoms on changes in school belonging. Linear regression showed a non-significant decrease in school belonging, and none of the studied variables had a significant effect on this change in our whole sample. However, sensitivity analysis on a subsample from three countries (Denmark, Finland, and the UK) showed a small but significant negative effect of increasing post-traumatic stress symptoms on school belonging during Covid-19 school closures. Given that scholarship on school belonging during Covid-19 is emergent, this study delineates some key areas for future research on the relationship between wellbeing, school belonging, and inclusion.

Keywords
Covid-19; inclusion; migrants; post-traumatic stress; school belonging; social support

Issue
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1. Introduction

The inclusion of migrant students is challenging for many educational systems. We use the term migrant as an "umbrella term" referring to "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence…temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons" (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019, p. 132). While several considerable differences exist between migrants, here we focus on transnational migrants who migrated

during childhood. Inclusion is understood as an overarching principle and a process whereby all students are provided with equal opportunities to participation and educational achievement (Ainscow et al., 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; UNESCO, 2005). In schools, a crucial component of fostering inclusion is building a community to which students feel they belong (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Kovač & Vaala, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). However, several issues still exist that may jeopardise migrant students' inclusion and school belonging (e.g., Abu El-Haj & Skilton, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2021; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). Such challenges are, among others, placing migrant students in separated newcomer or language classes that might lead many students to lower educational pathways and limited learning opportunities (Emery et al., 2021), schools' monolingual policies and teaching norms (Gogolin, 2021), school practitioners' challenges in teaching migrant and refugee children (Pastoor, 2015; Szelei et al., 2020), racialising and "othering" discourses (Ambrose, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2021; Szelei et al., 2021), and experiences of exclusion and victimisation in schools (D'hondt et al., 2015; Adams-Wiggins, 2020). When taking these issues together, schools often create what Abu El-Haj and Skilton (2017) call an "illusion of inclusion."

These challenges of inclusion and belonging for migrant students existed long before Covid-19. However, with the closure of schools from March 2020 onwards, concerns about migrant students' access to education have gained renewed attention (European Commission Joint Research Centre [EC JRC], 2020; OECD, 2021). Teachers expressed anxieties about how to continue teaching and caring for migrant students, as school life, relationship building, and structural support were interrupted (Primdahl et al., 2021). There has also been a focus on the so-called "learning loss" (OECD, 2021) and "increased inequities" (EC JRC, 2020), often linked to the disadvantages of online teaching and distance learning for migrants. According to an OECD (2021) survey, only 44% of the surveyed countries implemented specific measures to ensure the online participation of migrant youth in schools during the first lockdown. This is alarming since students' smooth transition to online teaching might then overly depend on conditions at home, such as parents' familiarity with technology (Dimopoulos et al., 2021).

Another often-voiced concern related to Covid-19 has been the potentially deteriorating mental health of students. Some studies have described increases in depression and anxiety for adolescents during Covid-19 (Nearchou et al., 2020), yet other studies have not detected the pandemic's clear negative impact on mental health (Ramirez et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it has been noted that interrupted schooling was not necessarily a new phenomenon for many migrant students (Chang-Bacon, 2021). Before Covid-19, Potochnick (2018) found that migrant students with interrupted schooling did not differ in school engagement from their native-born peers even though their educational achievement was lower. Taking into account the concerns about the negative effects of the pandemic on students' wellbeing and education, and the specific issues affecting the educational inclusion of young migrants, there is still a need to investigate the impact of Covid-19 specifically on migrant students. While previous studies have investigated issues of school access, online learning, and mental health related to Covid-19, to our knowledge there is currently no study that examines the impact of Covid-19 on migrant students' sense of school belonging.

This article is part of a large project (RefugeesWell School) that implemented and assessed five school-based and social support-focused interventions to promote migrant students' wellbeing. The study took place in six European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK) and had a longitudinal design. The project was ongoing when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, and this meant that many of the students who participated in the second assessment did so during home confinement. The impact of Covid-19 on assessment varied across the participating countries. In Sweden, all assessments at the second timepoint (T2) were completed before school closures, whereas in Belgium and Norway, all T2 assessments were conducted after schools closed. In Denmark, Finland, and the UK, T2 evaluations were collected both before and after Covid-19 school closures had commenced. Therefore, to map potential general tendencies among the groups that were and were not affected by Covid-19, we first present results with altogether 751 migrant students in all participating countries. Secondly, we conduct sensitivity analysis with 320 students in Denmark, Finland, and the UK, as these were the countries where T2 data were collected both before and after Covid-19 school closures were implemented.

The schools in this study followed the national measures of their respective countries to contain the spread of Covid-19, and closed fully (Belgium, Denmark, UK, and Norway) or partially (Finland) in March 2020. In Sweden, the participating schools remained open and they made autonomous decisions about the specific measures they would implement against Covid-19. In the other countries, distance learning and online teaching were implemented as much as possible. Already existing and newly developed digital platforms were used to sustain curricular learning. In Finland, while school closures applied to the general school population and extracurricular activities were cancelled for all students, migrant students were still allowed to attend face-to-face teaching. Schools in Norway were also permitted to follow this approach if they wished. In our study, some Norwegian schools returned to in-school teaching for migrant students before the general school closure ended but not immediately after the lockdown began.

Field observations in our project show that Covid-19 was a difficult experience for schools and migrant

students. A lack of digital devices was observed in all the countries. Accessing online content was also difficult for many students due to a language barrier and a lack of close teacher support. In some cases, crowded home environments, lack of curricular learning support, and students' increased participation in family responsibilities (e.g., looking after younger siblings while parents worked) made remote learning challenging. At the same time, some teachers made remarkable efforts to remain in contact with their students and to support their learning and wellbeing. For example, some teachers regularly called students via phone, communicated through mobile phone applications, dropped off homework at students' homes or organised physical home visits. In sum, Covid-19 has brought on a new reality for most schools as they have had to create and utilise alternative ways of teaching and caring for migrant students. These changing conditions provided an opportunity to investigate the impact of Covid-19 school closures on school belonging among migrant students.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings of School Belonging and Literature Review

School belonging is an active and relational social process whereby students interact and connect with members of the school community and the broad school context (Halse, 2018; Kovač & Vaala, 2021; Pincton & Banfield, 2019; Puroila et al., 2021). School belonging is a multi-layered concept (Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Halse, 2018; Puroila et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2004), influenced by several demographic (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, school location), individual (e.g., personal characteristics, mental health), social (e.g., support from teachers, parents, peers), and environmental (e.g., school climate) factors (Allen & Kern, 2017, p. 25). We follow Allen et al. (2018) who apply Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model to the concept of school belonging. In this view, school belonging is a result of interactions between the individual student and the broader complex environment, such as peers and teachers in schools, families, school culture, school policies, norms, and values (Allen et al., 2018, p. 4). More specifically, we investigate the effect of some demographic (gender, age), individual (mental health), social (social support from friends and family), and environmental (Covid-19 school closures, daily stressors) factors on the potentially changing feeling of belonging.

School belonging has been established in the literature as a positive predictor of educational achievement, academic self-efficacy and attitudes (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012), and wellbeing (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2019; Scharpf et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that positive peer relationships, connectedness with friends (Allen et al., 2018; Ambrose, 2020; Delgado et al., 2016; DeNicolo et al., 2017; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020), and parental support at home (Allen et al., 2018; Hu & Wu, 2020) are linked to increased feelings of school belonging. Research has also found that school belonging forms a protective factor against the development of mental health problems (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2019; Scharpf et al., 2020). Fewer studies have investigated the role of mental health in the development of a sense of school belonging, but mental health problems are assumed to have a negative influence on school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen et al., 2018). This might be particularly relevant for migrant youth who often present with high levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms (Spaas et al., 2021).

School belonging is often a complex experience for migrant students whereby personal emotions and formal representations and norms of belonging interact with and conflict with each other (e.g., Ambrose, 2020; Gao et al., 2019; Puroila et al., 2021; Souto-Manning, 2021; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2004). DeNicolo et al. (2017) identify the quality of teacher–student and peer relationships, as well as migrant students' agency, as key components in creating a positive sense of belonging for migrant students. Friendships and social support from peers and family can foster belonging and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2017; Hu & Wu, 2020; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2019). Schools can enhance feelings of belonging by facilitating newcomers' settlement in a new country, and by building positive social relationships in schools (Schweitzer et al., 2021). Using online spaces where migrant students can connect with peers and family members may help to alleviate exclusionary tendencies in schools (Rowan et al., 2021). Teachers' pedagogical practices (Edgeworth & Santoro, 2015; Pendergast et al., 2018) also play a role in defining belongingness. Therefore, Edgeworth and Santoro (2015, p. 423) recommend developing "pedagogies of belonging" understood as "pedagogies that create all students in states of belonging."

Secondly, how migrants actively construct and forge new places and definitions for belonging highlight their resilience and agency (Gao et al., 2019; Moberg Stephenson & Källström, 2020; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). For example, children can adopt multiple identifications and points of belonging (Devine, 2009; Rutland et al., 2012), contradicting narrow definitions that usually surround them in society and education (e.g., "migrant" or "language learner"; Gao et al., 2019). For instance, in Gao et al. (2019), young people redefined belonging by drawing on notions such as multilingualism, personal emotions, and connectedness to the city where they lived. In Van Caudenberg et al. (2020), young migrant students actively resisted schools where they felt alienated and decided to attend other schools where they felt more belonging.

Furthermore, it is important to note that academic belonging (e.g., academic motivation, self-efficacy, performance) is also part of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Fong Lam et al., 2015; Pendergast et al., 2018).

This is relevant for migrant students who often have high academic ambitions at the beginning of their schooling in a new country (Devine, 2009; Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). For migrant students, schools may represent hopes and opportunities for social connections, learning ambitions, safety, and educational and societal progress in a new country (De Jacolyn et al., 2021; Devine, 2009; Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). In sum, belonging is a complex issue for migrant students and can be developed in multiple ways, especially in contemporary societies where digital forms of communication are prevalent (Halse, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Participants

Data collection took place within the RefugeesWellSchool study. This project implemented and evaluated five school-based interventions that focused on social support and social cohesion to promote migrant adolescents' wellbeing. The study applied a cluster randomised controlled trial design; school classes were therefore randomly assigned to participate in an intervention or a control group. The project collected quantitative data before (T1) and after (T2) the interventions were implemented. As the project was ongoing when Covid-19 was announced as a pandemic, some of the T2 data was collected during Covid-19 school closures.

Schools in the six countries were recruited based on the criteria of having a high proportion of newcomer migrant students in their school population or having newcomer/language classes for migrant students. Students, parents, and school practitioners were provided with an information sheet about the project. Information sessions were also organised where the researchers presented the project to the school community, using visual aids, PowerPoint presentations, and interpreters where possible. Consent was obtained from all students via informed consent forms, as well as via parental consent for those under the legal age of consent.

Quantitative longitudinal data was collected in 2019 and 2020 via a questionnaire that was available in 22 languages. We analyse data in two steps. First, we include responses from 751 students who replied at both T1 and T2 in all six countries (see the sociodemographic characteristics of this sample in Table 1). This step is necessary to detect whether general tendencies exist between the groups that were and were not affected by Covid-19 at T2. In this sample, time between the two measurement points ranged from 3–6 months. The age of participants ranged from 11–18, with an average of 14.82 (*SD = 1.57*). Time spent in the host country ranged from 0 to 16 years, on an average of 3.31 years (*SD = 3.44*). 366 students completed T2 assessment before school closures and 385 did so after school closures. However, as noted previously, this distribution was unequal across the countries. Consequently, we conduct a sensitivity analysis with 320 students in Denmark, Finland, and the UK, as these were the countries where T2 data were collected both before and after Covid-19 school closures were implemented.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics per T2 assessment Covid-19 group (N = 751).

Sociodemographic characteristic	T2 assessment took place before Covid-19 school closures (N = 366)	T2 assessment took place after Covid-19 school closures started (N = 385)	Total (N = 751)
Gender			
Females	144	177	321
Males	215	198	413
Other	3	0	3
Unknown	4	10	14
Age	14.58 (*SD 1.48*)	15.05 (*SD 1.62*)	14.82 (*SD 1.57*)
Time spent in host country	4.65 (*SD 3.69*)	1.45 (*SD 1.87*)	3.31 (*SD 3.44*)
Country			
Belgium	0	182	182
Denmark	80	63	143
Finland	100	10	110
Norway	0	125	125
Sweden	124	0	124
UK	62	5	67
Intervention group			
Intervention	227	235	462
Control	139	150	289

3.2. Measures

Students' sense of school belonging was measured by the Psychosocial Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale, developed by Goodenow (1993) and validated in Cowden et al. (2018), Gaete et al. (2016), Goodenow (1993), and Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007). The PSSM items pose questions about students' perceptions of being accepted and involved in school, and how other students and teachers treat them. In this study, a shortened version of the original PSSM was used. Students were asked to rate nine items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *completely true*). Although this version was not validated in this study, we found it to be an appropriate measure based on the instrument's previous validity in several contexts.

Students' post-traumatic stress symptoms were measured by the Children's Revised Impact of Events Scale-8, developed by Perrin et al. (2005) and validated in Perrin et al. (2005) and Magalhães et al. (2018). This scale is often used with children aged between 8–18 to screen for post-traumatic stress disorder. Students rated eight items on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *not all*, 1 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 5 = *often*).

Social support was measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) scale, developed by Zimet et al. (1988) and validated in Chou (2000) and Zimet et al. (1988). In this study, two subscales were used: 4 + 4 items related to perceived support from family and friends, respectively. Both subscales followed a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*) and asked how much support students felt they received from family members and friends.

Daily stressors were examined using the Daily Stressors Scale for Young Refugees. The scale was developed by Vervliet et al. (2010) and previously applied in Vervliet et al. (2014). The original scale consists of 15 items measuring different types of daily stressors (e.g., social, material, discrimination, etc.). This scale has not yet been validated, but due to its relevance to the circumstances of migrant and refugee adolescents, we found it to be applicable to our study. In this project, we used six items of the original scale that measured students' perceived material safety on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *always*).

We also collected a wide range of sociodemographic information, including gender (male, female, other), age, and intervention/control group. Migrant students were identified according to their self-identification as "born abroad" on the item "Where were you born?" since this was the information that indicated movement from one country to another during childhood, consistent with our operational definition of a "migrant" (IOM, 2019). The impact of Covid-19 was operationalised by using a context variable whereby T2 assessment was dichotomised as taking place before or after Covid-19 school closures had commenced. All T1 responses were collected before Covid-19 school closures.

3.3. Analysis

First, a series of tests were performed as part of a measurement invariance test for the PSSM and CRIES-8 scales, to test if they measured the same underlying construct on both timepoints. A model where all parameters were free was compared to a model where the factor loadings of the items were restricted to be equal for the two timepoints. This way each item's influence on the scale remains the same over time. If this test is non-significant, then weak (metric) measurement invariance has been established. In the second test, the model with restricted factor loadings was compared to a model with restricted factor loadings and equal intercepts for the items. If this test is non-significant, then there is strong (scalar) measurement invariance, which is needed to be able to compare the means of the latent variables over time.

After the measurement invariance tests, the model fit and internal consistency of all scales were examined. For the model fit, different fit indices were used, i.e., the chi-square test statistic, Root Means Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI). For the RMSEA, a value below 0.06 was considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and a value below 0.08 was an acceptable fit (Schreiber et al., 2006). For the SRMR, Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendation of a value below 0.08 was followed. For CFI and TLI, values above 0.95 were considered a good fit and values above 0.90 were an acceptable fit to the data (Brown, 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1999). When the fit indices were not acceptable, the models were adjusted based on the standardized factor loadings and modification indices, but only if the suggested changes were theoretically acceptable. Possible changes were the removal of indicators that had weak factor loadings on the underlying scale or adding correlations between error terms. Adjustments were implemented incrementally until an acceptable model was found.

The PSSM scale showed scalar measurement invariance (χ^2_5 = 1.66, p = 0.89) and an acceptable fit after adding correlations between items 2 ("It is hard for people like me to be accepted here") and 3 ("Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here"), as well as 1 ("I feel like a real part of my school") and 9 ("I feel proud of belonging to my school"; χ^2_{134} = 307.72, p = 0.07, *TLI* = 0.90, *CFI* = 0.91, *RMSEA* = 0.05, *SRMR* = 0.05). The scale showed only moderate internal consistency at both timepoints (α = 0.67 and α = 0.69). The CRIES-8 scale also showed strong measurement invariance (χ^2_8 = 4.37, p = 0.82), and a good model fit (χ^2_{109} = 546.67, p < 0.05, *TLI* = 0.90, *CFI* = 0.90, *RMSEA* = 0.07, *SRMR* = 0.05). Even though the p value was significant, it has been noted that the p value of the chi-squared test is sensitive to sample size (Byrne, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1995). Therefore, it is likely that this significance is related to the relatively large sample size. The scale showed good internal consistency at both timepoints (α = 0.86 and

α = 0.88). The family subscale on the MSPSS scale had a good model fit (χ^2_2 = 1.35, p = 0.05, *TLI* = 1.00, *CFI* = 1.00, *RMSEA* = 0.00, *SRMR* = 0.01), and high internal consistency (α = 0.92). The friends subscale was improved by adding correlations between item 5 ("My friends really try to help me") and 6 ("I can count on my friends when things go wrong"), and this way we reached a good model fit (χ^2_1 = 1.69, p > 0.05, *TLI* = 1,00, *CFI* = 1,00, *RMSEA* = 0.03, *SRMR* = 0.01). The scale also had high internal consistency (α = 0.92). The daily stressors scale showed a good fit (*TLI* = 0.99, *CFI* = 0.99, *RMSEA* = 0.08, *SRMR* = 0.06), and high internal consistently (α = 0.92). See the average scores on these scales in Table 2.

