



Education and Equity in Times of Crisis

Learning, Engagement
and Support

Emily S. Rudling · Sherridan Emery
Becky Shelley · Kitty te Riele
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ISBN 978-3-031-18670-7 ISBN 978-3-031-18671-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18671-4>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge and pay respect to traditional land ownership. This book was prepared in lutruwita, on the lands of the mouhenneener /muwinina people.

We would like to acknowledge and extend our thanks to those who made this book possible: school leaders and staff, education system officers, non-governmental organisation staff, and advocates. We are also grateful to Tess Crellin, Aishah Bakhtiar, and Damien Walker for creating the figures throughout the book and to Linda Bathish for her careful copy editing. Finally, our deepest thank you to colleagues at the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment for supporting this work. As always, we dedicate this to children and young people and their pursuit of learning.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Services
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CoAG	Council of Australian Governments
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
HBL	Home-Based Learning
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ICPA	Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association
LMS	Learning Management System
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy
NBN	National Broadband Network
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NSW	New South Wales (state of Australia)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OER	Open Education Resource
PAYG	Pay As You Go
SELPS	Social and Emotional Learning Programs
SES	Socioeconomic Status
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

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USA	United States of America
USB	Universal Serial Bus
WHO	World Health Organization

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Facing a Crisis: Foregrounding the Future

Abstract Equity is a perennial concern in education. At a global level, this is recognised in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In wealthy countries, educational inequality remains problematic, as evidenced in multiple sources such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment reports.

The COVID-19 pandemic radically altered children and young people's engagement with learning. The pandemic not only exacerbated existing inequities but created newly vulnerable groups: families who had lost jobs or who were struggling with combining their children's learning from home with the demands of working from home. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an impetus for innovation, for example in relation to the use of technology and enhanced interagency collaborations. The disruption caused by such crises is an opportunity to revisit questions of equity and education.

This chapter outlines our conceptual tools and provides an overview of the book.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic • Equity • Education • Vulnerability • Learner rights • Social capital

INTRODUCTION

Equity is a perennial concern in education. International organisations, including the United Nations, have fluidly transmitted the possibility and promise of education for all (Robeyns, 2006). The right of the child to education has also been asserted with Article 29a of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), stating that “the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (United Nations, 1989, p. 9).

In this book, we recognise the right of the learner to an equitable education. However, we examine equity in education through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic to unpick what equity means in disaster and crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is the largest recorded disruption to education globally (United Nations, 2020) with over a billion children affected (OECD, 2021). The closure of schools to manage the spread of COVID-19 pushed learning into the home environment and, in doing so, dismantled the supports schools offer learners, and blurred the once firm boundaries between school and home.

Despite some success in the second half of the twentieth century to improving access to education globally, access to education was in decline prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Azevedo et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020). A “twin shock” to both education and economy (Azevedo et al., 2020, p. 2), children and young people are experiencing compromised access to education as well as broader social and economic stressors.

The pandemic has also raised a unique opportunity for a reset in education, one that, we hope, could go some way to redressing inequities. COVID-19 school closures have spurred innovations in the digital provision of learning as well as creating new challenges to equitable access to education while learning from home (Sahlberg, 2021; Zhao & Watterson, 2021). The role of schools in remedying educational inequities has also altered: now, more than ever the home environment and socio-economic context mediate learner access to education.

Our intention is not to attempt a comprehensive review of global experiences of the pandemic. Instead, we analyse the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of education to children and young people to understand some of the critical challenges that crises present for equity in education systems. It is in this context that we explore what we can learn from the global pandemic to reset and reconsider education and the role of schools, and outline ongoing implications for schools and society, not only for times of crisis but also for enhancing educational equity more broadly.

There is urgency to ensure education is equitable for learners during and beyond crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Sahlberg, 2021). Despite the reality that disaster and crisis are recurrent features of the global landscape, there is little understanding of how such events impact on learners. Socio-economic disadvantage and privilege affect the extent to which a learner is impacted by crisis; and crisis and disaster have the potential to create cohorts of newly vulnerable learners. For example, learning loss as a result of disaster and crisis have long-term impacts on individual and national wellbeing and productivity (Azevedo et al., 2020). As we will discuss in Chap. 3, historical crises and disasters teach us that periods of heightened stress have the potential to affect the entire life course of a child (Yoshikawa et al., 2020). The pursuit of educational equity is thus enmeshed within broader socioeconomic conditions.

