

Barcelona

General Background

Lockdown in primary schools

On 13th March 2020, regional Governments in Spain decided to close schools as a strategy to reduce physical contact and to control the spread of COVID-19. In Spain, the school lockdown between March and June 2020 seamlessly merged with the beginning of the summer holidays, resulting in students' absence from school lasting six months for all the educational levels, from preschool education to university.

During the first two weeks of confinement, the Catalan Department of Education advised schools not to provide new curriculum content, in an attempt to contain the adverse effects of the technological gap on educational inequalities. Despite the Department of Education's order, some schools reacted rapidly to the new circumstances and switched to remote learning strategies. Other schools stopped their activities entirely. Between these two extremes, there were a range of reactions and responses. So, during the COVID-19 Catalan lockdown, the instructional time received by students attending different schools was unequal.

When the third semester (after Easter Holidays) started, most schools were asked to follow their learning activities according to their own capacity and resources. There were not general rules, tools neither protocols for the schools coming from educational authorities, so most schools implemented their own methods of instruction. On-line platforms, mainly Classroom, were used by schools. But the digital divide and the exclusion of vulnerable children forced schools to find other ways of learning such as Instagram or the use of telephone. The Department of Education assessed the needs of schools for distance education in both hardware and connectivity and the management of online virtual educational platforms. Based on this detection, the Digital Plan in Catalonia was launched and will be deployed in the 2022-23 academic year.

Schools and special education schools remained closed until September 2020. Few policies for ensuring schooling for at-risk students was set up by the Catalan government between March 2020 and the end of the school year. Local education authority (Consorti d'Educació de Barcelona, CEB) played an important role to attend vulnerable families' needs:

- a) Prepaid cards were distributed among vulnerable families who were beneficiaries of Free School Meals to allow them to spend money in food markets.
- b) Digital devices and connectivity access were distributed among vulnerable students at the last course of lower secondary education, baccalaureate and training education.
- c) Some extracurricular programs, such as "Èxit", turned into online to offer extracurricular activities and support tuition to vulnerable students.
- d) Vulnerable families were offered telephone support from schools' socioeducational professionals.

It must be said that, while schools remained closed, other social and economic activities were reactivated without any policy to ensure that families could take care of their children.

Reopening

In June 2020, when the school year was about to finish, the Catalan Government opened schools to students whose parents were doing in-person work and to vulnerable students. This proposal failed because of the opposition of teachers' union, who argued that it was too dangerous to go back to in-person teachers and it was not worthy when there were just 2 weeks left before summer holidays. School board discouraged families to bring their children to schools. Thus, most of the children remained at home until September 2020, having eventually visited their school in July just to pick their school supplies and grades.

While schools were not formally opened until September, at the end of July and beginning of August summer camps for students were offered, also in public schools. 16.000 students participated in summer activities organized by the Barcelona City Council and 850 lower secondary students attended summer activities to catch up the learning loss. The CEB helped in the management of grants. These summer camps were not run by teachers but by free-time structures.

In September 2020, primary and secondary schools reopened, following some special rules:

- School ratios decreased from 25 to 20 pupils in primary and up to 30 in secondary schools.
- More teachers were assigned to schools to ensure ratios reductions and to manage work absences.
- The organization of schools were based on "groups of stable coexistence", a measure that tried to minimize contact between the students from different groups.
- Students had to wear a mask all the time, except during sport's activities.
- Preventive quarantines were applied to the whole group if a student tested positive.
- Schools were asked to increase their activities in outdoors spaces. The city council makes more than 200 public spaces (outdoors or civic and cultural facilities) available to schools.
- The Department of Education started the program addressed to improve educational opportunities among vulnerable students. Resources of this program cover excursions, cultural activities and extracurricular activities of students in highly segregated schools.

In the 2021-22 academic year, absenteeism has returned to an average of 0.2% but with peaks of up to 4% or 3.5% in some neighbourhoods with a large presence of Roma students.

From September 2022 little changes have taken place. In the case of secondary education, quarantines were restricted to unvaccinated students. Later on, criteria were changed in primary education in order to reduce preventive quarantines (the group was confined if at least 5 students tested positive in a 7-days period) and from February 2022 only the student tested positive is not allowed to attend class. A decrease of restrictions is expected.