Next, we performed linear regression, first testing the null model of changes in school belonging over time (between T1 and T2 sum scores in the school belonging scale). Then we added the Covid-19 variable to analyse the effect of Covid-19 school closures on the change in school belonging. In the third step, we ran the full model where change in school belonging was the outcome variable, independent variables were the change in post-traumatic stress symptoms between T1–T2 and social support at T1, and control variables were age, gender, daily stressors, and intervention group at T1. Linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were checked and were acceptable. The model explained a very small (1%) part of the variance in school belonging.

Given the fact that the distribution of data on the T2 Covid-19 variable was unbalanced among the different countries, we also performed a sensitivity analysis. This meant conducting the same linear regression analysis but only on the samples from Denmark, Finland, and the UK that had a variance in the T2 Covid-19 variable. Statistical analyses were carried out using R 4.0.3.

4. Results

4.1. Change in School Belonging and the Effect of Covid-19 School Closures

In the null model that tested changes between T1 and T2 without any effects, there was a small and non-significant decrease between the two timepoints (M = −0.68, p = 0.12). No significant differences on the school level were found (var = 1.28, p = 0.72), rendering multilevel analysis unnecessary. Next, we added the Covid-19 assessment variable in the regression model to determine the effect of Covid-19 school closures in the change in school belonging. Students who completed T2 assessment before Covid-19 school closures presented with a decrease of M = −0.132 in the sense of school belonging. For students who completed T2 during Covid-19 school closures, this decrease was slightly larger (M = −0.744). However, the difference between the two groups was not significant (p = 0.200, t = − 1.28). These results show that in this sample, Covid-19 cannot be established as impacting changes in school belonging for migrant students.

4.2. The Effect of Trauma, Social Support, and Other Socio-Demographic Characteristics

In the next regression model, we inserted all context variables, namely, levels of social support from family and friends, daily stressors, gender and age at T1 to see their effects on the change in school belonging. We also controlled for whether students belonged to an intervention or control group in the larger project to control for any potential effects of the project's interventions on the change in school belonging. In this study, none of these context variables influenced the change in school belonging, except for age (see the overview of results in Table 3). Age was a minorly significant negative predictor in the change in school belonging: older students had slightly decreased levels of school belonging (M = −0.540, SD = 0.280, p = 0.054).

4.3. Sensitivity Analysis on a Subsample from Denmark, Finland, and the UK

Since three countries (Denmark, Finland, and the UK) had a variance in the T2 Covid-19 assessment variable, we conducted a sensitivity analysis on this part of the sample. The same linear regression analysis

Table 2. Average scores on the scales per T2 assessment Covid-19 group (N = 751).

Scales	T2 assessment took place before Covid-19 school closures (N = 366)	T2 assessment took place after Covid-19 school closures started (N = 385)
PSSM (school belonging)	T1: 42.02 (*SD 9.72*) T2: 40.31 (*SD 10.99*)	T1: 43.09 (*SD 9.73*) T2: 42.75 (*SD 10.37*)
CRIES-8 (post-traumatic stress symptoms)	T1: 10.51 (*SD 9.47*) T2: 10.72 (*SD 9.44*)	T1: 13.61 (*SD 10.70*) T2: 13.90 (*SD 10.76*)
MSPSS friends (social support from friends)	12.44 (*SD 4.03*)	11.81 (*SD 3.38*)
MSPSS family (social support from family)	12.97 (*SD 3.88*)	13.70 (*SD 2.69*)
Daily stressors	21.71 (*SD 3.91*)	20.81 (*SD 3.99*)

Table 3. The effect of Covid-19, post-traumatic stress symptoms, social support, and socio-demographic characteristics in the change in school belonging.

Predictor	Mean	Standard error	*t*-value	*p*
Covid-19 school closure	2.487	4.063	0.612	0.541
Intervention	0.915	0.887	1.032	0.303
Age	−0.540	0.280	−1.927	0.054
Gender (male)	−0.144	0.881	−0.163	0.870
Gender (other)	9.716	6.559	1.481	0.142
Daily stressors	−0.076	0.109	−0.700	0.484
Friends support	0.105	0.183	0.572	0.568
Family support	−0.098	0.231	−0.425	0.671
Change in trauma	−0.061	0.057	−1.062	0.288
Friend support * Covid-19 school closures	−0.391	0.265	−1.473	0.142
Family support * Covid-19 school closures	0.072	0.306	0.236	0.813
Change in trauma * Covid-19	0.032	0.086	0.374	0.710

was performed, following the same analytical steps as described in the analysis of the whole dataset (see the overview of results in Table 4). Just as before, school belonging decreased between T1 and T2, but this change was not significant (M = −1.288, p = 0.135), and Covid-19 had no effect on that change (Covid-19 mean effect on difference in school belonging M = −1.927, p = 0.299; before Covid-19 group M = 0.157, p = 0.910). Compared to the analysis on the whole dataset, we detected that here age did not significantly influence the change in school belonging (M = −0.246, SD = 0.509, p = 0.629). On the other hand, the change in post-traumatic stress symptoms had a slightly negative and significant influence on the change in school belonging (M = −0.429, SD = 0.193, p = 0.027). In other words, if post-traumatic stress symptoms increased, school belonging decreased. However, we also found a significant interaction effect between the change in post-traumatic stress symptoms and the type of Covid-19 group (M = 0.472, SD = 0.213, p = 0.029). These results indicate that the change in post-traumatic stress symptoms had almost no influence on those who were assessed before Covid-19 school closures (M = 0.043). Therefore, the finding that increasing post-traumatic stress symptoms predict decreasing school belonging is applicable for those who were assessed at T2 after school closures started.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the impact of Covid-19 school closures on changes in migrant students' sense of school belonging in secondary schools in six European countries. School belonging was understood as part of educational inclusion (Kovač & Vaala, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021), and in

Table 4. Sensitivity analysis: The effect of Covid-19, post-traumatic stress symptoms, social support, and socio-demographic characteristics in the change in school belonging.

Predictor	Mean	Standard error	*t*-value	*p*
Covid-19 school closure	4.526	9.071	0.499	0.619
Intervention	1.211	1.457	0.831	0.407
Age	−0.246	0.509	−0.483	0.629
Gender (male)	2.048	1.479	1.384	0.167
Gender (other)	11.819	7.174	1.647	0.100
Daily stressors	−0.088	0.197	−0.448	0.654
Friends support	−0.393	0.437	−0.899	0.377
Family support	0.494	0.598	0.826	0.409
Change in trauma	−0.429	0.193	−2.221	0.027
Friend support * Covid-19 school closures	0.195	0.493	0.396	0.695
Family support * Covid-19 school closures	−0.659	0.685	−0.962	0.336
Change in trauma * Covid-19	0.472	0.213	2.219	0.029

the context of the particular difficulties that migrant students face in negotiating school belonging (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Souto-Manning, 2021; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). We approached school belonging as a multilayered concept (Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Halse, 2018; Puroila et al., 2021), and investigated the impact of some demographic (i.e., gender, age), individual (i.e., post-traumatic stress symptoms), social (i.e., perceived social support from friends and family), and environmental (Covid-19 school closures) factors in the changing feeling of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017).

In this study, the sense of school belonging decreased over time, but this change was not statistically significant. Despite previous concerns about the negative influence of Covid-19 on mental health, curricular learning and school participation (EC JRC, 2020; Nearchou et al., 2020; OECD, 2021), this study observed no impact of Covid-19 school closures on the decrease in school belonging. This result might imply that physical distancing alone may not have affected decreased feelings of school belonging and that further research is necessary to uncover the complex relationship between Covid-19 school closures and sense of belonging. Building on previous literature, despite the challenges migrant students potentially encountered in their school environments during Covid-19, they might have been able to develop feelings of belonging otherwise (Halse, 2018), for example, through connecting in online spaces (Rowan et al., 2021). This finding may also be related to the fact that interrupted schooling was not necessarily a new experience for many migrant students (Chang-Bacon, 2021), and that migrant students with interrupted schooling are still able to maintain school engagement (Potochnick, 2018). While further research is necessary in this regard, it might be that some migrant students are more familiar with abruptly changing school arrangements and thus may develop and sustain school belonging in ways that might not necessarily require a continuous physical presence on school sites. Another explanation could be that schools in this sample have made sufficient efforts during Covid-19 to maintain connections with migrant students and to sustain feelings of belonging. Our field observations confirm that some teachers made remarkable efforts to care for and connect with migrant students, and these actions might have made a difference in this sample. However, these observations were not registered quantitatively, and more systematic quantitative research is, therefore, necessary to conclude on this matter.

Previous research has often emphasised the role of school belonging as a protective factor in wellbeing (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2019; Scharpf et al., 2020). Some have asserted that mental health problems also influence feelings of belonging to school (Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen et al., 2018). This study did not confirm a relationship between the change in post-traumatic stress symptoms and the change in school belonging using our whole sample. However, interestingly, the sensitivity analysis showed a small negative influence of increasing post-traumatic stress symptoms on school belonging. At the same time, increasing post-traumatic stress symptoms had almost no effect on those who completed T2 assessment before Covid-19 school closures. This result means that it may be the effect of increasing post-traumatic stress symptoms and Covid-19 school closures together that negatively influenced school belonging. However, this tendency was detected in a small subset of data in three countries, and not as an overall trend in the whole dataset. Therefore, we do not aim to generalise these findings to other populations and note that larger-scale investigations are necessary to make any conclusions on this matter. Future research could also focus on the differences between student groups who score within the clinical range of post-traumatic stress disorder, and those who do not.

Furthermore, we were also interested in the effect of perceived social support from family and friends in the change in school belonging. This was important since previous research indicated that peer support had a positive impact on school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Ambrose, 2020; Ho et al., 2017), as well as family support at home (Allen et al., 2018; Hu & Wu, 2020). Investigating the effects of social support structures was also pertinent as previous research indicates that migrant students experienced challenges to participation in online teaching during Covid-19 school closures (OECD, 2021; Primdahl et al., 2021). This study did not detect any effect of perceived social support in the change in school belonging. These findings might be explained by the fact that belonging specifically in school contexts is not only related to social relationships, but also to other learning-related identifications such as curricular learning, learning motivation, emotions, and efficacy (Allen et al., 2018; Fong Lam et al., 2015; Pendergast et al., 2018). Academic belonging is an important part of school belonging for migrant students, as they often have high aspirations and ambitions for learning and educational achievement (Devine, 2009; Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). For migrant students, there can be also other points of belonging to a school, such as a place that provides routines and care, stability, and safety, or that represents a new way of life and educational opportunities (De Jacolyn et al., 2021; Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020). Further research is necessary to closely understand the specific types of social support that impact migrant students' sense of school belonging.

Several methodological limitations to this study must be considered. First, it is possible that we did not detect any effect due to low statistical power related to low sample size. Second, T2 assessments were conducted at different points during home confinement. Feelings of belonging might have been different after a few days, a week, or many weeks away from school, and further research could investigate what impact the time spent in home confinement might have had on the changing feeling of school belonging. Thirdly, the management of the

Covid-19 school closures and efforts to maintain school participation and feelings of belonging for migrant students might have been very different across the various countries. While statistically, we did not find school-level differences in the sense of school belonging, the type of schooling practices during Covid-19 school closures might have had an important role, which is currently not captured statistically by this study. Consequently, further studies are needed to uncover how migrant students experienced the changing schooling arrangements, such as distance learning, online environment, and less physical contact with their friends and teachers, and how that impacted their sense of school belonging. Qualitative studies could reveal how migrant students gave meaning to their experiences of belonging during Covid-19 school closures.

While the findings of this study are limited due to the constraints listed above, they still provide important contributions to the currently emerging scholarship on Covid-19 school closures, belonging, and inclusion. They pose crucial questions for future investigations and may inspire researchers and practitioners to further explore the nuanced ways in which migrant students feel belonging to school during Covid-19. While the findings of this study are relevant starting points for future research, we do not claim that they can be generalised, due to the limitations mentioned above. What we do point out with these findings is that belonging is a complex experience, and does not function in the same way for all students, and for migrant students in particular (Allen et al., 2018; Halse, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2021; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2004). Therefore, migration-, Covid-19-, and school practice-related components have to be considered in order to provide a nuanced picture. Listening to migrant students themselves about the specific barriers they encountered, the practices that worked well for them during school closures, and how they wish schools to foster belonging is crucial for inclusion during the currently ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. We suggest researchers and practitioners think about belonging with an open mindset, considering the many ways in which migrant students can understand and develop belonging (Gao et al., 2019; Halse, 2018) during Covid-19.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Nikolett Szelei is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees, Ghent University, Belgium. She holds a PhD in education, specialising in teacher education. Her interests are multilingualism, multiculturalism, and social justice in education and migration. Previously she worked as an early childhood educator and primary school teacher.

Ines Devlieger is a postdoctoral researcher at Ghent University in Belgium, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Her major research interests include data analysis.

An Verelst is a psychosocial manager at the Centre of Expertise for Psychosocial Support for Victims of Collective Emergencies of the Belgian government, and a postdoctoral researcher at Ghent University, Belgium. She holds an MA in clinical psychology, an MA in cultures and development, and a PhD from Ghent University in educational sciences. Her research interests are the psychosocial impact of migration, terrorism, armed conflict, and sexual violence and its implications for treatment.

Caroline Spaas is a clinical child psychologist, family therapist, and doctoral researcher at KU Leuven, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Her research focuses on child development in refugee children and adolescents, and on relational processes of post-trauma reconstruction in community-based care for refugee children, adolescents, and their families.

Signe Smith Jervelund has an educational background in public health sciences and is an associate professor in health services research. Her research has a particular focus on vulnerable groups and social and ethnic inequality in access to healthcare (in both a national and international comparative perspective), and how we can overcome these inequalities in health and promote integration using a complex intervention research framework.

Nina Langer Primdahl works as a research assistant at the University of Copenhagen, where she has also earned an MA in public health. Her research interests are health equity, minority health, and participatory methodologies.

Morten Skovdal is a community health and applied social psychologist, earning his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research focuses on the contextual factors and relational processes that shape engagement with health services and promote psychosocial wellbeing and care in the community. He is particularly interested in involving underserved groups in research, both to challenge dominant narratives and to attune interventions to their lived realities.

Marianne Opaas is a researcher at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies in Oslo, Norway, and has her PhD from the Psychological Department, University of Oslo. Her research interests are traumatic stress, refugees' mental health, wellbeing and exile life functioning, and the longitudinal trajectories of trauma-affected adult refugees before, during, and after therapy. She is also a clinical psychologist and has worked clinically with refugees and other client groups for more than 30 years.

Natalie Durbeej is a behavioural scientist and an associate professor in public health at the Department of public health and caring sciences, Uppsala University. Her research interests include mental health problems in children and youth, as well as the evaluation of preventive interventions to reduce mental health problems in these populations.

Fatumo Osman is a registered nurse, senior lecturer, and associate professor at Dalarna University. She is also a researcher at CHAP, Uppsala University. Her research focuses on developing and evaluating culturally tailored parenting support programs for migrant parents living in Sweden. Current research projects involve sustainability of parenting programs as well as school interventions to promote the mental health of refugee and migrant children.

Emma Soye is a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. Emma has an MA in development studies and has conducted research on refugee education and wellbeing for organisations including the Institute of Development Studies, Save the Children UK, and UNICEF. She currently lectures on MA and BA modules on migrant and refugee wellbeing at the University of Sussex.

Hilde Colpin is a full professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at KU Leuven. Her research focuses on the role of proximal social relationships in families and schools for children and adolescents' social-emotional and academic development, and on the interplay between teacher–student and peer relationships at school. These topics are studied with a variety of research designs, e.g., longitudinal designs and randomized controlled trials.

Lucia De Haene is an associate professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven, where she conducts research on refugee family relationships and clinical intervention for refugee families and communities. As a family therapist, she coordinates her team in transcultural trauma care for refugees at the Faculty Clinical Centre and leads the development of the child psychiatry daycare unit Paso of the University Psychiatry Hospital (UPC KU Leuven).

Sanni Aalto is a clinical psychologist and doctoral candidate at Tampere University, Finland. Her major research interests include psychosocial interventions promoting migrant wellbeing and integration. Previously she has worked as a clinical psychologist in child psychiatry.

Reeta Kankaanpää is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University, Finland. Her major research interests include the evaluation of psychometric properties of survey instruments, intervention effectiveness research, and migrant wellbeing.

Kirsi Peltonen is a senior researcher working at the Research Centre for Child Psychiatry. She has studied the mental health of children with various adverse experiences, and her main focus is on trauma interventions among war-affected children.

Arnfinn J. Andersen was research director of the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Studies (NKVTS) from 2010 to 2018, where he is now head of the section for trauma, catastrophes, and forced migration—adults and elderly. He has a doctoral degree (dr. polit.) in sociology. His research has focused on masculinity, gender, family structures, forced migration, violent extremism, social networks, and friendships.

Per Kristian Hilden (PhD) is a social/medical anthropologist, affiliated as a senior researcher with the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies. Hilden's research interests include culture of medical systems, migration and global health, inequality in health, social justice, marginalisation, and stigma.

Charles Watters is professor of well-being and social care at the School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex. His major research interests include migration, health, and social care, with a particular focus on the well-being of refugee children.