Throughout this book, we draw on international literature to underline our claim that educational equity is of global concern. We focus on literature from nations with similar education systems: Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States of America. We recognise that circumstances in developing countries create different challenges, which are largely beyond the scope of this book.

The pandemic is not the only crisis to have affected the world in the early 2020s. Earthquakes, floods, and bushfires as well as ongoing and new military conflict and wars have affected children's lives—including learning, development, and access to schooling—in many countries. These events are beyond the remit of this book but are a reminder that the relevance of our contention—that equity in education matters—extends beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to other crises, such as those triggered by climate change.

CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

Educational outcomes and experiences (as well as other measures such as life expectancy, physical and mental health) correlate strongly with geography, gender, race, and poverty (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Much research shows how educational inequality relates to socioeconomic status. This body of work, which we draw on across the book, provides important insights into the significance of equity to educational outcomes. However, disadvantage is multidimensional. It is not just about a lack of material resources, but also lack of access to rights and services, and “the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available

to the majority of people in a society” (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 25). Disadvantage is also complex, with people exposed to multiple dimensions of disadvantage at risk of facing deep exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007) highlighting the layering effects of patterns of power, discrimination and inequality that create compounding barriers in a variety of ways (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). To acknowledge this complexity, and the intersectional nature of educational equity, we draw on three conceptual tools to build a theoretical framework.

First, tools provided by Urie Bronfenbrenner are useful. A central theme across his seven decades of work on human development is that “children must be nurtured and educated to be able to maintain and strengthen their society” (Hamilton & Ceci, 2005, p. 284). It was Bronfenbrenner’s view that societies should be judged according to “the concern of one generation for the next” (Hamilton & Ceci, 2005, p. 284). Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological system model places the child at the centre and highlights the multiple layers of systems that sit around the child—each offering loci for influences that can support or inhibit children’s learning, wellbeing, and development. This is of particular importance in the context of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when families, schools, communities, employers, governments, and non-government organisations all swing into action to respond. While many of these responses are not explicitly targeted towards children and young people, they inevitably impact them.

Secondly, theories of capital are valuable. Social capital, according to Putnam (2000) and Bourdieu (1984), refers to the advantages generated by connections between people and amongst social groups. Through its potential for helping people gain access to resources, Putnam (2000) argues that social capital also acts as a public good, and benefits can reach the larger community. School can be a key site for the building of children’s social capital according to Guilfoyle et al. (2011), as a place where the formation of networks of skills, knowledge and relationships occurs. Public health research identifies positive associations between social capital and health (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Uphoff et al., 2013).

Social capital is also a cornerstone of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of capital (1984) which further encompass economic and cultural capital. Economic capital refers to money, property and other financial assets people use to acquire resources. Cultural capital is conceptualised as taking three forms. First, institutionalised cultural capital refers to educational attainment and qualifications, and relevant here is the cultural capital

located in schools and educational institutions. Second, objectified cultural capital relates to the possession of cultural goods and artefacts. Third, Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital, refers to people's values, skills, knowledge, and tastes. Social and cultural capital have been widely employed in relation to education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and are helpful in explaining the social reproduction of advantage and disadvantage. These theories provide us with tools to consider the differential access to resources that supported students during the pandemic, through the shift to learning at home rather than at school.

Lastly, crises tend to involve a re-ordering of people's priorities, especially when day-to-day survival is suddenly under threat. In recognition of this, we draw on Abraham Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs which places the child's security and physiological needs as the basis for healthy development, together with broader psychological needs of love, belonging and esteem. These, according to Maslow, precede the attainment of self-fulfilment needs such as self-actualisation. Noltemeyer et al. (2021) further unpack the antecedent/subsequent elements of Maslow's theory, distinguishing "deficiency needs", namely children's food, shelter, health, and psychological needs, from "growth needs", encompassing academic work, achievement, and self-esteem. In arguing for the necessity of children's basic (or "deficiency") needs being met as precursors to their learning (or "growth") needs, Noltemeyer et al. (2021) help to explain why children in families with higher incomes and capital resources are typically well placed to have the motivation to pursue higher order growth needs.

