

# THE COVID-19 GENERATION CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

*Edited by* Marcelo Suárez Orozco



Workshop | 28 February - 1 March 2022 | Casina Pio IV

STUDIA SELECTA 9

# **The COVID-19 Generation Children and Youth In and After the Pandemic**





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*The Proceedings of the Workshop on*

# **The COVID-19 Generation Children and Youth In and After the Pandemic**

*28 February - 1 March 2022*

*Edited by*

Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco



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*The pandemic has an enormous impact on education. In many parts of the world, great numbers of children are unable to return to school, and this situation runs the risk of an increase in child labour, exploitation, abuse and malnutrition.*

The Holy Father Pope Francis,  
Message to the Pontifical Academy of  
Sciences, Oct. 7, 2020









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# THE COVID-19 GENERATION CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

**MARCELO M. SUÁREZ-OROZCO**

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A virus that does not recognize barriers, borders, or cultural or political distinctions must be faced with a love without barriers, borders or distinctions. This love can generate social structures that encourage us to share rather than to compete, that allow us to include the most vulnerable and not to cast them aside, and that help us to express the best in our human nature and not the worst. True love does not know the throw-away culture, it does not know what it is. In fact, when we love and generate creativity, when we generate trust and solidarity, it is then that concrete initiatives for the common good emerge.

Pope Francis, September 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3xiLxp0>

Millions of children and youth around the world are experiencing COVID-19 damage and dislocation that will likely mark their development for years to come (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume; McCartney and Fenlason, this volume). COVID-19 removed children from the normative pathways that lead them to master culturally determined milestones in the maturational, socio-emotional, cognitive, and moral realms. It robbed them of many of the rituals and routines that structure and give predictability to daily life (see Sithole, this volume). The pandemic took from them the joy of socializing with other youth, and the love and support of caretakers, teachers, mentors, and extended family members. It dramatically disrupted access to school, playgrounds, health care, vaccinations, nutrition, sports, and other scaffolding needed for appropriate psychosocial development. In UNICEF's somber assessment, "Across virtually every key measure of childhood, progress has gone backward in the 12 months since the pandemic was declared, leaving children confronting a devastating and distorted new normal". <https://uni.cf/3b2FJVA> COVID-19 is the undertow most likely to drown the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4.2: "by 2030 ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for

primary education”. <https://bit.ly/3QEK19B> As Hans Zollner, of the Pontifical Gregorian University, summarizes, “The COVID-19 pandemic is probably the most comprehensive and complex challenge to human dignity and care, especially for vulnerable persons, that the world’s population has faced since the end of World War II” (this volume).

A growing body of research suggests that while the rate of transmission “symptom presentation, and fatality is lower in children than people from other age groups, they have been disproportionately affected by strict lockdown measures needed to curb viral spread” (Manivannan, et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup> According to Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom,

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of nurturing care in the short and longer term: young children’s physical and mental health, safety, security, access to food and healthy nutrition, and opportunities to learn, and it has disrupted childhood immunization schedules, triggering the largest backslide in childhood vaccinations in 30 years. In 2021, 25 million children missed out on one or more doses of vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis – 2 million more than in 2020 and 6 million more than in 2019 (this volume).

Children and youth are growing up in a world that saw significant increases in COVID morbidity and mortality “with the World Health Organization estimating excess mortality between January 2020 and December 2021 at nearly 15 million deaths” (Ibid.).<sup>2</sup> As of early 2023, the pandemic had infected well over half a billion people globally.<sup>3</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/> Furthermore, new research has identified a debilitating illness, so-called long COVID, infecting at “least 65 million individuals worldwide ... with cases increasing daily”. <https://go.nature.com/3QOIPBv> Millions of children have lost parents and caretakers. <https://bit.ly/3XqK0Z0> <https://bit.ly/3w2chtq> According to Imperial College London data, over 10.7 million children have lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID. <https://bit.ly/3W97y3B> The consequences for millions of children are devastating “including institutionalization, abuse, traumatic grief, mental health

<sup>1</sup> See, Manivannan, Madhumitha, P. Jogalekar Manasi, Subash Kavitha Muthu, Venmathi Maran Balu Alagar, and Prakash Gangadaran. “A Mini-Review on the Effects of COVID-19 on Younger Individuals”, *Exp Biol Med* (Maywood) 246, 246, no. 3 (2021): 293-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1535370220975118> See also Ashish Jha 2022. <https://bit.ly/3HTpq0>

<sup>2</sup> More recent estimates put excess covid deaths at 20 million. <https://bit.ly/3lB-Dwck>

<sup>3</sup> See also <https://bit.ly/3loaA7g>

problems, adolescent pregnancy, poor educational outcomes, and chronic and infectious diseases”. <https://bit.ly/3t0uUfP> Worse still, the suffering is unequal: “While COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations are declining in some parts of the world, in low-income countries the COVID-19 death toll is four times higher than in high-income countries. Additionally, one-third of the world’s population remains unvaccinated in low-income countries. These conditions pose a continuing threat of orphanhood from COVID-19”. <https://bit.ly/3XqJN8a> Based on World Health Organization data, the “countries with the highest numbers of bereaved children in Southeast Asia included Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nepal and in Africa included Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa” (Ibid.)<sup>4</sup> Sithole writes, scholars “speak of ‘bad deaths’ in their vivid description of pain and trauma of families nursing and losing their loved ones in sub-Saharan Africa. Many family members feel they did not give their family members the send-off they deserve by way of funerals. This has created a lingering feeling of guilt and pain for people already traumatized by loss” (Sithole, this volume).

Millions of children are in COVID-mourning. They face losses that are at once immediate and concrete as well as ambiguous and distal. <https://bit.ly/3U65ijM> In the United States, the country with the most COVID deaths (over 1.1 million as of early 2023), more than 300,000 children are COVID orphans, having lost a parent or primary caregiver to the pandemic. <https://bit.ly/3Nhh4in> Underserved, minoritized populations face exceptionally severe losses. Analyses of U.S. federal, state, and local data reveal “particularly large disparities in cases and deaths for Black and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) people and in cases among Hispanic people compared to their White counterparts” (Ibid.). Youth in minoritized populations have been ravaged by COVID-related parental and caretaker losses. American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander children “lost caregivers at rates of nearly 4 times the rate of White children;

<sup>4</sup> The JAMA September 2022 estimates reveal the rapid increase in orphanhood and caregiver death – doubling every six months. A July 2021 Lancet study had estimated that some 5.2 million children had lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19, See Unwin HJ, Hillis S, Cluver L, Flaxman S, Goldman P, Butchart A, Bachman G, Rawlings L, Donnelly C, Ratmann O, Green P, Nelson C, Blenkinsop A, Bhatt S, Desmond C, Villaveces A, Sherr Let al., 2022, More than 5.2 million children affected by global surges in COVID-associated orphanhood and caregiver death: new evidence for national responses, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, ISSN: 2352-4642 (see also <https://bit.ly/2XDmEWO>).



Black and Hispanic children at nearly 2.5 times the rate of White children; and Asian children at 1.6 times that of White children” (Ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

### **‘Coping with Not Coping’: COVID Trauma Emerging Psycho-Social Considerations**

COVID-19 is leaving in its wake an empire of suffering and loss. In the words of Pearl Sithole of the University of the Free State South Africa, under COVID, “societies had to learn to cope with not coping” (this volume).

Distress became the pandemic within the pandemic. In a rare advisory on youth mental health, the United States Surgeon General reports:

Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, have increased. Recent research covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms. Negative emotions or behaviors such as impulsivity and irritability – associated with conditions such as ADHD – appear to have moderately increased. Early clinical data are also concerning: In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time period in early 2019. Moreover, pandemic-related measures reduced in-person interactions among children, friends, social supports, and professionals such as teachers, school counselors, pediatricians, and child welfare workers. This made it harder to recognize signs of child abuse, mental health concerns, and other challenges.

Researchers have identified risk factors contributing to the development of symptomatology during the pandemic. These include (a) Having mental health challenges before the pandemic; (b) Living in an urban area or an area with more severe COVID-19 outbreaks; (c)

<sup>5</sup> Loss by Geography, Race, and Ethnicity revealed, “The District of Columbia had the widest disparities in caregiver loss, where Black and Hispanic children’s rates of caregiver loss were 11 and 18 times the rates of loss for White children, respectively. The rates of caregiver loss for American Indian and Alaska Native children were more than 10 times those of White children in Mississippi, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah. See <https://bit.ly/3nWBOzp>

Having parents or caregivers who were frontline workers; Having parents or caregivers at elevated risk of burnout (for example, due to parenting demands); Being worried about COVID-19; Experiencing disruptions in routine, such as not seeing friends or going to school in person; Experiencing more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, community violence, and discrimination; Experiencing more financial instability, food shortages, or housing instability; Experiencing trauma, such as losing a family member or caregiver to COVID. <https://bit.ly/3sXRG7q>

COVID brought pharaonic suffering on humanity. The pandemic embodies all the characteristics of a “wicked problem”.<sup>6</sup> It will take generations to discern its full *sequela*. Research itself was impacted. As Pearl Sithole notes, the “pandemic disturbed most professional routines. This includes social research, which was plunged into make-shift situations that require careful strategizing around accessing data” (this volume). Thus, there are significant limitations to the available data. Furthermore, as McCartney and Fenlason note, from “a methodological perspective, it is not possible to isolate the impact of COVID-19 from other factors, because all developmental outcomes are the product of multiple influences: genetic predispositions, the environment, and the correlation and interaction between the two”. While a plethora of studies began to appear in scholarly journals, our exhaustive review of the literature assessing the first two years of the pandemic did not identify experimental studies tracing pathways and mechanisms of COVID’s impacts on children and youth. As the Argentine cognitive neuroscientist Sebastián Lipina warns, the preponderance of the available data comes from “researchers, governments, NGOs, think-tanks

<sup>6</sup> DeGioia, identifies wicked problems as: “1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem. 2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule. 3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse. 4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem. 5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a “one-shot operation”; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly. 6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan. 7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique. 8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem. 9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution. 10. The social planner has no right to be wrong. (i.e., planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate) (DeGioia, this volume).

and multilateral organizations (e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, ECLAC, and IDB), [basing the work] on surveys and questionnaires conducted virtually or remotely” (Lipina, this volume). In the chapters that follow, therefore, we proceed with caution in interpreting the available evidence:

(In) almost the entire world, scientific activity was also widely interrupted since the beginning of the pandemic, and in general there were many difficulties in resuming field work, as well as in carrying out remote studies more specific than surveys. Nonetheless, some research groups began to make changes in their methodologies and to carry out virtual studies – some of them with longitudinal designs – that are still under development (Lipina, this volume).

Yet, as McCartney and Fenlason (this volume) note, there “is consistent evidence that mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, increased dramatically across the world following the COVID-19 pandemic”. According to Hans Zollner, “The first scientifically validated evidence of the negative impact of prolonged quarantine on children’s lives comes from a study of the situation in Italy and Spain, the two European countries that were particularly hard hit by the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> This study evidences a deterioration in emotional state and behavior, especially through concentration difficulties and of feelings such as boredom, irritability and loneliness. However, Spanish children seem to have been more affected than their Italian peers” (Zollner, this volume).

Scholars using a range of methodologies report significant increases in mood disorders, including depression and dysthymia, as well as anxiety, clinginess, distraction, irritability, panic, regressive behaviors, and loneliness, *inter alia*. An analysis of 116 peer-reviewed articles with data on 127,923 children and adolescents and 50,984 child and adolescent proxy reports (e.g., parents, healthcare practitioners) examined a range of COVID-19-related mental health impacts on children and adolescents. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12501> The researchers found more depressive and anxious symptoms compared with pre-pandemic estimates. The data suggest that older adolescents, girls, and children and adolescents living with neurodiversity and/or chronic physical conditions were more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes. The researchers also identified mental health deterioration among children and adolescents due to COVID-19 pandemic control

<sup>7</sup> Mireia Orgilés, Alexandra Morales, Elisa Delveccio, Claudia Mazzeschi and José P. Espada, “Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain” (18 April 2020). <https://psyarxiv.com/5bpfz/>

measures. The data also revealed a high prevalence of COVID-19-related fears among children and adolescents<sup>8</sup> (see also McCartney and Fenlason, this volume).

The emerging comparative record echoes a range of psycho-social concerns. In a survey of “60,000 caregivers in Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Peru, 61% of the youngest children reported at least one symptom of mental distress” (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume). A *Lancet* study on child mental health in the UK examined the results of England’s Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey. More than a quarter of children (aged 5–16 years) and young people (aged 17–22) reported disrupted sleep and one in ten reported “often” or “always” feeling lonely.<sup>9</sup> Many were fearful to leave the house. Parents – compared with working age adults without young children – experienced larger than average increases in mental distress during the pandemic. Notably, youths with a parent in psychological distress were more likely to have mental health problems. These youths were more than twice as likely to live in households newly falling behind on bills, rent, or mortgage payments compared with those whose families were able to pay their bills. One in ten children and younger people reported not having enough to eat or increased reliance on foodbanks. 44.6% of 17–22-year-olds with probable mental health problems saw disruptions in access to health care. The data revealed a wide range of COVID-related challenges: 12% of children had no reliable Internet access at home; 19% had no quiet space to work; and 26.9% did not have a desk at which they could study.

A study of Children’s Mental Health in Canada examined internalizing symptomatology indexed by irritability, generalized anxiety, panic/somatization, depressive, and PTSD symptom severity *qua* perceived social support. It found broad impacts of the pandemic on children’s psychological distress, as assessed by both children and parents/guardians, including higher irritability, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced well-being. Higher perceived social support availability from family and friends was associated with moderately lower severity of irritability, anxiety, depressive,

<sup>8</sup> For a conceptual framing of the developmental implications of COVID-related mental health effects on youth and young adults, see Caffo, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HT-pqu0>; McCartney and Fenlason, this volume.

<sup>9</sup> See Newlove-Delgado, T., McManus, S., Sadler, K., Thandi, S., Vizard, T., Cartwright, C., & Ford, T. (2021). Child mental health in England before and during the COVID-19 lockdown. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(5), 353–354.

and PTSD symptoms and attenuated increases in psychological distress. These findings are generally consistent with emerging research in disparate Canadian contexts.<sup>10</sup> Other North American researchers found that neurodevelopmentally atypical and complex learners – youth with dyslexia, spectrum disorders, and other disabilities, experienced significant negative COVID-related mental health, socio-emotional and physical outcomes “(including [less] sleep, [poor] diets, [less] exercise, [more] use of electronic media; and increased symptoms of child neurodevelopmental disability [NDD] and comorbidities)”. <https://bit.ly/2ZLgDYP>

Researchers in China gathered data using a cross-sectional survey of 3613 students ages 7 to 18 in 20 mainland provinces.<sup>11</sup> They found high levels of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents flowing from fear of self, family, and/or friend infection. Socioeconomic status and living in urban areas, *inter alia*, contributed to higher levels of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents.<sup>12</sup> Other research in China found elevated signs of inattention, clinging, worry and irritability in children and youth aged 3-18 years.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Mactavish, A., Mastronardi, C., Menna, R., Babb, K.A., Battaglia, M., Amstadter, A.B., & Rappaport, L.M. (2021). Children’s Mental Health in Southwestern Ontario during Summer 2020 of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry = Journal de l’Académie canadienne de psychiatrie de l’enfant et de l’adolescent*, 30(3), 177-190. See also, Courtney, D., Watson, P., Battaglia, M., Mulsant, B.H., & Szatmari, P. (2020). COVID-19 impacts on child and youth anxiety and depression: challenges and opportunities. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 65(10), 688-691. See also, Panchal, U., Salazar de Pablo, G., Franco, M. et al. The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on child and adolescent mental health: systematic review. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w> Singh, S., Roy, D., Sinha, K., Parveen, S., Sharma, G., & Joshi, G. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations. *Psychiatry Research*, 293.

<sup>11</sup> They included self-rating questionnaires; a Chinese version of Spence Child Anxiety Scale (a 44- item self-report Likert’s scale); a Child Depression Inventory (a 27-item self-report measure on severity of depressive symptoms); the Short Version of Smartphone Addiction Scale and other measures.

<sup>12</sup> See Duan, L., Shao, X., Wang, Y., Huang, Y., Miao, J., Yang, X., & Zhu, G., 2020. An investigation of mental health status of children and adolescents in China during the outbreak of COVID-19. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 275, 112-118. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2020.06.029

<sup>13</sup> See, Li, W., Wang, Z., Wang, G., Ip, P., Sun, X., Jiang, Y., & Jiang, F. (2021). Socioeconomic inequality in child mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: First evidence from China. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 287, 8-14. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2021.03.009

A plethora of studies deploying distinct methodologies and different conceptual frameworks paint a picture of the dangerous mental health undertows children and youth face as they struggle to navigate the ebbs and flows of COVID-19 globally.<sup>14</sup> Isomorphic patterns of psycho-social suffering are emerging from country-specific research in Argentina,<sup>15</sup> India,<sup>16</sup> Jordan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Qatar, Australia and elsewhere<sup>17</sup> (see also, Lipina, this volume).

<sup>14</sup> See, Marques de Miranda, D., da Silva Athanasio, B., Sena Oliveira, A.C., & Simoes-e-Silva, A.C. (2020). How is COVID-19 pandemic impacting mental health of children and adolescents? *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51, 101845. doi:10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101845

<sup>15</sup> See Lipina, this volume; Beliz, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HTpqu0>

<sup>16</sup> See Sethi 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HTpqu0>

<sup>17</sup> See, de Figueiredo, C.S., Sandre, P.C., Portugal, L.C.L., Mázala-de-Oliveira, T., da Silva Chagas, L., Raony, Bomfim, P.O.-S. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic impact on children and adolescents' mental health: Biological, environmental, and social factors. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry*. Malkawi, S.H., Almhdawi, K., Jaber, A.F. et al. COVID-19 Quarantine-Related Mental Health Symptoms and their Correlates among Mothers: A Cross Sectional Study. *Matern Child Health J* 25, 695-705 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-020-03034-x> Yeasmin, S., Banik, R., Hossain, S., Hossain, M.N., Mahumud, R., Salma, N., & Hossain, M. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children in Bangladesh: A cross-sectional study. *Children and Youth Services Review*. Imran, N., Zeshan, M., & Pervaiz, Z. (2020). Mental health considerations for children & adolescents in COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.36.COVID19-S4.2759> For Italian findings, see, Davico, C., Ghiggia, A., Marcotulli, D., Ricci, F., Amianto, F., & Vitiello, B. (2021). Psychological Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Adults and Their Children in Italy. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12; Di Giorgio, E., Di Riso, D., Mioni, G. et al. The interplay between mothers' and children behavioral and psychological factors during COVID-19: an Italian study. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 30, 1401-1412 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01631-3>; Vallejo-Slocker, L., Fresneda, J., & Vallejo, M.A. (2020). Psychological wellbeing of vulnerable children during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psicothema*, 32(4), 501-507. For Australian findings see Li, S.H., Beames, J.R., Newby, J.M. et al. The impact of COVID-19 on the lives and mental health of Australian adolescents. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01790-x> Also, Orgilés et al. 2020; and Westrupp, E.M., Bennett, C., Berkowitz, T. et al. Child, parent, and family mental health and functioning in Australia during COVID-19: comparison to pre-pandemic data. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01861-z> Schmidt, S.J., Barblan, L.P., Lory, I., & Landolt, M.A. (2021). Age-related effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of children and adolescents. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1). Magklara, K., Lazaratou, H., Barbouni, A., Poulas, K., Farsalinos, K., & Group, C.G.R. (2020). For Irish findings, see O'Sullivan, Katriona, Serena Clark, Amy McGrane, Nicole Rock, Lydia Burke,

## Poverty, Violence, and Migration in the Age of COVID

COVID-19 has been a powerful accelerant of inequality (see Sachs, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HTpq0>). As Harvard’s Mary Waters notes, “social scientists have demonstrated that this pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and caused greater harm and suffering to those at the bottom of societal hierarchies, even while the global elite has grown more wealthy and more powerful as investment soared” (this volume). Indeed, the pandemic at once revealed and intensified preexisting gross inequalities in opportunities for children and youth to flourish:

COVID-19 has spotlighted the gaping holes in the world’s institutions, policies, and collective commitments to safeguard the wellbeing of our disadvantaged, our vulnerable, and our young children. Our failure to fill these gaps is indefensible on moral, ethical, and humanitarian grounds. It is indefensible in terms of the world’s stated commitment to human rights. It is indefensible in terms of our collective interest in building cohesive, peaceful, equitable, secure, and politically stable societies. It is indefensible on grounds of economic rationality and investment in a sustainable, long-term future (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume).

It is estimated that COVID-19 increased child poverty significantly – by over 15 percent. Well over a billion children are now growing up in poor households. <https://bit.ly/3HpQUqT> Underserved and minoritized youth in particular are experiencing alarming levels of food insecurity <https://bit.ly/2ZMYqdC> (see also Sithole, this volume), child abuse <https://bit.ly/3cr04ET>, child trafficking <https://bit.ly/3watKya>,<sup>18</sup> suicide attempts <https://bit.ly/2RH6VDg>,<sup>19</sup> and risk of firearm injury <https://bit.ly/3CIuAW6>.

Neasa Boyle, Natasha Joksimovic, and Kevin Marshall (2021). “A Qualitative Study of Child and Adolescent Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 3: 1062. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031062> For South Africa, see Sithole, this volume. For Qatar see, Abdelrahman, M., Al-Adwan, D. & Hasan, Y. Impact of Social Distancing on the Mental Health of Parents and Children in Qatar. *Int J Ment Health Addiction* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00555-6>

<sup>18</sup> See also, Farley 2022. <https://bit.ly/3HTpq0>

<sup>19</sup> In the United States the Center for Disease Control and Prevention noted that in the early phase of the lockdown (May 2020) Emergency Department visits “for suspected suicide attempts began to increase among adolescents aged 12-17 years, especially girls. During February 21-March 20, 2021, suspected suicide attempt ED visits were 50.6% higher among girls aged 12-17 years than during the same period in 2019;

COVID-19 put millions of children on the streets and at risk of abuse, trafficking and exploitation (see Farley, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HTpq0>). David Bloom and Maddalena Ferranna of the Harvard School of Public Health summarize COVID's impact on children and youth as, “degrading the emotional and mental health of students, and increasing the risk of domestic violence and abuse”. <https://bit.ly/3DLX4RU>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis occurred in the form of an upsurge in violence toward children... Numerous factors such as stress, poverty, and financial situation, history of violence, school closures, and lack of contact with support organizations contribute to this phenomenon. Social action and support needed is the right of every child in need in this critical situation. *Health Sci Rep.* 2022 Sep; 5(5): e790. Published online 2022 Aug 17. doi: 10.1002/hsr2.790

A study of twelve peer-reviewed publications noted,

A rise in physical, psychological, and neglect kinds of abuse, according to the results of the review of studies: Four articles reported a reduction in the incidence of child abuse, ... The reporting of abuse was hindered during this time of quarantine owing to a lack of contact and access by children to centers, schools, or relatives and acquaintances.

The World Health Organization global status report on preventing violence against children, warns of the dramatic impact of COVID-19. <https://bit.ly/3cr04ET> Abused children, missing children, children of forcibly displaced migrants, and children trapped in slavery are enduring acute suffering that COVID-19 has made harder to survey, prevent, and heal (see Farley 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HTpq0>). Indeed, the scourge of modern slavery accelerated during the pandemic as the number of children in “child labor has risen to 160 million worldwide – an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years – with millions more at risk due to the impacts of COVID-19, according to a new report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF”. <https://uni.cf/3sq1hDU>

According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), human trafficking has become more hidden under COVID-19. In its most recent report, UNODC states, “The pandemic has increased vulnerabilities to trafficking in persons while making trafficking even harder to detect and leaving victims struggling to obtain help and access to justice”. <https://bit.ly/3B5SFG> COVID-19 has also increased trafficking in

among boys aged 12-17 years, suspected suicide attempt ED visits increased 3.7%”. <https://bit.ly/3rC671v>



persons from countries experiencing the fastest and most persistent drops in employment. And “Children account for about one third of the detected victims of trafficking”. <https://bit.ly/3watKya>

Women, children, and migrants have been identified by survey and interview participants as particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation during the pandemic.

Women and girls have been recruited, often locally or online, for sexual exploitation, especially in private apartments. Children have been particularly affected – out of school and needing to support parents who have lost their livelihoods, children have been increasingly targeted by traffickers at the local level and online. They have been trafficked for sexual purposes, forced marriage, forced begging and for forced criminality. There is clear evidence of increased demand for child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM), which has exacerbated the exploitation of children around the world. <https://bit.ly/3spMPvp>  
COVID-19 has put millions of children at risk for diverse and complex reasons. First, research has shown that extreme poverty compromises socio-emotional and cognitive development, health, and wellness in vulnerable populations. Poverty is yet another pandemic within the pandemic, extracting a heavy toll on children and youth across the world (Barber II, this volume). As Lipina suggests, “Different poverty indicators are associated with lower cognitive and academic performance during several stages of development. Psychological and neural evidence generated in recent years suggests the need to review the interpretations of these associations in the sense of deficit, and to consider the occurrence of adaptive processes instead” (Lipina, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3DLX4RU>).

According to the World Bank,

The world’s poorest have faced two extraordinarily difficult years. The pandemic has caused unprecedented reversals in poverty reduction that are further exacerbated by rising inflation and the effects of the war in Ukraine. We estimate that these combined crises will lead to an additional 75 million to 95 million people living in extreme poverty in 2022, compared to pre-pandemic projections. If the more pessimistic scenario plays out, 2022 could be the second-worst year in terms of progress made in reducing extreme poverty this century – behind only 2020, when there was an actual increase in global poverty. <https://bit.ly/3DvOFiA>

Even as progress is made, global hunger and malnutrition continue to cripple millions globally and the pandemic is reversing important gains. The war

in Ukraine is another factor. Food prices are near all-time highs, and “the Agricultural Commodity Price Index is 25% higher than its January 2021 level. Maize and wheat prices are 20% and 25% higher, respectively, than their January 2021 levels, and rice prices are about 21% lower”. <https://bit.ly/3GLkzIY> For the world’s poor, the taste of COVID is hunger.

Millions are suffering from chronic hunger, regularly not getting enough food to lead active lives. <https://bit.ly/2lqoA1M> “Between 720 and 811 million people in the world went hungry in 2020, according to the UN report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World. Looking at the middle of the projected range (768 million), around 118 million more people were facing chronic hunger in 2020 than in 2019. Using a different indicator that tracks year-round access to adequate food, nearly 2.37 billion people (or 30% of the global population) lacked access to adequate food in 2020 – a rise of 320 million in just one year”. <https://bit.ly/3GLkzIY>

In the United States, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data, more than 42 million people, including 12 million children, are food insecure. And the “pandemic has increased food insecurity among families with children and communities of color, who were already faced hunger at much higher rates before the pandemic”. <https://bit.ly/3qur4LM>

The pandemic created new synergies with today’s drivers of mass migration <https://bit.ly/3203Tif>, pushing unprecedented levels of both legal and unauthorized migrants worldwide (see Water, this volume). In 2022, the most trafficked border in the world – between Mexico and the United States – has seen an extraordinary surge of unauthorized immigrants <https://bit.ly/3HTbCBg> with an all-time record of more than 2.7 million from around the world, “many of them fleeing pandemic-ravaged countries ... trying to enter the United States illegally in the last 12 months, capping a year of chaos at the southern border”. <https://nyti.ms/3jxTrEy>

According to the International Organization for Migration, the vulnerabilities of international migrants are “exacerbated ... with the COVID-19 pandemic”. <https://bit.ly/3kyUJzB>

Mary Waters, the eminent sociologist of immigration at Harvard, notes, Immigrant parents have been at much higher risk of contracting COVID and of experiencing severe disease and death. Most countries do not have COVID-specific disease and death rates by nativity status. But the few that do point to much higher rates of illness for immigrants. Testing data are available by immigration status in a few countries and in those countries, immigrants are vastly overrepre-

sented among those testing positive relative to their representation in the population. In the period from the beginning of the pandemic to May 2020, 32% of the people testing positive for the virus in Sweden were migrants; in Norway, 42% of those testing positive were immigrants. In the province of Ottawa in Canada, migrants composed 44% of those testing positive for COVID in the period of March 2020 to June 13, 2020. In Italy, immigrants were more likely than natives to be diagnosed late, hospitalized, and admitted to an ICU. Migrants from lower- and middle-income countries had worse outcomes when they did get sick in Sweden; “adjusting for socio-demographic characteristics, migrant men from the Middle East and north Africa had a 3-times higher mortality from COVID-19 than people born in Sweden” (Waters, this volume).