Ilse Derluyn is full professor at Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy (Belgium). Her main research topics concern the wellbeing of (unaccompanied) migrant and refugee children, war-affected children, and victims of trafficking. Ilse is actively involved in supporting refugees and practitioners working with these groups and in policy research. She published many international publications, is the PI of the ERC-SG ChildMove and coordinator of the H2020 RefugeesWellSchool project. Ilse heads the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees (CESSMIR) and is co-director of the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations (CCVS).

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Article

Spanish LGBTQ+ Youth and the Role of Online Networks During the First Wave of Covid-19

R. Lucas Platero * and Miguel Ángel López-Sáez

Psychology Department, Rey Juan Carlos University, Spain

* Corresponding author (lucas.platero@urjc.es)

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Abstract
During the lockdown measures put in place at the time of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain (March through June 2020), LGBTQ+ youth lived through a particularly stressful situation that has so far received little attention. Confined in homes that are often hostile to their sexuality, struggling with the transition to online classes, they reached out to Internet social networks to obtain the support most of them lack in person. This article explores the role of technology for LGBTQ+ youth during a period when the educational environment was not supportive of students' sexuality and identity needs. The research assesses correlations between the use of online social networks and the perceptions of support received from others (using the concepts of social support, thwarted belongingness and burdensomeness, and cohabitation in their homes). The study involves a sample of 445 Spanish participants aged 13 to 21. A descriptive multivariate analysis of variance and bivariate correlations was performed. We found that social networks were very important for LGBTQ+ youth during the pandemic, helping them to explore their identities, but could also be a source of violence. In this regard, while trans and nonbinary youth's use of social networks to contact acquaintances show important differences when compared to that of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, the former group also experiences more violence coming from these networks, finds less social support through them, and feels a stronger sense of burdensomeness in relation to them. Additionally, they were often living with people other than family members during the lockdown. This data suggests the need to offer specific support and online services for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly for trans and nonbinary youth.

Keywords
burdensomeness; Covid-19; gender identity; LGBTQ+; social networking; thwarted belongingness; vulnerable youth; youth support

Issue
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1. Introduction

In Spain, unlike other European countries, childhood and youth were strongly stigmatized during the first wave of Covid-19 (Chmielewska, 2020), which required harsh confinement and social distancing measures between 15 March and 21 June 2020. High schools and universities moved their classes online until the end of the semester. Faculty felt overwhelmed and unsupported in this technological transition, not knowing whether their students had the means to keep up with their classes or under what conditions (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). The requirements of young people were often overshadowed by the urgent need to address the pandemic crisis, and by the common view that sexuality and bullying are not only minor issues but also politically controversial. Additionally, many families faced economic uncertainty and job losses, with unemployment rising to 16% (INE, 2021).

Having access to a device (computer, phone, tablet, etc.) and the Internet was very important for these young people to attend online classes and maintain ties with

their peers. Probably due to the widespread use of cell phones (Pérez Díaz et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2010; Qustodio, 2019), young people spent a significant amount of time online during the pandemic and, depending on their use of these resources, were able to access academic resources and maintain communication with one another. However, at the same time, they exposed themselves to potential mental health risks (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Before Covid-19, the literature indicated specific Internet usage by LGBTQ+ youth particularly related to their need to explore their sexuality (González-Ortega et al., 2015). Most notably, LGBTQ+ youth can make sense of their identities using this form of communication (Austin et al., 2020). On social networks, LGBTQ+ youth explore their desires and make friends, practice their social skills, and seek resources to cope with a world that tells them they are too young to know about sexuality (Tortajada et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2017). They find a "public intimacy" on these networks, having intense online experiences with their devices to which their families and other people around them are oblivious (Jenzen, 2017). LGBTQ+ youth can see how their identity is received online and "come out" to a small group before talking to their families. In particular, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain, access to these social networks was vital for LGBTQ+ youth to make sense of who they were: to stay in touch with other people, being able to express an identity that they themselves have chosen and which is not always known to all around them (Fish et al., 2020). For those who lack family support, these online connections can alleviate stressful situations linked to their non-normative sexuality and gender identity (Green et al., 2020). However, online social networks are also a space where many LGBTQ+ youth are subjected to harassment (Tortajada et al., 2020).

Overall, it is important to consider how having the social support of their families, schools, friends, and neighbors is essential for LGBTQ+ youth to cope with the stigma of being outside cisgender and heterocentric norms (Frost et al., 2016; Moody & Grant Smith, 2013; Platero, 2014; Warner, 2002), avoiding what is known as "minority stress" (Meyer, 2003). Having this support helps them avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation, but also the sensation of burdensomeness (Green et al., 2020). This is even more true in a situation of a pandemic. Alarming data exist on the lack of support for LGBTQ+ youth and, in particular, trans or nonbinary youth (Buspavanich et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Mirabella et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, support networks helped these young people cope with the associated challenges and imposed restrictions (Mirabella et al., 2021). This occurred in a context in which not only were their social relationships reduced, but they faced potentially hostile situations around their sexuality and greater discomfort linked to their uncertainty regarding the immediate future. They also encountered a standstill in the public administration that affected individuals who wanted to change their names or receive hormonal or retroviral treatments, among others (Green et al., 2020; Platero & López-Sáez, 2020).

Acknowledging the fact that LGBTQ+ youth in Spain often sought support online during the pandemic (Platero & López-Sáez, 2020), we want to understand to what effect this technology was used at a time when the institutional educational environment was not able to provide a comprehensive response for youth development. With an awareness of the contradictory idiosyncrasies of the Internet, which both provides LGBTQ+ youth with an opportunity to explore their sexuality but also exposes them to significant risks, we explore the role of online networks for the vulnerable group of LGBTQ+ youth during the first wave of the pandemic. In particular, we pose questions related to the interrelationship between using online networks, social support, LGBTQ+ youth housemates, and the self-perception of burdensomeness. Finally, we analyze their experiences from the viewpoint of their age, sexual identity, and identification as cis or trans to offer information about a social group that is insufficiently studied in Spain (CIMOP, 2010; Coll-Planas et al., 2009).

2. Method

This is an exploratory ex post facto prospective and cross-sectional study (Montero & León, 2002), with the independent study variables being age (adolescents and young adults) and gender identity (cis and trans/non-binary).

2.1. Participants

A total of 445 people aged 13–21 (M = 1.8, SD = 0.40) living in Spain completed the questionnaire, as part of a larger study that included the participation of 2,833 people of different ages.

Of the sample of 445 young people, 51.5% were cis women, 17.1% cis men, 13.9% trans men, 12.6% non-binary, and 4.9% trans women. The vast majority were students, with 17.1% in elementary or compulsory junior high education, 55.1% in high school or vocational training, and 27.9% enrolled in college. Politically, 66.5% described themselves as left-wing, 26.1% center-left, 5.6% center, 1.6% center-right, and 0.2% right-wing.

With specific regard to Covid-19, 3.6% stated that they had had symptoms related to the illness. Concerning their place of residence during the lockdown, 26.5% were in large cities, 44% were in small cities, and 29.5% were in towns; 29.4% stated that they had to change their residence due to lockdown measures.

2.2. Procedure

In May 2020, a group of researchers in gender psychology from the Rey Juan Carlos University, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and the University of Barcelona

designed a study to assess the psychosocial impact of Covid-19 on the LGBTQ+ population. Participants were recruited through advertisements in different social networks and by reaching out to feminist and LGBTQ+ non-governmental organizations, between 4 April and 10 May 2020.

Different scales with the appropriate psychometric properties were used to design the instrument battery based on substantive relevance and consistency for our study. In addition, two experts in gender psychology reviewed the final battery to assess whether each item adequately represented the dimensions of interest. The items were also given to a pilot group consisting of two Black lesbians, two Caucasian gay men, two Caucasian trans persons, and one Caucasian intersex woman, who judged each item in terms of comprehensibility. Four people in this pilot group were under 22 years of age (respectively 15, 17, 19, and 21). Lastly, the items were reviewed by an expert in inclusive language and an expert in psychometric analysis. These revisions improved the clarity, simplicity, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. Likewise, control items were incorporated to avoid acquiescence bias and loss of veracity, and the non-inclusion of intermediate response options was considered adequate to avoid central tendency bias and social desirability bias when responding to questions related to intimacy.

All the participants received the same instructions and were informed of the voluntary nature, confidentiality, and anonymity of their responses. Before participating, they had to read and accept an informed consent form.

2.3. Instruments

Except for the socio-demographic questionnaire, the scales used a response format from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The different instruments used, along with their corresponding consistency indexes according to the authors of each scale, are discussed below.

2.3.1. Socio-Demographic Questionnaire

This questionnaire gathered information about gender identity, sexual orientation, age, education, Covid-19 status, access to treatment, and changes in place of residence. The *change in residence* variable asked whether a change in residence had occurred and about the participants' housemates before and after the lockdown measures were enacted.

2.3.2. Items on Social Network Usage

Five specific items were included in the questionnaire on the use of social networks, with one question focused on the perception of anti-LGBTQ+ aggression on virtual social networks ("I have received/observed more LGTBQphobic aggression on virtual social networks") and four on how they used networks ("I use online media like social networks/calls/video calls for sexual practices") and whether they made voice or video calls for different purposes (flirting, sexual interactions, talking to friends, talking to family members). These items referred back to two moments: currently (the period of the state of alarm in Spain, between 15 March and 21 June) and before the Covid-19 pandemic. These items were selected because of the usual importance of social networks for young people and adolescents, especially for those with non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Craig et al., 2015), at a particular time that usually required coping with living in very close quarters with family members and being isolated from peers and other people who help them have a sense of self that is more in line with their self-perceived identities.

2.3.3. Social Support Frequency and Satisfaction Questionnaire

This survey comprises 12 items that measure perceived social support on an emotional, informational, and instrumental plane. The tool has a factorial structure composed of four dimensions: (a) social support received from a partner (Social Support Frequency and Satisfaction Questionnaire [SFSQ]-P), (b) social support received from the family (SSFSQ-F); (c) social support received from friends (SSFSQ-FR), and (d) social support received from the community (SSFSQ-C). Higher scores reflect a greater perception of social support. García-Martín et al. (2016) indicated a high reliability with internally-consistent alpha coefficients of .95, .91, .92, and .92, respectively.

2.3.4. Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire

This questionnaire is composed of nine items, six related to the dimension of self-perception as a burden to others, i.e., burdensomeness (Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire [INQ]-PB) and three related to the sensation of loneliness and a lack of reciprocal support, i.e., thwarted belongingness (INQ-TB). Feelings of burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness are two risk factors strongly linked to suicidal ideation (Van Orden et al., 2010). Higher scores reflect a greater self-perception of burdensomeness. Silva et al. (2018) reported a good overall reliability with an omega coefficient that ranged between .85 and .95.

2.4. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were obtained for each item and instrument, along with visual histograms and normality tests. The scores were calculated for each dimension by averaging the items.

Differences in age (adolescents aged 13–17 or young adults aged 18–21) and gender identity (woman, man,

or gender non-binary) were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The different kinds of cohabitation, changes in residence, scales, and the items related to social network usage were considered dependent variables, while age group and gender identity were independent variables.

Lastly, correlations between the different variables were estimated using Pearson's coefficient.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Regardless of whether there was a change of residence, most participants chose to live with family members: 39.3% lived with family members before 15 March, a figure that increased to 89.2% after that date. Adolescents and young people living with friends decreased from 26.1% to 4.3%, those living with their partner(s) increased from 1.3% to 3.1%, and those living alone decreased from 4.7% to 3.1%. During confinement, 28.1% felt little or no support from their partner(s), 27.2% from their family, and 18.2% from friends. During the same period, 31.6% had a feeling of burdensomeness or thwarted belongingness either moderately, frequently, or very frequently. Social networks before the lockdown were used to talk to friends (94.6%), talk to family (79.6%), flirt (51.9%), or engage in cybersex (29.7%). The percentages during confinement were as follows: (a) talking to friends, 98.7%, (b) talking to family, 84.7%, (c) flirting, 40.4%, and (d) cybersex, 30.3%. Some 80% perceived anti-LGBTQ+ aggression before the lockdown, while 71.5% perceived it during confinement.

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations, divided by age group (adolescents 13–17 years old × young adults 18–21 years old) and gender identity (cis × trans × nonbinary gender).

3.2. Multivariate Analysis of Variance

The results of the MANOVA indicate significance in the interaction (age group × gender identity), $F(14,427) = 1.78$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. This occurred with the items concerning SSFSQ-FR, $F(1,440) = 5.70$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. This kind of interaction requires an analysis of the simple effects in order to be interpreted without error (see León & Montero, 2015). The analyses of the simple effects of the age groups showed that there were significant differences between cis- and trans/nonbinary adolescents ($F(1,87) = 8.53$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$), but not

Table 1. Means and standard deviations, divided by age group and gender identity.

	Adolescents: 13–17 years old				Young adults: 18–21 years old			
	Cis (N = 41)		Trans/non binary (N = 48)		Cis (N = 263)		Trans/nonbinary (N = 92)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Change of residence	1.02	.16	1.08	.28	1.38	.49	1.27	.44
Live with family	1.98	.16	1.94	.24	1.90	.30	1.83	.38
Live with friends	1.00	.00	1.00	.00	1.05	.22	1.07	.25
Live with a partner	1.00	.00	1.04	.20	1.03	.16	1.05	.23
Live alone	1.02	.16	1.02	.14	1.03	.16	1.05	.23
Support from family (SSFSQ-F)	4.17	1.20	3.56	1.42	4.01	1.35	3.39	1.52
Support from friends (SSFSQ-FR)	4.24	1.36	3.34	1.51	4.24	1.22	4.10	1.30
Support from partner(s) (SSFSQ-P)	3.87	1.60	3.79	1.44	3.96	1.50	3.86	1.64
Perceived burdensomeness (INQ-PB)	2.39	1.54	3.30	1.75	2.29	1.46	2.83	1.60
Thwarted belongingness (INQ-TB)	2.40	1.19	2.97	1.33	2.40	1.26	2.64	1.33
Current perception of aggression	3.39	1.92	2.79	1.70	3.00	1.83	3.60	1.91
Pre-confinement perception of aggression	3.80	1.83	3.25	1.70	3.20	1.75	3.77	1.59
Current use for flirting	2.41	1.80	1.67	1.43	2.21	1.75	2.50	2.00
Pre-confinement use for flirting	2.51	1.79	1.58	1.15	2.56	1.79	2.59	1.86
Current use for cybersex	1.78	1.44	1.60	1.27	1.90	1.60	2.15	1.80
Pre-confinement use for cybersex	1.54	1.19	1.35	.79	1.79	1.46	1.90	1.48
Current use for talking to the family	5.51	1.17	4.96	1.54	5.22	1.34	5.21	1.40
Pre-confinement use for talking to the family	5.27	1.32	4.46	1.79	4.53	1.65	4.52	1.67
Current use for talking to friends	4.56	1.92	3.79	1.83	4.05	1.85	3.54	1.92
Pre-confinement use for talking to friends	4.05	1.95	3.31	1.93	3.58	1.88	3.08	1.82

among young adults. Thus, cis adolescents scored higher in perceived support from friends than trans and nonbinary adolescents. Analyses of the simple effects of gender identity showed that there were significant differences between trans/nonbinary adolescents and young adults (F(1,138) = 9.50, p < .005, η_p^2 = .06), with young adults scoring higher on perceived support from friends. No such differences appeared between cis young adults and adolescents.

Differences also appeared in the perception of aggression on social networks, F(1,440) = 7.01, p < .05, η_p^2 = .01. The analyses of the simple effects of the age groups showed that there were significant differences between cis- and trans/nonbinary young adults (F(1,354) = 7.23, p = .05, η_p^2 = .02), but not between adolescents. That is, trans/nonbinary young adults scored higher on perceived aggression than cis young adults. Analyses of the simple effects of gender identity showed that there were significant differences between adolescents and trans/nonbinary young adults (F(1,138) = 6.07, p < .05, η_p^2 = .04), where young adults scored higher. No such differences appeared between cis young adults and adolescents.

Lastly, regarding the use of networks for flirting, the analyses found (F(1,440) = 5.62, p < .05, η_p^2 = .01). The analyses of the simple effects of the age groups showed that there were significant differences between cis—and trans/nonbinary adolescents (F(1,87) = 4.74, p < .05, η_p^2 = .05), but not between young adults. Thus, cis adolescents scored higher on the use of social networks and dating apps than trans/nonbinary adolescents. Analyses of the simple effects of gender identity showed that there were significant differences between adolescents and trans/nonbinary young adults (F(1,138) = 6.58, p < .05, η_p^2 = .04), and trans/nonbinary young adults, with young adults scoring higher. No such group differences appeared between cis young adults and adolescents.

With cohabitation with family members, the analyses of the main effects of age showed the existence of significant differences between adolescents and young adults (F(1,440) = 6.41, p < .05, η_p^2 = .01), with adolescents of all groups scoring higher in family cohabitation. Similarly, the analyses of the main effects of living with friends showed significant differences between adolescents and young adults (F(1,440) = 5.37, p < .05, η_p^2 = .01), with young adults of all groups scoring higher on living with friends.

Regarding the use of social networks and applications for cybersex, the analyses of the main effects found differences close to significance between adolescents and young adults (F(1,440) = 2.92, p = .08, η_p^2 = .01), indicating that young adults in all groups scored higher in the use of networks for cybersex.

