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United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Topic 2: Ensuring the right to education in compliance with COVID-19 safety measures

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INTRODUCTION

SARS-CoV-2, or simply Covid-19, is a severe acute respiratory illness which was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019, and started spreading all over the world in the first months of 2020. Covid doesn't present itself as a deadly disease compared to other diseases such as Ebolavirus or MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), however it has a high transmissibility index which in the first months, together with the little knowledge of the virus never found in man before, led to many deaths. The virus can be fatal for elderly people and for those who have diseases related to the respiratory system, for other people who do not fall into these categories the virus may be neither lethal nor painful, depending on the severity of the symptoms.

As we know well, this virus led to a pandemic that has dramatically changed our routine. The way we live has drastically changed in many aspects – how we shop, travel, work etc. - especially when it comes to education.



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IMPACT ON EDUCATION

The pandemic has forced a great number of young people all around the world to stay home from school and miss on their education. More than a billion children have not gone to school for almost a year to contain the infection, even if they are still less than 10% of the cases reported.

This was especially the case in Spring 2020, when many students in the world were trying their hand at e-learning for the first time. In order to carry on with the school year, schools switched to using video calling platforms like Zoom or Google Meet.

However, with the prolonged closure of schools, many opportunities have been lost, not only of an educational nature but also of an economic and humanitarian nature. There have been many surveys and interviews, and it has been found that very many countries have very little advanced relationship between technology and education. Many students have also struggled socially with e-learning, withdrawing into themselves, others have gained confidence and received good grades, also finding a response on a psychological level.

However, the situation is better right now. Many countries still have schools closed throughout the territory, others only in certain regions, and those who have opened completely, obviously apply the criteria and restrictions necessary for the health of students, teachers and school staff.



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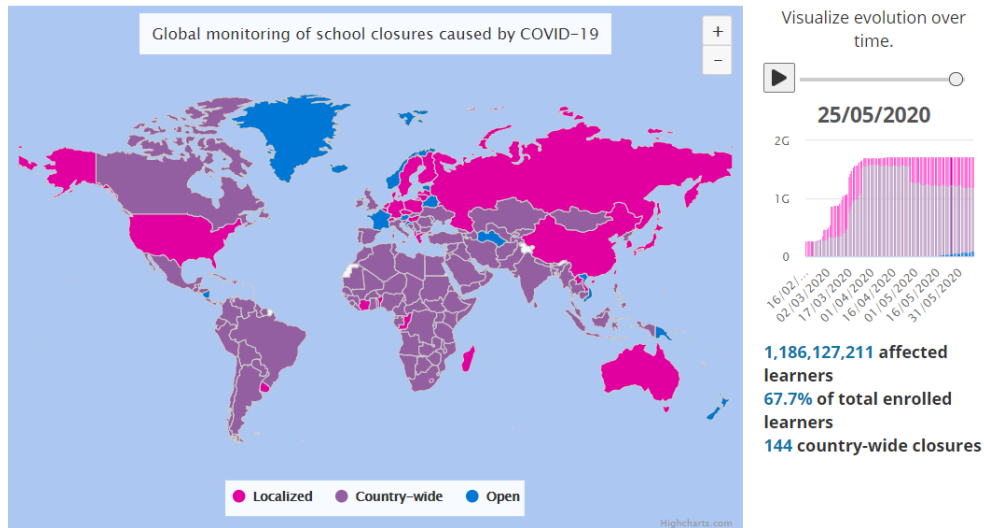


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COVID-19 Impact on Education

Data



RESTRICTIONS AND CRITERIA FOR RE-OPENING SCHOOLS

Especially in the past months, many countries have started to reopen schools, but as already mentioned, there are very specific criteria and provisions which country leaders must take into account:

- *The local situation at the epidemiological level, more specifically the most important aspects are the index of transmissibility and the number of current cases*
- *Other health measures taken outside the school*
- *The relationship between schools and local healthcare, there must be coordination and collaboration*
- *The ability of schools to operate in safety*
- *The capacity of schools to provide and comply with the standards set by their region/state*

Schools also have some duties to comply with for the sake of the students, teachers and school staff.

- *Ensure the required services, policies and infrastructure are in place to protect the health and safety of all school staff, including those at higher risk.*



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- *Consider the age and willingness of students to understand and appreciate the steps taken. Younger children can find it more difficult to stick to physical distance or to use masks properly.*
- *Hygiene and everyday practices: physical distance of at least 1 meter between people, including desk spacing, frequent hand and respiratory hygiene, age-appropriate mask use, ventilation and environmental sanitation measures should be in place in order to be able to clean the environment*
- *Screening and treatment of sick students, teachers and other school staff: schools should follow the policy of "staying at home if not well," waive the need for a doctor's note, draw up a checklist for parents/students/staff to determine whether to go to school (taking into account the local situation), ensure that students who have been in touch with the COVID-19 case stay at home for 14 days.*
- *Security of high-risk individuals: Schools should recognize high-risk students and teachers with pre-existing medical conditions in order to implement measures to keep them safe; maintain physical distances and medical masks; and maintain regular hand hygiene and respiratory marks.*
- *Physical distance from the classroom: ensure a distance of at least 1 meter for all students (all age groups) and staff, if possible.*

MAJOR COUNTRIES INVOLVED

France

With the recent sharp re-emergence of virus cases, France has released some of the most comprehensive recommendations for the re-opening of schools. Children in secondary schools would have to wear face coverings at all times while they are in school and in the playground, the Minister of Education said on Thursday, as France has registered a record number of regular coronavirus cases since the easing of restrictions.



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This is a change from the July guidelines that it would only be appropriate to face coverage for older children if 1-meter social distance could not be handled, which is a reaction to teaching union concerns about rising infections as the summer has gone on.

Although when French schools first reopened, there were class size limitations, there would be no size limits in the new term and the 1-metre social rule is recommended but is not necessary.

Germany

Germany has drawn attention in recent days to the experience of Berlin, where, since re-opening in the last fortnight, several dozen schools have had to close due to infections.

Officials state that most of the infections in Berlin involve only one teacher or student and indicate that the transmission occurred outside the classroom.

German schools are run regionally, unlike in countries where education is coordinated at a national level. While some German states have made face covers compulsory in schools at all times, in others they are only compulsory in hallways and playgrounds. More broadly, by holding classes apart, schools around the country have sought to manage the risk of infection.

South Korea

Considered one of the most comprehensive education systems in the world, South Korea struggled with reopening, several delays in restarting classes, and then eventually in different age groups.

While the country's resurgence of infections forced schools to close again, they resorted to various tactics to keep running, including alternate day attendance and temperature controls.

Denmark

In April, Denmark was one of the first Western countries to reopen its schools, splitting younger children into 12 "micro-groups" known as "protective bubbles."



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With staggered school starting times and desks 2 metres apart, masks were not considered appropriate. However, in the wider population, Denmark had relatively low infection numbers.

Israel

Israel has emerged as one of the most significant cautionary stories. Having handled its initial outbreak reasonably successfully, it reopened its schools in May, initially sending a limited number of classes of children back to small 'capsules' to minimize the risk of transmission. In a shocking move, however, the government then declared that all grades could be restored and the class size limits lifted.

The reopening led to a virus resurgence, with tens of thousands of students eventually sent into quarantine as positive tests were conducted by their classmates.

MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

- *The United Nations*
- *WHO (World Health Organization)*
- *UNICEF*
- *UNESCO*
- *European Union*

Useful Links/Bibliography

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