Migrants have been affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways. Many have lost their employment in the destination country and have been unable to return to their home. Some “migrants ended up in an irregular status in destination countries after being unable to renew their residence and/or work permits. Others have been forced to stay in inadequate accommodation with limited COVID-19 safety measures in place. The families of migrants have also suffered through the loss of much needed remittances. Survey and interview respondents highlighted the plight, in particular, of migrant domestic workers who have been confined to private homes and exploited by abusive employers”. <https://bit.ly/3spMPvp>

During the pandemic, migrants became vulnerable to hate crimes and social exclusion. Indeed, COVID accelerated cascading anti-immigrant sentiment (see Waters, this volume). Asian immigrants became targets of xenophobic violence as the former President of the United States and others framed the COVID disaster with the vulgar term, “the China Flu”. According to FBI data, US hate crimes against Asian Americans “rose 76% in 2020 amid pandemic”. <https://bit.ly/3DdBfHL>

### **Educational Disruptions**

The pandemic stunned education systems with geologic force. Stefania Giannini, UNESCO’s Assistant-Director General for Education, writes, “At the peak of the crisis, 90% of the world’s student population – over 1.5 billion learners – were locked out of schools. This is without historical parallel” (Giannini, this volume). UNICEF data suggest that for over half-a-billion children whose schools closed due to COVID-19, there was no such thing as remote learning opportunities. By the first quarter of 2021, a

year into the pandemic, more than 160 million children “around the world [had] missed school for nearly a year due to COVID-19 restrictions”. Fourteen countries “have remained largely closed since March 2020 to February 2021”. Two-thirds of those countries are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

During the COVID pandemic, it is estimated that over 830 million students did “not have access to a computer at home”. As Stanford University scholar Bridgit Barron notes, “Although unequal access to information technologies had been documented well before the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatic school closures have brought a significant digital divide into sharp relief and exposed the ongoing cost of inequities, as teachers across the world scrambled to continue the education of millions of children” (Barron, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3I2jDT0>).

UN estimates that COVID-19 has wiped out twenty years of gains as “100 million more children fail basic reading skills because of COVID-19”. <https://bit.ly/3Hm89IZ> New data on the global distribution of basic skills (measured as mastering at least PISA Level 1) paint a dire picture: “two thirds of the world’s youth do not obtain basic skills; the share of children not reaching basic skills exceeds half in 101 countries and rises above 90 percent in 36 of these countries. In high-income countries, a quarter of children lacks the PISA Level 1 basic skills. Skill deficits reach 94 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 89 percent in South Asia but also hit 68 percent in Middle East and North Africa and 65 percent in Latin America. While skill gaps are most apparent for the third of global youth not attending secondary school, fully 62 percent of the world’s secondary-school *students* fail to reach basic skills. ... Economists estimate the lost world economic output due to missing the goal of global universal basic skills at a present value of over \$700 trillion over the remaining century” new paper.

A new study in *Nature Human Behaviour* examined:

5,997 peer-reviewed papers and preprint studies on the pandemic’s impacts on education. ... Their analysis included 291 learning-deficit estimates, reported in 42 studies from 15 high- and middle-income countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Mexico, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, the Netherlands, Germany and Colombia.

The researchers calculated that, on average, school-aged children across all grades lost 35% of a school year’s worth of learning during the pandemic, and that these learning gaps had not been recovered as of May 2022. The loss of skills was worse in maths than in reading – possibly because parents

are less able to help their children with maths exercises, the researchers speculate. <https://go.nature.com/3kSb4Cn>

The impacts on education were not uniform. Fernando Reimers notes,

In high-income countries schools reopened earlier and students experienced relatively lower losses in education because the strategies of remote learning were more effective. In contrast, in lower income countries, which experienced longer school closures and where the strategies of remote education were least effective, interruption of schooling continued for extended periods for many students.<sup>20</sup>

Four UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank-OECD cross-national surveys carried out between 2020 and 2022 revealed considerable differences in the country education responses by level of income of the country and by world region. In the first two years since the outbreak of the pandemic schools were closed, on average, 20 weeks, but school closures were much longer in South Asia (35 weeks) and Latin America (37 weeks).<sup>21</sup>

In addition to learning losses, school closures disrupted immunization and other health services that are often provided at school (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume) and prevented many children from accessing their only nutritious meal of the day. In the largest school districts in countries around the world, students from the most underserved communities have become the new *desaparecidos*: as their peers migrate to remote learning, thousands of students of color are nowhere to be seen.

COVID-19 laid bare for the world to see the deepening inequalities in opportunities to learn that flow from poverty, race, ethnicity, and immigration background. As education endeavors to move into a phase of recovery, children in poverty face significant losses, “[T]he costs stand to be tremendous in terms of learning losses, health and well-being and drop-out. Prioritizing education as a public good is crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe and drive a sustainable recovery. To be more resilient, equitable and inclusive, education systems must transform, leveraging technology to benefit all learners and building on the innovations and partnerships catalyzed throughout this crisis” (UNESCO, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3GBhXgG>).

<sup>20</sup> Fernando Reimers (Ed.), *Primary and Secondary Education during COVID-19*. <https://bit.ly/3YNc6yg>

<sup>21</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. *From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation. Insights and reflections from the 4th survey on national education responses to COVID-19 School Closures* (Paris: UNESCO, 2022), 7.

According to the authors of the *Nature Human Behaviour* study, “The pandemic reinforced learning inequality at the global level... There was a lack of data from lower-income countries, but the study found that children from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in high- and middle-income countries have experienced larger learning losses”. The authors predict that the pandemic’s effects on learning will be more severe for children in poorer regions. “Those students were suffering before the pandemic, they suffered more during the pandemic, and now, as we’re trying to get our way out of this, they’re going to receive less than others to recover”. <https://go.nature.com/3kSb4Cn>

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed expectations that new technologies could be deployed to effectively continue the education of youth via remote teaching and learning. Children in areas with little infrastructure can learn to read and engage via new creative apps. As framed by UNICEF, “if leveraged in the right way and universally accessible, digital technology can be a game changer for children being left behind – whether because of poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, displacement or geographic isolation – connecting them to a world of opportunity and providing them with the skills they need to succeed in a digital world”.<sup>22</sup> The first Education XPrize competition embodied one such endeavor.<sup>23</sup>

The pandemic saw schools turn to educational technologies in order to continue schooling millions of children. This rapid innovation has led to great enthusiasm about the potential for networked tools to provide more children with low-cost access to learning opportunities that might help min-

<sup>22</sup> See UNICEF, “Children in a Digital World – UNICEF”. UNICEF Division of Communication, 2017. <https://www.unicef.org/media/48601/file>

<sup>23</sup> The 2019 XPrize (disclosure I served in the Board of Advisors of the 2019 Education XPrize), was awarded to KitKit School out of South Korea and the U.S., and one billion, operating in Kenya and the U.K. XPrize set its 2019 award to support the development of scalable services that could enable children to teach themselves basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills within 15 months. The project required each competing platform to be field-tested in Swahili, reaching nearly 3,000 children in 170 villages across Tanzania. Kitkit School, with a team from Berkeley, Calif. and Seoul, developed a program with a game-based core and flexible learning architecture to help kids learn independently, while one billion merged numeracy content with literacy material to provide directed learning and activities alongside monitoring to personalize responses to children’s needs. Shieber, Jonathan. “Xprize Names Two Grand Prize Winners in \$15 Million Global Learning Challenge”. *TechCrunch*, May 16, 2019. <https://techcrunch.com/2019/05/15/xprize-names-two-grand-prize-winners-in-15-million-global-learning-challenge/>

imize existing educational inequities. Ambitious initiatives to provide inexpensive computing power to those most in need have distributed networked laptops to children in remote villages and urban centers, in the hope that provision of access to content and modern tools would fuel learning. These experiments have yielded important insights (see Reimers, this volume).

The use of proven technologies to engage children unable to access traditional schooling should be redoubled. Endeavors to leverage technology “to benefit all learners and building on the innovations and partnerships catalyzed throughout this crisis” should be fully explored and carefully mined. While there is exemplary educational work conducted via new technologies during COVID,<sup>24</sup> the overall evidence is mixed. As the world turned to technological solutions, vulnerable youth in underserved communities were left behind.<sup>25</sup>

### **Technology’s Limits**

For some learners, online education was inappropriate or irrelevant:

For the youngest children, online learning is not always the most appropriate method to compensate for loss of in-person learning. This, of course, had consequences for moving children off track in their development in those crucial early years – from 2 to 6 million in the low- and lower-middle income settings. Sixty percent of countries reported offering digital and broadcast remote learning options to pre-primary students, compared with more than 95% offering these options for primary and secondary students. In the pre-primary schooling context, in turn, fewer than one in five LMICs reported having more than 75% of pre-primary students engage in remote learning (see Barron 2022).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Reimers, Fernando M., Uche Amaechi, Alysha Banerji, and Margaret Wang. “Can universities and schools learn together? Connecting research, teaching and outreach to sustain educational opportunity during a pandemic”. *An educational calamity* (2021): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Stanford’s Bridgit Barron sums up a review of the literature, “Radio, television, and the Internet were deployed in an attempt to connect schools and homes. Learners in rural areas, citizens from less affluent countries, families who have less wealth, and female students were the least likely to have access to any of these forms of remote learning” (2022 <https://bit.ly/312jDT0>).

<sup>26</sup> Barron, Bridgit, *Global Learning Ecologies: Leveraging Technologies for Equity*. In *Education: The Global Compact In A Time Of Crisis*. Columbia University Press, 2022. <https://bit.ly/312jDT0>

For older learners, online education options presented an entirely different set of questions:

Although concerns about data privacy, access to inappropriate content, and increased potential for exploitation are raised, the [UNICEF] report also highlights the significant equity challenge reflected by growing evidence of differential use by children and youth with more and financial assets, digital skills, access to devices, or the quality and stability of their Internet connections that can help them use the technology in empowered ways. Over a third of youth worldwide do not have Internet access and most of these young people are in developing countries” (Barron, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3I2jDT0>).

Scholars of educational technologies suggest that schools vary widely in, *seriatim*, (a) how well they envision the purposes of using technology; (b) how they prepare their teachers; and (c) how they provide the infrastructure for sustaining working tools. Better practices correlate with affluence (Barron, 2022). “A great deal of technology use also takes place outside school. Families leverage their own background knowledge, traditional literacy skills, values, and connections to knowledgeable social networks as they incorporate technology into their family routines in ways that might support children’s learning and social development. Significant gaps in preparation to leverage technology to connect homes and schools, unequal access to the Internet and devices, and differential teacher and parent knowledge have limited our capacity to sustain learning in a time of crisis” (Ibid. <https://bit.ly/3I2jDT0>).

Other scholars have noted that new media are failing to connect with the very students they would benefit the most: those from underserved communities. A survey by the Inter-American Development Bank showed that in “the Latin American and Caribbean region, only about 45% of households have adequate access to the Internet and smartphone penetration is as low as 32%. Therefore, in the recovery, we must consider blended approaches – approaches that do not exacerbate existing inequities in society” (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume). And in Africa, the Tanzania experience indicates that, “while school buildings were closed, children in just 6 percent of households listened to radio lessons, 5 percent accessed TV lessons, and fewer than 1 percent participated in online learning” <https://mck.co/3l5OfeM> (see also Sithole, this volume).

Further research suggests that new technologies are creating concerns in several basic educational domains: (1) its long-term impacts on “deep



reading”;<sup>27</sup> (2) socio-emotional learning;<sup>28</sup> (3) cyber bullying;<sup>29</sup> (4) that new media undermines empathy;<sup>30</sup> (5) greater access to inappropriate materials;<sup>31</sup> and (6) that it provides lethally effective tools for exploitation and trafficking of children and youth. The intentionally addictive qualities of many new media platforms open another area of concern.

In Stefania Giannini’s sobering assessment, technology can be “fool’s gold”:

[It] would be disingenuous to say that technology saved the day and holds a golden key to universalize access and bring home better report cards. We caution against the over-reliance on technology for learning and the uncritical acceptance that the digital transformation of education is desirable, inevitable and a pillar of educational resilience. Overwhelming evidence goes against the oft-heard mantra that technology will enable education to “leap-frog” to a better future. The “anywhere, anytime” learning sometimes associated with technology has actually proven elusive.

For nearly 500 million learners it was a solution that never started and for millions more, one that quickly broke down. Half the world’s population lack a functional Internet connection. Over 700 million people don’t have access to electricity. In many low-income countries, less than 10% of children and adolescents are connected, against 90% in high-income ones. The cost of devices – even the cheapest available smartphone – and mobile plans – is simply prohibitive for poor families” (Giannini, this volume).

<sup>27</sup> Wolf, Maryanne, “The Future of Literacy in a Digital Culture: Reconciling the Promise and Perils in our ‘Hinge Moment’”. In *Education: The Global Compact In A Time Of Crisis*. Columbia University Press, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3j7Rpva>

<sup>28</sup> Katzir, Tami. “The Feeling of Reading in a Changing World: From Neurons to Narratives”. In *Education: The Global Compact In A Time Of Crisis*. Columbia University Press, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3j7Rpva>

<sup>29</sup> See “Children in a Digital World – UNICEF, 2017”. <https://uni.cf/3khSwaT>

<sup>30</sup> See Wolf, Maryanne. “The Future of Literacy in a Digital Culture: Reconciling the Promise and Perils in our ‘Hinge Moment’”. In *Education: The Global Compact In A Time Of Crisis*. Columbia University Press, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3j7Rpva>

<sup>31</sup> See “Children in a Digital World – UNICEF, 2017”. <https://uni.cf/3khSwaT>

## **“Building a new civilization of love and solidarity”:<sup>32</sup> Paths to Recovery & Re-Construction**

The pandemic’s long-term impact on youth is yet to be known. We will not be able to fully discern the long-term sequelae of the pandemic for years to come (see Caffo, 2022). Children are highly adaptable even to the most adverse of circumstances. McCartney and Fenlason write, “As conditions improve and adaptive systems are restored or mobilized, most people improve to normative functioning, although there can be lifelong consequences of severe and prolonged trauma and related deprivation, illnesses, or injuries”. *Qua* COVID, the U.S. Surgeon General notes:

According to more than 50 years of research, increases in distress symptoms are common during disasters, but most people cope well and do not go on to develop mental health disorders. Several measures of distress that increased early in the pandemic appear to have returned to pre-pandemic levels by mid-2020. Some other measures of wellbeing, such as rates of life satisfaction and loneliness, remained largely unchanged throughout the first year of the pandemic. ... Many young people are able to bounce back from difficult experiences such as stress, adversity, and trauma. <https://bit.ly/354aObt>

Children and youth are inherently resilient. The sources of their resilience are not always obvious. A 2010 task force report on child refugees in the United States by the American Psychological Association found that despite enduring trauma and adversity, “these children and their families also demonstrate profound strength and resilience in their survival strategies, coping mechanisms and abilities to adapt within what are often completely unfamiliar environments”. <https://bit.ly/3Z8nzZF>

A six-year Harvard study of 529 war-affected youth in Sierra Leone found remarkable improvement in mental health symptoms “over time despite nearly nonexistent access to mental health care”. The answer does not lie in individual characteristics. There is no special category of children with extraordinary capacities for self-healing. Instead, as the authors of another Harvard study put it, resilience “must be viewed as a dynamic process, rather than a personal trait”.

Research, our own and that of others, suggests that the process plays out in a physical and social environment that involves family and caretakers most immediately, but also includes peers, schools, faith communities, and

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, Address at Patriarchal Church of St. George, Istanbul, November 30, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3YHjUKY>

larger communities <https://bit.ly/3f96vxp> (see also McCartney and Fenlason, this volume). Just as the pandemic, war, and flight imply a disruption, even a destruction of all the elements of “home” (Dryden-Peterson, this volume), healing comes about with the rebuilding of a child’s social world. Fortunately, we know how to do that. And primarily, we do it through the institutions of society. As Stefania Giannini argues in her Chapter,

As the pandemic has demonstrated everywhere, schools are far more than a locus for learning. They are spaces for growing together, social interaction, protection, nutrition and essential services. ... The first step of an *inclusive recovery* is to get all kids back to school and learning, in safe environments.

A successful recovery has to go beyond the academic, especially for the most vulnerable children, acting on all the barriers that keep them out of school or not learning. Comprehensive school health and nutrition programmes, including school feeding, are essential to support vulnerable children’s education, health and overall well-being, particularly in times of crisis.

This is why UNESCO is working with UN partners, such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme and WHO to step up school health and nutrition, and has also joined the School Meals Coalition, to give every child in need the opportunity to receive a healthy meal in school by 2030, together with other essential school health interventions.

Second, *teachers and the teaching profession*. Teachers carry tremendous responsibility – they are the center stage actors of this recovery just as they have been on the frontlines throughout the crisis. They have demonstrated incredible resilience and dedication. Now they must be better recognized and supported, and directly involved in the design and use of technology in their practice.

This brings me to how we *steer the digital transformation for inclusion and equity*. Education and knowledge cannot be treated as private commodities. They are global common goods that provide collective benefits. Supported by Dubai Cares, we gathered experts and led consultations to chart a new course for connected learning. The result is the Global Declaration on Connectivity for education that puts forward three key principles: centering innovation on the most marginalized; expanding investing in open, free and high-quality

digital contents; and supporting pedagogical innovation. This provides a roadmap for unlocking the potential of technology to advance inclusive education, on the principles of human rights and equity (Giannini, this volume).

McCartney and Fenlason suggest focusing on prevention,

From the extant literature on mental health, we know that prevention is critical. Educating the public on wellness strategies is a good first step, for example the importance of investing in healthy relationships, practicing techniques to manage stress, taking care of our bodies, and being intentional about social media and video games (U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory 2021). Some studies have identified specific behaviors that decrease stress, for example keeping a journal, physical activity and exercise, and positive reappraisal and reframing of one’s circumstances; regarding the latter, some adolescents saw the lockdown as an opportunity to decelerate their lives (Shanahan et al. 2022). Parents, physicians and teachers have critical roles to play as well – parent education will promote warm, trusting relationships with children and adolescents; physician education will promote mental health screening during visits with patients; and teacher education will promote individualized instruction in a caring, supportive environment (this volume).

### **Plan of the Book**

Our focus spans from the time COVID-19 gained global momentum in early 2020 to the emergence of the highly virulent omicron variant to the availability of vaccines and boosters in 2022. This project is exploratory, selective, and opportunistic. It is a first pass at what will become a major area of basic and applied research and translational work in the years ahead. It is the antonym of exhaustive. Indeed, our point of departure is that COVID-19’s impact mimics the virus itself – it is changing and evolving. It’s full impact on children and youth will not be fully understood for decades. Rather, the work strategically mines the thinking of leaders in their fields as they begin to identify important COVID-19 problems in their own scholarly domains – indeed our scholars originate from and have had significant research experience in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe.

In Chapter 1, Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom examine data on early childcare and education (ECCE). Less attention has been “devoted to the wellbeing of those in utero and the more than 800 million children aged 5 years and younger who collectively represent roughly 10% of the total

world population”. Yet these formative early child care and education experiences are foundational in supporting all further development. They review the most rigorous and compelling research findings to date. In a sobering assessment, the Harvard scholars write, “today’s young children and their families, communities, and societies will experience what is effectively a social form of long COVID” over the decades to come:

COVID-19 has affected the health, routines, and capacity of caregivers to provide optimal positive nurturing and responsive care. Adults suffered through lengthy periods of job, income, food, housing, and familial insecurity. Grandparents have been socially isolated and physically, economically, and psychologically burdened. Given the dependence of the very young on their parents, grandparents, caretakers, and communities, a full study of the health, social, and economic impact of COVID-19 on early childhood development must give equal consideration to the impact on caregivers and on the environments children grow up in as well (Yousafzai, Ghazi, and Bloom, this volume).

Moving forward, the Harvard researchers suggest prioritizing,

[T]he immediate fulfillment of essential functions, including the consistent operation of education and health systems and related social safety net programs, especially ones that focus on nutrition and food security ... The second highest priority, over the longer term, would be to build a programmatic initiative around the compelling and rigorous research showcasing the importance of early childhood development to the entire life cycle with respect to:

ability to get along with others; economic wellbeing; and the level and shape of one’s potential lifelong trajectory for cognitive function and for physical, mental, and emotional health.

Programmatic initiatives here include the design and implementation of programs for (a) rapidly assessing the physical, cognitive, and emotional health of young children, especially those at greatest risk, and (b) addressing deficits through proven interventions such as

caregiver guidance, support, and access to resources to invest in their young children, food supplementation, access to quality healthcare, access to preschool programs aimed at social development, finance monitoring for early childhood development and progress tracking, the constructive engagement of community members in monitoring and supporting early child development, policies that support caregivers with

young children (e.g., paid parental leave, subsidized high-quality childcare services).

The third highest priority, also over the longer term, would be to prioritize support for the primary healthcare components of the overall health system. Primary healthcare is a health system best buy. And that is in no small measure because of its central role in the implementation of immunization programs. While we certainly refer here to COVID-19 immunizations, we are also thinking of routine immunizations for diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, measles, polio, rotavirus, pneumococcal disease, human papilloma virus, and hepatitis. We are also thinking of catch-up protocols for those who missed immunizations in the past few years. In support of immunization programs, we urge nations to remember the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, along with the related public health finding that immunizations are among the most cost-effective health interventions available to mankind.

In Chapter 2, the Argentine cognitive neuroscientist Sebastián Lipina surveys the emerging literature on COVID’s impacts on psychosocial development in children and adolescents in Latin America. He examines, in broad terms, an array of social impacts in the region. The data present an alarming picture revealing, *seriatim*, (a) loss of income [and] increased debt (e.g., 68% of households in Colombia); (b) increased job insecurity and instability (e.g., Costa Rica, El Salvador and Peru: between 60% and 70% job loss); (c) food insecurity and reduction of food intake (e.g., Argentina 39%, Colombia 30%, Peru 60%, Dominican Republic 37%); (d) increased levels of family violence, specifically, gender violence (e.g., Argentina 59%); (e) [increased] domestic burden on women (e.g., Argentina 44%); (f) increased “expression of anger and fights inside homes (e.g., Argentina 15%; Chile 59%; Colombia 20%); (g) decreases in time and spaces for free play (e.g., Chile 28%); and (h) increased screen time (e.g., Chile 68%) (Lipina, this volume).

Lipina details the emotional, cognitive, and psychosocial correlates to these COVID-19 shocks, including: mourning for the death of a family member (e.g., Chile 15%): “From March 2020 to April 2021 10.2, 3.5, 2.4, 2.3, and 1.1 per thousand in Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina, experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver, respectively”. He details “low levels of emotional control among in adults, elevated fears of contagion and death, increased signs of anxiety and depression in caregivers in a range of 15% to 85% (e.g., Dominican

Republic 15%; Peru 40%; Costa Rica, El Salvador 85%)” ... as well as new challenges in “self-regulation, emotional development, organization of time and routines (e.g., Chile), learning (e.g., Peru: 72% of families with a child with a disability), and behavioral problems (e.g., Peru: 37% in single-parent households)” (Lipina, this volume).

In their contribution, developmental psychologist Kathleen McCartney and her colleague Laurie Fenlason focus on COVID’s impact on late adolescence. Scholarly work on human development has identified a variety of psychosocial domains pertinent to this critical phase of development. Why does adolescence matter to an understanding of COVID’s impacts? The authors articulate a series of claims specific to the changes that unfold during that period of maturational and psychosocial development. First, they note, neuroplasticity during adolescence makes youth “more easily excited, emotionally aroused, and prone to getting angry or upset” (McCartney and Fenlason, this volume). Second, they note that pandemic has likely delayed “normal psychosocial development because the evolutionary tasks that all adolescents face – identity development, autonomy and the reorganization of relationships with parents and peers – were disrupted by school closures and concomitant social isolation” (Ibid). Third, “adolescence has been called ‘a sensitive period for the emergence of mental health disorders’, based on prevalence rates by age (Liu et al. 2022)”. Fourth, “existential threats, like COVID-19, are deeply experienced by adolescents because their self-regulation skills are still developing, compared with adults, thereby limiting their ability to cope in the face of significant stressors. For all these reasons, it follows that the impact of COVID-19 on psychosocial development might be especially acute during this stage of life” (McCartney and Fenlason, this volume). They find a global increase in adolescent anxiety and depression. They review several research studies from East Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East suggesting:

[E]stimates of mental health problems are double those of comparable estimates prior to the pandemic. Further, older adolescents had higher levels of depression, which is consistent with the hypothesis that the risk of mental illness is higher during late adolescence than during other times of life. Consistent with other studies, rates of depression and anxiety were higher in girls, perhaps because girls are more likely to report mental health problems or, as the authors suggest, because gender inequity increases stress. Taken together, these public health studies document a worldwide mental health problem among adolescents and emerging adults that necessitates better poli-

cies and practices, grounded in evidence (McCartney and Fenlason, this volume).

McCartney and Fenlason carefully examine the pertinent scientific literature on family, peer, school, and community level factors mitigating as well as aggravating the impacts of COVID-19 during adolescence. They sum up their findings as follows:

In this review, we have identified processes associated with these structural changes [remote work and school closures] that influenced adolescent psychosocial development:

In the *family* context, indicators of experience like parent-adolescent conflict and restriction of adolescent autonomy were shown to be risk factors for psychosocial development while other indicators like parental warmth were shown to be protective.

In the *peer* context, the pandemic necessitated a decrease in peer interaction, which was associated with decreased social support and increased stress, as well as with decreased victimization and bullying. Like parents, peers offered both risks and protections for adolescents.

In the *school* context, school closures led to disengagement from school, learning loss, decrease in services associated with school and, as a result, increased stress for students across the world.

In the *community* context, we assume that customs and values matter, and we know that there are great differences in adolescent experience within cultures and countries. Still, there is very little research to date. A new line of research suggests that adolescent interventions that promote solidarity, or concern for community, may help address the impact of a community crisis like COVID-19...

The pandemic has revealed, once again, the unequal social systems, discrimination, marginalization and violence that are endemic in our globalized contemporary world (Velez, Taylor, and Power 2022). The need to recommit to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – especially the goal of good health and well-being – has never been more clear. Children and adolescents deserve nothing less than universal access to prevention and intervention services, that is effective mental health care and wellness programs (McCartney and Fenlason, this volume).



Hans Zollner, SJ, of the Institute of Anthropology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome claims the COVID-19 pandemic is

[P]robably the most comprehensive and complex challenge to human dignity and care, especially for vulnerable persons, that the world's population has faced since the end of World War II. The impact on people in all, or almost all, countries of the world has been and continues to be manifold, persistent, and drastic. What is remarkable about this pandemic is that the entire population has been and continues to be affected, albeit to unequal degrees and in varying quality: young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural, all occupations, and people of every walk of life (Zollner, this volume).

Zollner reviews the relevant literature on COVID *qua* (a) the abuse and maltreatment of children and adolescents; (b) school closure and its consequences; and (c) the opportunities and threats of digital communication technologies. He then turns to an analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on child and adolescent psychological development and well-being with a sharp focus on spirituality.

Stefania Giannini's reviews COVID's impact on youth from her perspective as UNESCO's Assistant-Director General for Education. She outlines in significant detail the major domains of global concern *qua* teaching and learning in and after COVID. She articulates a plea to disrupt the catastrophic impacts of the pandemic on youth development, flourishing, and engagement focusing on the historic United Nations Transforming Education Summit in September 2022. At the Summit, 65 Heads of State issued a call to action as we move from recovery to transformation of education:

The Secretary-General's vision statement on Transforming Education<sup>33</sup> to meet our higher purposes calls for action in four areas.

First, it stresses the need to ensure learning environments that support the development of all learners – ones that promote inclusion, prevent and address all forms of violence; support learner's nutrition, physical and mental health.

<sup>33</sup> "Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future. Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education". United Nations Transforming Education Summit 2022. Vision Statement of Secretary-General on Transforming Education, United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/sg-vision-statement>

Secondly, it stresses that teachers are the backbone of all good education systems. To fulfill their essential roles, however, change is needed in how societies view and value teachers, and how teachers approach their roles and fulfill their responsibilities, including through broadening their capacity, agency and autonomy.

Thirdly, the statement calls for harnessing the digital revolution for the benefit of public education by unlocking the three keys of digital learning – connectivity, capacities and content.

Finally, it appeals for investing more, more equitably and more efficiently in education because put simply, the cost of not financing education is much higher than the cost of financing it.

Such transformation requires collective leadership – from political leaders to parents, students, teachers and the public at large (Giannini, this volume).