In the social support received from family, SSFSQ-F, the analyses of gender identity F(1, 440) = 13.22, p < .001, η_p^2 = .03) showed the existence of significant differences between cis and trans/nonbinary people, with cis adolescents and young adults scoring higher. These data reveal that cis people perceive that they have more support from their families than trans and nonbinary people.

On the negative self-perception of burdensomeness to others and thwarted belongingness, INQ-PB (F(1,440) = 14.90, p < .001, η_p^2 = .03) and INQ-TB (F(1,440) = 11.23, p < .05, η_p^2 = .02), the main effects analyses of gender identity showed the existence of significant differences between cis- and trans/nonbinary people, with adolescents and trans/nonbinary young adults scoring higher. That is, both trans and nonbinary adolescents and young adults have more self-perceptions of burdensomeness and more thwarted belongingness.

Finally, for the use of social networks and other apps to talk to family, the analyses of the main effects of gender identity (F(1,440) = 7.91, p < .05, η_p^2 = .02) showed the existence of significant differences between cis and trans/nonbinary people, with cis adolescents and young adults scoring higher. Homologously, although bordering on significance (F(1,440) = 2.92, p = .08, η_p^2 = .01), this relationship was also found in the use of social networks and other applications to talk to friends. Thus, cis people of all ages use networks more to talk to family and friends.

3.3. Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations for the whole sample according to the following variables: gender identity, age, SSFSQ, INQ, housemates, change of residence, use of networks, and perception of aggression. The correlations were calculated using Spearman's ρ coefficient due to the breakdown of the assumptions of continuity or normality in all the pairs of variables.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The intersection of age (adolescence and young adults) and gender identity (cis and trans/nonbinary) seems to influence the perception of support received from friends (especially for cis adolescents), as well as the use of networks and applications (with communicating with family and friends and flirting being more frequent among cis people). Age and being trans or nonbinary are key when it comes to perceiving more aggression on social networks during confinement. This perception is linked to the fact that they are, indeed, subjected to greater violence than their cis peers and that such violence is increasingly frequent on social networks, although it is not always reported (FELGTB, 2020a, 2020b).

Likewise, age itself seems to influence the choice to live with some people or others during the lockdown. As might be expected, the lower the age, the greater the likelihood of cohabitation with family members and the less likely cohabitation with friends or partners. This intensive cohabitation with relatives at a time of crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic, forces adolescents to assess whether to reveal their identity in homes where they do not always receive support and are

Table 2. Correlations of the whole sample with current network use.

	Perceived aggression	Flirting	Cybersex	Talking to family members	Talking to friends
Gender identity	.075	−.033	.013	−.036	−.125**
Age	.016	.072	.058	−.012	−.053
Change of residence	.055	.018	.012	.041	.015
Live with family	−.014	−.009	−.041	.071	−.062
Live with friends	−.071	−.011	.024	.001	.049
Live with partner(s)	.129**	−.018	.017	−.094*	.065
Live alone	−.022	.046	.027	−.032	−.013
Support of family (SSFSQ-F)	−.009	.088	−.006	.248**	.385**
Support of friends (SSFSQ-FR)	.094*	.189**	.102*	.407**	.269**
Support of partner(s) (SSFSQ-P)	.115*	.086	.160**	.255**	.212**
Perceived burdensomeness (INQ-PB)	.100*	−.067	.095*	−.149**	−.154**
Thwarted belongingness (INQ-TB)	.001	−.201**	−.029	−.297**	−.200**

Notes: *p < .05; **p < .01.

vulnerable to violence from which they cannot escape (Borraz, 2020; Gorman-Murray et al., 2018; Hawke et al., 2021; Momoitio, 2020). As some preliminary studies among young college students have shown, the people with whom one lives can influence anxiety levels (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020).

Age also influences the use of social networks. In general, during adolescence, there is a need to explore sexuality, and for those who have non-normative identities this often means facing potential rejection (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011). This encourages these teens to turn to social networks in search of support, places where they may find peers and potential partners that they do not have in their "offline life" (DeHaan et al., 2013). Our study found that adolescents are more interested in using networks to flirt, while youth use social networks more frequently for cybersex. These data must be compared with what has been found in other studies amongst the Spanish adolescent population, which is starting to use the Internet for sexual purposes (flirting, searching for information, watching pornography, cybersex, etc.) at an increasingly young age (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2016). Additionally, we also found a high prevalence of online "sexual activities" among Spanish young adults (Gutiérrez-Puertas et al., 2020), as well as the use of social networks for flirting, searching for sexual information, purchasing sexual materials, etc., which is also significant and coincides with the international literature (Shaughnessy et al., 2013; Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

The interactions between online and offline behavior shape the emerging identities, romantic relationships, sexual behaviors, and health of young people (DeHaan et al., 2013). For that reason, more studies are needed on the use of networks in this age group in the intersection with LGBTQ+ identities during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, our data suggest the need to create spaces and resources for youth that are informative, accessible, educational, and involve their peers, both online and offline (Fish et al., 2020). This work can be done by the public authorities who work in youth intervention programs. Moreover, these adolescents and young people are already content producers and can thus be an active part of these institutional proposals (Jenzen & Karl, 2014), challenging the adult-centric view of intervention with young people.

On the other hand, gender identity determines the perception of support from friends, since the cis people in the sample perceived that they have more support than trans and nonbinary people. There is a greater self-perception of burdensomeness, having feelings of frustration and thwarted belongingness, which is more common among trans and nonbinary people as the results of other studies have also shown (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019; Reisner et al., 2015). Finally, gender identity determines the type of use of social networks and apps to chat with family members, where cis people in the sample used them more frequently, perhaps because they receive more support from and have more communication with their families than trans and nonbinary people.

The correlations in the sample as a whole affirm some findings in the earlier literature, as well as information appearing in the press (Borraz, 2020; Momoitio, 2020). Gender identity correlated negatively and significantly with using networks to talk to friends. In other words, trans/nonbinary individuals make less use of networks to communicate with friends and—although not significantly but negatively—to flirt and talk with family members. This data raises two questions: What freedom did trans and nonbinary individuals have to communicate and talk during confinement about their identities while under intense family monitoring? Are trans and nonbinary youth finding friendships and bonds with peers that they may not find in their usual places

of socialization (school, neighborhood, leisure spaces, etc.) elsewhere? (DeHaan et al., 2013). Contacts made through social networks can compensate for the absence of support "in real life," allow these youths to understand themselves and their processes, find peers with whom to share important experiences in the development of their identity, and potentially forge offline friendships (DeHaan et al., 2013; FELGTB, 2020b; Jenzen, 2017; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

These data, in particular on the perception of support received, suggest that there is a specific need for support (both online and offline), not only for adolescents and young adults with non-normative sexualities but especially for those who are trans and nonbinary, who often do not find answers in the existing resources for young people, especially during times of crisis.

Living with a partner correlated positively and significantly with perceiving the existence of aggression on social networks, and negatively with using the networks to talk to family. This suggests that those who live with a partner may not need as much family support. Furthermore, interacting and communicating with a partner could contribute to making this violence on social networks more visible.

Feeling that one has family support positively correlated with using social networks to talk to both family members and friends. This data is consistent with the literature that has observed that, for adolescents, Internet use is a way to stay in touch with the world and explore opportunities (Ofcom, 2014; Procentese et al., 2019; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). For youth, the Internet extends how they connect and communicate with other important people in their lives, such as family members (Neustaedter et al., 2013).

It is significant that perceived support from friends correlated positively with all uses of social networks and with perceived aggression. For these adolescents and young adults, social networks may expand social circles, and separate circles may mix, allowing users to explore different uses because of this support (Jenzen & Karl, 2014). The same happens with perceiving partner support, which correlates with all network uses (except flirting) and perceived aggression. If flirting and looking for a partner are two frequent activities on social networks for this age group (Pascoe, 2011), and their online and offline life is interconnected, it is not surprising that partners in monogamous couples are not encouraged to use social networks in this way. In addition, the visibility of a partner or one's very identity as an LGBTQ+ person with friends can be linked to greater exposure to online violence and, consequently, a greater perception of violence.

Self-perceived burdensomeness correlates positively with perceived aggression, but negatively with any use involving contact with others, except cybersex. This could indicate that cybersex is a poor protective factor, unlike other social network uses. Although cybersex can help young people to explore their sexual preferences (Shaughnessy et al., 2013), it also carries some potential risks (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2016), such as exposure to misinformation, reinforcing sexual stereotypes (Longo et al., 2002), and receiving unwanted sexual content (Castro et al., 2015). Furthermore, if it becomes an addiction, it can interfere with daily life (Döring, 2009).

Lastly, the perception of thwarted belongingness correlates negatively with all uses of social networks that involve contact with other people, which is consistent with the feelings of thwarted belongingness and lack of reciprocal care that characterize them. This data is consistent with the existing literature, which indicates that a perceived lack of belonging is related to the perception of loneliness and isolation, which together with a feeling of burdensomeness are risk factors for an active desire to commit suicide (Joiner et al., 2012; Silva et al., 2015; Van Orden et al., 2010).

These data need to be contrasted with more specific studies (that is, based on more representative samples) and comparative studies between countries. However, our data show the need to recognize a population with intersectional characteristics who experiences a particular type of violence and often lacks the necessary support from their environment and the institutions that serve young people.

As some studies have indicated (Espinosa, 2020), access to health protection related to Covid-19 must be better articulated as part of the basic human rights of adolescents and young adults. In Spain, this age group has been discriminated against because of their alleged "potential to spread the coronavirus" while, at the same time, they have not been sufficiently protected and their needs have been ignored. In particular, the lack of protection for LGBTQ+ young adults and adolescents during the pandemic has entailed significant health risks for a population that already has notable health disadvantages, intensifying the gap with their peers.

One lesson learned from the effects of the pandemic is that education and youth-related policies must address existing social inequalities, including sexual and gender diversity. Specifically, policies and youth programs should pay more attention to the use of social networks and apps by LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults, offering more support services, both inside and outside these networks, particularly considering that young adults and adolescents are already content producers of online materials, in addition to being consumers (Jenzen & Karl, 2014). LGBTQ+ inclusive programs and policies could be extraordinarily helpful in providing much-needed support during these young people identity processes, especially for vulnerable adolescents who are trans and non-binary.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

R. Lucas Platero is an assistant professor at Rey Juan Carlos University, Psychology Department, and director of publications for trans* studies at Bellaterra Publishing House. His academic journey is strongly linked to his activist life, gradually shifting his social activism to activism based on academic research, to which he has made multiple contributions. In 2020, Platero received the Emma Goldman Award, supporting innovative research and knowledge on feminist and inequality issues in Europe.

Miguel A. López-Sáez holds a PhD in psychology from the Autonomous University of Madrid. Currently, he is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Rey Juan Carlos University. His work focuses on social psychology in the areas of children and youth, gender, sexual diversity, and sexual and gender-based violence. He recently coordinated projects on feminist research, trans* childhood, and masculinities. He is a member of activist networks reporting on sexual violence, as well as several public health policies and feminist epistemology research groups.

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Article

The Inclusion of Students With Disabilities: Challenges for Italian Teachers During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Maddalena Colombo * and Mariagrazia Santagati

Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

* Corresponding author (maddalena.colombo@unicatt.it)

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Abstract
In March 2020 all schools in Italy were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the novelty of distance learning was introduced. During the 2020–2021 school year, pre-primary and primary schooling was carried out in situ, while secondary education was re-organized into a mixed system, with students spending 50% of their time attending classes from home, in distance learning. This reconfiguration was a challenge to students, teachers, and parents, affecting the learning experience of the most vulnerable students and students with disabilities, particularly. It necessarily brought into question Italy's "progressive" legal framework for "school inclusion." The scope of the present article is to analyze the teaching activities carried out with students with disabilities in Italy during the first wave of the emergency lockdown and their consequent challenges for school inclusiveness. An overview of the Italian inclusive model in education and the national measures adopted to guarantee the right to education during times of school closure/restriction is outlined. We have sought to test the hypothesis that distance learning may introduce many risks for inclusion (resulting in a "downgrading inclusion," that is, a decline of the level of inclusion already reached for students with disabilities), but it may also present an improvement in how teachers address these students and their needs. To this end, after reporting data from the available studies on this target, we provide insights from a web questionnaire submitted to a non-probabilistic sample of nearly 150 primary and (lower and upper) secondary school teachers. Results showcase that, though with a general worsening of school inclusion, in some cases, teachers were actually able to support students with disabilities and their families in a new, customized, empathetic, and more attentive manner.

Keywords
Covid-19; distance learning; Italy; school inclusion; school lockdown; school–family relationship; students with disabilities; support teachers; vulnerable students

Issue
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1. Introduction

In March 2020 all schools in Italy were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the novelty of distance learning was introduced. During the 2020–2021 school year, pre-primary and primary schooling took place regularly, while secondary education was re-organized into a mixed system, with students spending 50% of their time attending classes from home, in distance learning. This reconfiguration posed a challenge to every student, teacher, parent, and school manager, highlighting latent educational problems and unveiling educational inequalities already affecting the most vulnerable students. Among this group, students with disabilities more generally, and the issue of their inclusion in education specifically, have been an educational priority during the Covid health crisis.

After presenting an overview of the Italian inclusive model of education and a review of the literature investigating the impact of lockdown on children with

disabilities, this article will try to test the hypothesis that distance learning offers students with disabilities a combination of both risk and improvement factors. Empirical evidence generated from a web questionnaire submitted to a non-probabilistic sample of nearly 150 Italian primary and secondary school teachers will be discussed.

2. The Italian Inclusive Model of Education

The Italian education system, as outlined by the 1946 Italian Constitution, is characterized by its inclusiveness: The document fosters a non-discriminatory system where access to education is ensured regardless of gender, race, social status, ability, and difference of opinion, and article 34, comma 1, stresses that "schools are open to everyone." During the second half of the 20th century, a wide cultural movement for the rights of people with disabilities took place and improved aspects of inclusivity in Italian society and its institutions.

Since the mid-1970s, students with disabilities have been the object of specific legislation in Italy (Law n. 517/1977) inspired by the principle of school integration (Dempsey, 2001), which has made it mandatory to recruit a support teacher certified by the National Health System for every four students with a disability in each class. The law, which has not been changed, features one of the most "progressive" legal frameworks in Europe (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003), in terms not only of de-segregation but also of integration in mainstream education. So far, other norms have been promulgated, aimed at broadening the range of needs classified as "special" and eligible for compensations and dispensations during a given educational career: Of these, Law no. 104/1992 and Law no. 170/2010 have been the most significant. An organic set of rights was established in compulsory education (which has been extended from eight to 12 years, or until the age of 18 in 2007) and the creation of an Individual Educational Plan (PEI) has become mandatory for students with disabilities at all school levels. A meaningful measure adopted to further promote educational inclusion was the Directive of the Ministry of Education, passed 27 December 2012, which distinguishes SEN students into three sub-groups: those with one or more disabilities, those with learning difficulties (ADHD, dyslexia, etc.), and those with a socio-economic and/or linguistic disadvantage due to ethnic background, economic deprivation, and/or family poverty. This distinction aims to develop more customized interventions. In this article we chose to focus on the first subgroup of special needs students, those with disabilities (be these physical, psychological, or sensory) given that they are the only ones who are assigned a support teacher. Accordingly, we use the term "support teacher" and not "special educational needs teacher," as the latter is not recognized as such in Italy.

As a positive impact of this legislation, there has been an increase in the target population, which now includes 270,000 students with disabilities (3.5% of the whole school population; see Istat, 2020). They can benefit from a student-to-teacher ratio of 1:3 thanks to a provision of about 203,000 support teachers, mainly operating in public schools, who represent 29.8% of all teachers employed (MIUR, 2021). Each student with a disability has the right to have a support teacher for 14.1 hours per week on average (as per the 2018–2019 school year) in addition to the classroom teacher, but this amount is still perceived as insufficient, given that 6% of parents have appealed against this allocation. Moreover, the turnover among support teachers is particularly high, given that 57% change yearly, and this is another reason parents complain (Istat, 2020).

Overall, Italian school integration policy can be considered as inclusive (D'Alessio, 2011), since it is based on a neat anti-discriminatory and de-segregating legislation, and focused on equity, access, opportunity, and rights. At a formal level, this approach is consistent with the "social model" of disability which has inspired the ICF framework (Barnes, 2012), because the help provided to students is not limited to the school environment but is located at the crossroads of school and health/social services, both of whom are responsible for the certification of disability and for the definition of support measures that will follow. These measures, however, are often not applied in full due to the different standards of diagnosis applied in the different regional healthcare systems and the local disparity in the availability of support teachers. Therefore, the measures do not achieve their full potential and, in some cases, this can hamper the path to inclusion. Moreover, the sociocultural climate, especially in secondary education, is often not yet ready to accept and adopt them fully, something we shall return to later in the article.

3. The Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in Italy During Covid-19

3.1. School Closure and Social Distancing

Italy was the first Western country to close all educational institutions nationwide at the beginning of March 2020. To this day, the country has navigated through different phases: from the first general lockdown (March–June 2020) to the re-opening of schools (September through mid-October 2021) with protection measures and social distancing in the classroom, to a long period characterized by the alternation of students in secondary schools (divided into two groups who could be present online or at school, alternatively) until the end of the 2020–2021 school year (Pavolini et al., 2021).