Maslow's work has met with important critique. By framing his theory as focused on human motivation, there is a risk that Maslow places too much emphasis on the responsibility of individuals for the decisions they make (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). This in turn, can be interpreted as blaming individuals for their circumstances without recognising broader factors like precarity, gender, or race (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). We nevertheless argue that the idea of a hierarchy of needs is both commensurate with both ecological systems theory and theories of capital and an important addition for the analysis in this book. When informed by sociological understandings of how social reproduction of advantage and disadvantage conditions a landscape (or ecological system) of inequality in education, Maslow's hierarchy offers insight into the constellation of environmental factors that are central to children's development, and which are particularly thrown into disarray in a crisis.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This chapter sets the scene for the book, outlining how we examine the connection between equity and education in the context of crisis, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The book is based on an extensive analysis of international scholarly and grey literature, alongside primary data from key informants in Australia and New Zealand, representing schools and education systems as well as relevant non-government organisations and allied professions. An array of rich formal and informal networks and connections are drawn upon to develop the capabilities of children and young people—these too have been impacted by COVID-19 related school closures and general geographical “lockdowns”. The longer-term effects of these choices upon learning and development are unfurling, and emerging data from the current crisis as well as experiences from past crises provide insight into how these are already affecting equity in education. Our argument here is that crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can exacerbate (and alter) inequalities, as well as present opportunities for action through sharpened attention for the need to address educational inequities. To address this, we need analyses from around and across the world, such as presented in this book.

In Australia, in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Federal Minister for Education sought expert advice from within the education field, leading to five rapid response reports¹. We produced one of these reports (see: Brown et al., 2020). What we learnt from that early work, and from ongoing reflection as education and health responses to the pandemic unfolded, suggested the need for a longer piece, enabling deeper analysis of the educational equity implications of the pandemic. We consider research against different points in time—from interviews conducted early in the pandemic to later in the pandemic, and beyond. For example, at early points in the COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of stress in the education system were evident in conversations with our research participants and correspondents. Sympathetic to that pressure, we continued our inquiry six months later and found that while the initial sense of being overwhelmed had abated, new and underlying educational issues were emerging, which are discussed throughout this book.

¹Available here: <https://www.dese.gov.au/about-us/announcements/new-research-examine-potential-impact-remote-learning>.

Employing a pragmatic approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008), the key methods and sources of information for our primary data are interviews and email correspondence with key informants. Purposive sampling methods were used to access key informants from national networks. The data is cross-sectoral, which in this study means that it includes several school sectors operating in Australia (e.g., government, Independent, Catholic, and flexible education systems as well as early childhood education and care). It also goes beyond the education system to other key stakeholders who, as per Bronfenbrenner’s model (see above) influence learning and development.

Table 1.1 introduces the primary data collected during the two rounds of interviews. Five participants provided insights in both rounds.

The categories in the table above are used throughout the book to indicate the source of quotes. In addition, we contributed to two other research projects on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and on children’s experiences:

- Children’s experiences and conceptions of learning at home through COVID-19 (see Bourke et al., 2021).
- Learning through COVID-19 (see McDaid et al., 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Tomaszewski et al., 2022; Plage et al., 2022)

Throughout the book, we use publications from those projects as well as our own report (Brown et al., 2020) as a source of data, except where the data has not previously been published. As noted earlier, findings presented in this book are based on analysis of primary data sets as well as international scholarly literature and a wide range of grey literature,

Table 1.1 Overview of Research Participant Sample

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number</i>
School-based staff (i.e., teachers and support staff)	9
School-based leaders (i.e., principals and assistant principals)	7
Early childhood education and care (cross-sectoral)	3
Education system (cross-sectoral)	6
Advocacy Groups and Services (e.g. from NGOs, foundations, child advocacy bodies, and peak bodies)	10
Total number	35