Fernando Reimers, the renowned Harvard international education scholar, offers an important corrective view on the general framing of the pandemic’s effects on education. While acknowledging that “the pandemic produced the worst educational calamity in the history of public education” (Reimers, this volume), the narrative on education loss and governmental failures is incomplete and possibly harmful:

The dominant narrative of the educational results of the pandemic focuses on what was lost, and on what governments failed to do and should do going forward. This narrative is not inaccurate, but it is incomplete in two ways. First, it ignores the many flaws of education systems prior to the pandemic. Second, it reflects and reinforces a top-down view of the process of educational change resulting from the agency of governments. This narrative blinds us to the collective efforts that involve other actors besides governments, local actors and translational actors, public actors, and civil society and to the necessity of not just restoring the levels of functioning of education systems to their pre-pandemic levels but to transform them. This narrative is counterproductive because it limits our thinking about how to address the obvious educational losses created by the pandemic. A more capacious narrative can help us see possibilities in the agency of other actors and can animate the collective leadership necessary for the bold transformations in education which is needed to build a more just and sustainable world (Reimers, this volume).

Dr. Reimers addresses the agency, savoir-faire, and on-the-ground innovations among teachers, members of civil society, government agencies, and international organizations. He highlights collaborations involving educators, communities, civil society organizations, governments, and international organizations “to sustain educational opportunity, and the efforts they continue to exert to recover opportunity in the face of the grave challenges created by the pandemic” (Reimers, this volume). Indeed, these initiatives, some under Dr. Reimers leadership, saw new approaches, agency, and collaboration across sectors to introduce innovative education interventions as the pandemic raged on.

Professor Mpilo Pearl Sithole, distinguished anthropologist at the University of the Free State South Africa, examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African families, with a focus on youth. She notes:

The shape of the pandemic was unknown. . . . Parents were guiding children on a situation that they themselves had no experience. On the other hand, children saw the anxiety of parents losing jobs, the pressure on breadwinners where loss of jobs was a reality. For some families, who had depended on daily hustling in the informal sector (*ukuphanta*), loss of economic sustenance was instant and had an impact on young people (Sithole, this volume).

With a keen ethnographic eye, she examines COVID’s malignant shocks to families and youth *qua*, (a) food insecurity; (b) gender-based-violence; (c) accumulated life traumas; (d) rural urban labor migration; and what Dr. Sithole terms “medicalized cognitive arrogance”.

The sum-total implication of all that is described above, which itself is not exhaustive, is that: a) the African family was reduced into an operated-on unit, that contributed very little to the approach to COVID-19 and could not even have a voice to be considered; b) This situation was reflected in the institutional reduction of people into statistics for regulations and management, as well as the subsequent ‘bullying approach’ to vaccination; c) Global empathy played straight into the hands of science capitalism in that it was silent about lack of indigenous expressions to management of Covid, it marketed vaccines, and inadvertently silenced local voice in the bid to lobby for vaccine equity. All of it became a classic case of “alienated consciousness” to use a phrase that aptly captures the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement [see More 2014] (Sithole, this volume).

Mary Waters, the Harvard sociologist, examines the pandemic’s impact on the children of immigrants – the fastest growing youth demographic in many high-income countries. She outlines the factors that put immigrant families at high risk during the pandemic:

Immigrants are concentrated in occupations and housing configurations that put them at greater risk of the disease and prevent them from working from home or otherwise avoiding infection. Immigrant families are more likely to be poor than natives and unauthorized status keeps many immigrant families from qualifying for or accessing government aid and health care. Immigrants are also often isolated from extended family and community support and this is exacerbated by language isolation. The children of immigrants are more likely than the children of native parents to suffer from schooling interruptions, partly because they have already experienced great disruption in schooling through the migration process, because they are already behind many of their peers because of the challenges of learning a new language and a new curriculum, and because school is not only a place for learning but an opportunity for immigrant children to integrate and create connections to other children and adults that eases their successful adaptation to a new society. Finally, throughout history, immigrants and minorities have been blamed for diseases. The fear of infection leads many to blame the stranger, leading to a rise in xenophobia and hate crimes, often intensified by politicians wishing to exploit fears and prejudices for political gains (Waters, this volume).

Immigrant parents faced greater risk of contracting COVID and experiencing severe disease and death.<sup>34</sup> Data suggest immigrants died of COVID at much

<sup>34</sup> Waters asks, “Why would immigrants and racial ethnic minorities have higher rates of COVID? First, immigrants in rich countries are overrepresented in high-risk occupations. Immigrants are much more likely to work in the service industry, in jobs that cannot be conducted from home, and that put them in greater contact with other people and thus at risk for this airborne disease. Based on 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data for a report on COVID-19 impacts, 69% of all immigrants in the U.S. labor force and 74% of undocumented workers were reported to be essential workers, compared to 65% of the native-born labor force; 70% of refugees and 78% of Black refugees are essential workers, with non-U.S.-citizens making up 9% of the labor force but 22% of workers in the agricultural industry. In New York, the hardest hit U.S. city during the first wave of the pandemic, 50% of non-governmental frontline workers are migrants. Health care is another high-risk industry where immigrants are 17% of the overall workforce but 29% of all physicians and 38% of all home health aides” (this volume).

higher rates than other populations. In countries with reliable data, “In the period from the beginning of the pandemic to May 2020, 32% of the people testing positive for the virus in Sweden were migrants; in Norway, 42% of those testing positive were immigrants. In the province of Ottawa in Canada, migrants composed 44% of those testing positive for COVID in the period of March 2020 to June 13, 2020. In Italy, immigrants were more likely than natives to be diagnosed late, hospitalized, and admitted to an ICU. Migrants from lower- and middle-income countries had worse outcomes when they did get sick in Sweden; ‘adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics, migrant men from the Middle East and north Africa had a 3-times higher mortality from COVID-19 than people born in Sweden’” (Waters, this volume). In U.S. states where data are available on native status, immigrants, “had twice the mortality rate for COVID than natives. Foreign born Latinos were particularly hard hit and young working age men had the highest rates of mortality” (Waters, this volume).

Yet, as Waters wisely notes, immigrants display enormous strength and resilience:

Immigrant children and families bring great resilience and strength to receiving nations. They have experience coping with uncertainty, they are able to adapt to new situations and constraints. Immigrants have helped one another and through their essential work they kept our societies and economies functioning through the worst of the pandemic. Immigrant children should not have to face the illness and loss of caregivers, the loss of learning in school, the poverty and hunger that resulted because they were excluded from government aid, and the continuing discrimination and racism that has been targeted at their communities. Unfortunately, the past two years has brought many of these challenges and difficulties to their young lives. The least we can all do is try to heal the harm that has been done and create more opportunities for these young people to flourish and reach their potential (Waters, this volume).

Despite repeated prior endeavors for pandemic preparedness, (Stone and Stone, this volume) “not knowing” – how to prepare, how to plan, how to manage, defined COVID’s entry onto the world stage. COVID-19 ushered in a global era of deep uncertainty. Sarah Dryden-Peterson offers a series of lessons from refugee education in times of uncertainty, including current and future pandemics.

For many young people, especially those who experience marginalization and including refugees, uncertainty in education is not new.

Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has made more visible for more people how uncertainty shapes education (Vavrus 2021). Importantly, rather than conceiving of uncertainty as only a negative state to circumvent, educators, students, and families have been forced to reckon with the idea that uncertainty is increasingly unavoidable and that we must find ways to learn from and within it. Expanding on conceptualizations of the resonance of lessons from refugee education from early in the COVID-19 pandemic (Dryden-Peterson 2021a, 2021b) and drawing on newer empirical findings (Salem and Dryden-Peterson 2022; Dryden-Peterson et al. Under Review; Dryden-Peterson 2022), I outline three elements of “pedagogies of belonging”: pedagogies of predictability, adaptability, and future-building.

Pedagogies are practices of teaching. They embody envisioned purposes of education and the theories and values behind these purposes (Alexander 2001; Schweisfurth, Thomas, and Smail 2020). Belonging is integrally tied to ideas of “home”, including stability and feelings of being oneself, not only in private spaces but also public ones (e.g., Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006; Hovil 2016; Bloemraad 2018), including schools. In our research with refugees, we find that belonging is also integrally tied to being able to link together one’s past, one’s present, and one’s future and to capacities to contribute as an individual and as a member of a collective (Chopra and Dryden-Peterson 2020; Dryden-Peterson 2022).

This essay explores, in turn, pedagogies of predictability, adaptability, and future-building, all dependent on relationships and oriented toward belonging. Our research finds that refugee young people describe these pedagogies as important to them as they seek to learn in the present and build their futures. These lessons from refugee education are relevant for the continued educational, economic, and political uncertainty so many students face in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and for anticipated future uncertainties related to pandemics, conflict, and climate change.

In their contribution, *Resilience in an Age of Pandemics*, Cathleen D. Stone and James M. Stone, reflect on resilience in the age of pandemics. They frame resilience as the capacity to recover quickly from challenges. “But the importance of resilience has been placed in stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic showcased how events that oc-

cur in one area of the world can have profound reverberations across the planet. And it illustrated that we are not well prepared for the challenges that lie ahead” (Stone and Stone, this volume). They focus their work on two of the most serious threats to preparedness moving forward, *seriatim*, unchecked climate change and the accelerating trend toward wealth inequality (Ibid.). Indeed, wealth inequality threatens the very foundations of democratic citizenship.

*Qua* climate change, they argue,

Scientists have suggested that there is an undeniable link between climate change and an increase in potentially lethal viruses that jump from animals to humans.<sup>35</sup> The reasons for this are simple to understand, but have yet to be widely appreciated by the general public. First, the warming of our planet due to human activity, and the destruction of habitat, also due to human activity, bring more animals into contact with one another and with humans.<sup>36</sup> More contact means more chances for viruses to jump from one species to another. Second, vector-borne diseases carried by insects proliferate as the climate warms and more regions of the world become hospitable to these hosts.<sup>37</sup> The more places mosquitoes can thrive, the more are the opportunities for pathogens to spread from one host to another. Third, the reduction of biodiversity, by which I mean fewer species thriving on earth, can inhibit the resilience of the remaining species to fight against viral threats (Stone and Stone, this volume).

Stone and Stone then articulate a series of proposals in the spirit of authentic resilience:

Resilience means planning to live with higher seas and more frequent storms. It also means creating stability in the economic lives of people so they can weather life’s inevitable challenges. Actions we take today can, and will, affect the impact the warming climate will have on the earth and all those who inhabit it. The extreme connectedness of our world means that changing weather patterns,

<sup>35</sup> Konstans Wells, Robin Flynn, “Managing Host–Parasite Interactions in Humans and Wildlife in Times of Global Change”, *Parasitology Research* (September 6, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00436-022-07649-7>

<sup>36</sup> See also, *Nature Outlook*, 26 October 2022. “Preparing the world for the next pandemic”. <https://go.nature.com/3Erhwr>

<sup>37</sup> Andrew K. Githeko et al., “Climate Change and Vector-Borne Diseases: a Regional Analysis”. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2000. <https://www.scielo.org/pdf/bwho/v78n9/v78n9a09.pdf>

storms, fires, floods, and other environmental disasters that occur on one continent can easily cause food shortages, disease, and despair in communities thousands of miles away. It means that when homes and entire communities are washed away by the rising seas, the impacts are felt around the globe. We must act now to build more resilient communities. But this effort will require collaboration the likes of which we have probably never seen. It will require collaboration across sectors and across national boundaries. The world's governments, academics, non-profits, and communities must come together in unprecedented ways.

One effort currently underway in Boston is the Stone Living Lab. It is a partnership based at UMass Boston that unites the City of Boston, the State of Massachusetts, the Federal government of the United States, academics from multiple universities, indigenous tribes, and a local non-profit, Boston Harbor Now, to make vulnerable coastal regions adaptive to climate change while enhancing natural and built environments. The underlying goal is to identify new ways to build more resilient communities while recognizing that the only viable way forward is for humans to live in harmony with nature, rather than at odds with it. The Lab brings together scientists, policy makers, government officials, educators, and community leaders on an even playing field to address complex questions such as: how can we protect the coastline while also protecting fragile ecosystems that are critical to a healthy planet; and how can we ensure the solutions we develop also help alleviate undue climate burdens that so often fall on the most marginalized in society?

As a “Living Lab” we bring these questions out of the siloed halls of academia and corporate R&D and into the real world by creating a user-centered, open, innovative ecosystem that engages scientists and the community in collaborative design and exploration. Climate change is upon us. But what we do today can make a difference to the world we pass onto the next generation. The Stone Foundation is committed to establishing more Living Labs focused on building resilience across neighborhoods, towns, cities and ecosystems. In addition to bolstering the resilience of our coastlines, we see the protection of large landscapes as a key part of ensuring that today's youth inherit a more resilient and ecologically stable world. Stone Living Labs will bring together diverse stakeholders to address the



economic, social, political and environmental challenges that prevent us from conserving the habitats we know are crucial to the viability of our planet (Stone and Stone, this volume).

In a set of final reflections, Georgetown President John J. DeGioia reflects on “The University in the Age of COVID” and elaborates on the purpose of the University in times of wicked problems – pandemics, unchecked climate change, growing inequalities, *inter alia*. Three elements constitute the university:

First, is formation, we provide a context for the formation of young people. That is, along with the knowledge that becomes transmitted through students’ coursework and faculty engagement, we value the importance that all students explore and develop the intellectual, moral, social, spiritual, and civic dimensions of their selves.

Second, is inquiry. We support the scholarship and research of our faculty. In essence, we are contributing to the discovery and construction of knowledge as well as establishing a home for epistemic communities that establish the conditions for truth.

Third, is the emphasis on common good, as universities we contribute to common good of the communities in which we participate. There is a good we can achieve together that we could never hope to achieve alone (this volume).

Universities privilege knowledge. “Colleges and universities are dedicated to the acquisition and dissemination, the discovery and construction, the interpretation and conservation of knowledge. Together, these knowledge-developing activities determine the orientation of the university” (DeGioia, this volume). But in times of wicked global problems, he calls for the kind of knowledge St. Ignatius called *sentir*.<sup>38</sup> “Knowledge that we just know, in the deepest parts of our beings, is true. We have both our intellect and we have this practice – of discerning the affect that we have in each of our interiorities. Ignatius asks us to privilege the significance of our ‘inner lives’” (this volume).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified gross pre-existing inequalities. Not surprisingly, the poor, the marginalized, immigrants, people of color, and native communities, paid dearly in nearly every negative COVID-19 shock on humanity. In his intervention, Bishop William J. Barber, II, Co-

<sup>38</sup> “No el mucho saber harta y satisface al anima, mas el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente”. <https://bit.ly/3YI5BwO>

Chair of the Poor People’s Campaign, articulates a plea for a moral economy in the age of COVID:

The Holy Father embraced St Francis’ vocation when he chose his pontifical name, and he has endorsed the work of the Holy Spirit in today’s poor people’s movements in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. So I have come to share what we have learned and are learning in our campaign as a way of contributing to this on-going work of proclaiming God’s good news that the poor and rejected of society are blessed to lead us in the revolution of values that the world so desperately needs (Bishop William J. Barber, II, this volume).

He makes the case for 14 Steps Forward Together to a Third Reconstruction,

1. Engage in indigenously-led grassroots organizing across the state.
2. Use moral language to frame and critique public policy, regardless of who is in power.
3. Demonstrate a commitment to civil disobedience that follows the steps of nonviolent action and is designed to change the public conversation and consciousness.
4. Build a stage from which to lift the voices of everyday poor and low-wealth people impacted by immoral policies.
5. Recognize the centrality of race and racism worldwide. We must challenge the continuing harm in thinking and policy whose roots trace to sinful notions of manifest destiny, the Doctrine of Discovery, and race-based chattel slavery.
6. Build a broad, diverse coalition including moral and religious leaders of all faiths.
7. Intentionally diversify the movement with the goal of winning unlikely allies.
8. Build transformative, long-term coalition relationships rooted in a clear agenda that doesn’t measure success only by electoral outcomes.
9. Make a serious commitment to academic and empirical analysis of policy. Have a core of scholar activists who constantly footnote and make the case for the demands and critique of the movement. We must actually write the policies that will need to change – not just say that they need to be written. Our campaign has presented a Moral

- Budget<sup>39</sup> to the US Congress and pushed a House Resolution for a Third Reconstruction<sup>40</sup> to end poverty and low-wealth from the bottom up.
10. To shift the narrative and to build concern and power, coordinate use of all forms of social media: video, text, Twitter, Facebook, and so forth.
  11. Engage in voter registration and education.
  12. Pursue a strong legal strategy. Whenever there are legal forums to challenges systems of oppression and death dealing poverty making policies use those forums.
  13. Engage the music hymns poverty and cultural arts in service of the movement.
  14. Resist the “one moment” mentality; we are building a movement!

The church must have a prophetic moral outcry and must help foster another way of seeing the world. A movement with poor and low-wealth people, moral religious servant leaders, and academic social advocates must push a penetrating moral imagination. One of the first works of a prophetic movement is to cause a change in moral imagination. We have learned from our reading of sacred texts, our study of history and our engagement in struggles for justice that moral leaders have a unique ability to proclaim truth in the face of deceit. We must break the spell that oppression seeks to have over humanity and its belief about what is possible (Bishop William J. Barber, II, this volume).

The Workshop and this volume are – to the best of my knowledge – among the first international, interdisciplinary, and comparative efforts to examine the effects of COVID-19 on children, youth and emerging adults, draw lessons learned from best practices and make concrete suggestions to prepare for catastrophic disasters moving forward. The preponderance of evidence suggests the global response to COVID-19 has been rachitic at best, catastrophic at worse. In the harsh words of the WHO, the response has been a “catastrophic failure of the international community in showing solidarity and equity”. <https://go.nature.com/3YtSRtP> The world needs

<sup>39</sup> Poor People’s Moral Budget”, [www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/poor-peoples-moral-budget/](http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/poor-peoples-moral-budget/)

<sup>40</sup> “H.Res.438 – Third Reconstruction: Fully addressing poverty and low wages from the bottom up”, [www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/438/text](http://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/438/text)

to do much better to prepare for the inevitable next pandemic (Stone and Stone, this volume). In what follows, we examine levers to make the family, schools and societal institutions tasked with promoting the healthy development of children more humane and equitable, more engaging and fulfilling, and more relevant to the disparate needs of children and youth around the world in an era of global pandemics, deep inequalities, obscene poverty, and unchecked climate change. We close with the eternal words of Pope Francis on our duty to serve the least among us:

The first of these voices is that of the poor. In the world, there are too many women and men who suffer from severe malnutrition, growing unemployment, the rising numbers of unemployed youth, and from increasing social exclusion. . . . We cannot remain indifferent before the cries of our brothers and sisters. These ask of us not only material assistance – needed in so many circumstances – but above all, our help to defend their dignity as human persons, so that they can find the spiritual energy to become once again protagonists in their own lives. They ask us to fight, in the light of the Gospel, the structural causes of poverty: inequality, the shortage of dignified work and housing, and the denial of their rights as members of society and as workers. As Christians we are called together to eliminate that globalization of indifference which today seems to reign supreme, while building a new civilization of love and solidarity” (Pope Francis, Address at Patriarchal Church of St. George, Istanbul, November 30, 2014). <https://bit.ly/3YHjUkY>

# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Why Early Childhood Matters

The global failure to support young children’s development predates COVID-19. Prior to pandemic disruptions, early childhood care and education (ECCE) had poor outreach. In many places, it was absent altogether. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), access to ECCE services ranged from 20% to 55%, compared with nearly 80% in high-income countries.[1] An estimated 250 million children in LMICs, representing 43% of the world’s children, were at risk of not meeting their developmental potential due to biological and psychosocial risks in the first 5 years of life (e.g., malnutrition, inadequate early learning opportunities, maternal depression, and exposure to violence).[2] Young children in Southern Africa and South Asia bore higher burdens,[1] illustrating the fragility and inequitable access to support systems for the youngest citizens.

The pandemic further compounded existing inequities between children living in disadvantaged versus advantaged contexts, between urban and rural populations, and in remote regions around the world. In the first 11 months of the pandemic, the number of children off track in their early development increased further by an estimated 10.75 million children. Throughout the pandemic, around half of in-person teaching days were lost. In LMICs, the proportion of in-person instruction days lost due to preschool closures was 50–57%, and the number of children off track in their early development increased by slightly more than 10 million. In contrast, for young children living in high-income countries, the proportion of in-person instruction days lost was less (about 46%), with far fewer

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children off track in their early development (fewer than 0.5 million).[1]

Early childhood development refers to the period from conception to 8 years of age. It is a sensitive window of opportunity, particularly in the first 3 years of life, when children transition from their family and home environments to neighborhoods, communities, and ECCE environments.

[3] Early childhood is a time of rapid brain development that lays the foundations for sensory-motor and cognitive-language skills that will grow in the life course. Development is a robust process, with genetics forming the blueprint for foundational skills, but the child's experiences – their exposure to the environment and their social interactions – shapes the quality of healthy brain development. Due to greater neuroplasticity, protective factors and risks both exert their influence on the developing brain.

The development established in these early years is also the foundation upon which later development, interventions, and other important points in the life course, such as adolescence, are built. The skills acquired in these early years predict later learning outcomes in adulthood. Studies on the personal, social, and emotional impacts of investments in early childhood development point to social competence of children in this age group as an indicator of positive and negative outcomes in education, employment, criminal justice, substance abuse, and mental health in adulthood.[4] Therefore, promoting protective environments and reducing the risks that emerge from harmful environments or experiences around the world's youngest children is critical.

Much expert attention on the impact of COVID-19 on children concerns those of primary- and secondary-school age. Less attention has been devoted to the wellbeing of those in utero and the more than 800 million children aged 5 years and younger who collectively represent roughly 10% of the total world population.[1] The pandemic has impacted every aspect of nurturing care in the short and longer term: young children's physical and mental health, safety, security, access to food and healthy nutrition, and opportunities to learn,[5] and it has disrupted childhood immunization schedules, triggering the largest backslide in childhood vaccinations in 30 years. In 2021, 25 million children missed out on one or more doses of vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis – 2 million more than in 2020 and 6 million more than in 2019.[6]

Furthermore, COVID-19 has affected the health, routines, and capacity of caregivers to provide optimal positive nurturing and responsive care.[7] Adults suffered through lengthy periods of job, income, food, housing, and familial insecurity. Grandparents have been socially isolated and physically,

economically, and psychologically burdened. Given the dependence of the very young on their parents, grandparents, caretakers, and communities, a full study of the health, social, and economic impact of COVID-19 on early childhood development must give equal consideration to the impact on caregivers and on the environments children grow up in as well.

The rigorous and compelling research findings that have accumulated to date indicate that the full breadth and intensity of the pandemic's consequences will take decades to manifest. Today's young children and their families, communities, and societies will experience what is effectively a social form of long COVID over this time frame. The compounded COVID-19 impacts on these groups, if left unaddressed, have long-term implications for children's developmental trajectories along the life course.

## **II. The Impact of COVID-19 on Young Children and Their Caregivers**

Children's relative insusceptibility to infection and severe disease has muted the pandemic's impact on the health of young children. The rapid spread of the Omicron variant proved that COVID-19 infection in the very young is not uniformly benign. In the United States, for example, the hospitalization rate for children under 5 years was five times what it was during previous surges. As of July 2022, a handful of countries, among them the United States, Argentina, Bahrain, China, Cuba, and Venezuela, have authorized COVID-19 vaccines for children under 5 years.[8] Even so, the benefits of vaccinating the youngest age group remain unclear, and parent hesitation to vaccinate their very young children matches expert consensus. Since June 18 when these children became eligible in the United States, just 2.8% of this population sector has received shots, and 43% of parents report that they would "definitely not" vaccinate their children under 5 years.[9]

Nevertheless, the risks for early childhood development go beyond children's health. The pandemic's substantial negative spillovers with respect to the social and economic wellbeing of young children and their caregivers have magnified these risks. They are wide-ranging and include reduced ECCE access due to episodic childcare and preschool closures;[10] disruptions of access and adherence to routine immunization and other well-baby and well-child schedules; increased parental anxiety, stress, and depression; and increased violence against young children.[10,11]

COVID-19 has caused much excess morbidity and mortality throughout the world, with the World Health Organization estimating excess mortality between January 2020 and December 2021 at nearly 15 mil-

lion deaths.[12] Among these losses, more than 5 million are of parents or grandparents responsible for the care of young children in the first period of the pandemic.[13] Three-quarters of these deaths are of paternal caregivers. Global estimates between March 2020 and April 2021 from 21 countries indicate that 1,042,000 children became orphans due to COVID-19 caregiver losses and nearly 1,134,000 children lost a significant primary or secondary caregiver. These vulnerable children face risks along the life course in terms of their health, their psychosocial wellbeing, and their economic security. We must think about multisectoral actions that target the most vulnerable within these populations now to ensure the risk to institutional care is mitigated. It is preferable in many cases to have family-centered care, kinship care, and high-quality foster care as options.[14]

With respect to ECCE, disrupted operations cut off young children from care, protection, and learning opportunities.[1] In the United States at the beginning of the pandemic, 40% of childcare centers were reported as being at risk of permanent closure.[15] Even when communities transitioned out of lockdowns and educational facilities reopened, households in the lowest income groups were less likely to have children return to their prior childcare routine, with implications for the safety and protection of young children.[16] While the reporting of child abuse decreased, this reduction is likely due to disruptions to children's safety nets, such as child protection programs, social protection programs, and of course ECCE centers where educators can often flag risk.[7]

In the wake of facility closures, schooling transitioned to remote options. Here, the pandemic shed light on glaring digital divides, as some countries were better equipped to offer remote learning. Remote learning programs amid school closures could not reach at least 463 million children globally.[17] Three out of four of unreached students came from rural areas or poor households. Countries with longer durations of school closures also had lower rates of school-aged children with at-home Internet. In India, for example, schools widely offered remote instruction, but four out of 10 students lacked necessary Internet connectivity to attend.[18]

It is important to recognize, however, that online teaching, especially in public schools, was available mainly for older students. For the youngest children, online learning is not always the most appropriate method to compensate for loss of in-person learning. This, of course, had consequences for moving children off track in their development in those crucial early years – from 2 to 6 million in the low- and lower-middle income settings. [1] Sixty percent of countries reported offering digital and broadcast remote



learning options to pre-primary students, compared with more than 95% offering these options for primary and secondary students. In the pre-primary schooling context, in turn, fewer than one in five LMICs reported having more than 75% of pre-primary students engage in remote learning.[17]

Furthermore, the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic are unevenly distributed among those in utero through 6 years. For many young children, advantageous individual or community circumstances, and related adaptive behaviors, can sidestep the burdens of COVID-19. But for others, the pandemic is yet another cruel misfortune that will set them back even further in their capacity to achieve a healthy and secure existence.

COVID-19 has added to the already perilous mix faced by massive numbers of young children whose daily existence tends to be dominated by the experience of extreme stress, trauma, and insecurity due to various combinations of life circumstances, including physical or mental disability and abuse; domestic, civil, or international conflict; displacement; and race-, ethnic-, or gender-based prejudice and mistreatment. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, for example, has displaced more than 6.3 million people from Ukraine, including nearly two-thirds of all children in Ukraine, at a rate of one child every second, reflecting today's largest global human displacement crisis.[19] These children join the more than 400 million children who live in countries affected by violent conflict. In Yemen, where almost one-third of children aged 6 months to less than 5 years regularly suffer from wasting and two-thirds show signs of stunting, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a decline in access to nutrition and health services that an ongoing conflict in several zones had already strained.[20]

These groups of young children are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 – whether because of heightened risk of own or familial infection, lack of access to quality healthcare and schooling, loss of caregivers and social interaction, food and physical insecurity, diminished household standards of living, or increased levels of stress and related domestic violence. For young children whose early life circumstances have already weakened their social defenses to adversity and their emotional and physical reserves, the pandemic has been an especially deep, unkind, and unavoidable cut.

Insofar as COVID-19 has exacerbated inequities, it has also intensified gender disparities, given that its impacts have been felt at different intensities among men and women worldwide. Childcare facility closures constrained the capacity of caregivers to participate in the labor force, but mothers and fathers did not bear this constraint equally. Gender inequality

persists in society and particularly with regard to the burden of care. Before the pandemic, mothers' labor force participation globally (55% among women aged 25-54 years with partners and at least one child younger than 6 years at home) lagged behind women's overall participation rate (62.1%), and it substantially lagged the participation rate of fathers (97.1%). COVID-19 only worsened these stark divides, with evidence showing a marked decline in labor force participation by mothers during the pandemic, particularly among women with young children.[21]

Despite mothers bearing the brunt of labor force decline, both qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that during the pandemic paternal involvement in caregiving for young children has increased.[7] That said, considerable room exists for additional research on the role of fathers and their experiences with COVID-19. The evidence on COVID-19 and early childhood development overwhelmingly focuses on pregnant women and children up to 18 years of age, with study samples predominantly including mothers rather than fathers. How we leverage the information available on the experiences of mothers and fathers during the recovery period and beyond is critical for more equitable care outcomes in society that emphasize psychological and social wellbeing.