No doubt, the urgent and drastic measure of suspending all early childhood education services and schools (Decree-Law n. 6 of 23 February 2020) marked an unprecedented scenario for Italy. One month into the pandemic the Minister of Education issued the first operational indications for distance learning activities (DAD):

to maintain class relationships and learning environments and to contrast isolation and demotivation among students. Many Italian schools started distance learning almost immediately while awaiting more specific national guidelines. They carried out a set of different educational activities using ICT, videoconferencing, and assigning homework and study materials through digital platforms (or via e-mail and WhatsApp if the connectivity was too weak for synchronic exchanges). Social activities with students online were the most widespread practice (Indire, 2020). The Ministerial Note no. 388 of 17 March 2020 suggested paying special attention to students with disabilities: Support and curricular teachers were invited to maintain the interaction with these students and their parents, albeit remotely, to continue supporting them through distance learning and to monitor the effective implementation of their PEI. Meanwhile, the website of the Ministry of Education was expanded to include a section called "online inclusion," aimed at supporting school staff by providing tools, experiences, and webinars they could use with students with disabilities (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020).

During the summer of 2020, in preparation for the re-opening of schools in September, the Ministry of Education delivered the guidelines for integrated digital teaching (DDI), which stipulated that each school was required to prepare a specific plan, capitalizing on the experience gained during the months of lockdown. Each school was also asked to survey any specific needs for tablets, PCs, ICT connections, and other infrastructural equipment for students and teachers, and make sure those needs were catered to. Whereas during the first lockdown students with disabilities were subjected to the same restrictions imposed on all students (which placed a heavy burden on their families), from September 2020 onwards they received special provisions: In the case of blended learning (remote and presential), they would be given priority in receiving face-to-face learning with their teachers to avoid both physical isolation and care deprivation—both of which are at risk in the case of prolonged exclusion from presential learning among students with disabilities.

Ministerial Decree no. 39, issued 26 June 2020, identifies disability and school inclusion as educational priorities for the 2020–2021 school year. By adopting ordinary and extraordinary measures, schools have been required to ensure that students with SENs, especially those with disabilities, be present at school, by creating customized face-to-face activities based on the number of students, type(s) of disability, and available professional resources; in some cases, they were even dispensed from using an (otherwise mandatory) protective face mask.

Given the sharpening of the pandemic, the 2020–2021 school year started with many concerns: Several interruptions to regular school attendance (based on differential criteria of risk of contagion for each region) and different forms of distance learning were carried out, especially in upper secondary education. With the Prime Minister Decree of 2 March 2021, one year after the start of the Covid-19 emergency, all schools were closed again, allowing only teachers (who, in the meantime, had been among the first categories of workers to take part in the vaccination campaign) and students with special needs to enter school grounds.

3.2. Studies on the Impact of Lockdown on Children With Disability

Since 2020, studies began to investigate the indirect effects of prolonged school closures on students, both in terms of learning and of their physical and mental health (Schleicher, 2020). The learning loss (Agostinelli et al., 2020) appeared difficult to regain, especially for pupils from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, with an increased likelihood that school inequalities would worsen (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). One year later, in March 2021, with almost half of the world's students still affected by partial or full school closures (UNESCO, 2021), the global effects of lockdown on students began to become clearer. Due to the lack of ICT devices, poor connectivity, and the absence of direct teacher–student interaction, distance learning proved its inadequacy as a means of ensuring universal access to education. Indeed, it has been estimated that one-third of school-age children in the world have been excluded from distance learning activities (UNICEF, 2021).

Little research has specifically focused on students with disabilities. International analyses remark on the negative consequences of home confinement and "home-based distance learning," and point out that distance learning programs reduce school participation (Petretto et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020). Italian studies also highlight the presence of additional problems for this group during the pandemic. Between April and June 2020, over 23% of students with disabilities (about 70,000) did not take part in distance learning activities (Istat, 2020). The reasons are mainly linked to the severity of their disability/ies, the difficulty in ensuring the collaboration of family members, and the family's socioeconomic disadvantage. In particular, the few studies carried out during the pandemic focused on the role played by three factors: (a) availability of ICT devices at home and school (Filosa & Parente, 2020; Indire, 2020); (b) level of family collaboration; and (c) readjustment of the objectives of the PEI.

A month after the first school closure, an explorative survey based on nearly 3,000 teachers (Ianes & Bellacicco, 2020), showed that more than one student with a disability out of three was excluded from distance teaching, while for 20% only individualized activities were contemplated. Exclusion seemed to be widespread across different school levels: In more than 20% of cases, no digital materials were made available for these students; their adaptation, when it occurred, was assigned only by support teachers. Sometimes the relationship with families and between teachers appeared to be

positive, whereas peer involvement was found to be lacking, leading to isolation for students with disabilities (Fondazione Agnelli, 2020).

In a local study carried out in a Northern Italian region (Parmigiani et al., 2020), 24% of the nearly 800 teachers surveyed declared that the families of students with disabilities did not have ICT devices at their disposal that were sufficiently powerful to launch videoconferencing software or to download the applications necessary to utilize digital materials. Most families (65%) collaborated in many ways with teachers by coaching their children, giving continuous feedback, supporting them emotionally, and helping teachers during the personalization process. Most teachers declared having had a good level of team collaboration (70%), whilst 154 teachers noted situations where support teachers were excluded from the teaching team and left alone to manage their assigned students with disabilities. Obstacles to successful online inclusive activities were lack of physical contact, lack of face-to-face interaction, lack of attention, and lack of participation. Among others, the lack of social moments appears to be the most important problem, since there are difficulties in maintaining contact with the rest of the class. Finally, national studies emphasize that in one school out of 10 no support teacher took part in specific courses for the appropriate use of ICT in education: Therefore, a scarce preparation in the management of distance teaching is hypothesized for this group of teachers, with possible negative consequences on students with disabilities, the impact of which has not yet been fully estimated (Censis, 2020).

4. Hypothesis and Method

There is no doubt that the inclusive approach of the Italian education system has suffered during the pandemic, and the consequences may have had an impact over and beyond the students themselves, on teachers and parents. No teacher, however well prepared, can be inclusive, in conditions of permanent external danger and with minimal (or no) institutional support. Teachers were able to cope with the emergency mostly at an individual level by drawing upon their personal experience with ICT, goodwill, and capability to test out new teaching solutions through trial-and-error and by learning how to grab and exploit public digital resources (online, radio and TV materials, online tutorials, etc.) available at the given moment.

Given the limited studies on this issue, our first exploratory hypothesis is that, during this emergency, which created new working conditions for both regular and support teachers, the inclusion of students with disabilities in the educational environment could face a risk of decline (H1). On the other hand, through specific digital resources, teaching tools, and various communication channels, we believe that teachers may have also found ways to implement practices that made students with disabilities more directly involved and motivated in learning (H2).

To test these hypotheses, we use data from an online survey carried out in December 2020. Using a Google questionnaire circulating on Facebook, we reached a non-probabilistic sample of Italian teachers/educators employed in different school divisions. The sample includes 147 respondents (95% female), distributed as follows: 53% from primary schools, 20% from lower secondary schools, and 27% from upper secondary schools, with an acceptable territorial distribution (about 50% from the North, 15% from the Center, and 35% from the South of Italy). The sample included classroom teachers (52%), support teachers (34%), and other professionals (14%) responsible for students with disabilities, such as educators, personal assistants, and tutors. The questionnaire (made up of 20 closed and open questions) aimed at collecting experiences and opinions about the teaching strategies adopted during the first lockdown (March–June 2020) with students with disabilities, their emotions and feelings surrounding their work at this time, and the relationship maintained with these students' parents.

No doubt, the self-selection of the sample represents the main methodological limitation of this investigation, whose results are not useful for statistical inferences and generalization, given that the sample presumably includes only the most engaged and motivated teachers. However, the data, which derives from voluntary participation in the survey, may produce an early picture, in real-time, of teachers' experience with students with disabilities during the first phase of the pandemic and their teaching activities. The distribution of the sample in terms of teachers' role, gender, and territorial distribution mirrors the general situation of teaching in Italy, with only an underrepresentation of teachers working in the central regions of Italy.

5. Data Analysis and Results

The data analysis is articulated in two steps: First, we offer a general frame of the activities of distance education and of the difficulties encountered by teachers addressing the needs of students with disabilities during the first school lockdown in Italy (Section 5.1). Considering the sample's limitations, as described above, the data analysis has been limited to a frequency distribution. Some closed questions showcased a list of frequency options that respondents were invited to fill out to indicate if they chose certain activities and tools or faced difficulties with families and students with disabilities (possible responses were: never, sometimes, often, or always; no missing responses were allowed).

Second, we carried out a more in-depth analysis of the following two open questions in the questionnaire (Section 5.2):

1. What negative and positive aspects emerged from the relationship with parents of students with disabilities?

2. What negative and positive elements emerged from the relationship with students with disabilities?

A thematic analysis of the written answers given by respondents allows us to outline teachers' opinions about their work with students with disabilities and their parents during the pandemic and summarize the emerging trends in a final analytical matrix (see Table 3). Ambivalent aspects, emerging from the teacher–student and teacher–parent relationship, are interpreted identifying core dimensions and categories to reach a deeper understanding of the educational dynamics concerning students with disabilities in times of emergency.

5.1. Learning Activities, Students Difficulties, and School–Family Communication

The Covid-19 emergency lockdown has been lived by many teachers with a sense of inadequacy (65%), stress (62%), anxiety (45%), and frustration (37%). Despite many respondents (67%) reporting they would plan lessons taking into consideration the different learning needs of their students, the majority (53%) also claim that working alone (that is, without their teaching team) was the first impediment due to the conditions of lockdown.

If we take a closer look at the activities, they were able to carry out via distance learning, the "live lesson" was the most adopted across all grades, especially the common lesson with the entire class (57–70% opted for this "often/daily"). Individual lessons by support teachers were offered "often/daily" by 37–57% of respondents (more in primary and upper secondary education than in lower secondary schooling), but there are 22.5% of lower secondary teachers who did not offer individual lessons to students with disabilities at all. The most popular teaching tool among respondents was the use of PowerPoint presentations. In primary schools, recorded lessons were also used frequently (42.5% "often/daily") with students with disabilities, more than in other grades (33.5% "often/daily" in lower secondary classes, 21% in upper secondary classes). Online exercises were typically assigned more by primary school teachers (50.5% "often/daily"), especially if compared with upper secondary teachers (32.5% "often/daily").

On the whole, teachers included in this sample were quite active in addressing students with disabilities, albeit without didactic innovation and/or customization of activities. They tried to avoid isolation and disconnection among these students by choosing a top-down model rather than more discursive and dialectic modes. One negative point that emerges from the questionnaire is that 27% of primary school, 26% of lower secondary school, and 22.5% of upper secondary teachers did not do anything (or almost anything) specifically for students with disabilities (i.e., they marked "always/often" or "sometimes" for the item *no activity for pupils with disabilities*).

To test the sensitivity of respondents to the learning needs of students with disabilities, we asked them to report the main difficulties mentioned by students during school closures (Table 1). Students mostly felt an impediment in interaction with both classmates (42–47% "often/daily" in secondary education) and teachers (32% "often/daily" in primary education, 43% in lower secondary education). After that, the main impediment was the weakness of their Internet connection (38% "often/daily" in primary education, 25% in lower secondary education, and 34% in upper secondary education)—only a few students did not have any connection problems (5% in high schools, 10% in primary schools, and none in middle schools).

According to teachers, the younger students with disabilities are the harder they find it to cope with digital tools. In primary schools, difficulties in using ICT devices or digital platforms are greater than in secondary schools, and often younger children must share devices with other family members more than their teenage counterparts. The same appears to be true concerning home space: Difficulties in studying at home for the lack of a dedicated room to study is more frequent among disabled children (according to teachers, 20.5% find this aspect difficult "often/daily") than adolescents (only 10,5%). This could be, at least in part, the reason why there is a meaningful share of students with disabilities who have difficulty in following online teaching activities: According to the respondents, 30.5% of primary school children "often/daily" cannot follow sync lessons and video calls regularly (versus 18% in lower and upper secondary schools).

To sum up, teachers see age as intersecting with the presence of a disability as a determinant of the different responses of students to the proposed learning activities: While children lacked more structural and digital tools and support, teenagers and adolescents were more challenged by the difficulty in understanding and doing specific school assignments, also because the personal interaction with teachers was strongly limited by distance learning.

Many teachers and support teachers acknowledge the importance of the parents' mediation to improve the quality of students' response and learning outcomes. The questionnaire enquired about the different solutions and tools adopted by teachers to guarantee a stable relationship (and communication channel) with the parents of students with disabilities (Table 2). Parents who were not contacted/reached at all during the school lockdown are 15% in primary schools, 8% in middle schools, and 16.5% in high schools. In secondary education, a considerable share of respondents did not have any contact with parents through digital platforms: In upper secondary schools, 24% reported "never" having any contact, the same answer as 17.5% of respondents from lower secondary schools. An even higher number of teachers did not contact parents either via WhatsApp or through individual text messages (39–40% of the former

Table 1. Main difficulties mentioned by students during school closures.

Difficulty in:	Primary school			Lower Secondary school			Upper secondary school		
	Never	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*	*Never*	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*	*Never*	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*
Peer interaction	13.5	68.0	18.5	21.5	36.0	42.5	7.5	45.0	47.5
Student–teacher interaction (mediated also by screens)	14.0	54.5	31.5	21.5	35.5	43.0	10.5	65.5	24.0
Sharing devices with other family members	16.5	46.0	37.5	10.5	64.5	25.0	34.0	53.0	13.0
Internet connection	10.5	51.5	38.0	—	75.0	25.0	5.5	60.5	34.0
Doing homework	17.5	63.5	19.0	3.0	77.5	19.5	21.5	51.5	27.5
Using ICT device and platform	14.5	62.0	23.5	12.5	68.0	19.5	14.0	74.0	12.0
Following live/sync lessons	14.0	55.5	30.5	14.0	68.0	18.0	18.5	63.0	18.5
Doing oral interrogations	32.5	55.0	12.5	17.5	72.0	10.5	18.5	63.0	18.5
Studying at home	26.5	53.0	20.5	28.5	57.5	14.0	31.5	58.0	10.5
Following async lessons	23.0	64.5	12.5	21.5	71.0	7.5	29.0	52.0	19.0

Notes: These are answers to the closed question: How often during lockdown did students with disabilities refer to the following difficulties? Percentage on the row total per each school division; 78 respondents are teachers/educators at primary schools, 29 are teachers/educators at lower secondary schools, 39 are teachers/educators at upper secondary schools (the same applies to Table 2). Source: UCSC (2020).

Table 2. Tools adopted by teachers to remain in contact with families of students with disabilities.

Tool	Primary school			Lower Secondary school			Upper secondary school		
	Never	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*	*Never*	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*	*Never*	*Sometimes*	*Often/ daily*
Platform	7.5	24.0	68.5	17.5	17.5	65.0	24.0	38.0	38.0
Individual WhatsApp message	15.0	23.0	62.0	39.0	39.0	22.0	40.5	13.5	46.0
E-mail to parents	14.0	31.5	54.5	10.5	54.0	35.5	19.0	48.5	32.5
WhatsApp group with parents	26.5	25.0	48.5	53.5	29.5	17.0	61.0	19.5	19.5
Digital school register	19.0	28.0	53.0	22.0	22.5	55.5	21.5	24.5	54.0
School website	28.0	38.0	34.0	28.5	28.5	43.0	32.5	32.5	35.0
Word-of-mouth among parents	32.5	39.5	28.0	63.0	22.5	14.4	69.0	21.5	9.5
No contact with parents	67.5	17.0	15.5	68.0	24.0	8.0	64.0	19.5	16.5

Notes: These are answers to the closed question: How often during lockdown did you use the following tools to remain in contact with families? Percentage on the row total per each school division. Source: UCSC (2020).

responded "never"), and the majority didn't participate in parent-led class chatrooms (53–61% of respondents said "never"). The use of institutional top-down channels, i.e., the digital school register and the school website, was frequent and widespread among secondary school teachers (54–55% said they "often/daily" used the digital register, 43–35% said they "often/daily" used the school website). A large share of respondents "never" used the word-of-mouth system of communication (63% in middle schools, 69% in high schools).

On the contrary, in primary schools, teachers dealt with the need for a stable school–family communication by varying channels more than in secondary schools, moving freely between more formal and informal and horizontal channels of communication. They "often/daily" used emails (54%), exchanges through the platform (68.5%), the digital school register (53%), and word-of-mouth (28%).

The closed questions of the questionnaire are too narrow to fully understand the process of communication between teachers and parents; they can give us information about teachers' behavior but not details on the feedback from parents. Moreover, they highlight only the frequency with which each tool was used and not its efficacy. Thus, we followed up with the following question: Is the choice of daily communication through "institutional" and top-down channels more successful than informal and peer-based channels to foster the independence of students with disabilities, or does it fail by bypassing or underestimating the importance of the parent–teacher relationship? In next section, we are going to focus on these questions.

5.2. Teachers' Opinions on Distance Learning: Negative and Positive Consequences on Students with Disabilities and Their Families

In this section we are going to examine the answers to two open-ended questions included in the questionnaire that allowed us to reconstruct teachers' opinions on their professional experience during the Covid emergency lockdown, considering both negative and positive aspects that emerged in their relationship with students with disabilities, in activities of distance learning, and during communication processes with their families. This part of the questionnaire enabled us to identify not only the challenges and difficulties experienced by teachers working with students with disabilities and their families, but also highlight positive experiences and good relationships, as we have resolved to do in our hypotheses.

The following thematic analysis compares negative and positive aspects emerging from the answers of curricular and support teachers of primary and secondary school to these open-ended questions. First, we consider the impact and consequences of school closure on the relationship between teachers and families with children with disabilities; secondly, we look at the changes and transformations in the relationship between teachers and students with disabilities, trying to identify core dimensions and categories that should allow us to comprehend the new educational dynamics of this target of students.