Governance of the crisis (National/local authorities, schools, others)

- A committee was set up with officials from the Department of Health and Education to take decisions affecting students and schools.
- Public schools haven't had autonomy in covid management and every morning they have received a statement with the most important indications.
- However, each school, following some rules, had to design their own organizational and learning plans for the school year and different plans to pass to online learning if needed.
- Each school counts with a reference figure of its nearest health centre.

A registration system (*traçacovid*) has been set up to monitor the impact of the pandemic on schools and to adapt measures to pandemic evolution.

Implications for Education

- A survey administered between 26–30 March 2020 to families with children aged between 3 and 18 allows to build an index of opportunities to learn (OTL), which concentrates information on hours spent on homework, online contact with the school and teachers, the carrying out of homework and homework feedback by students in upper primary education (Bonal & Gonzalez, 2020). This index ranges from 0 to 100 depending on the frequency observed when performing these tasks. Despite being considered a non-school period, during the first two weeks of confinement most children in Barcelona do homework.
- Data, however, show important differences. 10% of primary school students didn't have contact with school learning (OTL = 0) and 17.5% had a score of 100 on the OTL index. Polarization is visible depending on the level of education of the families. While the average for Barcelona is 58 points, the OTL index for families with a university degree is 65 (10 points more than families with compulsory education).
- Private and charter schools, during the first two weeks of confinement, were much more active than public schools in maintaining schoolwork. Thus, the averages of OTL by sector of ownership are clearly different between public school (48), charter school (67) and private (76).
- The results of a survey administered by the Barcelona Education Consortium on May 2020 show an increase of OTL for all students once schools were asked to resume their learning activities after Easter Holidays. However, important differences according to social origin and school ownership are still clear. Thus, at the end of the school year, the IOA for vulnerable students was 55.3 in the public sector and 66.6 in the public sector, while in the case of non-vulnerable children and young people the figure grew to 68.6 in public schools and up to 84 in public schools (CEB, 2020).
- Standardized tests at the end of the primary and secondary education show lower results for students who did the exam in 2021 in comparison to 2019 cohort. Compared to 2019, there is a loss of 0.9 points for Spanish language, 2.2 points for mathematics and 5 points for English. These global results confirm that competencies most affected by school closures are mathematics and English, while for Catalan language and natural sciences students did it better in 2021 (+1.2 points and +7.5 points, respectively).
- Results also show an increase of the gap between schools according to their social composition. After the school closure, the differences between schools have increased and returned to the levels of 2013, especially for English and mathematics.

The school absenteeism registered in the city of Barcelona (students who miss more than 50% of school days) in the 2019-20 academic year was 0.1% on average, placing the maximum of 2.9% absenteeism (most of these students belongs to the Roma community). At the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, absenteeism reached 39% of students in some extreme cases. The socio-educational workers of these schools worked on restoring families' confidence and the situation was normalized, although with each new wave, school attendance decreased again. Absentees' groups belong mainly to Roma community and Chinese minority but there was also a significant increase of the absences of wealthy families who decided to temporarily move to second homes and not bring their children to school. In the 2021-22 academic year, absenteeism has returned to an average of 0.2% but it remains at percentages of 3.5% or 4% in some areas with a large presence of Roma students.

Mental health

- Over the last few years, and especially since the COVID pandemic began, children's and teenager's mental health has worsened.
- Teenagers present more depressive symptoms, self-harm and suicidal behaviour.
- Before the pandemic, it was estimated that 30% of minors had presented suicidal ideation at some point, 10% had attempted it and 2% seriously, requiring medical attention. It is estimated that 18% of minors self-harm before the age of 18.
- Recent studies indicate increases in all these indicators after the COVID pandemic. During this period, the ANAR Foundation has attended an increase of 145% calls from minors with suicidal ideas or attempts, and 180% more self-harm compared to the previous two years. In 2020, 14 children under the age of 15 committed suicide in Spain, twice as many as the previous year. Among the group of young people between 15 and 29 years of age, suicide is already the second cause of death, only surpassed by malignant tumours.

Quality of life / family relations

- According to the first data resulting on the impact of COVID-19, there's been a slight increasing trend in gender differences of the unemployment rate.
- Unemployment have affected more those sectors where women's participation has increased the most (except in the case of hospitality).
- There haven't been any law or program to facilitate families to take care of their children, not under normal conditions, neither during school closures or during children's quarantines.