The pandemic has entirely reshaped how households function and shaken the protective environments and nurturing relationships around young children that foster their healthy development in the short and longer term. These disruptions highlight the importance of understanding, valuing, and supporting the mental health of children and their caregivers. With regard to parental distress, global figures increased during the pandemic in terms of reports of depression, stress, and parenting-specific stress.[22] In a survey of about 60,000 caregivers in Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Peru, 61% of the youngest children reported at least one symptom of mental distress.[23]

Prior to the pandemic, we already recognized that maternal depression was significant and widespread. For example, in LMICs, depression during pregnancy and post-partum was at 15% and 20%.[24] This is significantly higher than the prevalence figures that we have seen in high-income countries. This is not only negative and detrimental for the women themselves, but also has impacts in terms of the young children's cognitive development, the quality of their attachment, behavioral development outcomes for boys, increased infections, and lower quality of mother-child interaction.[25] In addition, disturbed cognition in pregnancy accounts for 20% variance predicting offspring depression at 18 years.[25] These impacts are not only short

term; given the chronicity and severity of a particular type of maternal depression, it is also likely to have reverberations along the life course.

In addition to the need to support children and their parents, COVID-19 highlighted the integral need to provide care for the infant and early child mental health workforce through its own pandemic concerns. Stressful, sporadic, and unpredictable school reopening plans as nations phased out of lockdowns and sought to return children and their parents to their pre-pandemic school and workplace routines challenged the wellbeing of this workforce. In the face of ambiguous and often absent public health messaging about safe school reopening, caregivers tasked with operating early childcare settings suffered too, and COVID-19 proved the imperative nature of care for the caregiver. The more COVID-19 stress a caregiver reported in one study, the fewer self-care behaviors they engaged in and the higher the risk for internalizing and burnout.[26]

Prior to the pandemic, we knew what worked to support young children adequately. We knew, for example, that early parenting programs or home-visiting programs recommended by the World Health Organization were essential for young children's healthy development.[27] Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses looking at studies in high-, middle-, and low-income countries show that such programs consistently benefit children's cognitive, language, motor, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, and the quality of attachment between children and their caregivers.[28] COVID-19 continues to threaten and reverse progress in early human development, with long-term consequences for health, learning, and behavior. The evidence outlined in this chapter suggests that risks do not occur in isolation, so interventions cannot happen in isolation. They require multisectoral coordination and actions to address the needs of young children holistically.

### **III. Accelerating Progress in Research, Programs, and Policies for Young Children: A Global Imperative**

COVID-19 has spotlighted the gaping holes in the world's institutions, policies, and collective commitments to safeguard the wellbeing of our disadvantaged, our vulnerable, and our young children. Our failure to fill these gaps is indefensible on moral, ethical, and humanitarian grounds. It is indefensible in terms of the world's stated commitment to human rights. It is indefensible in terms of our collective interest in building cohesive, peaceful, equitable, secure, and politically stable societies. It is indefensible on grounds of economic rationality and investment in a sustainable, long-term future.

The cost of inaction to address young children's growth can impact about \$176 billion in lifetime earnings.[29] Failure to implement basic parenting and preschool programs is estimated to cost countries anywhere between 2.1% and 4.1% of their total gross domestic product,[30] and failure to address COVID-related preschool closures may result in about \$800 billion in lifetime earning losses.[1] These failures, of course, lead not only to immediate losses in preschool outcomes but affect primary and secondary education as well.

So how have we responded to these challenges? While early childhood development, care, and education have certainly been visible in the Sustainable Development Goals, progress has been slow over the last decade. For example, the countries with national policies embracing early childhood development have increased, but scalable programs are few and far between, with significant gaps in our understanding of the quality of those at-scale programs.

Since the start of the pandemic, nongovernmental organizations, civil societies, and governments around the world have responded to modify programs. These efforts have aimed to innovate and to ensure that parents, caregivers, and educators around the world can reach young children through adaptation of existing home-visiting, parenting, and ECCE services. Examples of large-scale programs include Grade R in South Africa that prepares 5- to 6-year-old children for primary school; Chile Crece Contigo, which is an effort by the Chilean government to provide care across public sectors to children from the prenatal period to 4 years; Criança Feliz in Brazil, which leads home visits to promote family skills of households with young children; and the Integrated Child Development Services in India, which provides nutrition, education, immunization, health check-up, and referral services to support children 0-6 years of age.[31]

Nevertheless, these are just a handful of existing programs. For most early childhood development interventions, efforts tend to be short term and project based and have very little outreach. In fact, programs tend to reach few children relative to the scale of the challenge that existed pre-pandemic and that has been exacerbated during the pandemic.

With these caveats in mind, there are two key questions to consider: do interventions meet the needs of caregivers, or do they add to the burden of already highly distressed families during this time? Second, do interventions compound existing inequalities in society? For example, Internet access and technology solutions were a central focus of pandemic interventions. Yet, a survey by the Inter-American Development Bank shows that in the Latin

American and Caribbean region, only about 45% of households have adequate access to the Internet and smartphone penetration is as low as 32%. [32] Therefore, in the recovery, we must consider blended approaches – approaches that do not exacerbate existing inequities in society.

The world has known since before the pandemic that early childhood is the foundation for lifelong outcomes. We have known about the underinvestment in early childhood interventions. We can also learn from how other crises, such as the HIV epidemic, affected early childhood to conceptualize solutions that enhance children’s growth moving forward. We must recognize, nonetheless, that much of how we conceptualized early childhood programs was not working given the underinvestment prior to the pandemic.

If the immediate crisis has a silver lining, it is that we can use this opportunity to strengthen the fragile systems that were not serving young children. Immediate policy options are extremely constrained, and leadership skills are being sorely tested in ways that no one could have foreseen just a few years ago. In conceptualizing a path forward, we must inform and stimulate discussion about the place of early childhood development against the backdrop of wider human capital investment options to prevent further losses, regain some of what has been lost, and fulfill nations’ missions by restarting the engines of progress. With regard to human capital, we are referring to the skills and capacities embodied in people that allow them to create things of value. In general terms, skills and capacities can be fostered through strong and inclusive education and health systems that are closely linked to each other and to the broader economy and society.

In designing interventions, public and government forces, in addition to private and familial units, must collaborate to tend to COVID-19 issues that affect early childhood development and keep equity front and center in devising a way forward.

Fortunately, we have options available. As nations consider priorities in their long-term development trajectories, their first and highest priority must be the immediate fulfillment of essential functions, including the consistent operation of education and health systems and related social safety net programs, especially ones that focus on nutrition and food security, which has recently become more perilous as a result of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

The second highest priority, over the longer term, would be to build a programmatic initiative around the compelling and rigorous research showcasing the importance of early childhood development to the entire life cycle with respect to

- the ability to get along with others;

- economic wellbeing; and
- the level and shape of one’s potential lifelong trajectory for cognitive function and for physical, mental, and emotional health.

Programmatic initiatives here include the design and implementation of programs for (a) rapidly assessing the physical, cognitive, and emotional health of young children, especially those at greatest risk, and (b) addressing deficits through proven interventions such as

- caregiver guidance, support, and access to resources to invest in their young children,
- food supplementation,
- access to quality healthcare,
- access to preschool programs aimed at social development,
- finance monitoring for early childhood development and progress tracking,
- the constructive engagement of community members in monitoring and supporting early child development,
- policies that support caregivers with young children (e.g., paid parental leave, subsidized high-quality childcare services).

The third highest priority, also over the longer term, would be to prioritize support for the primary healthcare components of the overall health system. Primary healthcare is a health system best buy. And that is in no small measure because of its central role in the implementation of immunization programs. While we certainly refer here to COVID-19 immunizations, we are also thinking of routine immunizations for diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, measles, polio, rotavirus, pneumococcal disease, human papilloma virus, and hepatitis. We are also thinking of catch-up protocols for those who missed immunizations in the past few years. In support of immunization programs, we urge nations to remember the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, along with the related public health finding that immunizations are among the most cost-effective health interventions available to mankind.

Realizing Sustainable Development Goal target 4.2 (for all children to have access to early care, development, and education services) requires urgent multisectoral action to mitigate the detrimental impact on the quality of care and opportunities that young children receive. Solutions are available to address the needs of young children and their caregivers (e.g., parenting programs, ECCE services, and prevention of violence strategies). However, interventions’ design and delivery must not further exacerbate

the stark inequities in access to early childhood care and opportunities for young children. Further, approaches must invest in strengthening systems that serve young children and their caregivers.

To close, we would remind everyone that Winston Churchill once urged that we should “never let a good crisis go to waste”. In the pandemic context, this is an especially interesting piece of advice because it directs us to think and act progressively and to use the pandemic to renew – not just in word but also in deed – our commitment to the world’s youngest victims of disadvantage and vulnerability.

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# EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS' PSYCHO-SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

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## Introduction

This chapter presents a brief of the scientific literature and reports from multilateral organizations and other regional NGOs on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the psychosocial development of children and adolescents in Latin American (LA) countries, between March of 2020 and July of 2022. In this context, the term “psychosocial” refers in a broad way to different emotional, cognitive and social processes, which children and adolescents use for adaptive purposes in their everyday life.

After running several bibliographic searches in Pubmed, EBSCO, Google Scholar, governmental and multilateral organizations' websites, and abstracts presented at conferences on child and adolescent development, 223 empirical papers and reports have been consulted. When the available information is analyzed, two main aspects emerge: (a) the increment of studies on mental health since the start of the pandemic (Caballero-Apaza Luz M., 2022); and (2) the little empirical material collected experimentally related to the impact of the pandemic on psychosocial development. “Experimentally” means information based on the implementation of methods and techniques that developmental science usually uses to explore psychosocial processes. In addition, after reviewing the abstracts of some of the main international conferences on child development (e.g., Society for Research on Child Development), it is possible to anticipate that new scientific literature on the topic in Latin America will begin to appear in the following two years. This means that to date there is no experimental published material of this type in LA, and that the information available comes mainly from reports made by researchers, governments, NGOs, think-tanks and multilateral organizations (e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, ECLAC, and IDB), which are based on surveys and questionnaires conducted virtually or remotely. Consequently, it is important to consider

that this information does not allow us to measure adequate incidences, prevalence nor mechanisms (Silverio–Murilloa Adan, 2021).

In general, in LA, the implementation of studies or surveys applying longitudinal designs is not frequent. Although there is available indirect information on such aspects collected by some researchers and Observatories, the type of indicators that are used are approximations to such phenomena, but not direct information on the performance or state of the psychosocial development of children and adolescents by themselves (Tuñón Ianina, 2021). Furthermore, as in almost the entire world, scientific activity was also widely interrupted since the beginning of the pandemic, and in general there were many difficulties in resuming field work, as well as in carrying out remote studies more specific than surveys. Nonetheless, some research groups began to make changes in their methodologies and to carry out virtual studies – some of them with longitudinal designs – that are still under development (Segretin Soledad, 2021). In any case, such kinds of efforts did not occur to the same extent in LA than in high income countries.

Most of the available information to date corresponds to the first year of the pandemic. In most cases, the effects refer to the implementation of confinements. In a few countries, follow-up rounds were verified between 3 and 6 months after their start. The information on the effects of the pandemic on children and adolescents' psychosocial development in later stages of the pandemic, when vaccination and reopening of schools were verified, is still being collected or analyzed.

In summary, the available information that is presented here does not necessarily imply decreases or increases in cases, but rather the difficulties in the detection capacity because of the caregivers' perceptions under stress during the development of a different type of pandemic experiences collecting papers and reports. These conditions pose some limitations in the quality of the information from a scientific perspective, due to the generation of potential sampling and other eventual methodological biases. This implies to consider at least three aspects: (a) Caution in the use of this information (2) Reconsideration of the implemented methods. And (3) investments in efforts aimed at periodically collecting information based on the implementation of controls that could increase its quality, and consequently its predictive value.

### **Prepandemic socioeconomic circumstances in LA**

LA has been a region characterized by high levels of socioeconomic inequality for decades. It is still considered the region with the highest

income inequality in the world, in which the richest 10% own about 80% of the wealth. In particular, current markets are characterized by tending to be dominated by a small number of large companies with high levels of power. These monopolies contribute to the maintenance of high social inequality, low productivity growth and the distortion of fiscal policies that translates into a weak redistribution power. (PNUD, *Atrapados: Alta Desigualdad y Bajo Crecimiento en América Latina y el Caribe. Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano 2021*, 2021).

The progressive deterioration of socioeconomic factors before the pandemic (ECLAC, 2020) significantly reduced social protection. Almost 50% of the economically active population gained its living in the informal sector with high gender gaps in labor participation. The projection of monetary poverty for children and adolescents in the region in 2020 was 51%; and over 65% of children lived in households without access to social security (Blofield Merike, 2020; PNUD, *COVID-19: El desarrollo humano va camino de retroceder este año por primera vez desde 1990*, 2020). Until February 2020 the most critical threats to children were those derived from the crisis in climate, poverty, migration, malnutrition, lack of access to adequate housing, education, social protection, and the commercial marketing of harmful products. In other words, before the pandemic, a great proportion of people in LA were not able to meet minimum health and human development standards, which already posed a risk to the development of children and adolescents, especially those who were in situations of vulnerability due to poverty, violence, and human trafficking. Once the pandemic began, the unequal circumstances became more harmful. Actually, findings from a 2020 study based on Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico data showed that the impact was strongly asymmetric and affected particularly the human capital of children from disadvantaged families (Binns Colin, 2021; ECLAC, 2020; ECLAC-UNICEF, 2020; Chancel Lucas, 2022; Cuartas Jorge, 2020; Lustig Nora, 2020; PNUD, *COVID-19: El desarrollo humano va camino de retroceder este año por primera vez desde 1990*, 2020).

### **Microsystemic and ontosystemic effects**

A synthesis of the reviewed literature on impacts at the family microsystemic level allows us to verify the following profile of results:

(a) Loss of income in a range of 30% (e.g., Mexico) to 69% (e.g., Chile). (b) Increase in debt (e.g., 68% of households in Colombia). (c) Increase in job instability and informality (e.g., Costa Rica, El Salvador

and Peru: between 60% and 70% job loss). **(d)** Increase in governmental reception of cash transfers (e.g., Chile 26%, Mexico and Colombia 30%, Argentina 59%). **(e)** Suspension in the purchase or reduction of food portions in a range of 30% to 60% (e.g., Argentina 39%, Colombia 30%, Peru 60%, Dominican Republic 37%). In Colombia, a recovery of 20% was reported after the first period of the 2020 confinement. **(f)** Increased signs of anxiety and depression in caregivers in a range of 15% to 85% (e.g., Dominican Republic: 15%; Peru: 40%; Costa Rica, El Salvador: 85%). **(g)** Gender violence (e.g., Argentina: 59%). **(h)** Domestic burden on women (e.g., Argentina: 44%). **(i)** Report of concern in caregivers regarding: the effects of confinement; job demands, unemployment and job instability, decreased income, contagion on the return to school, adult low emotional control in the face of uncertainty, fear of contagion and death (e.g., Chile, Peru). And **(j)** report of concern in caregivers about parenting aspects such as: self-regulation, emotional development, organization of time and routines (e.g., Chile), learning (e.g., Peru: 72% of families with a child with a disability), and behavioral problems (e.g., Peru: 37% in single-parent households) (Attanasio Orazio, 2020; CEDEP, 2020; ECLAC-UNICEF, 2020; Chile Crece Contigo, 2020; Curcio Javier A., 2021; Duarte Fabián, 2021; UNICEF México, 2021; Guerrero Gabriela, 2020; Hincapié Diana, 2020; UNICEF Colombia, 2020) (Naslund-Hadley E., 2020; Naciones Unidas República Dominicana, 2020; Sandoval-Reyes Juan, 20021; United Nations, 2020; UNICEF, La respuesta a la COVID-19. Informe Anual., 2020; UNICEF, En mi mente. Promover, proteger y cuidar la salud mental de la infancia., 2021; UNICEF A., 2021)

At the individual level, the following phenomena were verified: **(a)** Sleep disturbances (e.g., Chile 29%, Argentina 42%). **(b)** Alterations in feeding (e.g., Argentina: 50%) and increase in food insecurity. **(c)** Suspension of health controls in a range of 17% (e.g., Argentina) to 65% (e.g., Chile). **(d)** Suspension of immunizations in a range of 4% (e.g., Argentina) to 35% (e.g., Colombia). **(e)** Increase in signs of anxiety and depression in a range of 10% to 60% (e.g., Argentina: 43%; Chile: 37%; Colombia: 35%; Costa Rica, El Salvador: 60%; Mexico: 36%; Peru: 43%; Dominican Republic: 13%; and Uruguay: 10%). In Colombia and Mexico these values were maintained after the end of the year 2020 confinements. In Argentina, a reduction of 17% in anxiety and 6% in depression was verified after the long confinement of almost three months. In Costa Rica, El Salvador, Colombia, and Peru, this type of incidence was greater in children who were victims of violence. Regarding the changes in symptoms of depression and anxiety in

adolescents during the pandemic, a study with a longitudinal design carried out in Peru suggests only a decrease in anxiety after months of the start of the confinements (Barendse Marjolein E.A., 2022). With respect to the study of emotional well-being reported by the children themselves, in a preliminary study carried out in Mexico, differences were verified between girls and boys in the expression of their positive and negative emotions from 8 years of age (Armenta Hurtarte Carolina, 2022; UNICEF A., 2021). **(f)** Increase in communication problems inside homes in a range of 7% to 34% (e.g., Argentina: 24%; Mexico: 34%; Dominican Republic: 7%; Uruguay: 10%). **(g)** Increased expression of anger and fights inside homes in a range of 15% to 59% (e.g., Argentina: 15%; Chile: 59%; Colombia: 20%). **(h)** Decrease in times and spaces for free play (e.g., Chile: 28%); **(i)** increase in screen exposure (e.g., Chile: 68%). And **(j)** mourning for the death of a family member (e.g., Chile: 15%). From March 2020 to April 2021 10.2, 3.5, 2.4, 2.3, and 1.1 per thousand in Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina, experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver, respectively (Andrés María Laura, 2022; CEDEP, 2020; Chile Crece Contigo, 2020; Curcio Javier A., 2021; Grupo de Investigación Relaciones Vinculares y Desarrollo Socioemocional, 2020; Guerrero Gabriela, 2020; Hillis Susan D, 2021; Hincapié Diana, 2020; Naciones Unidas República Dominicana, 2020; Naslund-Hadley E., 2020) (UNICEF Colombia, 2020; UNICEF, En mi mente. Promover, proteger y cuidar la salud mental de la infancia., 2021; UNICEF A., 2021).

### Implications of the available evidence

As in other many regions in the world, even considering the limited available information, in LA the pandemic has disrupted the functioning of systems that support human well-being and development at many levels, from individual biology to families, health care, education, local and national governments, economies, and many other interconnected systems in profound and varying ways (Katz Carmit, 2022). Consequently, the pandemic can be represented as a “multi-systemic shock” event (Dhaliwal Mandeep, 2022).

Although the initial measures of physical distancing made it possible to contain the contagion (United Nations, 2020), they also confined a large proportion of caregivers, children and adolescents to their homes. Consequently, this increased children’s exposure to parental job loss and income instability and its effects on the dynamics of emotional interaction inside homes. In turn, these phenomena made the distribution of tasks within

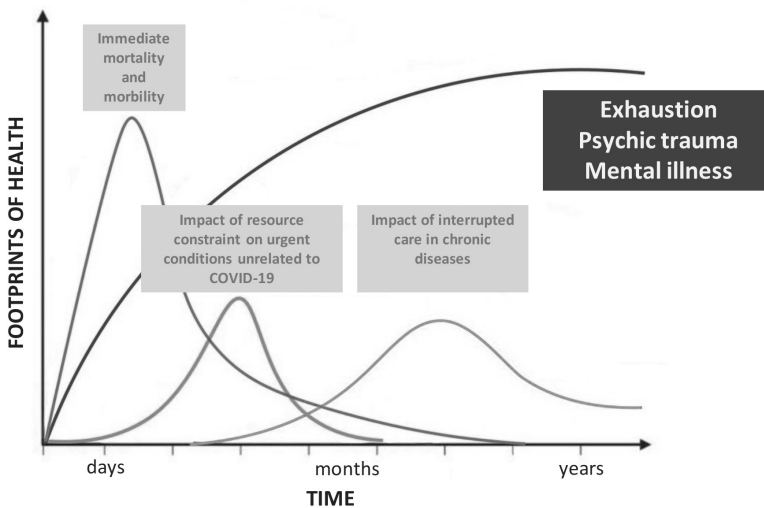
the home and the care of children more complex (Guerrero Gabriela, 2020). In addition, childcare, justice, and educational programs have been disrupted imposing challenges to parents and children's self-regulatory and learning development (Ravetlat Ballesté, 2022; Gassman-Pines Anna, 2020; UNICEF, *La respuesta a la COVID-19. Informe Anual.*, 2020). This drastically limited the possibilities of teachers and other caregivers to detect cases of violence, to provide accompaniment and advice to children with this and other special needs, and to activate primary and secondary prevention actions (Urizar Jr Guido G., 2022). Children may have different reactions to the loss of a caregiver and grieving is highly individually variable. However, when the loss is experienced as traumatic it can affect emotional development by increasing the probability of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, which in turn can lengthen the mourning process and prevent from focusing on everyday activities including learning and social interactions (Hillis et al., 2020). At the same time, the phenomena of resilience and agency of children and adolescents were verified that gave rise to socialization processes in which there was an innovation in the ways of bonding, playing and inhabiting family spaces (Aguilar-Farias Nicolas, 2020; Barcala, 2022; Vinícius Paiva Albarado Kaio, 2022).

In some countries (e.g., Brazil) there was a significant absence of state intervention and an increase in the intervention of community organizations to address vulnerabilities (Basile Patricia, 2022). While the prevalence of mental health problems was high in the region, heterogeneity between countries was also verified, which raises the need to implement approaches that adequately identify different population groups with different characteristics and needs (Zhang Stephen X, 2022). In particular, the groups of children and adolescents most affected by the increase in signs of impact on mental health were those who already suffered from some type of disorder, those who lived in households with socioeconomic deprivation, in single-parent households (especially headed by women), and in households with caregivers from families with younger children (Ben Brik A., 2022; Gómez-Salgado Juan, 2021; Katz Carmit, 2022; Palomera-Chávez A., 2021; Vilar-Compte Mireya, 2022). In some cases, it was verified that the use of negative parenting strategies was associated with an increased risk of negative signs of mental health in children (Oliveira Thaís Dell'Oro, 2022).

Perhaps one of the hallmarks of the pandemic has been at the extent to which it has impacted the predictability of daily life. There is an extensive scientific literature showing that lack of predictability and control can have long-term effects on biological stress response and immune systems, two

of the main mechanisms involved in self-regulation processing in adaptive circumstances (Rettie Hanna, 2021). In such a relational dynamic the information on effects suggests that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those subjected to structural inequalities, with additional health and/or special needs, from families in which there are mental health issues have been the most impacted by the pandemic.

In summary, also in LA the pandemic can be conceptualized as an unanticipated and uncontrollable chronic stressors phenomenon that is detrimental to the mental health of children, adolescents and families, particularly in those with disabilities, from migrant, refugee, culturally and ethnically diverse and socioeconomically deprived communities. In this sense the COVID generation can be conceptualized as one with an exacerbation of exposure to psychosocial stressors than those of the pre-pandemic stages which effects on mental health and well-being are expected to last years in the context of a complex intergenerational dynamics (Figure 1) (APPG, 2020; Arnsten Amy F.T., 2021; Masten Ann S., 2021; Rao Nirmala, 2021; Guerrero Gabriela, 2020). Consequently, such a sort of “stress-tsunami” may impact several self-regulatory competences for coping with adaptation challenges in the mediate and immediate future (APPG, 2020; Arnsten Amy F.T., 2021; Gassman-Pines Anna, 2020; Masten Ann S., 2021; Rao Nirmala, 2021; Guerrero Gabriela, 2020; UNICEF, La respuesta a la COVID-19. Informe Anual., 2020).



**Figure 1.** Expected phases in the need for healthcare services linked to COVID-19. Source: Adapted from four waves of the COVID-19 pandemic by Victor Tseng – Twitter provided on 30 March 2020.



## Conclusions and future directions

Any consideration of such a complex problem necessarily requires a relational perspective approach (Lerner Richard, 2018), which necessarily should involve a complex set of planning and actions to allow the identification of variable trajectories eventually expressed by different vulnerable groups exposed to know and new constellations of risks and opportunities, and orient the corresponding and adequate interventions.

Regarding the *conceptual understanding of the available information*, although insufficient, it is possible to interpret it in a preliminary way from the pre-pandemic conceptual models based on a rich history of developmental theories and empirical research on ecological and family systems, family stress and parenting, and resilience of children, adolescents, and families in complex and adverse contexts. However, the COVID generation imposes new challenges that could update and/or modify previous theoretical proposals. The pandemic is teaching key lessons about how people respond to crisis and misinformation and is promoting changes in the way scientists study public-health questions (Aschwanden Christie, 2021). A full understanding of the impact of massive, everyday unpredictably over time will depend on the implementation of theoretical and analytical models that can capture multiple variable trajectories of different aspects of psychosocial development, at different levels of analysis and stages of development, in different developmental contexts. Such capture of complexity necessarily requires new methods of collection and analysis of the complexity of human development. In this sense, perhaps the COVID generation constitutes an opportunity to channel efforts that allow important conceptual and methodological advances in the knowledge of psychosocial development in LA and other regions. Now, there is an urgent need for research to address how mental health consequences for vulnerable groups can be mitigated under pandemic conditions. In more mediate stages, discovery, evaluation, and refinement of mechanistically-driven interventions to address the psychological, social, and neuroscientific aspects of the pandemic are also required. Rising to this challenge will require integration across disciplines and sectors, and should be done together with people with lived experience.

With respect to the *collection of information*, efforts require methodological improvements at the level of: (a) sampling; (b) selection of specific indicators of psychosocial development, preferably combining direct information on child development and caregiver reports; and (c) periodic assessments. There are already some examples of international collaboration

projects that consider these aspects (Solmi Marco, 2022), and even some of them specific to LA and in relation to issues of inequality in women, children and adolescents considered in the SDGs (Sanhueza Antonio, 2021). Such innovations could benefit from the specific financing of inter-sectoral efforts that involve different Observatories of human development, researchers from different disciplines related to child development that already carry out their activities in the region, as well as other stakeholders and policymakers. In particular, such efforts would be of great value for the exploration and identification of onto-, micro- and macro-systemic impact mechanisms that could guide different upgradable intervention efforts. The continuous collection of information is a shortcoming in the region that requires specific financing plans, while it is a minimum requirement necessary to face the effects of the pandemic on mental health and the self-regulatory development of the COVID generation in the short and long term.

Regarding the *continuous and dynamic identification of vulnerable groups*, the information available before and during the pandemic accounts for known vulnerable groups. In addition, it is possible that during the development of the pandemic, other constellations of risks and resilience will emerge in caregivers, children and adolescents of the COVID generation, which require specific, different, and innovative solutions. These scenarios impose the need for continuous and dynamic research work to identify them; as well as the creation of new instances of building capacity that contributes to the training of professionals who can deal with information from multiple sources and very fast dynamics of change. These types of efforts could benefit from the implementation of artificial intelligence methods, which during the pandemic have served to analyze scaling communications phenomena, provided platforms for understanding how COVID-19 spreads, and speed up research and treatment even in LA (Mhlanga David, 2022; Ormeño Pablo, 2022). However, the design and implementation of such types of algorithms require an adequate analysis of ethical, technical and methodological aspects that are still under debate at the international level (Gibney Elizabeth, 2022; Peeples Lynn, 2022).

In relation to the *immediate necessary actions*, given the previous and current exposure to stressors that challenge the psychosocial development of children and adolescents, and the lack of adequate investment in mental health services in practically the entire region (Busso Matías, 2021), one of the priority aspects is the provision of primary psychosocial care services for the population in general, which allow to prevent and treat

mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and stress in caregivers, children and adolescents. Likewise, such immediate interventions should seek to promote assertive and healthy parenting and communication practices between different social actors, including adolescents and youth in the design of community programs (Bishop Stephanie, 2022). In other words, innovation should include a concept of primary care in mental health that transcends the work in health centers, and the use of information technologies in innovative ways to promote mental health at as least the microsystemic level (Breed Ananada, 2022). Although several countries have implemented portals and other information mechanisms, this does not replace the provision of specific mental health interventions through primary care settings.