With regards to the teacher–family relationship, the answers to the open questions highlight the insurgence of new stress factors affecting the lives of families with students with disabilities. Teachers report closures, rigidities, and tensions with parents when they assigned students with disabilities different or "separate" activities. They emphasize the difficulty in building positive collaborations between schools and families due to a lack of common strategies, excessive (or rather, an anxious form of) support from parents worried about learning loss and wanting to improve their children's school performance, and a demanding attitude from parents towards teachers. If teacher–parent relations are not based on common and cooperative strategies, the partnership is ineffective with possible role conflicts and mutual distrust. Over-delegation to teachers, with requests for extra-curricular support, or excessive protection and involvement among parents are the two main risks, at opposite ends of the spectrum, but both indicators of a confusion between the adults' roles. The difficulties in cooperating are also due to insufficient ICT devices and problems with internet connection at home, with consequent feelings of discouragement, anxiety, or frustration for not being able, as adults and educators, to support students adequately. Below are a few quotes collected from the questionnaire:

> With some parents there was a closure that, unfortunately, affected part of the progress that could have been achieved had there been an effective collaboration. (Class teacher, primary school)

> Probably parents help students during remote class assessments. The evaluation is thus distorted, and it is very difficult to identify the real gaps and difficulties on which to intervene. Sometimes it seems that for the family the priority is the diploma and not a real learning experience. (Support teacher, upper secondary school)

> The students themselves cannot understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. Why do parents feel the need to help their children with assessments? Do they want to reinforce their self-esteem? Why don't they believe they can do it themselves? I don't know what the reasons are, so I refrain from judging. (Support teacher, upper secondary school)

However, teachers point out that the forced distance also revealed the added value of distance education in terms of improvement of communication and exchanges between teachers and parents. In primary school, informal and direct contacts via WhatsApp with parents increased, in turn boosting and improving confidence,

mutual listening, and dialogue between families and teachers. Positive discussions on students' strengths and weaknesses unveiled or amplified by distance learning generated closer relationships and greater collaboration among the significant adults in students' lives. In secondary schools, constructive, frequent, and constant exchanges are facilitated by effective and immediate communication. Parents continue to feel the presence of the teacher in the educational process of their children even at home:

From the questionnaire:

> The constant relationship with the family has allowed for greater collaboration and, at the same time, made it possible to reassure the family on their children's learning and development, in this complex and uncertain moment. (Support teacher, lower secondary school)

During these turbulent and uncertain times, teachers felt they acquired a more accurate picture of families' true living conditions, a broader view of students' daily lives, a greater awareness of their school difficulties, and better comprehension of the educational dynamics involved:

> As teachers, it was positive to have a better understanding of how children are managed at home, what the different roles of parents are respecting childcare, the economic and emotional conditions of families, their core values. (Class teacher, primary school)

> With distance learning, families are more in contact with the challenges that we, as teachers, have to face every day…and also, they can better understand their children's academic difficulties. There is a greater exchange and greater openness towards teachers, which continues even now. (Support teacher, primary school)

If we consider the teacher–student relationship—the second element examined in the qualitative analysis—the negative impacts on students with disabilities during school closure are determined by the worsening of learning/teaching conditions, the role of home confinement on vertical and horizontal interactions, and the onset of new learning and teaching problems.

Especially in primary schools, the lack of many educational dimensions that were essential in the everyday school experience (i.e., physical and emotional contacts, face-to-face interactions, movements, different ways of communicating, etc.) makes distance learning particularly challenging, with serious effects on the quality of educational interactions. Contacts characterized by low levels of empathy and attunement, an excessive level of auditory and visual attention, and the paucity of non-verbal communication make interactions very difficult and perhaps even ineffective: All these negative aspects reduce opportunities to receive feedback, listen to students' needs and emotions, and encourage and support students. Teachers denounce a "very discouraging regression" in terms of learning loss and an increase in levels of insecurity among students with disabilities: The new learning conditions determined a drop in attention, concentration, and motivation in all students, but with a larger impact on students with disabilities:

> What was lacking was the physical proximity that allows us to actually carry out the teaching and learning process, using various materials, be they structured or not, which can be manipulated and tested, while receiving immediate feedback, as well as the possibility of intervening, not just from behind a screen and not just in words. (Support teacher, primary school)

> [During DAD] the three students with disabilities go in "stand-by": They turn off their brains and feel exempt from participating. During oral interrogations, they try to read maps, summaries, or notes (albeit badly): It seems they are not able to do any reasoning. It is a very discouraging regression. It is as if they are affected by lethargy: They gawk during the lesson, they do not follow the explanations and they do not concentrate at all. (Class teacher, primary school)

In secondary schools, teachers also report the negative experiences of "talking to the wall," that is, of ineffective communication and interaction with students. They also lose the possibility of constantly monitoring the progress in learning because they cannot control and revise homework and exercises in real-time.

Collecting feedback is harder during synch lessons than in other kinds of educational activities because teachers have to simultaneously manage two groups of students, online and in situ. New educational problems emerge in this scenario, exacerbated by a significant reduction in the support and interaction with peers, that limits the educational inclusion within the group of classmates. In terms of learning, furthermore, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate and customize activities for students with disabilities, mediating and simplifying live lessons in real-time for all students. This list of problems is even more complex for support teachers with poor digital competencies:

> The difficulty of personalizing learning for students with disabilities is made apparent. Often, online lessons feel like one is "talking to the wall," without knowing if, on the other side, someone is listening to you or not. (Class teacher, upper secondary school)

Despite the negative perspectives underlined by these answers, a list of unexpected positive points also emerges from the written notes of the questionnaire. Positive experiences with students with disabilities are linked to the following aspects: a re-organization of the

learning space, time, and patterns, in ways that are more suitable for students with disabilities; a more intense relationship between support teacher and students, balanced out by more independence on the students' part and fostered by a stronger cooperation between curricular and support teachers; new educational opportunities opened up by the massive use of ICT.

The situation deriving from school closure is characterized by positive aspects that improve the learning process of students with disabilities: Shorter lessons, with more time for homework and relaxation, as lessons are more carefully prepared and less improvised, are a better fit with the learning style of most students with disabilities, which in turn leads to less anxiety and stress linked to school performance. From a relational perspective, the teachers from our sample observe an intensification of their personal relationships with students in order to develop and monitor their PEI. They report experiencing supportive and positive connections with their students, fostering their independence and organizational skills:

> The meetings on the Meet [platform], through the activation of a course dedicated to a small group of six disabled students, has improved upon the already well-established relationships in the classroom. It has favored a collective working-through of experiences and emotions and fostered exchanges regarding the proposed work activities. (Support teacher, primary school)

> Some disabled students have acquired more independence, especially those who were already able to use the computer beforehand. (Class teacher, lower secondary school)

> Some pupils participated more actively in synch online lessons than in face-to-face lessons. (Class teacher, primary school)

Last but not least, in respondents' opinions, school closure is also associated with new opportunities obtained from the use of ICTs, which proved positive and important compensatory tools for inclusive learning. For example, audiovisual tools and other inclusive communication channels between teacher and student promoted a gradual improvement in students' digital skills:

> Students with learning difficulties, who had adopted compensatory tools before the pandemic, have benefited from the increased use of ICT. Not having to write manually for some came as a liberation. Furthermore, engaging with remote oral assessments has greatly reduced their anxiety. (Support teacher, upper secondary school)

The following analytical matrix (Table 3) summarizes the results of the qualitative analysis regarding teachers' opinions on their experience with students with disabilities during distance learning. Three negative trends and three positive trends are highlighted in the thematic analysis, corresponding to many indicators of these trends described earlier using teachers' answers (some examples are recalled and listed in the table).

A multifaceted picture of teachers' experiences with students with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic is provided. Among the negative trends, we can highlight the following: (a) a general worsening of teaching and learning conditions for students with disabilities; (b) a reduction in the quality of both vertical relationships (with teachers, especially curricular ones) and horizontal relationships (with classmates); and (c) the emergence of new teaching and learning problems stemming from the emergency scenario. Among the positive trends, we can identify, at one and at the same time, (a) an improvement of some learning conditions, which has served students with disabilities particularly well, (b) a renewed commitment among support teachers who

Table 3. Negative and positive trends emerging from teachers' opinions on their experience with students with disabilities during Covid-19 (analytical matrix).

Negative trends	Positive trends
1. Worsening of teaching and learning conditions due to lack of physical and emotional contact, lack of non-verbal communication, excessive emphasis on listening, etc.	1. Improvement of learning conditions for students with disabilities due to shorter lessons, more time for homework and relaxation, an environment that can foster concentration among students, etc.
2. Worsening of the quality of educational relationships due to a lack of time for curricular teachers to offer personal encouragement to students in live lessons, scarce interaction among classmates, little opportunities for the practice of inclusion among students, etc.	2. Intensification of supportive relationships "at a distance," i.e., supportive, continuous, and intense relationships between support teacher and student thanks to inclusive multi-channel communication, etc.
3. Emergence of new teaching and learning problems such as the difficulty of teaching in a dual mode, difficulty in differentiating and customizing activities and sync lessons, increasing lack of concentration and motivation among students, etc.	3. Development of new educational opportunities and strategies such as the use of audiovisual tools and other ICTs as compensatory tools (which empowered opportunities for learning), the strengthening of individual relationships to develop each student's PEI, etc.

developed very supportive relationships "at a distance," and (c) the emergence of new educational opportunities, mainly linked to the exploitation of the full potential of ICTs.

6. Retrocession or Improvement in the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities? Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite some methodological limitations, the survey helps us explore the "micro-decisions" that were taken by individual teachers during the challenging times of the first wave of Covid and can inspire reflections on how to improve the role of teachers during a permanent emergency (much like the one we are currently living at the time of writing, early 2022) and to better support school inclusion.

According to our findings, the Italian model of school inclusion was indeed challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic, but it brought about effects that were not as negative as one might have expected. In particular, the human resources on which inclusion is based (the combination of curricular teachers and support teachers), and on which it has been invested over the past decades, seem to have played an active role in ensuring the right to education to students with disabilities and basic school connection (i.e., maintaining a daily relationship with support teachers).

Many studies have already emphasized the complexity of situations and the variety of obstacles faced by students with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our exploratory survey presented here confirms these problematic findings from the point of view of teachers in Italy. It recognizes that the pandemic has produced a general worsening of teaching and learning conditions, and highlights the difficulties faced by teachers, students, and parents—many of them related to the challenges of distance learning as such. Moreover, we can confirm that three negative impediments can diminish the inclusion of students with disabilities despite the efforts made by teachers to engage them in distance learning activities: the unavailability of adequate spaces and ICT devices at home; the lack of effective collaboration among parents; and a poor level of communication between teachers and families, which is fundamental in monitoring the home situation of students and—in cases of specific impairment and incapacity—to adapt the individual learning plan to the student's needs.

Our study, however, also allows us to highlight positive trends in the educational scenario marked by the pandemic. Italian teachers were able to take advantage of ICTs and the new relational conditions produced by distance learning in unexpected ways. They used them not only to foster the skills of students with disabilities, but also to enhance their independence and, unexpectedly, to listen to families more attentively. These improvements suggest that teachers have maintained their sensitivity towards students with disabilities during distance education, perhaps even increasing the intensity or fine-tuning the quality of their presence, with many daily contacts and improved inter-personal interaction.

In our view, the coexistence of negative and positive trends, of decline and improvement indicators, does not represent per se a cause for concern. This is because the main agents of school inclusion (teachers) could perceive the risk of losing any accrued advantage as a result of the progressist Italian legislation concerning school inclusion should they not be able to cope with such a dramatic and unexpected scenario. This is why they have mobilized every personal and professional resource available to prevent any decline in students' inclusion.

But the emerging positive trends, such as the acquisition of new skills and opportunities generated by the use of ICTs (for both teachers and students with disabilities), and the unforeseen improvement in empathy levels, at least among the most engaged teachers, lead us to conclude that it is time to trigger teachers' reflective thinking in order to save (and not waste) these rich learning experiences and teaching resources.

Serious investments on/for teaching and teachers must be made, both during the emergency period and beyond: from training methods on handling the needs of students with disabilities more effectively to making more channels for teacher–parent communication available; from digital skills training to awareness exercises on digital environments for distance learning, for students with disabilities in particular. These measures can help, with immediate and middle-term effects, improve complex school–family relationships, expand on the limited use of digital instruments by teachers (especially support teachers), and boost methodological innovation, all of which problems that have been underlined by previous research and confirmed also by our study.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Maddalena Colombo is full professor of sociology of education, sociology of educational policy, and sociology of inequalities and differences at the Faculty of Education, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy). Since 2013 she is the director of the CIRMiB (Centre of Initiatives and Research on Migration) and the LaRIS (Laboratory of Social Research and Intervention), in Brescia. She is a member of the scientific board of several journals in Italy. She wrote more than 200 texts on the school system, socialization processes, and migration.

Mariagrazia Santagati is assistant professor of sociology of education at the Università Cattolica (Italy, Milan). Her main interests concern educational inequalities and the education–migration nexus, especially analyzed through qualitative research. Among her last publications are: "School Closure and Learning Experience in Italy: Giving Voice to Students, Families, and Teachers During the Covid-19 Pandemic'' (2022), in *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, and "Writing Educational Success: The Strategies of Immigrant-Origin Students in Italian Secondary Schools" (2021), in *Social Sciences*.

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Article

Inclusive Learning for Children in Northeast Nigeria: Radio School Response During a Global Pandemic

Margaret Ebubedike [1,*], Michael Boampong [1], Kiki James [2], Hassana Shuaibu [2], and Temitope Yetu Monyeh [2]

[1] Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, UK
[2] ACE Charity Africa, Nigeria

* Corresponding author (margaret.ebubedike@open.ac.uk)

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Abstract
With a burgeoning out-of-school population and illiteracy rate, the situation of protracted conflict and crises fuelled by the Boko-Haram insurgency further exacerbates educational inequality for children in northern Nigeria. The Covid-19 pandemic further deepened the "educational poverty" experienced there. This article focuses on data generated around ACE radio school, an initiative to mitigate the impact of Covid-19-related school closures in northern Nigeria. The initiative targeted young learners using radio as a medium to support their continued learning remotely in numeracy, literacy, sciences, and civics education. Daily learning activities were broadcasted in the local Hausa language, supported through "listening groups" that engaged local learning facilitators in the communities. Despite the known existing barriers that have been identified to hinder access to quality education in the region, including poverty, religion, socio-cultural factors, and protracted conflict situations, our interviews revealed that parents were committed to supporting their children's attendance at listening groups, due to the use of their mother tongue as a mode of instruction. Drawing on a conversational learning approach, we argue that understanding local conditions and adopting local solutions, such as the radio lessons delivered in these children's mother tongue, have implications for enhancing improved learner outcomes in marginalised contexts.

Keywords
alternative education; Covid-19; education inclusion; girls' education; northern Nigeria; radio school; vulnerable communities

Issue
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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and school closures disrupted the way education is practised. During the health crisis, 190 countries closed schools as part of control measures to protect children and teachers. This affected almost 1.6 billion learners (UNICEF, 2020).

For many children in some developing countries, there was unequal access to education before the pandemic, but the Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to concerns about existing educational poverty and the exclusion of some children (UNICEF, 2021). Since the pandemic's beginning, the typical practice has been for education stakeholders to promote remote learning for children via technology. However, capacities to implement this have been diverse and uneven. Remote learning remains a challenge for children from low-income families who may face challenges accessing informational communication technologies (ICT) and the internet. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a survey carried out by UNICEF suggested that distance learning was not reaching vulnerable and marginalised children due to a lack of digital tools and poor connectivity for learners, particularly in poor and hard-to-reach locations (UNICEF, 2020). In addition, children from marginalised contexts often struggle with learning due to poor fluency in the

language of instruction (Nishanthi, 2020). Even when children access learning materials, unstable political-economic conditions, and low parent education levels, including parents' inability to use digital tools, may impact their learning at home. These issues have significant implications for young learners' inclusive education in addition to family circumstances, geography, and economic status. Hence, the need to reconsider inclusive learning opportunities for children.

As some countries continue to find ways of addressing learning challenges in a "new normal," there is an urgent need for alternative education interventions that could address the needs of children in developing countries such as Nigeria, whose educational aspirations and learning are affected by multiple factors including conflict, poverty, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

We draw on interview data generated from local learning facilitators (LLFs), learners, and their parents or guardians. We seek to explore how the initiative drew upon existing partnerships with LLFs who used radio lessons delivered in the children's native languages to support them locally. We provide insights into ensuring access to education using LLFs to reimagine education through alternative learning for children from marginalised communities who do not have access to the internet or mobile devices. We aim to offer insight into how the LLFs were recruited to support the radio lessons and their motivations. We then touch on the challenges LLFs experienced and how they responded. Finally, we consider perspectives around the effectiveness and impact of the initiative on learners, especially girls.

We examine these elements through the following overarching research question: In the context of Covid-related global school closures, how did a radio school initiative support young people from disadvantaged communities to continue learning?

2. Context and Conceptual Framework

Inclusive education has continued to permeate global debates in academia and practice, including regional and national education policy agendas. Conceptualisations of inclusion and approaches to promote inclusive education vary across contexts and remain highly contested (Artiles et al., 2011). The conceptualisation of inclusive education across various disciplines, including psychology and education, relates to efforts to respect diversity (Hick et al., 2009) and linked to global agendas such as "leave no one behind" and "endeavour to reach the furthest behind" (United Nations Development Program, 2018).