With respect to the *synergistic effects of investment in psychosocial development*, it is possible that, if implemented, this type of planning and actions will contribute to generate solutions to the effects of the pre-pandemic inequity on the self-regulation development of children and adolescents. In this sense, multilateral efforts could consider the design of policies and investments in the context of the SDGs (Sachs Jeffrey, 2021), to help generate equity in access to mental health care and contribute to the psychosocial development of children and adolescents in the region (Tausch Amy, 2022). In such a context, the role of the researchers must be oriented at least towards the continuity of impact assessment and the generation of continuous and dynamic knowledge that can anticipate medium and long-term impacts and involving communities in specific roles based on different type of available resources (Merlinda Santi, 2021). This requires also considering the development of algorithms that allow generating answers online, instead of waiting for the completion of stages of the interventions. This is also related to the professionalization and sustainability of public management processes that need to be reinforced or built.

For all these efforts, the recommendations made by the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners in 2020 (Clark Helen, 2020), before the beginning of the pandemic, remain valid: (a) Put child health and well-being at the center of recovery plans. (b) Include experts on children's issues in the relevant task forces and legislative working groups. (c) Engage their ministries to work together for children. And (d) ask children and adolescents what changes they would like to see. An important factor that could contribute to amplifying this type of action would be the planned development of communication frameworks that contribute to (a) making visible the problems to be faced, as well as the importance of the commit-

ment and participation of all sectors of society; and (b) reduce as much as possible the construction of communication frameworks that contribute to infodemic (Bhatt Shumaila J. i, 2022; Ball Phillip, 2020).

Finally, what is needed to face the challenges that the COVID generation presents us not only requires multilateral collaboration, innovation in financing and maintaining high-quality clinical and research standards, but also to base any effort on a moral premise of solidarity and gender perspective that can navigate the trouble waters of the inertia of the pre-pandemic effects which have made Latin America one of the most unequal regions in the world.

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# THE PANDEMIC AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DURING LATE ADOLESCENCE

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For people around the world, the impact of COVID-19 on our daily lives has been significant and profound. We have all suffered from the inability to plan in the face of uncertainty; from the intermittent need for isolation as we deal with new strains of the virus; from lost opportunities; and perhaps from loss of loved ones. As Rao and Fisher (2021, 739) have noted, “From a systems science perspective, global pandemics represent a ‘shock to the system’, affecting every aspect of society”.

In this paper, we review the research literature of the pandemic’s impact on psychosocial development during late adolescence. Adolescence denotes the time of life between childhood and young adulthood. Throughout most of human history – and in some societies today – puberty marks the end of childhood, whereby full-time work expectations and new family obligations emerge. In societies with formal schooling, delayed adulthood is the norm because children continue to be dependent on their parents while in school. Consequently, in most societies today adolescence has emerged as a relatively long phase of development, typically defined from ages 12 to 25, with late adolescence defined from ages 18 to 25. There is a growing consensus among researchers that adolescence “constitutes a critical intervention window, given the far-reaching physical, socio-emotional changes that occur” (GAGE 2017).

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To understand the impact of COVID-19 on late adolescence, it is critical to begin with an understanding of the developmental changes this age group experiences as part of normal development. First, as Steinberg (2014, 15) has argued, neuroplasticity in the brain causes adolescents to be “more easily excited, emotionally aroused, and prone to getting angry or upset”. In other words, the ability to understand and manage emotions as well as behavior develops through late adolescence, which explains why risky behavior and mental health problems are more prevalent during this time of life. Second, Tambelli et al. (2021) have posited that the pandemic delayed normal psychosocial development because the evolutionary tasks that all adolescents face – identity development, autonomy and the re-organization of relationships with parents and peers – were disrupted by school closures and concomitant social isolation. Following the pandemic, especially when schools were closed, adolescents’ increasing need for autonomy was checked by parents who exerted control to ensure their children’s health and safety. Third, adolescence has been called “a sensitive period for the emergence of mental health disorders”, based on prevalence rates by age (Liu et al. 2022). Finally, we argue here that existential threats, like COVID-19, are deeply experienced by adolescents because their self regulation skills are still developing, compared with adults, thereby limiting their ability to cope in the face of significant stressors. For all these reasons, it follows that the impact of COVID-19 on psychosocial development might be especially acute during this stage of life.

Psychosocial development typically includes social cognition, perspective taking, adjustment, and mental health; much of the research on the effects of the pandemic has focused on adjustment and mental health. There is a robust research literature already documenting an increase in mental health problems following the onset of COVID-19. A review of 21 studies has demonstrated a clear link between the pandemic and mild to severe anxiety in children, adolescents and young adults (Stavridou et al. 2020). Further, according to a recent U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory (2021), there is burgeoning evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated the incidence of mental health problems, especially for vulnerable populations, including youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, youth in immigrant households, youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and homeless youth. This is particularly troubling given that there was already a youth mental health crisis prior to the pandemic. The U.S. Surgeon General’s report summarizes U.S. survey data documenting the

mental health crisis in recent years. For example, between 2009 and 2019, among high school students, the number of adolescents who reported depressive symptoms increased by 40 percent, while the number with serious suicidal ideation increased by 36 percent. Further, between 2011 and 2015, youth psychiatric visits to emergency departments for mental health symptoms increased by 28 percent.

The reasons for the increase in mental health problems is unclear, although the U.S. Surgeon General's report suggests two possible causes. First, popular culture and social media may play a role because they can negatively influence an individual's sense of self worth. Second, young people do not believe that there has been adequate progress on issues that will affect their future, such as climate change, racism and poverty. The threat of climate change is an existential one, given that the habitability of the planet is in doubt; as journalist Masha Gessen (2022) has observed, Gen Z is the first generation that believes it may be the last.

A meta-analysis of the prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents following the onset of the pandemic, conducted by Racine et al. (2021), documents that the increase in anxiety and depression is a global problem. They identified 29 articles that met the criteria for their study: 16 from East Asia, 4 from Europe, 6 from North America, 2 from Central America and South America, and 1 from the Middle East. From a public health perspective, their results are quite concerning: 1 in 4 youth experienced depression, and 1 in 5 experienced anxiety. These estimates of mental health problems are double those of comparable estimates prior to the pandemic. Further, older adolescents had higher levels of depression, which is consistent with the hypothesis that the risk of mental illness is higher during late adolescence than during other times of life. Consistent with other studies, rates of depression and anxiety were higher in girls, perhaps because girls are more likely to report mental health problems or, as the authors suggest, because gender inequity increases stress. Taken together, these public health studies document a worldwide mental health problem among adolescents and emerging adults that necessitates better policies and practices, grounded in evidence.

## **Risk and Protection**

As a next step, we need to consider why the pandemic disrupted adolescent psychosocial development; in other words, how did the experience of adolescents during the pandemic differ from the experience of adolescents prior to the pandemic, and why did these differences pose a

threat to psychosocial development? Developmental theory and research inform our review, especially work on risk and protective factors in development. These factors are typically considered within an ecological system, whereby the individual is embedded within nested contexts, such as family, peers, schools, and community (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). As Browne et al. (2021) have argued, the direction of effects generally flows from a distal variable like COVID-19 to a proximal variable, defined as what an individual experiences, to an outcome variable, in this case a measure of psychosocial development. A fuller understanding of the impact of COVID-19 necessitates an understanding of proximal variables – or mechanisms – associated with the consequences of COVID-19 for adolescents, especially home confinement and school closure.

COVID-19 is likely a risk factor with a pervasive impact across ecological contexts. A salient feature of COVID-19 is that nearly everyone around the world experienced an abrupt change to their daily lives to some degree. Further differentiating COVID-19 from many other risk factors is the fact that it poses an existential threat: people have died from this virus and will continue to do so. In this way, COVID-19 may operate like other events that Masten (2021) has defined as “catastrophic”, for example mass casualties, war and terror, famine, and climate change. Clearly, catastrophic events can have a wide-ranging negative impact on the development of adolescents. COVID-19 shares two important qualities of these catastrophic events, specifically, it affects populations and can result in death. Fear of death emerges in early adolescence, as individuals contemplate the possibility of non-existence for the first time, and continues throughout adulthood, as individuals develop coping mechanisms for this knowledge.

From a methodological perspective, it is not possible to isolate the impact of COVID-19 from other factors, because all developmental outcomes are the product of multiple influences: genetic predispositions, the environment, and the correlation and interaction between the two. In other words, it is difficult to disentangle the myriad effects on any given behavior. Nevertheless, longitudinal research can often provide the strongest evidence of environmental influence. The best data is derived from longitudinal studies, whereby a change in experience, for example an environmental indicator before and after the onset of COVID-19, is associated with a change in a measure of psychosocial development. Other research can be informative as well, especially when researchers control for other indicators of experience in an attempt to isolate the effect of COVID-19. Further, consistency across studies can provide compelling evidence of the

salience of a specific risk or protective factor. From a public health perspective, the identification of risk and protective factors can point the way to prevention and intervention efforts.

## **Family**

We begin with a review of research on the family because we agree with Weeland, Keijsers, and Branje (2021, 1559) that “Of all the influences on the development of children and adolescents, the family system is among the most proximal and important ones”. During the pandemic, families experienced disruption in their routines, given that many parents were working remotely. As a result, it is likely that many parents had fewer psychological resources, such as time, attention and patience, resulting in family relationships – between parents, between siblings, and between parents and children – that were more hostile and less sensitive than pre-pandemic (Browne et al. 2021). At the same time, parents served as a source of comfort during the pandemic (Weeland, Keijsers, and Branje 2021). Thus, parenting behaviors could confer both risk and protection during the pandemic, with the overall quality of parent-child relationships varying significantly across families.

Older adolescents, especially those in college, may have experienced lockdown solo or in small peer groups or pods; however, many returned to the family home and community from which they had been building their independence and autonomy. Some adolescents, especially girls, returned to responsibilities for caregiving, household operations and supporting younger siblings with remote learning. Like many aspects of the pandemic, the forced return to the family home carried disproportionate impacts for some populations. For example, sexual and gender minorities, some of whom were able to live openly and authentically upon leaving home, faced family hostility and rejection under lockdown (Salerno et al. 2020). The inability to explore gender identity and same-sex relationships is likely to carry developmental impacts beyond the immediate crisis.

We know that positive psychosocial development is associated with relationship quality with parents, especially as indicated by parental warmth, as well as by parental support of emerging autonomy. A study of adolescents and their parents in the Netherlands pre and post lockdown revealed several provocative findings (Bülow et al. 2021). First, parents established new rules to protect their children’s health during the early stages of the lockdown, thereby limiting autonomy; however, most adolescents believed that the new rules, such as not seeing friends who might expose

them to the virus, were legitimate. Second, there was great heterogeneity among families, such that family functioning varied greatly. Preexisting characteristics of family relationships predicted whether families thrived during the pandemic. Families characterized by greater warmth and less conflict before lockdown fared better than other families. In the words of the researchers, “Oftentimes, the poor get poorer and the rich get richer” (Bülow et al. 2021, 1593).

Several longitudinal studies from a variety of countries have yielded a fairly consistent pattern concerning the impact of the pandemic on parents and their adolescent children. Measures of poor family functioning, such as family chaos or disruption of family life, were associated with negative child and adolescent outcomes, including greater internalizing or externalizing of problems, anxiety, depression, anger, and argumentativeness. Importantly, these same studies demonstrated that some parent and child behaviors moderated this association – we say importantly because these moderators signal possible family interventions. In one of the stronger methodological studies, Skinner et al. (2021) studied families in five countries – Italy, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States – to assess moderators of association between disruptions caused by the pandemic and changes in young adults’ adjustment. Adolescent adjustment was assessed when they were 17 years of age, pre-pandemic, and again three years later, during the pandemic. Higher levels of family disruption were associated with increases in adolescent internalizing and externalizing behaviors over time – convincing evidence of the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health. These associations were attenuated by three behaviors assessed prior to the pandemic: higher levels of youth disclosure, more supportive parenting, and lower levels of destructive adolescent-parent conflict. These three moderators offer directions for family interventions that are likely to be successful in reducing adolescent mental health problems.

Similarly, using a two-way longitudinal design, with subjects assessed one week before school reopenings and three months later, Qu et al. (2021) found that, in a sample of Chinese adolescents, parent-child conflict moderated the association between psychological stress more generally and psychological distress following the return to school; return-to-school stress was only associated with psychological distress in families with higher levels of parent-child conflict. A number of potential family moderator variables have been identified in other studies. In a different study of Chinese youth, parent involvement during the pandemic alleviated stress

in their children, thereby serving as a protective factor (Ding et al. 2022). And, a study in New Zealand identified partner support and cooperative co-parenting as predictors of positive parenting (McRae et al. 2021).

Child moderators have also been identified (Donker, Mastrotheodoros and Branje 2021). Tambelli et al. (2021) hypothesized that self regulation would mitigate the association between security to parents and distress due to COVID-19. To test their hypothesis, they used social media to recruit a sample of 454 late adolescents during the second wave of COVID-19 in Italy. Participants completed an anonymous survey about the quality of their attachment to parents and their ability to process their emotions. Because the findings are not longitudinal, it is difficult to link them to COVID-19 per se; still, we know that late adolescents experienced heightened distress during the pandemic, providing the conditions to assess the activation of parent-child attachment. As predicted, reported attachment to mothers was linked with lower levels of distress. Importantly, this association was mediated by an index of self regulation, specifically a measure of one's ability to recognize and describe one's own emotions. Similarly, a study of 5,503 Chinese youth found that self-control mediated the association between insecurity and well-being during the pandemic (Wen et al. 2021). These findings are consistent with Steinberg's (2014) view that self regulation is a key indicator of adolescent mental health.

Individuals infected by COVID-19 prior to the availability of vaccines experienced particular trauma, as did members of their families who worried about the health of loved ones as well as themselves. Early in the pandemic, historian and filmmaker Alexandra Zapruder collected diary entries from adolescents about their experiences (Zapruder 2020). As part of this project, an 18-year-old with COVID-19 wrote vividly about her experience living at home while ill:

I was ill until proven  
healthy. My mother  
left me small foods  
laid on paper plates  
on the stairs, running  
away as I came out.  
A date, some almonds,  
a sweet potato stabbed  
through with a fork.  
I despised her for being so

scared of me, for crying  
 to the doctor ‘If she comes down  
 I will feel panicked’. I did not come  
 down. I stayed still for six days,  
 four of which I did not get out  
 of bed. My father texted me  
 from downstairs, saying that  
 he missed me.

This poem captures poignantly the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic heightened adolescents’ experiences of isolation, even with the support of caring parents.

### Peers

Engagement with peers plays a central role in adolescents’ psychosocial development, because the influence of peers gradually exceeds that of parents, as emerging adults begin to distance themselves from family to achieve greater autonomy. Teens are acutely sensitive to the need for social interactions, and they seek increasing time with peers outside the home (Lam, McHale, and Crouter 2014), as they expand their capacities to form friendships and intimate relationships (Orben, Tomova, and Blakemore 2021). Social distancing and confinement measures, imposed in response to the pandemic, undermined adolescents’ typical social-emotional development by decreasing time spent with peers and increasing time in the presence of family, especially parents who exerted more controls.

A number of studies have documented young adults’ isolation from peers during the early days of the pandemic. Data from a longitudinal study in the Netherlands (Bülow et al. 2021) found that 14- and 15-year-olds who, prior to the pandemic, had spent 14.5 hours a week in face-to-face contact with friends, experienced strong declines in peer socialization opportunities under lockdown, with their in-person peer contacts shrinking to just four hours weekly. And, while digital connection filled part of that gap, the authors argue that adolescents “missed important opportunities to obtain support and comfort from friends and romantic partners, in circumstances when these social resources were needed most” (Keijsers and Bülow 2021, 119).

Isolation affected college and university students as well. A study of undergraduates in Switzerland compared students’ social networks – such as friendships, social supports, and study groups – during lockdown with



those of pre-pandemic cohorts. Elmer, Mepham, and Stadtfeld (2020) found a decline in the social networks of undergraduates during the pandemic compared with other groups prior to the pandemic. Social networks were associated with positive social interaction and emotional support. Not surprisingly, the decline in social networks was associated with increases in undergraduates' anxiety, stress and depression. In fall 2020, while students studied remotely, Smith College, where we both work, administered a survey to assess students' mental health and sense of engagement with the college community. Students' open-ended responses included statements such as these three: I miss bumping into people at meals and chatting; I miss hanging out with people; and I feel so deeply isolated from my friends. These kinds of statements suggest the need for rich qualitative data to inform the true impact of the confinement necessitated by the pandemic.

One qualitative study of U.S. adolescents identified three themes from open-ended responses to a survey: social disconnection and inadequacy of virtual means of communication; interconnection of daily routines, social life, and mental health; and a sense of missing out on key experiences (Velez, Hahn, and Troyer 2022). Written comments demonstrate convincingly that the participants were well aware of and could speak to the impact of the pandemic on their lives. One 16-year-old boy noted, "I kind of need to go out and hang out with friends. I know everyone faces what their social life is like in different ways, but high school is supposed to be the time I find out what I am and what kind of person I want to be and I can't really do that when I'm stuck inside". This participant understands the psychosocial task of identity development and the fact that his progress may be delayed by the conditions associated with the pandemic. Another adolescent wrote, "The current situation has me feeling isolated and alone. My mental health has definitely taken a toll, and depressive, harmful thoughts have measurably increased. My grades have plummeted". This participant understands the profound impact of isolation on mental health as well as academic progress.

In some studies, however, reduced time with peers and increased time with family appeared to confer protective effects, by buffering adolescents from the negative influences of peers. The protective effects were particularly salient for emerging adults. In a diary study of social interactions before and during the pandemic, researchers found that the lockdown was associated with a decrease in negative interactions with friends, for example bullying behavior and fighting (Gadassi Polack et al. 2021). Similarly,

a study of adolescent psychosocial functioning in Sweden showed that isolation from peers due to remote schooling reduced incidents of victimization, a phenomenon that the researchers linked to the fact that such activity often originates in a face-to-face context before continuing online (Kapetanovic et al. 2021).

The influence of social media and digital connectivity on adolescence, especially during the pandemic, is complex. Adolescents utilized social media for their education, entertainment, information, and social contact. Some of the developmental consequences of social deprivation on adolescent development and mental health can be addressed by expanding conventional ideas of what it means to be connected. As Orben, Tomova, and Blakemore (2021, 637) explain, “Digitally-mediated interactions challenge our traditional conceptualisations of what socialising entails as they can be asynchronous, click based, or audio-video reliant. These means of interaction raise the possibility that digitalised social contact can mitigate the potentially harmful effects of physical distancing in young people”. While this seems likely to be true, Salmela-Aro and Motti-Stefanidi (2022) offer a more nuanced perspective that media use can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the developmental stage of the individual, the type and extent of use, and individual characteristics of the adolescent. Digital connection clearly posed risks for some groups of adolescents during the pandemic. Many students experience cyberbullying, with one study reporting that 17 percent of 12-17-year-olds in Austria have experienced this at least once (Strohmeier and Gradinger, 2022). Some groups may be particularly vulnerable based on their identity alone. In one U.S. sample, students of color who posted or shared publications about racial issues and racial justice during the pandemic were more likely to be exposed to social media discrimination, which in turn was associated with depression and drug use (Tao and Fisher 2021). It is important to highlight that most studies of adolescent social media usage during the pandemic reported associations with depression (Liu et al. 2022).

Clearly peer interactions – or lack thereof – during the pandemic provided both risk and protection. This conclusion mirrors what we saw with respect to parenting behavior during the pandemic. Thus, to gain a complete picture of psychosocial development during adolescence, we need to assess a full range of predictive behaviors – from positive to negative – with respect to adolescents’ relationships with significant people like parents and peers. Facile conclusions about a given risk or protective factor are likely to be wrong.

## Schools

School closures associated with the pandemic have affected more than 1.6 billion learners worldwide (UNESCO 2021). The decision to close schools changed the lives of students in dramatic ways. Teachers taught their students using a variety of online platforms, sometimes synchronously and sometimes asynchronously. Adolescents without access to computers and/or internet connectivity were ill-equipped for learning during the pandemic, which exacerbated the so-called digital divide between less- and more-affluent students within and across countries. Some students, especially girls and young women, had to set aside academics to take on caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings while their parents were working remotely. Moreover, some students lost critical services provided by schools during the pandemic, for example tutoring and extracurricular activities, as well as health interventions ranging from free or subsidized meals to mental health counseling. The lack of in-person instruction resulted in learning loss as well as disengagement with learning for most students of all ages, across all cultures (Reimers 2022).

International studies reveal striking differences in adolescents' schooling experiences during the early phase of the pandemic. A UNESCO (2020) study of 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean revealed the extent to which education was disrupted in these countries compared with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Only four of the 33 countries studied provided live classes, while 18 provided asynchronous learning and 23 broadcast lessons via television and radio. Given the mode of delivery, it was challenging to monitor and assess student learning. Some countries, like Mexico, canceled end-of-year assessments. Not surprisingly, low-income students were less likely to have access to technology, although adolescents were generally more likely to have access to the internet and mobile devices compared with primary school children. Unfortunately, students with learning differences did not receive the services they would have had in an in-person school context. Finally, there was inadequate training and support for teachers to adapt their instruction to virtual platforms. In some countries, like Chile, teachers relied on learning guides and homework for students to complete independently.

Rajmil et al. (2021) identified 22 peer-reviewed studies on school closure, which involved participants who represented 15 countries, with a focus on changes in outcomes following school closure. Four studies ex-

amined indexes of mental health. There was some evidence linking school closure with increases in depression and anxiety as well as a decrease in life satisfaction, with a greater effect for girls. The findings linking school closure with suicidal ideation were mixed. The authors discuss several possible mechanisms to explain the link between school closure and depression. As reported by other researchers cited here, children and adolescents were more socially isolated, which can amplify personal vulnerabilities and/or result in a lack of social support from friends. In addition, several studies reported a decrease in physical activity, often linked with depression, during school closures.

Many studies reported a greater impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls compared with boys, perhaps because girls were more affected by the social isolation that accompanied the pandemic. This gender difference is clear in a longitudinal study of 175 adolescents whose mothers were originally recruited during pregnancy (Liu et al. 2021). There were no sex differences in self-reported depressive symptoms before the pandemic; however, after the lockdown, girls showed an increase in depression within the first seven weeks, an increase that was maintained over the next six months. In contrast, boys did not report increases initially, but did report increasing levels over time. For both boys and girls, mean levels of depression exceeded the average for non-pandemic populations. The authors attribute higher depression to higher stress experienced during the pandemic, especially during the onset of the pandemic when stresses included their fear of infection, concerns about the health of their loved ones, disruption of their plans, missed rites of passage, and loss of interpersonal relationships.

A study of university students in the U.S. examined the impact of COVID-19 on study-related stress, which they define as stress related to coursework, procrastination and study/life balance (Keyserlingk et al. 2021). Participants experienced not only online learning but also a change in residence, given that they were required to leave their dormitories. Generally, high levels of ambiguity and low perceived controllability leads to stress, so it is likely that COVID-19 would be associated with higher stress levels. Students completed a survey in February 2020, before there were any cases of COVID-19 on campus, and completed the same survey again in April, May and June of the same semester. There were three main findings: there was an increase in study stress following the onset of the pandemic; self regulation mitigated the increase in stress, thereby serving as a protective factor; and pre-existing psychological distress was associated with larger increases in study-related stress, thereby serving as a risk factor.

In another study, parent involvement in distance learning resulted in stress for adults and their adolescent children. Schmidt et al. (2021) conducted a 21-day diary study in Germany with 562 highly-educated parents, mostly mothers. On average, parents in the study had two children, where the older child was an adolescent. When the children were working on school tasks or when parental involvement was required for their children's learning, parents reported more negative parent-child interactions as well as lower parent and child positive affect. This finding is consistent with pre-pandemic research on the stress associated with parental involvement with homework.

While at-home learning exacerbated parental stress, it is important to note that parents held varying views about schooling for their children. In a recent essay, Astor (2022) noted, "Some parents whose children are learning remotely are upset that they aren't in school in person. Some whose children are learning in person are upset that they cannot be remote. Many are torturously ambivalent, trying to claw good solutions out of situations that offer none". Holmes (2022) and others have argued that it is foolhardy to view schooling during the pandemic with an either/or or win/lose frame, with academic success and socialization on one side and risk of infection on the other. Specifically, for some students of color in the U.S., the pivot to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic conferred some benefits, for example it closed, to some extent, the digital divide, through the provision of computing devices and connectivity; reduced academic losses associated with disproportionate suspensions for students of color; and provided more opportunities for conferences with teachers for parents with difficult job schedules. Further, Holmes (2022) as well as Gilbert et al. (2020) have urged school opening advocates to consider their recommendations in a broader context with consideration of racial identity; there are good reasons for parents of color in the U.S., specifically Black and Latino parents, to be reluctant to send their children to school, especially given the well-documented inferiority of public schools for students of color.

Disparities in economic and social circumstances tended to predict whether an adolescent would continue with schooling following school closures. A multi-modal study of adolescents' access to education during COVID-19 in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan found that poverty reduced school persistence and increased drop-out rates, especially among girls and young women (Jones et al. 2021). Data from Sub-Saharan Africa also suggests a disproportionate risk for girls (Kwauk, Schmidt, and Ganju 2021). Although younger girls returned to schools when they reopened

at rates equal to or better than boys, this was not true for adolescent girls. Economic precarity exacerbated by the pandemic often sent adolescent girls into the workplace – or into transactional sex work – either to support their families or because families no longer had the resources for school fees. A Brookings Institute survey of 4,000 adolescents in Kenya found that boys were twice as likely to return to the classroom when schools reopened as were girls (Kwauk, Schmidt, and Ganju 2021). This same survey revealed that adolescent girls in eastern Africa reported higher levels of anxiety, compared with boys, about their learning loss, their need for remedial education, and the prospect of repeating a grade at an age older than their peers. In study after study, girls fared worse than boys during the pandemic.

The effect of remote instruction and modified educational methods on adolescents' school performance and learning retention varied widely across countries. A systematic review of 42 studies – mostly in Europe, Asia and the U.S. – found that secondary students had sufficient facility with technology, which enabled them to learn fairly autonomously; nonetheless, the academic performance of most children suffered, especially children with neurodevelopmental disorders and those in need of special education more generally (Panagouli et al. 2021). Thus, we must consider individual differences among children when examining the effects of the pandemic. Going forward, it will be important to consider how and whether differences in learning outcomes during the pandemic are mediated by psychosocial development, which seems likely from a cumulative risk perspective.

## **Community**

Although there are studies of the impact of the pandemic across countries, most do not consider measures of how the pandemic was experienced as a function of a country's customs and values. Further, there are few studies of communities within a given culture beyond assessment of socio-economic status. Yet, we know from sociological and anthropological literature that cultural practices greatly influence families, peers, and schooling and, therefore, should be considered in the development of policy initiatives, social support programs, and public health interventions.

Two studies illustrate the importance of examining communities within a given country. One is the experience of indigenous young adults at tribal colleges in the U.S. One-third of Native American college students are single parents living in multigenerational households earning well below the poverty line; most are first generation college students carrying sig-

nificant responsibilities for family, extended family, and the greater tribal community. Many are high school dropouts seeking a General Equivalency Degree (GED); more than 60 percent require developmental support in math and 45 percent in reading to be prepared for college level work (Yarlott 2020).

The advent of the pandemic exacerbated existing stressors on Native American students and families. A 2020 survey of students at 13 tribal colleges conducted by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC 2021) found that 24 percent of those who had been able to meet their mental health needs prior to the onset of the pandemic were unable to do so; this builds on 15 percent who had been unable to meet those needs pre-pandemic (Redden 2021). Native communities have suffered pandemic-related deaths at 1.8 times the number for non-Hispanic Whites (Arrazola et al. 2020), leading to an increased demand for grief counseling, especially in light of the fact that COVID-19 isolation protocols precluded collective bereavement rituals. Amid multiple challenges – poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, insufficient technology access – tribal college leaders identified supporting students with mental health issues as one of their biggest challenges (Redden 2021).

To support students' mental health needs, Native colleges deployed resources across a number of dimensions, including everyday basic needs. Interventions included emergency funds for food, utilities, and car payments; expanded access to laptops, mobile phones and wifi connectivity; as well as the resources that technology enables such as tele-health services and remote mental health counseling (Weissman 2021). In this community context and across a range of others, economic supports and access to services through technology hold the potential to serve as protective factors during late adolescent development.

The experience of refugee and migrant youth reveals a different pandemic experience, requiring different supports and services. By United Nations criteria, there are more than 56 million migrant children and youth around the world, many unaccompanied by adults and/or separated from parents. Displaced from their families and countries of origin and severed from a collective cultural environment, these populations experience significant precarity of all sorts; as a result, adolescents face risks for psychosocial and developmental impacts, even in the absence of a global health crisis.

Not surprisingly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant and refugee youth struggled across multiple dimensions. They struggled to maintain school attendance and lagged in academic progress, particularly with

regard to language learning in their unfamiliar community contexts. Opportunities to form social connections – already hindered by language limitations as well as migrant youths’ vulnerability to sexual and labor exploitation – were further constrained by the lockdown.

As part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE 2017) study, a team of British, American and Bangladeshi researchers conducted telephone surveys of Rohingya adolescents living in migrant camps and in nearby host communities in Bangladesh. The surveys, conducted from May to June 2020, elicited quantitative and qualitative data across a range of areas, including education and psychosocial well-being. Respondents’ reported rates of moderate to severe depression (4.4 percent), lower than expected in comparison to 2019 WHO figures showing that 10–20 percent of adolescents around the world experience mental illness. The researchers attribute the low depression prevalence in their sample to underreporting of symptoms as well as to normalizing “extreme disadvantage” (Guglielmi et al. 2020). The relatively low rates of depression were also belied by the qualitative responses. For example, a 15-year-old respondent in the study reported, “I have to be alone all the time, which makes me sad. I am losing myself for all these disturbances and troubles”.

Pandemic impacts on displaced girls and young women, who are already disproportionately confined to domestic spaces, have been significant. They have been even less likely than their male counterparts to leave home or circulate with others under COVID-19 (Guglielmi et al. 2020). Lockdown limited their access to information, learning and social development. Relatedly, the reduced presence of humanitarian workers in refugee camps due to COVID-19 has raised concerns for girls’ increased vulnerability to child marriage (Guglielmi et al. 2020).

For adolescents from middle-class families in countries with developed economies, the picture is far more positive. As the world struggled to cope with the pandemic, Grütter and Buchmann (2021), researchers from Switzerland, developed profiles of 20-year-olds with respect to solidarity, defined as “mutually beneficial individual-context relation”, which they view as adaptive developmental regulation for any community. Given that the pandemic necessitated strong restrictions on our social lives as well as health behaviors like the use of masks, both to promote the public good, solidarity appears to be an important new construct. The researchers chose to study adolescents because this age group has been identified as a source of virus transmission, given their robust social lives. They identified three profiles: low solidarity (23 percent of the sample), average (54 percent of



the sample), and high (23 percent of the sample). Those in the high group were more likely to engage in adaptive behaviors, for example self isolation, mask wearing and volunteering to help others. The high group also reported higher levels of concern for others' health. In this longitudinal study, measures of social trust and sympathy at age 12 predicted solidarity at age 20. Grütter and Buchmann argue that these findings may inform interventions to prepare future generations to contribute to the common good as we face other global crises.

In a U.S. study, Coulombe and Yates (2022) discuss the importance of providing children and adolescents with motivation for other-oriented behavior, and they argue that secure attachment provides the foundation for this. In their study, secure attachment with parents at age 12 promoted not only prosocial and health protective behaviors, but also adolescent mental health. They argue persuasively that “interventions to promote the wellbeing of adolescents (and others) during this global crisis should consider the quality of parent-adolescent relationships with regard to children’s felt security and safety therein” (Coulombe and Yates 2022, 68). Taken together, these two studies suggest that interventions should focus on socio-cognitive skills, especially perspective taking, which leads to concern for others within the community. Although young people are shaped by context and community, under the right circumstances, they, in turn, can shape their community for the better.

## Conclusion

Adolescents today will be defined as the COVID-19 generation, and the full effects of the pandemic on their lives may not be clear for years to come. Yet, in just two and a half years, the scientific community has produced timely and valuable information about the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent psychosocial development. There is consistent evidence that mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, increased dramatically across the world following the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is why. The consequences of COVID-19 were many, including remote work for parents and school closures for children. These two structural changes led to profound differences in adolescents’ lived experiences. In this review, we have identified processes associated with these structural changes that influenced adolescent psychosocial development:

- In the *family* context, indicators of experience like parent-adolescent conflict and restriction of adolescent autonomy were shown to be risk

factors for psychosocial development while other indicators like parental warmth were shown to be protective;

- In the *peer* context, the pandemic necessitated a decrease in peer interaction, which was associated with decreased social support and increased stress, as well as with decreased victimization and bullying. Like parents, peers offered both risks and protections for adolescents.
- In the *school* context, school closures led to disengagement from school, learning loss, decrease in services associated with school and, as a result, increased stress for students across the world.
- In the *community* context, we assume that customs and values matter, and we know that there are great differences in adolescent experience within cultures and countries. Still, there is very little research to date. A new line of research suggests that adolescent interventions that promote solidarity, or concern for community, may help address the impact of a community crisis like COVID-19.

If there is one major conclusion from the extant research, it is this: relationship closeness buffered children from the negative impact of COVID-19. This is hardly surprising, given the existing developmental literature on parent-child attachment, parenting quality, peer interaction and support as well as research on risk and protection. A second key finding is that self regulation appears to help both parents and children navigate catastrophic events. People who can self regulate reflect on their emotions and can manage their behaviors and reactions as a result. In doing so, they learn more effectively and have better social relationships. In the context of COVID-19, self regulation mitigated the negative impact of this powerful stressor, as demonstrated across numerous studies.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with a cumulative adversity model or stress exacerbation perspective, identified by Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman (2002) in their comprehensive review of the literature on risk and protective factors. The more risk, the more vulnerability for the developing adolescent; however, protective factors can mitigate risk. Further, risks can both create vulnerability in adolescents or exacerbate genetic predispositions that are associated with vulnerability. Going forward, it will be critical to consider the impact of COVID-19 in light of individual differences among adolescents with the goal of providing tailored prevention and intervention programs in partnership with families, schools and communities.

Despite what the research community has learned, our knowledge of the impact of existential risks, like COVID-19, is just emerging. Only longitudinal research will allow us to understand both the directionality, timing and persistence of the impact of the pandemic as well as the developmental trajectory for given outcomes. As Masten (2021, 1749) has noted, “As conditions improve and adaptive systems are restored or mobilized, most people improve to normative functioning, although there can be lifelong consequences of severe and prolonged trauma and related deprivation, illnesses, or injuries”. Conditions in some countries and communities are improving throughout the world, which is encouraging; however, we need to prevent prolonged trauma for individuals within communities that continue to experience high rates of illness and death.

As a global community, we need to advocate for funding to conduct multi-site, longitudinal studies representative of populations within and across countries. Too often, researchers must rely on convenience samples that typically are not representative of populations with respect to demographic indicators such as education level, income and race. Further, research on the impact of COVID-19 must prioritize vulnerable groups, because there is ample evidence that COVID-19 disproportionately affects adolescents already at risk. Also, as this review demonstrated again and again, girls were more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 with respect to mental health, perhaps because of the additional family burdens they incurred during lockdown.

As we all know, we cannot await future research to act. How do we mitigate the impact of the pandemic on adolescents? From the extant literature on mental health, we know that prevention is critical. Educating the public on wellness strategies is a good first step, for example the importance of investing in healthy relationships, practicing techniques to manage stress, taking care of our bodies, and being intentional about social media and video games (U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory 2021). Some studies have identified specific behaviors that decrease stress, for example keeping a journal, physical activity and exercise, and positive reappraisal and reframing of one’s circumstances; regarding the latter, some adolescents saw the lockdown as an opportunity to decelerate their lives (Shanahan et al. 2022). Parents, physicians and teachers have critical roles to play as well – parent education will promote warm, trusting relationships with children and adolescents; physician education will promote mental health screening during visits with patients; and teacher education will promote individualized instruction in a caring, supportive environment. Of course,

sometimes prevention is not enough, especially for vulnerable people. For this reason, we need to be mindful about the importance of intervention, that is, mental health services, when needed.

The pandemic has revealed, once again, the unequal social systems, discrimination, marginalization and violence that are endemic in our globalized contemporary world (Velez, Taylor, and Power 2022). The need to recommit to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – especially the goal of good health and well being – has never been more clear. Children and adolescents deserve nothing less than universal access to prevention and intervention services, that is effective mental health care and wellness programs.

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# DIGNITY AND CARE FOR YOUTH IN THE AGE OF COVID

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The Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. The constitutions of nations supposedly aim first and foremost at preserving human dignity. This is normative. But as can be seen in any period of history, the reality is very different. This is not different today, despite all the progress that has been made. We live in an unjust and stratified world; not everyone is treated equally. Respect for the inherent dignity of human beings would mean that vital resources, such as access to material resources, but also health care and education, would not be unequally distributed. Not only are resources and developmental means unfairly distributed, even the honor of life is unequally assigned. It appears some lives matter less than others. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing social inequities and also revealed in many ways the extent to which human dignity is compromised with little awareness that dignity is essentially a relational reality: “Human dignity is the same for all human beings: when I trample on the dignity of another, I am trampling on my own”.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore probably the most comprehensive and complex challenge to human dignity and care, especially for vulnerable persons, that the world’s population has faced since the end of World War II. The impact on people in all, or almost all, countries of the world has been and continues to be manifold, persistent, and drastic. What is remarkable about this pandemic is that the entire population has been and continues to be affected, albeit to unequal degrees and in varying quality: young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural, all occupations, and people of every walk of life.

As far as the risk of COVID-19 infection and subsequent severe disease progression is concerned, the figures known so far for the younger popu-

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Message of Pope Francis for the Lenten Brotherhood Campaign in Brazil” (25 February 2014), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140225\\_messaggio-fraternita.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140225_messaggio-fraternita.html)

lation groups – and especially for young children – indicate a much lower susceptibility. On the other hand, the highest risk of disease, in addition to people with pre-existing conditions, is diagnosed in the elderly. The subject of this paper is not first of all the immediate consequences for health, but the indirect and medium- and long-term consequences of protective measures and official orders on the dignity and care of children and adolescents. This is done in the knowledge that this account cannot represent all facets of the ever-evolving pandemic, nor the global dimension of its impact.

### 1. Abuse and maltreatment of children and adolescents

What children experience during the coronavirus crisis can have a profound impact on them. How well or poorly they cope depends on the context in which they experience the pandemic. The difference is enormous depending on whether children experience this time in a stable or a broken household, whether they live in a house with a garden or in a prefabricated apartment, whether they are only children or grow up with siblings, whether they are in online contact with friends and teachers, or whether this is not possible for various reasons.<sup>2</sup> But beyond these generally effective factors, children and young people are at increased risk of being mistreated and abused in times of spatial and personal isolation.

Millions of children around the world are victims of neglect, psychological cruelty, physical abuse, and sexual violence every year – at home, in their social context and online.<sup>3</sup> The fear is that COVID-19 has unleashed unprecedented levels of abuse and mistreatment, trapping children at home with their abusers, and driving the problem underground or into invisibility.<sup>4</sup>

Empirical data collected and analyzed in recent months reflect a hidden pandemic, the pandemic of abuse against children and adolescents.<sup>5</sup> While there have been fewer reports of child abuse at times – especially at the

<sup>2</sup> Eva Oberle, Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl & Kimberly C. Thomson, “Understanding the link between social and emotional well-being and peer relations in early adolescence: gender-specific predictors of peer acceptance”, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 39 (2010): 1330-1342, doi: 10.1007/s10964-009-9486-9.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF et al., “COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online” (April 2020), [https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/Pressemeldungen/2020/COVID-19\\_and\\_its\\_implications\\_for\\_protecting\\_children\\_online\\_\\_\\_Technical\\_note.pdf](https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/Pressemeldungen/2020/COVID-19_and_its_implications_for_protecting_children_online___Technical_note.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> BBC, “Coronavirus: what lockdown is like for kids all around the world” (16 April 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52106625>

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, “Education: from school closure to recovery” (2020), <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

moment of the first massive lockdowns – experts believe this is due in part to the fact that victims have been unable to encounter, or have encountered only very sporadically, those adults in their lives whose professional mandate is to care for the welfare of children: physicians,<sup>6</sup> teachers, child protective services, and other welfare officials who might recognize those signs that indicate forms of violence are being used.<sup>7</sup> Cases of serious child abuse reported by emergency room physicians and pediatricians are on the rise,<sup>8</sup> as well as reports of children calling abuse hotlines themselves.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Impact of school closures

Measures taken by governments to contain the spread of the virus have been based primarily on quarantine and social distancing or distancing: Billions of people have been told to stay home, with dramatic economic, social, and psychological consequences.<sup>10</sup> By mid-April 2020 alone – just a few months into the pandemic – 188 countries had already imposed nationwide school closures, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and

<sup>6</sup> Jörg M. Fegert, Laura A. Kehoe, Benedetto Vitiello, Andreas Karwautz, Stephan Eliez, Jean-Philippe Raynaud et al., “COVID-19: services must remain active, we must communicate with networking partners and avoid further closure of psychiatric units” (9 April 2020), <https://www.escap.eu/index/coronavirus-and-mental-health/maintain-contact-with-patients-and-their-families-and-prevent-closure-of-services>

<sup>7</sup>The Guardian, “Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence” (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

<sup>8</sup>The Washington Post, “With kids stuck at home, ER doctors see more severe cases of child abuse” (30 April 2020), [www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/04/30/child-abuse-reports-coronavirus/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/04/30/child-abuse-reports-coronavirus/)

<sup>9</sup> RAINN, “For the First Time Ever, Minors Make Up Half of Visitors to National Sexual Assault Hotline” (2020), [www.rainn.org/news/first-time-ever-minors-make-half-visitors-national-sexual-assault-hotline?fbclid=IwAR2kzDtVQB-zN1Yo0qVyMcYHYwQs7Pp6M\\_jdiuitUKIG7xrXvbWTv718IxjQ](http://www.rainn.org/news/first-time-ever-minors-make-half-visitors-national-sexual-assault-hotline?fbclid=IwAR2kzDtVQB-zN1Yo0qVyMcYHYwQs7Pp6M_jdiuitUKIG7xrXvbWTv718IxjQ)

<sup>10</sup> Samantha K. Brooks, Rebecca K. Webster, Louise E. Smith, Lisa Woodland, Simon Wessely, Neil Greenberg et al., “The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence”, *Lancet* 395 (March 2020): 912-920, doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8.

adolescents.<sup>11</sup> These kindergarten<sup>12</sup> and school closures,<sup>13</sup> or severe restrictions and regulations of local school operations, have led to an interruption and severe disturbance of the daily lives of children and young people. Despite attempts at a slow reopening, it soon became clear that it would be impossible to conduct normal regular classroom instruction for entire school or academic years. Thus, the future of education of young people is left in uncertainty.<sup>14</sup> This is dramatic, with the consequences of school closures in other parts of the world reaching almost existential dimensions<sup>15</sup> The potential impact of the loss of education and training opportunities for the younger generation – consequently, on their future prospects – is difficult to gauge.<sup>16</sup> To minimize these losses, schools have offered virtual distance learning to their students. However, this option is not available to all children, even in economically developed countries. Children who were already potentially disadvantaged before the crisis – who come from poorer households and/or lack the appropriate language skills – will fall even further behind. This is especially true for children with certain learning disabilities or other special education needs.

School closures and the impracticality of activities outside the home are also a challenge for parents who must care for their children (with or with-

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children” (15 April 2020), [https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420\\_Covid\\_Children\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Domradio, “Traum oder Trauma?” (13 September 2020), <https://www.domradio.de/themen/ehe-und-familie/2020-09-13/traum-oder-trauma-welche-auswirkungen-der-lockdown-auf-kita-kinder-hatte>

<sup>13</sup> Russell M. Viner, Simon J. Russell, Helen Croker, Jessica Packer, Joseph Ward, Claire Stansfield et al., “School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks including COVID-19: a rapid systematic review”, *Lancet* 4 (May 2020): 397–404, doi: 10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30095-X.

<sup>14</sup> Spiegel Panorama, “Lernen fällt flach” (5 August 2020), [www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/corona-krise-schueler-haben-wenig-gelernt-ergebnisse-einer-ifo-studie-a-17958585-78b3-46d2-ae15-4d2e53790315](http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/corona-krise-schueler-haben-wenig-gelernt-ergebnisse-einer-ifo-studie-a-17958585-78b3-46d2-ae15-4d2e53790315)

<sup>15</sup> World Food Programme, “Futures of 370 million children in jeopardy as school closures deprive them of school meals – UNICEF and WFP” (29 April 2020), [www.wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp](http://www.wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp)

<sup>16</sup> Spiegel Panorama, “Für die Kinder in unserem Land wird gute Bildung zum Lotteriespiel” (24 August 2020), [www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/schulen-waehrend-corona-fuer-die-kinder-in-unserem-land-wird-gute-bildung-zum-lotteriespiel-a-73beb1b8-9c23-4eed-af38-cc76095d6298](http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/schulen-waehrend-corona-fuer-die-kinder-in-unserem-land-wird-gute-bildung-zum-lotteriespiel-a-73beb1b8-9c23-4eed-af38-cc76095d6298)

out a full-time job) and try to keep them occupied and help them learn.<sup>17</sup> In addition, families have had to stay at home in sometimes cramped and confined spaces without being able to count on external social support. Children and their parents have had to do without the support of important groups of people such as grandparents, other family members and friends. Grandparents or members of an extended family or members of village communities often play a critical role in family care and childcare, especially when parents work full-time. Layoffs due to business closures, long-term short-time work, isolation from normal social contacts, severe curfews, and concerns about physical and mental health and financial future:<sup>18</sup> the fears associated with all this are possible risk factors for the increase of domestic violence, abuse and exploitation of children, especially in pre-existing tense living conditions and precarious social circumstances.<sup>19</sup> Violent acts are more likely when families are virtually locked up at home and they suffer from severe stress and anxiety<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Helpful aspects and risk factors of social media use in times of lockdown

Digital communication technologies have played a crucial role in everyone's lives in recent months – especially children. First, they were employed to ensure continuity of learning during school closures by providing learning resources and lessons or contact with teachers online.

<sup>17</sup> Jörg M. Fegert, Benedetto Vitiello, Paul L. Plener, Vera Clemens, “Challenges and burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic for child and adolescent mental health: a narrative review to highlight clinical and research needs in the acute phase and the long return to normality”, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 14 (2020): 20, doi:10.1186/s13034-020-00329-3.

<sup>18</sup> Danny Horesh and Adam D Brown, “Traumatic stress in the age of COVID-19: a call to close critical gaps and adapt to new realities”, *Psychol Trauma* 12, 4 (May 2020): 331-335, doi: 10.1037/tra0000592.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, “UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horri-fying global surge’” (6 April 2020), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>; and UNICEF, “Childcare in a Global Crisis” (2020), <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1109-childcare-in-a-global-crisis-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-work-and-family-life.html>; and UNICEF, “Worlds of influence” (2020), <https://www.unicef-irc.org/child-well-being-report-card-16>

<sup>20</sup> Medical News Today, “‘Lessons never learned’ – How COVID-19 affects domestic violence rates” (24 April 2020), [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/lessons-never-learned-how-covid-19-affects-domestic-violence-rates](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/lessons-never-learned-how-covid-19-affects-domestic-violence-rates)

Second, social media platforms and online games gave children and adolescents the opportunity to maintain relationships with their friends. On the other hand, they were increasingly exposed to the risk of “oversharing”, i.e., the uncontrolled and inappropriate disclosure of private information and intimate content.<sup>21</sup> Add to this increased screen time, meaning the time children spend online increases the risk of falling into the hands of criminals.<sup>22</sup> Child sexual abuse livestreams increased<sup>23</sup> Pedocriminals have discussed on the dark web how they can exploit curfews to produce and distribute more child sexual abuse material.<sup>24</sup> Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) case reports to the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) cyber tip line doubled compared to prior year periods.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4. Psychological consequences of the lockdown on children and adolescents**

Experts were quick to point out the risk of negative psychological effects of the lockdown and pandemic on children and adolescents, with age and factors such as emotional and relational stability of the immediate environment playing a major role.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Europol, “Catching the virus cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic” (3 April 2020), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>22</sup> Europol, “Pandemic profiteering: how criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis” (6 December 2021), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/pandemic-profiteering-how-criminals-exploit-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>23</sup> NPR, “Child Sex Abuse Livestreams Increase During Coronavirus Lockdowns” (8 April 2020), [www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/08/828827926/child-sex-abuse-livestreams-increase-during-coronavirus-lockdowns?t=1596627017441](http://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/08/828827926/child-sex-abuse-livestreams-increase-during-coronavirus-lockdowns?t=1596627017441)

<sup>24</sup> Forbes, “Child Exploitation Complaints Rise 106% To Hit 2 Million In Just One Month: Is COVID-19 To Blame?” (24 April 2020), [www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#7851f3804c9c](http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#7851f3804c9c); and The Guardian, “Child abuse predator ‘handbook’ lists ways to target children during coronavirus lockdown” (13 May 2020), [www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/14/child-abuse-predator-handbook-lists-ways-to-target-children-during-coronavirus-lockdown](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/14/child-abuse-predator-handbook-lists-ways-to-target-children-during-coronavirus-lockdown)

<sup>25</sup> Forbes, “Online Child Abuse Complaints Surpass 4 Million In April. This Is How Cops Are Coping Despite COVID-19” (9 May 2020), [www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/05/09/online-child-abuse-complaints-surpass-4-million-in-april-this-is-how-cops-are-coping-despite-covid-19/#3a34d72848db](http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/05/09/online-child-abuse-complaints-surpass-4-million-in-april-this-is-how-cops-are-coping-despite-covid-19/#3a34d72848db)

<sup>26</sup> European Society for Child Adolescent Psychiatry, “Dealing with children and adolescent mental health during the Coronavirus pandemic” (2020), <https://www.>

Children respond to stress in a variety of ways: sleep disturbances or difficulty falling asleep, bedwetting, stomach-aches or headaches, anxiousness, withdrawal, anger, clinginess, or fear of being left alone. Adolescents may experience loneliness, sadness, depressive symptoms, anxiety, frustration, and anger. They may lose their sense of control, belonging, and connection.

The first scientifically validated evidence of the negative impact of prolonged quarantine on children's lives comes from a study of the situation in Italy and Spain, the two European countries that were particularly hard hit by the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> This study evidences a deterioration in emotional state and behavior, especially through concentration difficulties and of feelings such as boredom, irritability and loneliness. However, Spanish children seem to have been more affected than their Italian peers. According to the authors, this may be due to the fact that, when the study was conducted, Italian children had already been allowed short walks around the house, while in Spain this was not yet possible.

Quarantine hits particularly hard young people who had previously suffered from severe mental illnesses, such as autism spectrum disorders, psychoses or severe anxiety disorders. Children, especially those with pre-existing abnormalities and people suffering from mental disorders, need special support to deal with a fragile and unmanageable situation and to be able to withstand and channel the negative feelings that arise. For these individuals, the loneliness and lack of routine jeopardize their well-being and worsen their overall condition. Because of the temporary closure or curtailment of local support and assistance services, in most cases the necessary therapeutic interventions cannot be offered to this population group, which is particularly dependent on them. Even where attempts have been made to continue to offer support through online services, the elimination of face-to-face, on-site encounters does not provide for most the experience of care and attention they need.

## **5. The spiritual search**

Loneliness is a significant psychological factor that negatively impacts a person's mental health and well-being and can lead to anxiety, depression, and increased suicidality. Deteriorating health or death of partners and

[escap.eu/index/coronavirus-and-mental-health/dealing-with-children-and-adolescent-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic](https://escap.eu/index/coronavirus-and-mental-health/dealing-with-children-and-adolescent-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic)

<sup>27</sup> Mireia Orgilés, Alexandra Morales, Elisa Delveccio, Claudia Mazzeschi and José P. Espada, "Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain" (18 April 2020), <https://psyarxiv.com/5bpfz/>

friends gets in the way of maintaining a vibrant social circle with many and frequent encounters. The COVID-19 crisis has abruptly increased this always-and-everywhere hardship for many people. Whether they were left alone at home for the above reasons, or forced to remain in strictly segregated infectious wards or hospitals for several weeks or months, the unanticipated and extensive isolation was experienced by many as dramatic, distressing, and unsettling. The associated fear, uncertainty, cognitive dysfunction, and general dissatisfaction exacerbate serious physical symptoms such as heart disease and the like, and can lead to increased mortality rates, especially among the elderly, but not only among them.

It was even more astonishing that during the lockdown convincing answers and creative solutions from church bodies – parishes, dioceses, associations, etc. – on how to deal with these existential and spiritual challenges were lacking. This is all the more regrettable because children and young people were thus not given the opportunity to deal personally and spiritually with an unusual and challenging situation. It would have been a great opportunity to promote the spirituality of children by helping them to interpret the reality around them in a constructive way, to learn to deal with the losses they have suffered in relationships, the death of relatives and much more, and to cope with the uncertainty about their future. From a religious and spiritual perspective, the reference to finding the right priorities in life would have offered much potential.

## **6. Some concrete proposals for care and for protection of dignity**

Humanity will have to live with the effects of COVID-19 in the years to come, and measures must be taken to protect children and youth – as well as other groups such as the disabled, the elderly, the mentally ill, and the homeless – from the negative mental and physiological consequences of lockdown, while doing whatever is necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. Some specific measures include the following:<sup>28</sup>

- strengthening children’s resilience and nurturing their social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing by building safe spaces where they can feel seen and heard, share their emotions;

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also UNICEF, “6 ways parents can support their kids through the COVID-19 outbreak” (24 August 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/6-ways-parents-can-support-their-kids-through-coronavirus-covid-19>; and UNICEF, “How teachers can talk to children about coronavirus disease (COVID-19)” (8 September 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teachers-can-talk-children-about-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>



- exchanging their experiences and learning from one another how to replace time spent online or watching TV with other attractive healthy activities;
- interacting with their colleagues and their families in a positive way, with gratitude, appreciation, compassion, kindness;
- giving correct information about the COVID-19 pandemic and preventive measures;
- providing age-appropriate facts about what has happened, explaining what could happen in a reassuring way;
- giving them clear examples of what they can do to help protect themselves and others from infection;
- awareness campaigns, hotlines, and other services for children at risk of violence in their home or cyberbullying and online sexual exploitation;
- offering/suggesting safe e-learning environments.
- furthermore, some suggestions about what needs to be done at the political and societal level:
- raising awareness about increasing levels of violence against children in times of crisis and lockdown;
- helping create healthy, nurturing and safe environments for children during confinement, including online safety;
- supporting parents to nurture ethical values and spirituality in children within the family and in places of shelter.

## **7. Conclusion**

The manifold tensions arising from this – including the liberties of individuals versus concern for the well-being of the population as a whole; economic damage versus health risks – have led to a discussion about the meaningfulness and extent of the lockdown measures. For example, in the wake of contact restrictions, there has been talk of “collateral damage”, especially for at-risk groups such as the mentally ill, children and adolescents, and senior citizens, because of the potentially traumatizing effects. Experts expect a significant increase in post-traumatic stress disorders.<sup>29</sup> Thus, one

<sup>29</sup> Rhein Neckar Zeitung, “Trauma-Expertin erwartet mehr posttraumatische Belastungsstörungen” (16 May 2020), [www.rnz.de/wissen/wissenschaft-regional\\_artikel,-folgen-der-krise-trauma-expertin-erwartet-mehr-posttraumatische-belastungsstoerungen-\\_arid,514256.html](http://www.rnz.de/wissen/wissenschaft-regional_artikel,-folgen-der-krise-trauma-expertin-erwartet-mehr-posttraumatische-belastungsstoerungen-_arid,514256.html)

possible consequence of this pandemic is a higher incidence of psychosis, violence, divorce, and suicide. The question of whether the measures taken against the pandemic have a greater impact on mental health than the threat posed by COVID-19 itself will probably not be adequately discussed until some time has passed.

The current crisis, which we will be dealing with for years to come, will almost certainly lead to a reduction in the resources allocated by the government and other institutions to address abuse and maltreatment, as child protection has moved down the priority list. The temptation to weaken the commitment to safeguarding children and young people – and *mutatis mutandis* to vulnerable adults – because of other needs and imperatives perceived as more pressing will be very great. This will put us in a situation not unlike that observed in other parts of the world, where existential emergencies such as war, famine, natural disasters, and the like have captured everyone’s attention. If issues such as health and the economic consequences of lockdown are now such a central focus even in economically well-off countries, then even in countries where there is a relatively high standard of protection from sexualized and other violence, it is to be expected that the focus will be diverted from child protection and a serious discussion about ways of safeguarding will be pushed aside.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, then, the difficult economic and public health situation provides another weighty reason to push the unpleasant topic of child abuse even further away. Without adequate funding for prevention, intervention, legal aid, and treatment services, psychologists, social workers, and others cannot effectively protect children in the midst of this national and international crisis. The inclination will be to cut back or reallocate appropriate resources.

This is all the more pernicious because, in times of lockdown, the risks are significantly greater that protected children of all ages will become victims of forms of violence. Because these assaults and offenses take place behind closed doors, the marks of abuse (physical bruises or fractures, as well as trauma, shame, and other long-term consequences associated with sexual abuse) will not become apparent until later – in most cases, much later...