The research of Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) in educational settings across four low-resourced contexts shows that conceptualisations of inclusive education are shaped by colonial agendas, which often negate local philosophical understandings, beliefs, and practices drawing on local cultural resources (Dart et al., 2018; Phasha et al., 2017). The problem with these conceptualisations is that they are exclusive and inflexible to adjustment to stay relevant as the needs of learners change (Florian, 2014). They also reproduce social inequalities that create further complexities for learners who require diverse support (Walton, 2016). Hence, the call for local responses is underpinned by the inclusive principles of social justice and equity (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Our view is that a social justice framing for inclusive learning practices should support all groups vulnerable to exclusion both in schools and out-of-school settings. This remains essential for disrupting exclusive practices and structural disadvantages while responding to learners' cultural and situational demands (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Simón et al., 2021).

In northern Nigeria, inequality in education presents several complex and interdependent barriers to education access among girls (Okafor, 2010). The National Policy on Education (FME, 2006) identified as one of its primary aims the need for quality education for all Nigerian children, irrespective of circumstances. However, Kazeem et al. (2010) argue that the policy framework fails to recognise the intersectional nature of the dimensions of socioeconomic and geographical inequalities, which present difficulties for girls. The lack of consensus on the recognition of the culture, context, experiences, and learning needs of disadvantaged and marginalised groups in planning or designing educational initiatives (Olaniran, 2018) results in the "continued domination of homogenous policy approaches," which is one of the reasons that social justice and gender inequality in education persist (Bishwakarma et al., 2007, p. 27). The abduction of over 276 girls from their school in Chibok in April 2014 and the subsequent abduction of over 110 schoolgirls aged 11–19 years by the Boko Haram terrorist group from their school in Dapchi, all in northern Nigeria, are extreme illustrations of the violence against women and girls that occurs in this region and their implications for girls' education (Abayomi, 2018; Okafor, 2010).

The nationwide school closures that started in March 2020 significantly disrupted learning in Nigeria (Eze et al., 2021), presenting even greater complexities for girls' education in northern Nigeria. Covid-19 shed light on pre-existing discriminatory social norms, gender roles, and power dynamics for girls, who often suffer marginalisation in education resulting from religious and cultural dynamics, economic and geographical inequalities, and family poverty.

Before the pandemic, ACE Charity, a non-governmental organisation, was dedicated to improving educational outcomes for children from marginalised communities in Nigeria. During the pandemic, which widened an already existing educational gap, ACE Charity initiated the ACE radio school in nine states in northern Nigeria including the Federal Capital Territory Abuja which carted to neighbouring states such as Niger, Nasarawa, and Kogi. Other states included Adamawa, Kano, Borno, and Kaduna.

Logistically the ACE radio school lessons were designed for children to listen independently using family-owned radios or to listen together with LLFs in one of four "listening groups" (LGs). This initiative was supported by volunteer teachers who broadcast the radio lessons three times a week. Numeracy, literacy, and English language sessions were broadcast on Mondays for primary school students, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and English language for secondary school students were broadcast on Wednesdays with repeat lessons aired on Fridays. The thirty-minute sessions covered three subjects for ten minutes each.

To ensure that the lessons aligned with the Nigerian school curriculum, instructional materials for radio lessons were developed and designed for consistency with the Nigerian education curriculum. The radio episodes are then translated into local languages, Hausa and Fulfude. To effectively engage a wider group of target beneficiaries, external personnel reviewed and validated translated episodes with local language fluency. Experts were provided with the scripts to compare and validate the translated content. The scripts and audio lessons were reviewed by qualified staff members with degrees in education and extensive teaching experience. This article will focus on how LLFs locally supported learners, particularly girls, to continue learning during a global lockdown through the LGs.

Equitable educational response during a global crisis must ensure that marginalised learners are reached through alternative forms of education (UNESCO, 2019). This aligns with sustainable development goal no. 4, which focuses on quality education. Our understanding of alternative forms of education is based on flexibility and variety and adapted to the complex realities of disadvantaged populations while providing new possibilities and avenues for overcoming learning barriers (Vayachuta et al., 2016). Within this understanding, alternative schooling allows for flexibility and context-sensitive approaches, particularly those that create spaces for school-family partnerships. Epstein (2018) argues that the shared responsibility between school, family, and community creates interactive spaces where learners' needs are met. Learners' needs are a product of diverse, interdependent factors, including socioeconomic, individual learning history, and background language (Musgrave, 2017). These multi-level interactions between school-family-community remain central to influencing children's improved learning (Epstein et al., 2018). These insights align with Holmberg's (1999) conversational learning, which recognises the dynamics of interaction and communication for improved learner outcomes.

Other studies have looked at Holmberg's conversational learning from a distance learning perspective (Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Wanami & Kintu, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). This article captures Holmberg's conversational learning approach to illustrate distant learning based on a radio school initiative and to understand how shared interactive spaces between school and family can foster improved learning outcomes for learners from marginalised communities.

The data was examined through Holmberg's theory to understand the experiences of young learners involved in the ACE radio school intervention. Other elements of Holmberg's theory that explain the expected nature of transactions relevant to this article include effective communication between the LLFs, the learners, their families, and the community. Holmberg argues that feelings of personal relations between the teacher and learner tend to promote study pleasure and motivation, notably if well-developed instructional materials and two-way communication between the learner and the educator support such feelings. Within the context of this article, we frame Holmberg's conversational learning to understand how these interactions move beyond teacher and learner to include family and community to foster improved learning outcomes. Other scholars emphasise that the strong links between language and gender injustice can disrupt the two-way communication between the learner and the educator (Corson, 1993). However, evidence suggests that learners experienced successful learning outcomes and academic progress using local languages compared to learners who are not exposed to similar experiences (Benson, 2002; Nishanthi, 2020).

3. Methodological Approach

A qualitative approach was used to answer the research question for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how radio lessons were facilitated locally to support learners during the Covid-19 school closures. Given the pandemic situation, the LLFs were invited to take part in an online interview and the learners were interviewed face-to-face by the LLFs. In total, 15 interviews were carried out with nine LLFs and six learners who were purposively selected for the interviews.

We went back in early 2021 after schools reopened to interview the learners again and three purposively selected parents of learners who engaged in the LGs. Our intention was to understand if the earlier claim during the initial interviews held during the 2020 pandemic, that the radio lessons delivered in their mother tongue, combined with their participation in the LGs, supported their learner confidence. We were particularly interested in knowing if this new confidence supported learners, especially girls returning to school.

Data collection occurred in four LGs located in Kano, Borno, Adamawa, and Kaduna states. Two LLFs provided support for learners in each LGs, except in Kaduna, where we had only one LLF. In total, we had approximately 276 learners attending the LGs across the four states (Kano, Borno, Adamawa, and Kaduna). In each of these LGs, we had 60 learners attending (30 primary-

and 30 secondary-level students). This was in spite of the LG in Kaduna, where we had 36 learners attending (21 primary- and 15 secondary-level students). The initiative had been ongoing for sixteen weeks at the point of the first phase of data collection. The second phase of interviews was structured around understanding how the LGs supported learners to return to school when schools reopened.

To ensure no language barriers, particularly for the learners, the interviews were conducted in local languages and translated into English. Interviews with LLFs were carried out in the English language, as all nine LLFs interviewed could speak and understand English.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using colour coding. Excerpts from the interviews have been reported verbatim. The data were analysed through Holmberg's (1999) conversational learning approach, which emphasises that effective communication is at the centre of teaching and learning and is vital for enhancing children's learning development. The authors also used a thematic analysis approach, an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that incorporates many procedures, including familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for main themes, and reviewing themes.

Prior to collecting data, informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time if they wished to do so. For anonymity, tags and numbers have been used to represent participants (for example, "L" will stand for "learner" and "POL" for "parent of learner").

One of the study limitations is that the number of participants used in this study cannot be generalised to other populations due to the small sample size. In qualitative research, sample size tends to be small and purposive and often selected to provide rich, in-depth, and thick descriptive narratives relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. However, learnings from the inclusive LGs initiative can be useful in similar contexts.

4. Research Findings

We draw on interviews with LLFs, parents, and the learners themselves to present our findings. The analysis demonstrates how the initiative drew upon existing partnerships with LLFs who used radio lessons delivered in learners' native languages to support learning in communities during Covid-related school closures in 2020.

4.1. Recruitment of Local Learning Facilitators

When schools closed, ACE Charity drew from its existing network of ACE Charity field staff, who are qualified teachers from participating communities. LLFs supported the children to listen to the radio lessons through creative, interesting, engaging, and interactive LGs.

LLFs were driven by their passion to support children who did not have any other means of learning during the global school closure. They felt that all children should be given equal learning opportunities irrespective of their family backgrounds. LLFs noted that, by supporting children, they were making their contributions to society, especially in the face of a global crisis:

> Well, when I was told, I jumped into the opportunity because, at that moment, I felt that it was time to just reach out to children using my gift as a teacher. I teach children who cannot afford it. So, it was just like an opportunity for me. (LLF 1)

> I am a maths teacher and teach children here in this community. (LLF 2)

> Some of them are familiar with me because I am part of the community. I teach in the community school where most children attend. (LLF 3)

The LLFs are well-known teachers in the community. As noted in Power et al. (2021), such initiatives require the engagement of people who are already active, known, and trusted in the community.

In their interviews, LLFs mostly expressed their commitments and their desire to see the children in their community succeed:

> I am a teacher, I am also a parent myself, so what I want for my children is what I want for other children, that they will be very important tomorrow in the society. (LLF 4)

> I talk to them and their guardians and encourage them to allow the children to attend the ACE radio lessons because it would build them up. (LLF 2)

> My concern was for children to continue learning because, as a teacher, I know that if these children are out of school for a long time, they forget everything, and it is difficult for them to return to school. (LLF 6)

The narratives of the LLFs suggest a sense of empathy and commitment in their response to the learning needs of children during a global crisis. They took on this task to support children using their existing experience as teachers. We also see that their roles and responsibility as parents themselves drove this motivation.

4.2. How Children Engaged in Listening Groups

Urgency was a driving factor in program planning, considering the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. The radio lessons needed to reach those for whom the program was designed and intended and that it achieved its goal of promoting student outcomes. The radio school project had anticipated two ways learners could benefit

from them: (a) in in-person sessions with small groups of learners through LGs supported by community teachers serving as LLFs or (b) through independent engagement at home using family-owned radios. The LLFs interviewed described how they recruited children to participate in the LGs:

> First of all, I started selecting 20 children. From the primary side and then from the secondary side, I went in between my street and the other line on the next street in the same community. (LLF 1)

> I approached some of the children directly and then allowed them to talk to their parents about the radio school. Then some of the parents even came and met me and asked me about the lesson. I told them what ACE radio is all about. (LLF 2)

> Yes, when you sent the information concerning the radio school, I went to the village with other facilitators. So, we have to get some children that are out of school, mostly girls and some boys, so we gathered them, we discussed with them and asked them whether they will be able to participate in the ACE radio school. Some of them consented, some of them refused. So, we had to contact their parents before they could give their time to attend the school. (LLF 3)

The above narratives suggest the need for children and parents' involvement in deciding on participation in the learning process. The role of parents, particularly fathers or senior male family members, in decision-making regarding their children's involvement may be necessary in this context. This appeared to be particularly true for girls' involvement in the LGs, considering that some of the girls may depend on their fathers' consent to access education due to religious and cultural practices that create barriers to girls' access (Okafor, 2010). This notion of interaction aligns with our understanding of Holmberg's (1999) conversational learning about how interactions extended to family and community contribute to improving learner engagement.

In the interviews, LLFs were asked about their experience teaching children during a global lockdown in the community. We intended to understand the extent of resistance or receptiveness they experienced, particularly concerning girls' participation in the LGs. We also wanted to understand how LLFs encouraged learners and ensured parent buy-in for girls to continue participating in the LGs. Our interest in girls' participation is due to the barriers confronting girls' educational access in these communities, even outside of the Covid context. LLFs described how parents encouraged them to continue supporting their children. Some parents took it upon themselves to tell other parents about the LGs:

> So far, since I started, none of their parents came and said, no, I'm stopping a child or I'm stopping my child for this reason. No none of them has said anything Like this. (LLF 1)

> Yes, in my street, in the street that I do that lesson, one man supports us by giving us his compound, so it's inside his compound that we are, [it is what] we use to gather the children. (LLF 2)

In their interviews, LLFs also talked about their experiences of resistance, especially from parents who did not want their female children or wards to attend. LLFs noted that they dealt with such resistance through dialogue with the learners and their families. They approached the family head, who is often the father, uncle, brother, or the oldest male member of the family, to encourage them to allow their girls to attend the LGs. LLFs described that they encouraged families by explaining the benefits of girls' education to the community and the girls themselves:

> I had to calm them down, meet their parents, their guardians. You know some of them are not even from the community. They were taken from their relations to their neighbours, from their parents to their relations, and sometimes some relatives don't even care to educate children that are not theirs, so I have to encourage them. We talk to their guardians and encourage them to allow them to attend the ACE radio because it would "build" them up. (LLF 3)

Moreover, LLFs spoke about challenges they experienced because of the economic situation in most families. In some of these communities, there was existing poverty before the Boko Haram crisis, which resulted in further loss of livelihoods. The Covid-19 crisis further worsened the poverty situation experienced by members of these communities. As the pandemic persisted, their economic situation worsened, with many families struggling to feed themselves. In situations like this, children are made to work to support their families, which affects their ability to focus on their studies:

> The only challenges that we [had] was during harvesting, or maybe during the rainy season…some of them use[d] to go search of money. (LLF 1)

> You know, especially [in] this dry season, [the rice harvesting season] that they are doing now…some of them use[d] to go [to the market] for work [to sell their harvests, make some income for themselves and their families]….So we use[d] to encourage them…to come to school…even if they go there [to the market], when it's time for the radio school, they should make sure that they avail themselves in the class. So that's one of the challenges. (LLF 2)

While the LLFs shared how they supported inclusive learning for all learners, including those with diverse learning needs, they also reported some challenges:

> Mostly the arithmetic part of the course and even the writing part of it is somehow difficult for them, they preferred multiple-choice questions. (LLF 1)

> Yes, most especially if they did not understand, I start by slowing down the radio, or I download the lesson first. I have to play and pause, play, and pause, and explain it to them. (LLF 2)

The interviews showed that the challenges experienced in meeting diverse learner needs were a source of frustration amongst some LLFs. Others noted that additional training to support learners with diverse learning needs would have made it easier for them to support these learners and made learning more enjoyable for the learners themselves:

> Because if they're given the writing part for them to write, you'll find out that they didn't, they'll not even write anything. Some will just sit down and submit their book empty without writing anything there. (LLF 1)

> After the lesson, sometimes we encourage them to write because, you know, in a class like this somebody that cannot read and write…it's very difficult to teach that kind of student. (LLF 3)

In an initiative to mitigate the impact of Covid-19-related school closures in rural Zimbabwe, Power et al. (2021) pointed out the need to draw from the experiences of local networks of learning professionals to support diverse learner needs. Kirshner (2020) suggests that these local networks and partnerships support educators innovatively and collaboratively to find new ways of working together to support learners with diverse needs. These new networks present benefits to the learners and educators themselves. Such networks help improve their practice and their identities as educators.

Additionally, LLFs shared how they managed to keep in touch with children and their families, particularly girls, to ensure they continually participate in the lessons, especially during Covid-related school closures:

> We used to give information; we passed it through the town crier [a community informant], that tomorrow there will be radio school. All the registered students should make sure they avail themselves during the lesson. (LLF 1)

> Yes, so I used to tell them myself that they should not miss the lesson. (LLF 2)

> Yes, in every group I have, I delegate a leader among them. So, when I want to contact the group, I inform their leader who I delegated to gather them. (LLF 3)

4.3. Perceived Impact on Learners

LLFs were asked to see how they could help as many learners as possible. Small LGs were set up in the villages. The in-person LGs supported children to continue learning even when schools were shut down. Without such support, children may be at risk of losing their confidence as learners and their connections to learning experiences; these have implications on whether they will return to school when schools reopen. Their confidence as learners was further heightened due to the language of delivery used in broadcasting the radio lessons. The children in their interviews expressed how much they have learned since they began to engage in learning in their native languages and how the support, they received helped facilitate their return to school when schools reopened:

> Yes, I went back to school. It helped me a lot because [of the] things they did for me, they did for us at ACE radio. I found that they started it at school…and it came to me easy.

All the LLFs interviewees said the radio lessons delivered in the children's native languages were beneficial and contributed to the children's continued engagement. Parents and guardians noted that the learners particularly enjoyed the radio lessons delivered in the languages they spoke at home. They noted that the topics and subjects their children struggled to learn in English became clearer when taught in their local languages:

> Yes, because some of them might not understand English very well and I think, in that instance, the language they are taught in should be their mother tongue, which they understand very well. There is no reason [to teach] someone in a language she doesn't understand well. So, what he understands well is his mother language, and indeed if his mother tongue can be used to teach a child, he can grasp the lesson very well. (POL 1)

LLFs interviewed discussed how the radio lessons were creatively designed to adopt localised approaches to illustrate specific topics, especially science lessons. There were certain words in the science lessons that did not exist in the local languages, for example, words like "gravity'' or "evaporation," the radio lessons, started by defining and explaining the concept in the local language for the learners to understand the concept:

> I gained a lot from the ACE radio lessons, which I can always remember. Examples are the addition and subtraction of numbers in maths that are being taught in Hausa. (L 1)

> Yes, I learned nutrition under biology, I know the types of nutrition, and they translate and use

> examples where we can understand it in our own language. (L 2)

> When I used to listen, I felt really happy with this radio, because I am now understanding something from it. It helps me, the radio. (RL 3)

> The teaching…and the kind of songs they sang helped me to understand the topic. (L 5)

One of the most common ways LLFs assessed learning from the radio lessons delivered in local languages and participation in the LGs was through the baseline and end-line assessments. At the beginning of every month, the children were given a baseline assessment to test their knowledge of the topics to be taught for the month. After four weeks of radio lessons, they were given an end-line assessment consisting of the same questions asked at baseline. This allowed LLFs to assess learners' progress over time. The LLFs also spoke about how the numbers of learners in the LGs continued to increase, often by the learners sharing their experiences with their friends or parents encouraging their friends to allow their children and wards to participate.