It is essential to keep the dignity of young people in mind when developing ways to change everyday life and when offering strategies for caring and dealing with stressful and potentially traumatic situations. One

<sup>30</sup> Dirk Witteveen and Eva Velthorst, “Economic hardship and mental health complaints during COVID-19”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, 44 (November 2020): 27277–27284, doi: 10.1073/pnas.2009609117.

of the first goals should be to develop sustained research to understand this complex situation more fully and better assess the potential correlates with mental health and social well-being. Among the basic findings of the responses to the coronavirus should be that special attention be paid to mental, social, and spiritual well-being, not only but especially with regard to those groups of people who have been the subject of our consideration: children and youth. For this to happen, policy makers would need to be offered evidence-based programs so that the medium- and long-term psychological effects of a pandemic can also be taken into account in the democratic decision-making process when implementing the necessary health and safety measures. Only in this way will it be possible to protect and preserve the dignity of the younger generations in our care.

# EDUCATING THE COVID GENERATION

**STEFANIA GIANNINI**

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As I write this contribution, we are in the midst of escalating military attacks in the heart of Europe, with accounts of human suffering among civilians, potentially changing the course of history.

This strikes as we struggle to emerge from a global health crisis.

The interventions heard since this morning all ring the alarm on the devastating consequences of this pandemic on children and youth. It is an emotional, social, academic and economic toll – in short, a deep human recession.

Six months into the pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres had warned of a generational catastrophe, urging governments to reopen schools as quickly and safely as possible. The term has stayed in our vocabulary.

Coming from the perspective of the UN agency charged with education at all levels, I wish to share a few further insights into lessons emerging from this pandemic, and why they are a clarion call for transformation.

Today, two years into the pandemic, schools have reopened in a majority of countries after closures that ranged from a world average of 20 weeks to more than a full school year in many Latin American countries and, in some cases, beyond that, such as in Uganda where schools were shut for 80 weeks.

At the peak of the crisis, 90% of the world's student population – over 1.5 billion learners – were locked out of schools. This is without historical parallel. School reopenings do not equate with the end of a crisis – it would be dangerous to consider that back to school is back to normal. Over 400 million students in some 40 countries are still learning in hybrid mode, demanding adjustments in teaching and learning. The scars of this experience run deep.

UNESCO estimates that 24 million children may never make it back to school, swelling out of school numbers. Poverty, child labour, early marriage and unintended teenage pregnancies are all factors shrinking the right to education.

A joint report with UNICEF and the World Bank estimates that the number of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries who are unable to read or understand a simple story could reach up to 70 percent,

from the already dramatic 53%.<sup>1</sup> This same report estimates that the pandemic could cost this generation of students close to \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings.

We are not paying the price of inaction over the period, but of a pre-existing crisis that has collided with a global pandemic, laying bare deep fault lines in how education is managed and conducted.

### **The technology conundrum**

At stunning pace, governments everywhere reacted nearly overnight to pivot entire education systems to a distance learning modus operandi, using a mix of low to high tech, from radio and television to online platforms. This innovation and agility cannot be shunned – it was a race to keep learning afloat. But it would be disingenuous to say that technology saved the day and holds a golden key to universalize access and bring home better report cards.

We caution against the over-reliance on technology for learning and the uncritical acceptance that the digital transformation of education is desirable, inevitable and a pillar of educational resilience. Overwhelming evidence goes against the oft-heard mantra that technology will enable education to “leap-frog” to a better future. The “anywhere, anytime” learning sometimes associated with technology has actually proven elusive.

For nearly 500 million learners it was a solution that never started and for millions more, one that quickly broke down. Half the world’s population lack a functional internet connection. Over 700 million people don’t have access to electricity. In many low-income countries, less than 10% of children and adolescents are connected, against 90% in high-income ones. The cost of devices – even the cheapest available smartphone – and mobile plans – is simply prohibitive for poor families.

*When schools shut*, our global study exposing the gendered impact of school closures,<sup>2</sup> further points out that the gender digital divide significantly constrained girls’ ability to learn online.

We saw digital inequalities play out everywhere, including in the world’s most advanced countries.

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF. *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (2021).

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO. *When Schools Shut: Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures* (2021).

Beyond the hardware dimension, many other variables further prevented Ed tech from being a ready-to-go solution: teachers' readiness to use technology – only half of middle-income countries offered training on digital skills during the pandemic; available space to learn at home, the ability of families to support their children's learning; the economic pressures...

### **Development impacts beyond education**

This is why school closures come with cascading effects that supercharge inequalities. This was far more than deprivation of education. Globally, about 370 million children missed out on school meals and essential health services. Hunger and poor physical and mental health will also make it harder for children to return to class, and to learn when they are back.

Our surveys found that in many low and middle countries, girls shouldered an even greater burden of domestic responsibilities, while boys' participation in learning was often limited by the need to earn an income.

Prolonged isolation, fear, loss and other factors have brought issues of mental health to the forefront. Our joint Responses to Educational Disruption Survey<sup>3</sup> found that 50% of students interviewed felt overwhelmed by the pandemic, with the most vulnerable students expressing a loss of confidence in their ability to learn. Various studies from the US, the UK and by the OECD report increases in depression, anxiety, mental health emergencies and suspected suicide attempts.

And although global data is limited, evidence shows that cyberbullying has been on the rise, with girls between the age of 11 and 13 increasingly at risk of being targeted by online sexual predators. In short, the COVID-19 generation has been faced with two years of tremendous uncertainty and disruption in their lives. This is a generation that could see inequalities and poverty increase. And it is a generation growing up with the anxiety of climate change; with rapid digital transformation affecting every aspect of life and creating new divides; with an increase in intolerance fueled by social media, and with a loss of trust between people and institutions.

### **Tackling the recovery with vision: Futures report**

What are the implications of all this? What has to be put in march for this generation to recover and thrive? Education is their right and the

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education: international evidence from the Responses to Educational Disruption Survey* (2021).

strongest anchor to shape a sustainable future. The crisis of the past two years has magnified the shortcomings of education systems.

The urgency of the learning recovery has to be tackled through a much bolder and braver rethinking of education – of its purposes, its contents and delivery models.

Times of crisis call for vision, for acts of faith, just like those that founded the United Nations or that saw the genesis of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. At several turning points in recent history, UNESCO has spearheaded an exercise to set out a renewed vision for educational transformation and encourage research and policy change.

As my friend Professor Reimers has already evoked, our Futures of Education report,<sup>4</sup> under an International Commission led by the President of Ethiopia, offers such a vision as the basis for reimagining our futures together. Interestingly, it was planned before the pandemic. It calls for a new social contract in education to rebalance our relationships with each other, with technology and with the planet. It makes the case for pedagogies that emphasize cooperation and solidarity, not competition, and for curricula that prize ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning. Such a social contract is grounded in two principles: ensuring the right to quality education throughout life; and strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good.

In a world that remains deeply interdependent despite escalating tensions, we more than ever need education to build personal and collective capacities for transformation. This is not a utopia – it provides a direction to guide a human-centered recovery.

UNESCO has been setting the ground for transformative education, through education for sustainable development and global citizenship, for health and well-being, to empower students with the values and knowledge to act for positive change – to protect our endangered environment, to reject discrimination on and offline, and strengthen peace and non-violence.

Education is a dynamic process of interaction with the world – our response to the current education emergency cannot be piecemeal. Learning from the detrimental impacts of school closures, we must get priorities right and seize the opportunity to steer the recovery in the direction of inclusion, equity and sustainability.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. *Reimagining our Futures Together. A new social contract for education. Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education* (2021).

## Key dimensions of the recovery mission

I see a few gold standards to make this happen. As the pandemic has demonstrated everywhere, schools are far more than a locus for learning. They are spaces for growing together, social interaction, protection, nutrition and essential services. I have evoked the academic and psychological toll of closures.

The first step of an *inclusive recovery is to get all kids back to school and learning*, in safe environments. Every school needs the capacity to assess learning losses and put in place remedial programmes – whether through targeted instruction, consolidating the curriculum or extending instructional time.

But a successful recovery has to go beyond the academic, especially for the most vulnerable children, acting on all the barriers that keep them out of school or not learning. Comprehensive school health and nutrition programmes, including school feeding, are essential to support vulnerable children’s education, health and overall well-being, particularly in times of crisis.

This is why UNESCO is working with UN partners, such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme and WHO to step up school health and nutrition, and has also joined the School Meals Coalition, to give every child in need the opportunity to receive a healthy meal in school by 2030, together with other essential school health interventions.

Second, *teachers and the teaching profession*. Teachers carry tremendous responsibility – they are the center stage actors of this recovery just as they have been on the frontlines throughout the crisis. They have demonstrated incredible resilience and dedication. Now they must be better recognized and supported, and directly involved in the design and use of technology in their practice.

This brings me to how we *steer the digital transformation for inclusion and equity*. Education and knowledge cannot be treated as private commodities. They are global common goods that provide collective benefits. Supported by Dubai Cares, we gathered experts and led consultations to chart a new course for connected learning. The result is the Global Declaration on Connectivity for education that puts forward three key principles: centering innovation on the most marginalized; expanding investing in open, free and high-quality digital contents; and supporting pedagogical innovation. This provides a roadmap for unlocking the potential of technology to advance inclusive education, on the principles of human rights and equity.



## **Towards the Summit and beyond**

Our challenge today is humanistic and ethical: we have a collective responsibility towards the COVID-19 generation to make education a public good and involve youth in protecting, defending it and co-creating a new model.

The United Nations Secretary General has called for a Transforming Education Summit next September to unite world leaders, all education stakeholders and young people around these fundamental questions. It should catalyze a movement around education.

The Summit aims to make education a top political priority for the recovery and beyond. This will take a surge in financing. Education's share of total public spending has remained stagnant over the past 20 years, at about 14 percent. The funding deficit could hit 200 billion dollars a year, up from a pre-pandemic estimate of 148 billion dollars without investment in re-enrolment and remedial programs. This is the urgency to boost education's share in recovery plans. On average, developed countries allocate 3 percent; a figure that drops to one percent in lower income countries. Education is not a standalone goal – it is a societal endeavour and it needs all society behind it.

Children and youth themselves living in most deprived circumstances – in conflict-affected situations – are asking for education, for this human right. This is their hope and future.

Parents are ready to make enormous sacrifices to keep their children in school. This is why the Global Compact launched by Pope Francis in 2020 carries such meaning to UNESCO. It is about solidarity and reimagining our future together. Education must be the main driver for building societies based on solidarity, respect and tolerance – societies that value and promote an ethics of care.

As his Holiness affirmed at the inter-religious dialogue last October at the Vatican, “All change requires an educational process aimed at developing new solidarity and a more welcoming society”. This is the new grammar we need for the coming years. So let us here – through research, advocacy and collaboration – irrigate this transformation

## **Post-script: Transforming Education Summit**

Since this workshop took place, the global context has become all the more fragile with the war in Ukraine taking a heavy toll on civilians and on infrastructure, with close to 2700 educational institutions having suffered

from bombing and shelling.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting once again our interdependence, the consequences are felt well beyond European frontiers, with rising food and energy prices and the forecasts of a global recession looming.

It is in this context that world leaders came together at the United Nations Transforming Education summit in September 2022, as mentioned in the above piece. For the first time, education was elevated to the top of political agendas in the face of a crisis demanding transformative measures to recover learning losses and equip all learners with the knowledge, skills and competences they need to live in dignity and shape more sustainable and peaceful futures.

Leading up to the summit, 150 countries organized broad consultations moving education into a more democratic space by connecting policy-makers, teachers, students, civil society and other partners. The results of these consultations are telling and encouraging because they reflect an awareness that business as usual is failing too many learners. Three quarters of countries referenced measures to offset the costs of education for economically vulnerable communities. Some 80 percent of countries acknowledged in-service training and professional development as a key determinant of teacher motivation and retention. Interestingly, rethinking curricula content and methods was reflected in 80% of statements. Many countries placed strong emphasis on competency-based and interdisciplinary approaches. Digital learning was referenced in 80% of commitments, including to universalize broadband internet connectivity.<sup>6</sup>

At the Summit itself, 65 heads of state and government shared their national visions and statements of commitment. The outcomes are crystallized in six calls to action that connect recovery and transformation, break silos and nurture local ecosystems. Their success depends on the mobilization of a range of public and private partners, on financing, and of course on youth and teachers.

The call on foundational learning commits to halving the global share of children who can't read or understand a simple text by age ten. The Greening Partnership initiated by UNESCO aims to make every learner climate ready, with a focus on schools, teachers, curricula and communities. The initiative on Gateways to Public Digital Learning aims to ensure

<sup>5</sup> Ukraine Ministry of Education and Science (14 October). UNESCO compiles daily assessments of damages based on this source.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis conducted by UNESCO based on national statements and consultations. Analysis of National Statements of Commitment ([sdg4education2030.org](https://sdg4education2030.org))

access to open and free national learning platforms. Commitments were also made to catalyze transformative action for gender equality and to do justice to the staggering 222 million children youth affected by crisis whose education is on the line.

All these calls for action rely on raising the status of the teaching profession, ensuring they have decent working conditions and continuous training and learning opportunities to transform how they teach.

The Secretary-General's vision statement on Transforming Education<sup>7</sup> to meet our higher purposes calls for action in four areas:

- First, it stresses the need to ensure learning environments that support the development of all learners – ones that promote inclusion, prevent and address all forms of violence; support learners' nutrition, physical and mental health.
- Secondly, it stresses that teachers are the backbone of all good education systems. To fulfill their essential roles, however, change is needed in how societies view and value teachers, and how teachers approach their roles and fulfill their responsibilities, including through broadening their capacity, agency and autonomy.
- Thirdly, the statement calls for harnessing the digital revolution for the benefit of public education by unlocking the three keys of digital learning – connectivity, capacities and content.
- Finally, it appeals for investing more, more equitably and more efficiently in education because put simply, the cost of not financing education is much higher than the cost of financing it.

Such transformation requires collective leadership – from political leaders to parents, students, teachers and the public at large.

Young people, in particular, are at the heart of this effort. Youth were the face of this Summit and presented their own Declaration<sup>8</sup> to the Secretary-General that presents a common vision for transforming education, coming out of consultations with nearly half a million youth from 170 countries.

<sup>7</sup> “Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future. Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education”. United Nations Transforming Education Summit 2022. Vision Statement of Secretary-General on Transforming Education | United Nations

<sup>8</sup> Youth Declaration on Transforming Education. United Nations Transforming Education Summit 2022.

The Declaration sets out the stakes: “If we are to survive and thrive in planetary peace and righteous equality, then education is our primary source of hope and resolution. In order to redeem and remake the state of the world, we must first transform the state of education”.

While making demands to be fully engaged in decision-making on transforming education, youth make it clear that they are already at the “forefront of driving change, pioneering innovations, mobilizing our peers and communities and working from the ground up to transform education”.

Their Declaration captures all the links between education, climate justice, gender equality, inclusion, jobs, and sustainable development.

The Summit was a turning point in the reflection it generated, the commitments made at the highest level, and the engagement of youth. Everyone has a role in keeping the momentum so that education stays firmly on political agenda as a human right, a public good and a force that is transformational for individuals and societies.

# **FROM LOSS TO HOPE. PARADOXICAL EDUCATIONAL EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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The dominant narrative of the educational results of the pandemic focuses on what was lost, and on what governments failed to do and should do going forward. This narrative is not inaccurate, but it is incomplete in two ways. First, it ignores the many flaws of education systems prior to the pandemic. Second, it reflects and reinforces a top-down view of the process of educational change resulting from the agency of governments. This narrative blinds us to the collective efforts that involve other actors besides governments, local actors and translational actors, public actors, and civil society and to the necessity of not just restoring the levels of functioning of education systems to their pre-pandemic levels but to transform them. This narrative is counterproductive because it limits our thinking about how to address the obvious educational losses created by the pandemic. A more capacious narrative can help us see possibilities in the agency of other actors and can animate the collective leadership necessary for the bold transformations in education which is needed to build a more just and sustainable world.

The pandemic of COVID-19 was the most significant shock to education systems globally since public education was first ‘invented’ as one of the institutions of the enlightenment (along with public research universities and with democracy). This shock interrupted learning opportunities for most children, in many cases during a very protracted period. There is reason to be concerned about the long-term consequences of such educational losses because they will diminish the life opportunities for individuals and their ability to contribute to their communities. It is for this reason that efforts to recover such education loss are crucial.

However, just as important, are the efforts exerted during the pandemic by educators, communities, organizations of civil society, governments, and international organizations to sustain educational opportunity, and the efforts they continue to exert to recover opportunity in the face of the grave challenges created by the pandemic. These efforts created and

deepened new and significant forms of collaboration and of educational innovation, among teachers, among organizations of civil society and government agencies, and among international organizations.

In some respects, the crisis created by the pandemic brought the whole world together to try to sustain the powerful idea, universally adopted in the wake of another global tragedy World War II, that all people have a right to be educated. Paradoxically, a plague that brought about much loss in educational opportunity, also renewed the hope that education was the cornerstone to build a more just and sustainable world and reminded us that the global education movement to advance education comprises not just governments, but local and translational actors, teachers, students and communities, and that the process of educational change depends not just on top down government initiatives, but on bottom up innovation and on lateral collaborative initiatives.

### **The effects of the pandemic on education**

In March 2020, soon after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, education authorities and administrators were surveyed in a cross-national survey inquiring about the anticipated effects of the pandemic. Most respondents acknowledged that the plans were insufficient and anticipated great difficulty in continuing to educate for as long as in person instruction was interrupted.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, respondents foresaw increased educational inequality as the result of the differential effectiveness with which the plans to educate during the pandemic would be reaching poor and socially marginalized children. The survey revealed that few education authorities had, at that moment, a coherent education strategy (or any strategy for that matter) for how to educate during the pandemic. These early predictions proved, for the most part, accurate.

The pandemic produced the worst educational calamity in the history of public education. With schools closed, the ways in which students knew to learn and teachers knew to teach were interrupted, and the alternative arrangements which were made to teach during that period were, in many cases, improvisational and of varying effectiveness. School closures translated into students not learning what was expected they would be learning, and some students regressed, sliding back in some of the competencies

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Reimers and Andreas Schleicher, *A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020* (Paris: OECD, 2020a).

they had already gained prior to the closures.<sup>2</sup> The deficient arrangements to sustain student engagement led some of them to drop out. Estimates of the likely impact of the pandemic on secondary graduation rates in seventeen Latin American countries indicate that only 32% of children will be able to complete secondary school, down from 52% before the pandemic, a decline that brings those graduation rates to levels of the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Learning loss, lost opportunity to learn and dropout rates were greater for the most marginalized children not just because the arrangements made to educate them were less effective, but because their families were less able to compensate for such shortcomings with additional supports in the form of parental help or additional tutoring. The interruption of schools also interrupted the distribution of school meals and other psychosocial services, affecting marginalized students disproportionately. In addition, the pandemic impacted the poor through other channels – creating income and food insecurity, for instance – or exposing the children of the poor to greater violence at home and in communities, and this compounded the unequal effects of school closures, further increasing inequality.

In the summer of 2020, Save the Children conducted a survey of children and families in 46 countries to examine the impact of the crisis, focusing on participants in their programs, other populations of interest, and the public. The report of the findings for program participants – which include predominantly vulnerable children and families – documents violence at home, reported in one third of the households. Children also reported an increase in household chores assigned to them, 63% for girls and 43% for boys, and 20% of the girls said their chores were too many to be able to devote time to their studies, compared to 10% of boys.<sup>4</sup>

It was not just the deficient approaches to educate during the pandemic, and the compounding effects of the pandemic on income and health that limited the educational opportunities of poor children, it was also the differences in the responses of the various educational streams into which students of various social strata are sorted out, with poor children often

<sup>2</sup> Robin Donnelly and Harry Patrinos, “Learning loss during COVID-19: An early systematic review”. *Covid Economics*, 77 (30 April 2021), 145-153.

<sup>3</sup> Guido Neidhofer, Nora Lustig and Mariano Tommasi, “Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of Covid-19 in Latin America”. *The Journal of Economic Inequality*. July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Daniela Ritz, Georgina O’Hare & Melissa Burgess, *The hidden impact of COVID-19 on child protection and wellbeing* (Washington DC: Save the Children International, 2020).

segregated into schools of low quality, that magnified the losses for the children of the poor. Furthermore, the educational responses of governments around the world to the pandemic varied widely, with some governments prioritizing education and school openings, while others kept schools closed for much longer periods of time. These differences persisted over time as some governments eventually implemented programs to support teachers and students in teaching remotely, or to help students recover learning loss, whereas others did not. These differences reflected policy choices, levels of institutional capacity and contextual differences resulting from varying levels of resources and infrastructure, for instance percentage of the population vaccinated.<sup>5</sup>

Weaker health infrastructure and other resource and capacity constraints in lower income countries, including limitations in the ability to procure and distribute vaccines, compounded the impact of the pandemic on populations in those countries and in this way aggravated the educational impact as well. As was the case in other spheres such as public health and economic participation, the global education recovery from the pandemic was a two-track process. In high income countries schools reopened earlier and students experienced relatively lower losses in education because the strategies of remote learning were more effective. In contrast, in lower income countries, which experienced longer school closures and where the strategies of remote education were least effective, interruption of schooling continued for extended periods for many students.<sup>6</sup>

Four UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank-OECD cross-national surveys carried out between 2020 and 2022 revealed considerable differences in the country education responses by level of income of the country and by world region. In the first two years since the outbreak of the pandemic schools were closed, on average, 20 weeks, but school closures were much longer in South Asia (35 weeks) and Latin America (37 weeks).<sup>7</sup>

These differences between the disruption that the pandemic caused to educational opportunity in the Global North and the Global South, mirror the differences in addressing the public health crisis, and in the prospects

<sup>5</sup> Fernando Reimers (Ed.), *Primary and Secondary Education during COVID-19* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer. 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Reimers (Ed.), *Primary and Secondary Education during COVID-19*.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. *From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation. Insights and reflections from the 4th survey on national education responses to COVID-19 School Closures* (Paris: UNESCO. 2022), 7.



of social and economic recovery. As a result, students in the Global South experienced the combined effects of the disruption on their schools, on their health systems, economies, and home circumstances. In addition, education systems in the Global South were already experiencing more serious education challenges of access, low effectiveness, and relevance, while their education systems experienced greater funding gaps. The resulting interactions of these various processes place educational opportunity in the Global South at serious risk of suffering the most significant setback in history. A simulation of the impact of a full year of learning loss estimated it as a 7.7% decline in discounted GDP.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF estimated the cost of the education disruption as a \$17 trillion dollars in lost lifetime earnings in present value over time for the current generation of students, or 14 percent of today's GDP.<sup>9</sup>

A comparative study of the educational effects of the pandemic in Brazil, Chile, Finland, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, and the United States concludes that the education losses were the result of impacts of the pandemic on poverty and household conditions, as well as the result of insufficient capacity of remote instruction to adequately sustain opportunity to learn. The study shows different educational consequences of the pandemic by country and social class. The mechanisms through which the pandemic influenced educational opportunity, augmenting inequality, included both the responses of the education system as well as the direct health and economic impact of the pandemic on students, teachers, families, and communities. The main direct pathway limiting education comprised the interruption of in-person instruction, the duration of such interruption, and the adoption of a variety of education modalities during the period of suspension of in person schooling of varied efficacy. A secondary direct pathway included the constrains on education spending caused by the reduced fiscal space resulting from the unforeseen need to finance the health and economic response to address the health crisis. This finding is congruent with a recent cross-national study which documents that the pandemic diminished levels of education spending, particularly in low and lower middle-income countries.<sup>10</sup> Other

<sup>8</sup> Eric A. Hanushek & Ludger Woessmann, *The economic impact of learning losses*. Education Working Papers, No 225. OECD Publishing (September 2020).

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank. *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (Washington, DC: the World Bank. December 2021).

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. *From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation*, 42.

pathways influencing students, their families and teachers directly included the impact on health as well as the impact of the pandemic on income.

This comparative study showed also that education systems were in varying stages of readiness to sustain educational opportunity in the face of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Those differences included access to connectivity at home and skills to learn and teach online, as well as level of resources, capacities, and institutional structures to meet gaps during the emergency. Similar gaps were observed in teacher capacity. Institutional fragmentation and school segregation contributed to augmenting inequality.

This comparative study and other studies of the effects of the pandemic show that the story of the educational effects of the pandemic is not a single story, but a story largely mediated by nationality – as national policy choices and institutional capacity and resources shaped the duration of school closures and the effectiveness of policy responses – and by social class – as the social circumstances of students shaped the educational institutions they had access to and the support they received from parents and from their schools. The educational impact of the pandemic proved then to be a quintessential ‘Matthew effect’, a term coined by sociologist Robert Merton<sup>11</sup> drawing on the parable of the talents, to describe how unequal initial conditions often compound inequalities:

“For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him, that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

— *Matthew 25:24-30*

In making education more unequal, the pandemic diminished the capacity of schools to be an avenue of hope for the poor that their children may have more opportunities than they did in life, and less able to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. But paradoxically, the pandemic also stimulated new thinking about education, new partnerships, and increased hope on the importance of education.

This renewed hope in education, and the innovation dividend generated during the pandemic, will become increasingly important to address the deep education crisis accelerated by COVID-19. Particularly as the idea that the pandemic will be ‘controlled’ in any absolute sense appears

<sup>11</sup> Robert K. Merton, “The Matthew Effect in Science”, *Science*. 159 (3810): 56-63. 1968.

increasingly elusive, as new strands of the virus develop and the aspiration of ‘herd immunity’ seems one that will not materialize anytime soon. At the end of September of 2022, there were still 444,000 new cases per day, and while the proportion of those who would turn to fatalities was much lower than had been the case earlier during the pandemic’s course, over 1,000 were dying each day.<sup>12</sup>

### **Beyond learning loss. The education silver-linings of the pandemic**

It should not be surprising that the pandemic produced an educational calamity, arguably the worst crisis in the history of public education. After all, shocks such as natural disasters or wars typically interrupt the functioning of schools and the lives of students, negatively impacting their learning. What should really surprise us is that during a global crisis of such intensity there would be so much interest, effort, and collaboration to sustain educational opportunity. International development and civil society organizations demonstrated extraordinary leadership maintaining attention on the importance to sustain education during the crisis and offering various forms of support. These efforts made visible that the global education movement which emerged when education was included as one of the rights included in the universal declaration of human rights adopted in 1948, is a movement of *collective leadership* that includes governments at all levels, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, teachers, students and parents and that education is more of a *whole of humanity* effort than a government effort.

Inter alia, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the OECD increased inter-agency coordination, resulting in four waves of surveys to monitor the government responses to the pandemic, in various policy frameworks to offer guidance to respond to the pandemic and in other forms of collaboration. These and other international development organizations launched specific COVID-19 related initiatives during the pandemic, to support governments in sustaining educational opportunity. The United Nations convened a global summit on education in September of 2022 to call for a renewed priority to education in the wake of the pandemic. At the summit, UN Secretary General António Guterres issued a vision statement calling for a deep transformation of education as an urgent political imperative of our collective future. He underscored the crisis

<sup>12</sup> World Health Organization. *WHO Coronavirus Dashboard*. <https://covid19.who.int/> accessed September 28, 2022.

of education represented in the large number of children excluded from education and in the lack of relevance of education, challenges aggravated by the pandemic, and called for reimagining and transforming education so that individuals would be empowered to build a more just, sustainable, resilient, and peaceful future.<sup>13</sup>

These themes echoed those of *Reimagining Our Futures Together. A New Social Contract for Education* the report of UNESCO's international commission on the futures of education, chaired by Ethiopia's president Sahle-Work Zewde and written during the pandemic. This report calls for a new social contract of education which guarantees each person a quality education throughout life, and for a bold reimagining of the culture of education transforming curriculum, pedagogy, the teaching profession, the organization of educational institutions and the ecosystem of organizations that support lifelong learning. To achieve such transformation, the report proposed four catalytic actions: broad and inclusive societal dialogue that would empower each person as a changemaker, more educational research and innovation, greater involvement of universities with the rest of the educational eco-system, and a reimagined international cooperation architecture.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, national, and international civil society organizations as well as businesses, marshalled resources, and innovations to support education. Governments, at the local, state, and national level, advanced novel ways to sustain education. The latest interagency report documenting governments' responses to the pandemic based on responses collected between May and July of 2022 shows both decisive steps in sustaining education and heterogeneity in governments' responses. For instance, half of the countries took special measures to re-enroll all students in school, such as automatic re-enrollment, mobilization campaigns, and cash transfers for poor families. Most countries implemented programs to provide support to students affected by the pandemic. Over four in five countries implemented programs of teacher professional development to support remote instruction. About 70 percent of the countries continued programs to assess student learning, but less than half conducted studies of the impact of closures on learning outcomes, and only half of those assessed non-cognitive skills.