Before the pandemic, children who were out of school had possibly already lost their connection to learning (Girls' Education Challenge, 2016). However, through their engagement with the LGs during the global lockdown, they became more confident to learn and this new confidence supported them to return to school after the long school closures.

To better understand this, we went back early in 2021 after schools reopened to interview learners engaged in the LGs. We intended to test the claim shared during the 2020 initial interviews that the radio lessons delivered in local languages, combined with participation in the LGs, supported learner confidence. We were particularly interested in how this new learner confidence translated to the school setting, particularly for girls:

> Honestly, I have changed a lot because I was going to the listening group. The truth is I understood a lot of things, no limit to it. Of course, even now in school…there [were] many things I could not do, but now, at school, I can do many things very well….Even if I sit on my own, because of radio school I understand something, I am able to do things by myself now. (L 4)

> I stopped going to school after school closed. For a while, my friend was talking to me about a radio program that has learning through the radio, and the listening groups where they can explain everything to us. I have been thinking since I stopped going to school, so how can I learn to read on the radio? I always come because of listening to lessons. (L 6)

> Yes, I went back to school. It helped me a lot because of the things they did for us at the listening groups and the radio lesson. I found that they started it at school…and it came to me easily because I already know what it is. (L 7)

We also interviewed some of the parents of the learners to hear their views as parents on how they feel the radio lessons in local languages, combined with LG participation, supported their children to return to school after the extended period of school closures. In their interviews, parents discussed how engagement with the radio school helped mitigate learning losses for their children and improved their confidence as learners:

> There is a difference between the radio lessons and the lesson that was given in school, so that my children can pay attention and listen well to the instructor, and they have gained more than I think from what they are being taught in the school. (POL 2)

> Okay, the difference the radio lessons made is actually very nice, because the kind of teachers that were selected to give the instructions in the listening groups were the real experts. So, they know their work well, they know when to start, where to start, and how to deliver the lessons. So, indeed the lessons are quite structured, and they are very good and now my children are very happy. (POL 3)

These insights align with research evidence that suggests that learning loss is not only ascribed to loss of learning resulting from school closures but also to knowledge that is forgotten over time due to a continued disconnection from learning (Azevedo et al., 2021 de Barros Angrist et al., 2021). This loss is even more severe for vulnerable learners (Smith, 2021).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

> The fact that the lessons were taught in my native Hausa language made me understand better because, in our school, they just teach, not minding if we understand it or not, so I am happy I was part of the listening groups. (L 1)

We explicitly reflect on the overarching research question: In the context of Covid-related global school closures, how did a radio school initiative support young people from disadvantaged communities to continue learning?

The article reflects on how radio lessons were delivered in local languages and supported through locally facilitated LGs. The facilitators were experienced teachers in the community and understood the dynamics of the community and the barriers to children's education, especially for girls. Girls' education access in the context of northern Nigeria is impacted by several complex and inter-dependent barriers, including gender, age, religion, child marriage, family economic status, and socio-cultural norms. The limited access to girls'

education is underpinned by pervasive gender inequality. Girls often fall through the cracks of different educational policies and may be excluded from national and regional education provisions (Joda & Abdulrasheed, 2015; Williams & Istifanus, 2017).

However, the radio lessons delivered in local languages and supported through locally facilitated LGs enabled parents to engage and interact with those responsible for their children's learning. This suggested that any perceived language barrier in learning was addressed, as learning became more accessible to parents, the value they attached to education increased, and they supported their children to attend the LGs. The notion of shared responsibility is based on the understanding framed within educational sociology that emphasises the need for school, family, and community partnerships for improved children's learning experience and outcomes (Epstein et al., 2018). These insights align with our conversational learning framing and is consistent with literature from Sub-Saharan Africa that demonstrates that, when children are supported to learn in their native languages, there is greater interaction and parental engagement, thereby resulting in increased student participation and learner confidence (Nadela-Grageda et al., 2022). One parent of a female learner identified that the benefits of the radio lessons that were delivered in Hausa language and supported through local facilitators should also be linked to parents as well. He noted that "this experience allowed parents to understand what their children are taught and created an opportunity for parents to become more engaged in their children's learning."

A significant mechanism that fosters the reproduction of inequality, especially in education, is seen in the language barrier that exists in teaching and learning and as experienced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Benson, 2005, p. 1). A learner's native language is key to making schooling more inclusive for all disadvantaged groups, especially girls from marginalised contexts (Matengu et al., 2019).

For example, in Kailahun, the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, one educational response to the Ebola outbreak was the introduction of a radio education programme called *Pikin to Pikin Tok* (meaning "child to child talk), delivered in Krio language (Barnett et al., 2018). Responding to the educational need of children in their own language is consistent with literature from low-income contexts, which identifies that when lessons were taught in their native language, young learners from marginalised communities become more engaged and this has a positive impact on the learners' self-confidence and self-efficacy (Rubagumya, 2009).

Other scholars mention that local-language-based learning is an effective strategy for addressing girls' continued participation in education (Benson, 2005). More girls enrol and remain in school when they can learn in a known language. Our interviews with radio listeners in the LGs show that girls and their families were more receptive to the ACE radio school lessons because they were broadcast in their native languages, connoting a familiar culture, and set of values. When teaching and learning is carried out using a familiar language, it increases family access to information about the schooling processes, resulting in higher parental involvement in children's learning (Benson, 2005).

While we do not claim generalisation of this knowledge, we understand from this context that, post-Covid, teaching learners with diverse experiences of educational inequality using their native languages would be a valuable approach to meeting their immediate learning needs. This approach would support education to become more accessible and relevant, particularly for girls from similar contexts.

We also identified that to mitigate learning loss for children, the LLFs adapted social behaviours that enabled them to stay connected and forge new networks. It was precisely through these connections that educators were able to offer this support. For example, the LLFs shared how community members loaned their large compounds for use by LGs. Some others helped spread the news about the LGs and convinced other parents who did not believe in girls' education to allow their daughters to attend.

While LLFs talked about how they drew on existing networks to develop new connections with community members and how these networks supported program success, it was not evident that they leveraged these networks to offer support to children with diverse learning needs. While LLFs developed their understanding and practice of creating engaging LGs, the interviews showed that LLFs felt overwhelmed supporting the learning needs of multiple learners with different learning needs. The interviews disclosed that some children with special learning needs struggled to learn. This feeling of stress to provide adequate learning support for learners with diverse learning needs was in relation to the inadequate support the LLFs themselves received in supporting these groups of learners. Evidence from similar educational responses suggests that drawing on a network of practice with others, not only facilitates information exchange that is seen as useful for improving learning support for learners, but also informs new perspectives and presents new opportunities for educators' professional development (Kirshner, 2020; Power et al., 2021).

Conflict of Interests

Kiki James, Temitope Monyeh, and Hassana Shuaibu are employees of ACE Charity, the organization that implemented the intervention discussed in the article. The authors declare no remaining conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Margaret Ebubedike (PhD) is a researcher in international education at The Open University. Her research is currently focused on low-income contexts and draws on the use of participatory and creative approaches to explore the educational needs of girls.

Michael Boampong (PhD) is a lecturer in childhood and youth studies at The Open University. Michael's broad research interests concern the intersection of globalisation, local practices, and their impact on transnational childhoods and youth transitions. He has cross-cutting interests in gender and social class and creative and participatory research methods. Previously, he served as a migration and youth policy specialist to multiple UN agencies and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Kiki James is the CEO and founder of ACE Charity. In 2010, she moved to Nigeria and founded ACE Charity with a mission to support development in Africa through quality education and economic opportunities. She also still runs ACE Radio. She is a Malala Fund Education Champion and advocates for inclusive and quality education for all.

Hassana Shuaibu received her BSc in human anatomy from Ahmadu Bello University and her MSc in public health from the International Medical University in Malaysia. She is currently running a PhD program in community education and development at the Universiti Putra in Malaysia. Hassana is currently working as senior program officer at ACE Charity and is passionate about child rights, education, and public health.

Temitope Yetu Monyeh holds a BSc in statistics from Bowen University and an MSc in financial analysis from the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, UK. She is a data enthusiast passionate about education and development and currently works as monitoring and evaluation officer at ACE Charity.

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Commentary

A Commentary on the Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Youth After Covid-19

Dionysios Gouvias

Department of Preschool Education and Educational Design, University of the Aegean, Greece; dgouvias@aegean.gr

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Abstract
This is a commentary on the articles published in this issue, which are devoted to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational inclusion prospects of vulnerable children and young people. The articles presented in the thematic issue are especially focused on case studies at either national or international comparative levels. Their findings, in general, are in line with existing research, which was initiated during the first stages of the pandemic, and demonstrate the pandemic's adverse effects on existing disadvantaged health, educational, and social conditions. However, they raise interesting issues about promising methods and practices, as well as possible empowering tools that emerged through the use of ICTs and the implementation of various social policy measures through various digital platforms. They also point out the intersectionality of various factors generating or reinforcing social inclusion, something that has to be taken into account, not only by researchers, social welfare officials, and state agents, but also by activists and NGOs who work in the field.

Keywords
children; comparative studies; educational inclusion; pandemic; social exclusion; social inclusion; social inequalities; vulnerable youth

Issue
This commentary is part of the issue "Educational Inclusion of Vulnerable Children and Young People after Covid-19" edited by Spyros Themelis (University of East Anglia) and Angela Tuck (Pakefield High School).

1. Introduction

Among the fears expressed in early studies of the pandemic's consequences were those about its economic impact across the globe and those relating to the pandemic's adverse effects on existing disadvantages in health and educational and social conditions, especially considering one's family background, teaching environment, or specific individual characteristics (gender, cognitive development, learning disabilities, physical and mental health, etc.; see Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Psacharopoulos et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020).

Those fears came true when more advanced and comparative studies have been carried out by individual researchers or international organizations (Carretero Gomez et al., 2021; Flor et al., 2022; Reimers, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). The consequences of the pandemic, two years after its outbreak, have been, so far, diverse and multidimensional. Social cohesion, as well as individual rights of children and young people, especially of the most vulnerable segments of society, have been gravely hit. The pandemic (and essentially policy responses to it) has affected poverty levels worldwide, unemployment rates and related benefits, types of employment, insurance schemes, career development, stress levels related to the work environment, welfare arrangements, access to the labor market for disabled persons and discrimination based on age and gender, emphasizing inequalities at work, etc. (Caselli et al., 2022; Chtouris & Zissi, 2020; Decerf et al., 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020; Wong et al., 2022). It has also negatively influenced family relationships and exacerbated gender-based violence (Albanesi & Kim, 2021; Piquero et al., 2021). Access to education as a "universal right" has been gravely curtailed since it has been documented that full-time distance

education (or "remote education"), "with the current state of infrastructure and accessibility of equipment[,] would aggravate existing inequalities" (Carretero Gomez et al., 2021, p. 5).

2. The Thematic Issue

This issue is devoted to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational inclusion prospects of vulnerable children and young people. If we understand "inclusion" as "an overarching principle and a process whereby all students are provided with equal opportunities to participation and educational achievement" (Szelei et al., 2022, p. 173), then the picture sketched in the presented studies is worrisome, but not catastrophic or irreversible. The findings of the articles are in line with the existing research that was initiated during the first stages of the pandemic, which stressed the dangers of children and young people having their learning and well-being significantly compromised after the introduction of severe measures to stop the spread of the pandemic. Nevertheless, they add invaluable pieces to the "puzzle" of the risks to social inclusion globally at the later stages of the pandemic—no matter how premature the adjective "later" might sound.

McNair et al. (2022) present the findings of a multi-country project that outlines national and local responses to the pandemic, the relevant measures against it, and their lasting consequences for children in early childhood. It constitutes a comprehensive report of four countries that faced particularly high rates of infection by Covid-19 during the first waves of the pandemic and highlights the importance of taking into account not only macro-economic factors, that is, international structures of political, economic, and health planning (e.g., the WHO and its affiliated state agencies), but mainly the historical, social, and cultural contexts at stake in examining and assessing social policy at a national, regional, and local level. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of conjectural elements in policy-making, such as the political commitment (or lack thereof) of certain governments—for example, that of Brazil (for more on the case of Brazil and its federal government's policy response regarding access to schooling during the pandemic see also Costin & Coutinho, 2022).

The same conclusions are reached by Szelei et al. (2022) in their comparative, longitudinal study, which was based on quantitative data gathered from 751 migrant students in secondary schools in six European countries. In line with other comparative studies across the globe about migrant students' educational disadvantages (Devine, 2009; OECD, 2018; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020), this article points to the "learning loss" and "increased inequities" linked to the barriers of online teaching and distance learning for migrants. The authors focused on one rather underexplored dimension of migrant students' disadvantages during the pandemic, that of "school belonging." Their findings suggest that the sense of school belonging for migrant students decreased over time, but this change was not statistically significant, something that is attributed (by the authors) to the fact that "interrupted schooling was not necessarily a new phenomenon for many migrant students" and some of them "may develop and sustain school belonging in ways that might not necessarily require a continuous physical presence on school sites" (Szelei et al., 2022, p. 179). The study, despite its methodological limitations, raises important questions for future investigations on the interplay of school structures, economic environment, migration policies, on the one hand, and school culture, professional practices, level of family and general social support, and individual characteristics, on the other.

Colombo and Santagati (2022) examined the pandemic's effects on the learning experiences of secondary school students with disabilities in Italy. The two authors, through the administration of a web questionnaire submitted to a non-probabilistic sample of nearly 150 primary and secondary school teachers, conclude that, although the teachers recognized a general deterioration ("retrocession," as they describe it) of teaching and learning conditions during the pandemic, at the same time highlight very positive trends through the innovative use of ICTs. This is attributed to the fact that, despite the numerous problems and barriers that distance learning generated for students with disabilities, very often it facilitated the intensity and quality of daily contact and inter-personal interaction between teachers and school students. In that sense, "retrocession" was balanced by "improvement" on certain dimensions of social inclusion.

Another study that stressed the promising developments and initiatives during the school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is the one carried out by Ebubedike et al. (2022), who focused on "remote learning" in disadvantaged communities in Nigeria. These are affected by an intersection of factors related to social exclusion, such as geographical isolation, armed conflict, linguistic diversity, economic inequalities, extreme poverty, religious discrimination, wide gender violence, and high rates of Covid-19 infection. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and local learning facilitators, the case study highlights plans to use a traditional means of communication (radio transmission and creation of listening groups) as an ingenious and powerful tool for breaking down barriers to remote learning in marginalized settings, where there is no access to the internet or mobile devices. The article raises issues not only of a political nature but also of a pedagogical one, in the sense that a new approach to *collaborative learning* has been promoted and offered valuable and tangible results.

Platero and López-Sáez (2022) focus on problems of social discrimination and exclusion faced by the LGBTQ+ community(-ties) and suggest that social networks, although very important for LGBTQ+ youth during the pandemic (in the sense that they helped them

explore their identities), could also be a source of violence, especially for the non-binary part of this broader community. Findings like these should be corroborated through cross-sectional and/or longitudinal comparative studies, which will be able to explore the rather alarming suggestions of previous studies in Spain that the LGBTQ+ community is being repeatedly discriminated against on the basis of their alleged "potential to spread the coronavirus," something that sounds ominous for 21st-century European societies and their laudable records of legislation for the protection and promotion of human rights.

3. Conclusions

What the articles in this thematic issue of *Social Inclusion* suggest is that uniform, "one-size-fits-all" measures such as those taken by various governments across the globe might significantly undermine commitments towards children's and young adults' rights, with the subtlest of all problems being that *there is no recognition* of their abilities to contribute to discussions on the pandemic or make meaningful decisions about their lives (see McNair et al., 2022), something that poses a new dilemma concerning the very core of our purportedly democratic societies. In that sense, what the authors acknowledge is a retrenchment of policies concerning children's and young adults' rights globally, something that seems to bring us back to a previous stage of human development. At the same time, however, they raise interesting issues about positive trends that became evident during the pandemic, as well as possible empowering tools that emerged through the use of ICTs in a period when social distancing was obligatory. They also point out the intersectionality of various factors generating or reinforcing social inclusion, something that has to be taken into account, not only by researchers, social welfare officials, and state agents, but also by activists and NGOs who work in the field.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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About the Author

Dionysios Gouvias is an associate professor at the Department of Preschool Education and Educational Design, University of the Aegean (Rhodes, Greece). He has twenty years of teaching experience in higher education. His research and writing focus mainly on educational policy-making, inequalities in education, intercultural education, and gender in education. He has published two books and edited four collective volumes. He is a member of the Associate Teaching Staff of the Hellenic Open University for the period 2020–2023.

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