<sup>13</sup> António Guterres, *Transforming Education. An urgent political imperative for our collective future. Vision Statement of the UN Secretary General at The Education Summit* September 19, 2022, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO. *Reimagining Our Futures Together. A New Social Contract of Education. A Report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education* (Paris: UNESCO. 2021).

Half of the countries re-prioritized curriculum to help students recover learning loss. About two thirds of the countries implemented programs to provide psychosocial and mental health support to students.<sup>15</sup>

The educational impact of the pandemic should thus be evaluated not just with respect to the counterfactual of a world in which COVID-19 would not have infected 613 million people and taken the lives of 6.5 million, as it had up until the end of September of 2022, but also against a counterfactual in which education could have been ignored until the health crisis could be brought under control. The fact that education was not ignored, that it was in fact one of the top priorities of educators, education authorities, governments, and societies, speaks to the normalization of the idea that education is indeed a human right and to the crystallization of the global education movement.

It is also misguided to estimate the educational effects of the pandemic by reference to some standard of education before the pandemic because educational opportunity before the pandemic was barely adequate, too many children failed to learn, and too many learned knowledge and skills of little consequence to improve their lives or their communities.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore necessary to keep in mind, in assessing the educational impact of the pandemic, that such impact happened to education systems which were, in many ways, failing students, not only in the low levels of efficacy of schools in instructing the basic literacies of reading and math, but their low levels of relevancy in defining too narrowly the outcomes of schools and in failing to educate the whole child, addressing cognitive as well as socio-emotional dimensions of development.

Paradoxically, in disrupting the functioning of schools and education systems, in upending the rules that ordinarily govern such institutions, the pandemic created the occasion for new and different ways of teaching and learning, as well as novel forms of organization and collaboration which resulted in pedagogical and curricular innovations. While these efforts were insufficient to prevent the educational effects which have been documented, these ‘positive outliers’ these programmatic and policy interventions to educate during the challenging context created by the pandemic, are of interest

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. *From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation. Insights and reflections from the 4th survey on national education responses to COVID-19 School Closures* (Paris: UNESCO. 2022).

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 2018. Learning to Realize Education’s Promise* (Washington, DC. 2018.)

because of what they can teach us about the capacity of educational institutions to innovate during extremely challenging contexts and because they represent potential solutions to pre-existing deficiencies of the education system, contributing to more ambitious aspirations to transform education.

The pandemic represented a significant disruption, of unprecedented scale, which tested the organizational resiliency of education and upended many of the bureaucratic norms that govern education systems. Such disruption of education systems created a rare event in which the normal boundaries, constraints and roles that regulate the behavior of individuals in education organizations were suspended, in this way freeing the practices and interactions among educational actors and institutions allowing new forms of collaboration leading to novel ways to teach and learn. Even as the pandemic created other, new, constraints and challenges – resulting for example from the social distancing norms instituted by public health authorities to contain the velocity of the spread of the virus, or from inadequate resources or infrastructure to rapidly shift to digital platforms – it was precisely the existence of those new challenges and constraints, together with the temporary freedoms, which created the occasion for educational innovation.

Recognizing this innovation dividend of the pandemic is essential because recovering from the pandemic will require not that we find a way to bring education systems to their levels of pre-pandemic functioning, but to greater levels of effectiveness and relevance and this education renaissance will require innovation.

During the period between April 2020 and June 2021, my colleagues in the Global Education Innovation initiative and I, in partnership with colleagues in several international education institutions, conducted a series of studies of such innovation dividend.

The first was an effort to document emerging efforts of education continuity during the early phase of school closures, beginning in April of 2020. Between April and July 2020, we wrote 45 case studies of innovations to sustain educational continuity. Our approach was inspired in some of the basic tenets of appreciative inquiry, an approach to action research and organizational change that consists of identifying and leveraging areas of strengths in organizations, to support further improvement.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, D. and Jacqueline M. Stavros, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook for Leaders of Change* (Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Publishing, Inc. 2004).

The 45 case studies covered education responses to the crisis in thirty-four countries, efforts from municipal, state, and national governments, from school networks, from private and public institutions. The countries we covered varied in terms of resource level, infrastructure, size, and other characteristics. They included: Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, Finland, France, Ghana, India, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Russia, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Spain, Taipei, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, Vietnam, and Zambia.<sup>18</sup>

The case studies included initiatives such as using radio, printed materials, educational television, and a variety of digital platforms, with and without internet, to sustain educational opportunity. They also included initiatives to develop the capacities of teachers to teach remotely, and to support parents as they supported the education of children at home. Some of them focused on novel ways to assess student knowledge remotely.

The 45 innovations focused on a range of educational outcomes, from maintaining students' engagement with learning – in activities of review of previously covered material – to covering new content in academic subjects, to supporting the well-being and socio-emotional development of students.

Most of these cases address competencies beyond cognition, recognizing perhaps the salience of socio-emotional well-being during the crisis, and the foundational nature of attending to such well-being before any other form of learning could be productive. Among the conditions which enabled the innovations examined in these cases were preexisting networks across schools, and in some cases across schools in different countries.

The cases also illustrate the power of collaboration, as the innovations involved, in many cases, the collaboration among teachers, and other stakeholders: members of the community, civil society organizations, and the private sector. To some extent the case studies illustrate collective leadership, in which various stakeholders come together to collaborate for the purpose of improving the performance of the education system.

Such was the case, for instance, in the State of Sao Paulo in Brazil which developed in a matter of weeks a multi-media center, which delivered education content via TV, radio, an app and printed materials, to sustain educational continuity during the period of school closures because of

<sup>18</sup> Stephan Vincent-Lancrin, Cristobal Cobo and Fernando Reimers, *How learning continued during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Paris: OECD, 2022).

establishing partnerships with private providers and organizations of civil society. Of particular interest is the fact that this invitation to share leadership and responsibility extended by the State Ministry of Education to some of the most influential business leaders in the State, was followed by donations of services from telecommunication and education companies, which allowed the creation of the center, amounting to 0.6% of the annual education budget of the State. Several different organizations collaborated in providing access to various elements of the education platform to students, for example, police officers visited the homes of the most marginalized students to deliver printed materials, and donated cloud computing time to host the technology platform.

Many of the cases involve using digital platforms to support teacher collaboration among teachers and administrators, within and across schools, and of education resource digital networks, in sharing practices they had found effective in teaching remotely, and in problem solving together. While there is nothing novel in the creation of professional learning communities or in shared repositories of education resources, the pandemic immersed teachers in the use of digital platforms to teach and to participate in such professional learning communities.

Between June and December of 2021, we conducted a second study of 31 educational innovations generated during the pandemic, this time examining to what extent those innovations aligned with the recommendations of UNESCO's most recent report on the Futures of Education. Our intent was to examine whether the context of disruption created by the pandemic had allowed innovations dividend aligned with transformational aspirations.<sup>19</sup>

These thirty-one case studies of innovations focused on innovations to support learning from home. Some of them involved multimedia platforms or other technological platforms to support students, teachers and parents, others focused particularly on socio-emotional wellbeing and development of students, or in helping teachers develop new skills, to engage students, to provide them feedback, to design learning experiences. Most cases are multidimensional, for example including a platform to deliver digital content, but also support for teachers to develop digital pedagogies.

<sup>19</sup> Fernando Reimers and Renato Operti (Eds.) *Learning to Build Back Better Futures for Education. Lessons from educational innovations during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Geneva: UNESCO. International Bureau of Education. 2021).



A number of these innovations focused on developing student competencies providing them more agency over their learning.

These case studies shared several distinctive elements. They all supported student center learning, socio-emotional development and wellbeing, teacher and principal professional development and family engagement in schoolwork.

### **Sustaining Hope in Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic created an education crisis which robbed many students of the opportunities to learn what they were expected to and caused them to lose skills they had already gained, pushing some students out of school. These losses were unequally distributed among different students and education systems and, as a result, if they are not reversed, the outcome of the pandemic will be increased educational inequality, from which economic and social inequality will follow.

Paradoxically, the Education crisis created by COVID-19 also made evident that education is our best hope to support humanity in building a better and sustainable future at a time when this could not be more necessary. Three resources will be critical to sustain those efforts: 1) societal commitment to educational transformation as well as the institutional support and the financial resources to fund them, 2) collective leadership, and 3) educational innovation because, drawing on Albert Einstein's discussion of the dangers of atomic weapons "a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels".<sup>20</sup> For all it took away, the pandemic may well have unleashed these three resources in abundance.

<sup>20</sup> Einstein, A. quoted in the *New York Times* (25 May 1946): Atomic Education Urged by Einstein; Scientist in Plea for \$200,000 to Promote New Type of Essential Thinking. <https://www.nytimes.com/1946/05/25/archives/atomic-education-urged-by-einstein-scientist-in-plea-for-200000-to.html> Accessed July 26, 2021.

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# **FAMILY DECISIONS ON HEALTH AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL: A STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSIVE MERCY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## **A. Introduction**

This paper looks into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the African family, and specifically the youth. The intention is to reflect upon how the global hardship of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the African family – which already has its own dynamics in terms of how it relates to the globe. There is no getting away from the fact that the pandemic necessitates looking into hardship, because that is what this health scare has imposed on humanity. Yet, it is not a conceptual intention to reduce everything about children and the youth into a projection of people that are ‘operated on’ and who have no agency, zeal and a mission to interpret their situations. The whole analytical project is one that assumes fair analytical engagement must capture all stakeholders’ issues, with a fair consideration of their projected reality and ability. It is important to state this upfront because in many societies children and the youth suffer from a localized discourse of cultural placement. In some societies it translates into the an ‘ever looming release into individualism’; yet in other societies it is a question of living up to an ascribed role in terms of age, gender, sibling sequence, etc. Thus, I want to declare ‘hardship’, ‘localized cultural discourse’, and ‘material needs’ as factors of the environment, not conceptual assumptions intrinsically associated with the concept of youth.

I would also like to state what I mean by ‘African’ in this paper. This is important because, other than referring to ‘an African family’ here in the Introduction, by the end of this analysis I will have demonstrated ‘the informalization of the African’ by the globe. Essentially there are two meanings to the concept of ‘African’ in this paper. The first refers to someone with attributes of geographic subscription and loyalty to Africa, the continent. Interestingly both these can be difficult attributes to ascertain in some people. However, to postpone a long debate for the purposes of pro-

ceeding with current analysis, ‘the African’ is one who is self-defining as having a measure of both attributes – geographical subscription and loyalty to the continent. The second use and meaning of ‘African’ in this paper pertains to history. In so far as the continent is obviously dominated by an indigenous population that has a local and colonial history, culture and politics, it goes without saying that some contextual reference to the term ‘African’ will imply more of those existential realities. The amount of time unleashed to defining identities before one is able to articulate matters that concern Africa, is a matter for another paper.

In what follows, let me start by dealing with the analytical methodology. This article is not based on empirical research with an intentional design; it is rather an analysis based on living through the pandemic and secondary material. But it is also prudent to acknowledge the strengths of the reflection imposed by the conditions under which this analysis is made. It is as though one has forfeited something valuable in the research design, but there is something of value gained from shifting the emphasis to analytical design. Having said that, nothing excuses arm-chair practice since we know that in spite of what might be seen as information overflow in modern times, multiple perspectives still matter. The next section outlines the analytical methodology adopted here, and the rest of the paper details the socio-global justice argument that I am advancing based on how society has treated a segment of its population – the youth.

## **B. A note on analytical methodology**

The Covid-19 pandemic disturbed most professional routines. This includes social research, which was plunged into make-shift situations that require careful strategizing around accessing data. For mid-stream projects, ethical protocols had to be revisited to ensure that care was taken on health safety and remote collection of data was encouraged where feasible. In the process, other ethical dilemmas resulted in the potential to exclude people who are ‘not fluent in remote interaction’; researchers have had to be careful in blended interaction for research purposes. Social data is essential in social research;<sup>1</sup> for Anthropology there is no short cut without compromising the idea of holism, which in itself is always a moving target. However, the pandemic illuminated a situation of holistic awareness of issues, even where

<sup>1</sup> ‘Digital ethnography’; ‘cyber anthropology’; ‘techno-research’ – were all supposed to be used where relevant in the research design, not as a way to prioritize tools over rounded and grounded research engagement.

structured engagement is difficult. Holism began to have new meaning – how the world becomes aware of social actors whether or not there is direct and structured communication with them. The question of regard for well-being has become a physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual concern simultaneously. The pandemic created a social space where the tangible and intangible elements of survival have all been intertwined.

In 2011 I motivated for what I called ‘intellectual choreography’ – a mapping of intertwined issues that influence the logical search for meaning, regardless of the location of those issues in disciplinary classifications and theory-application binaries. This was simply borne out of the recognition that social issues do not present themselves according to available formats; they require available schemes of understanding to be enmeshed into finding meaning or intervention. Indeed, our research methods have had to benchmark themselves against this criterion of intellectual choreography in the times of the pandemic. Structure and the systematic gathering of data has been somewhat challenged – design and analysis require more iteration. Analytical mapping of what is possible to consider, what is missing, and how to account for what is missing has to be the name of the game. In addition to all this the traditional format of society has been tested by the pandemic – institutions, media, family, work, home, have all been intertwined. A lot was also lost – friendship groupings, peer interaction, travel, and for a researcher: participant observation.

I must clarify the loss of ‘participant observation’, because it is accompanied by a strange paradox – the loss of participation is actually fake. For the first time in the use of the term ‘participant observation’ we can say the ‘observation’ part is weaker than the ‘participant’ part, by virtue of pandemic circumstances. Observation is too mediated at times – remote interaction and social media is incomplete ‘observation’. Yet because media is a lobby tool, an instructive tool rather than a summation of information, it has a slightly different position in its relationship with research in the twenty-first century. There are practical challenges in planning participant observation in the traditional sense that this method has been used (from the time of classical ethnographies of Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s to modern versions of it in the form of grounded theory). The current situation calls for an experiencing researcher acutely conscious that their position is not typical and it is part of multiple positionalities frantically making sense of the world to solve.

This is far from an observer trying to rise above the experiencing part. The pandemic is the kind of analytical space where the environment has to

be received as it is, rather than a rush to explore through rising above it.<sup>2</sup> Anthropology has always acknowledged an insider analyst, but even that discipline had not anticipated a situation where everyone is a player, and a referee, and an intervener within a framework and scale prescribed by a specific socio-economic competition. This does not mean that researchers must debunk design. To the contrary, the idea of research design is affirmed. There have been embarrassing instances of stand-alone surveys on complex social matters, which have led society to doubt the credibility of the researcher – all in the name of pandemic-related research adjustments.

In undertaking this analysis, I have thus adopted the method of ‘immersion into society’ at a broader scale of intentionally tracing links of approaches and issues to family decisions and youth expressions on life during the pandemic. This deductive analysis included looking into news platforms, literature analysis, and reflecting on my own incomplete observations, including those of the sector of Higher Education.

### **C. The Covid-19 environment and the dilemma of the family**

There is well-known African saying which translates to: “It takes a village to raise a child”. It used to be cited between neighbors as they discussed the behavioral traits of their children, the discipline issues, peer circles, support by local institutions, and the referral to other members of community for support of the youth. Nowadays it is often resurrected with nostalgia, as something that used to happen in raising a child. The logistics of life are seen as having enforced a certain degree of household seclusion and institutional reliance for solving what used to be left to organic journeys of socialization. For every solution, the school, the clinic, the guidance teacher, the pastor, the after-school care group must be approached formally. Within that environment of social change, technology has gradually been inducting families and young people into new ways of interaction and expansion of the networks through social media – with all the remoteness of social ethos and common etiquette.

<sup>2</sup> But this statement must be dated. It is relevant to the current times of the novelty of the pandemic to all experiencing it. With a benefit of time ‘rising above the situation’ yet again, will be an affordable craft for researchers. The point for now is that we must acknowledge that an analytical design – that is more suspicious and willing to acknowledge omissions, can critically capitalise on the nature of observations affordable – is better than a pretence that traditional research design is relevant is the novelty of dealing with a pandemic.

All this was already the case before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic made the situation worse in many ways – compounding the alienation into a rather rushed manner under frightening, emotionally taxing fear of an invisible attack with no solution. Societies had to learn to cope with not coping. In a way, the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated that human beings are essentially social beings. It was fine to isolate or become aloof at own pace with a choice of digital and remote communication opted for where it was possible; but it was certainly difficult when isolation was imposed. In Africa, in any case, the digital divide is such that digital fluency is a problem – to a point that work and student life through digital platforms was a truly stressful switch. Newspaper articles on student matters lamented anxiety and other mental health issues associated with remote learning – the challenges of finding gadgets, connectivity, and learning remotely.

School learners and tertiary students alike were in a crisis of an unknown future. The shape of the pandemic was unknown. Focus was impossible just at a personal level of lack of motivation due to fear. Parents were guiding children in a situation that they themselves had no firm point of previous experience. On the other side, children saw the anxiety of parents losing jobs, the pressure on breadwinners where loss of jobs was a reality. For some families, who had depended on daily hustling in the informal sector, loss of economic sustenance was instant and had an impact on young people (see Gittings et al. 2021; Saasa and James, 2020 discuss Covid impact on people, society and institutions). Literature, traditional and social media, captures various facets of social trauma to children, the youth and family:

- **On forging forward as a necessity:** There were sporadic instances of children doing studies via social media platforms such as WhatsApp. The major issue was, of course a stark digital divide. In many communities in South Africa space to do homework was an issue in informal settlements. Gadgets are an unaffordable privilege in that context. On the other hand, there was the pressure of conflation of intelligence with technological pragmatism – which has seen a watering down of critical reasoning skills in favor of quiz-learning culture. In the early part of the digitalizing environment, sufficient interaction was not affordable. This has had lamentable consequences in the life of novel entrants to higher education in the context of the pandemic. Educationists started to worry about cognitive presence in teaching (see Maria Tsakeni’s 2021 insightful description of the struggle of teaching and learning with 4IR and the emergency ‘internet of things’ in a rural setting).

- **Food insecurity:** This was as a result of loss of employment; curtailed *ukuphanta* (hustling). In spite of a great deal of empathy and looking out for each other between family members, community structures being there for the homeless, government interventions by way of social grants, and so on; there was real destitution and hunger for many families. Lockdowns created termination of monetary entitlements to students that assist in alleviating hunger. Instead of those entitlements, students went back to struggling homes to add mouths to be fed.
- **Increase in gender-based violence (GBV):** Because of lockdowns people who are ordinarily separated by hustling suddenly had to be together for longer with added economic frustration. In societies such as South Africa a phenomenon of gender-based violence needs constant analysis because of its unabated high levels. Women and children are often the victims of growing levels of cruelty. Yet it is clear that whatever is wrong in the combination of culture, socialization, previous trauma, and weak institutional approach to the scourge, it affects men negatively as well. Reports of significantly high levels of suicide amongst men attests to this. GBV, and specifically rape, as well as suicide is an unfortunate feature of current times – worsened by the pandemic. Judy Dlamini (2021) describes in detail the multiple dimensions of GBV in South Africa, especially for women and girls. The point that she makes about Covid worsening an environment that was already a social justice nightmare is well-demonstrated (see also Ramparsad, 2020). She ends up also describing institutional approaches to this problem – most of which are approaches that have always been suggested without much success. Although I will not deal with GBV in detail in this paper the reasons for lack of effectiveness of the approaches are related to the same aloofness described later in this paper for institutional interventions for Covid-19 and the ensuing suspicions.
- **Deep life-changing traumas:** Community and family absence at a time of rampant and sudden death had a huge emotional impact on children and the youth. By the time of death of a family member, immense trauma would have already set in, because of seclusion and not being able to help the family member – due to protocols associated with the disease. The nature of death handling and reduced support entailed by restrictions, all created a situation where it is difficult to heal emotionally. Endomba et al. (2020) speak of ‘bad deaths’ in their vivid description of pain and trauma of families nursing and losing their



loved ones in sub-Saharan Africa. Many family members feel that they did not give their family members a send-off they deserved by way of funerals. This has created a lingering feeling of guilt and pain for people already traumatized by loss.

- **Intensification of regulation:** Urban-rural circular migration is rife in many countries in Africa – for work and hustling. In fact, it can be said that the rural space supports the urban space by sacrifices made to the effect of splitting families and people squatting in urban spaces not welcoming to them. The circular nature of this urban-rural migration for work is a meagre asset to families affected – rural spaces are both a social safety net for families and a dumping ground for ‘human rejects’ no longer useful in the urban space that never really catered for their citizenry. Thus, rural areas become a home to return to – during re-trenchments, sickness, old age, and in death for burial. Sad in itself, this aspect of life was hard to fulfill during hard lockdowns that were heavily regulated. At that time, even *ukuphathisa* (the practice of taking turns to go home and carry remit to various families on behalf of each other) was difficult. Travel restrictions, number-restricted funerals, reliance on each other – all were affected during the lockdowns. In some cases, older children had to step up and be all the rural family had without a predictable connection with a distant migrant parent. If such challenges existed within countries, the challenges of policies that were already not migration friendly within the region, as articulated by Mushomi et al. (2022), inflicted more pain to cross-border migrants.
- **Public health institutions:** the relationship between public health institutions and citizens is ridden with classism. In spite of the usual lamentation around resources, the most complicating factor in South Africa is lack of professionalism – a situation where public institutions that see themselves as servicing people of lower economic classes do not live up to administrative efficiency and sense of urgency. Citizens know this and make choices of whether to persevere with home remedies, to opt for a traditional healer or to bite the bullet and go through the dehumanizing experiences of the public health sector. This is the context in which the pandemic came to complicate public health in South Africa. This is the context in which children and young people had to face the reality of losing parents and grandparents. Covid-19 affected older people; the younger generation has had to deal with the injustice of the unequal society and the malice of Covid-19.

- **The ‘civilizing’ approach to delivery of vaccines:** When hope for a medical solution dawned, it came packaged in an amazing sense of cognitive arrogance. After months of social media promulgating home-based ways to curb or deal with the infections – vaccines came into the space, already accompanied by the pressing need for herd immunity and not having patience for ‘a reflective human subject’. Vaccine interventions came riddled with science capitalism. The value chain of vaccines is a socio-political matter that the enforcers had no time to entertain. In Southern Africa vaccines were imported from other parts of the world; parts of the globe that do not exactly have a history of compassion with Africa as a continent. Enforced by local leaders, who also do not have a trusted relationship with citizenry, the whole project communicated an attitude that said: ‘Thou shall take what we offer; we know better; you have always depended on us; and we do not expect anything from your context – not for yourselves, let alone for the rest of us’. Through mandatory vaccines local private institutions, employers, and public institutions – all of whom know that the African underling depends on them for sustenance, instituted cognitive gagging that came with ‘the offering of help’. The message of gagging was: ‘Do not question; when we say the solution is ripe, we know it is ripe’.
- **Personal social issues:** Cultural rites and important events had to be postponed or cancelled. A scene captured on video gaining widespread publicity in South Africa was that of someone connecting families through big screens for *lobolo* (bridewealth) negotiations. It flashed through social media at some point during intense lockdown in South Africa. While there was applause to this, many other families postponed important ceremonies, some of these being important for their human development cycle – initiation rites and weddings, not to mention the strain on funerals and post-funeral rites and ceremonies.

#### **D. Intervention initiatives and the Middle-Class Benchmark**

One of the negative results of the Covid-19 pandemic that is clear in all literature based on research that found ways to interact with people, is that institutions began to fully engage their ‘regulation gear’. This actually meant cascading levels of regulation – from government to all institutions and services that people use in their daily life – work, institutions of learning, shops, roads, etc. Life began to be one huge administration instantly. Young people in institutions of learning began to be reduced to statistics

and data to regulate. People were reduced to allowable numbers, carriers of entry permits or QR codes, and candidates for travel permits. For students in post-school settings, even competition for limited resources such as computers was calculated using the ‘vulnerability algorithms’ with tangible indicators such as ‘not having a computer’; ‘distance from institutions’; ‘previous poor performance’, etc. Anxiety, untenable social settings, connectivity challenges and how that affected the desire to pursue studies successfully could not be accommodated in the regulatory mode that was executed. All of this was happening in the absence of organic social interaction, where mental health issues needed a self-initiative to table them via remote means.

Because the public health interventions from lockdowns to vaccinations only illuminated the physiology and the economic logic, how various populations received the message of the necessary herd immunity was not addressed from an applied social science perspective. The whole global intervention regime reacted by well-intended and kind messages of:

- ‘give African countries vaccines; it is not right to discriminate them’
- ‘donate in good time; not as spared by looming expiry dates’
- ‘give people psychological counselling as they might be scared of needles’.

Thus, the whole approach did not think about the confusing inter-generational conversations and messages happening in communities in countries with different historical issues, such as:

- societies with histories of internal suspicion between health institutions and citizens
- societies where the traumas of regulation of miners inspected for syphilis in groups has not yet been forgotten
- no proper explanation of the urgency of ‘herd immunity’ in societies where death and grief had previously been normalized during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and science kept issuing ‘realistic but long-term projections’ of cure research. People can only be curious about the urgency given the travel ban squabbles that were also apparent
- many cultural, gender, and religious dynamics that citizens were not taken through – and only dealt with as quick explanations in the massive bid to vaccinate
- the sheer logistical and negotiation capability of world systems when it comes to vaccination for ‘herd immunity’ was amazing to many people,

compared to approaches to curb world hunger and negotiate sustainable access to assets of livelihood.

In all of this the middle-class centeredness of socio-global justice was apparent. The language of isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing may have been well-meant; but public health initiatives did very little to translate what it means for informal settlements, public transport, social grants queues, and limited health care facilities.<sup>3</sup> Some of these things affected young people more as care-givers, given the illness patterns and the split between families. It must be pointed out that the middle-class family in Africa is also emotionally conflicted – because the reduction of their skepticism or hesitation into mere belief in conspiracy theories was also disallowing engagement, and thus gagging. The neat categorization of families into socio-economic categories is not a fair reflection of families in many African countries. In fact, the concept of ‘Black Tax’ (where offsprings of struggling families wrestle with supporting their bigger families straddling geographic locations) comes from the recognition of complications of classifying the Black African family. Thus, when some people were asked to “download the Covid App” in order to be warned about Covid prevalence around them, they read through the snobbishness of the intervention. In South Africa the government had to quickly make arrangements to register people on site for Covid vaccines, because the procedure stipulated – to register electronically first before going to clinics – was untenable for many.

The sum-total implication of all that is described above, which itself is not exhaustive, is that: a) the African family was reduced into an operated-on unit, that contributed very little to the approach to Covid-19 and could not even have a voice to be considered. b) This situation was reflected in the institutional reduction of people into statistics for regulations and management, as well as the subsequent ‘bullying approach’ to vaccination. c) Global empathy played straight into the hands of science capitalism in that it was silent about lack of indigenous expressions to management of Covid, it marketed vaccines, and inadvertently silenced local voice in the bid to lobby for vaccine equity. All of it became a classic case of “alienated consciousness” to use a phrase that aptly captures the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement (see More 2014).

It is in this sense then that I want to suggest that ‘it has taken a global village to silence the African’. The global socialization precinct has created an

<sup>3</sup> See also Mbazzi et al. (2021) for similar concerns within the Uganda context...

environment that endorses the bottom status of Africa in the ladder of conceptual and professional sovereignty. Through my previous written work on care (Sithole 2014), I demonstrate how the depth of African concepts – as frameworks of analysis – that can be used to structure socio-moral relationships embracing planning and institutional practice. There is no reason why global social justice and diplomacy should not be influenced by those analytical frameworks – in order to ground its interventions or even to be influenced to enhance its own frameworks. I have pointed this out several times in relation to the concept of *ubuntu*, which I have seen being used less than optimally again, by local scholars this time, in relation to the Covid pandemic. Whilst the title of their paper holds a lot of promise,<sup>4</sup> Nxumalo and Edwards (2020) end up simply linking various concepts of love to *ubuntu*, and missing a chance to emphasize the link between rationality and morality in the concept of *ubuntu* which stands to fundamentally discourage discriminatory competitive practices. It must be noted that their publication is before the vaccination drive which has led to serious ethical questions being open to scrutiny. Nevertheless, their shallow preaching approach to the analysis of love and *ubuntu* makes it difficult to go any deeper than simply justifying the aggressive quest for herd immunity as *ubuntu*.

### **E. The Context of Decision-Making and Lack of Inclusive Mercy**

I want to turn into the African family's ability to decide for the future of their children and the youth; their ability to plan beyond the 'waiting for assistance' mode of survival. Essentially, I hope that by now the inferences that I make here have been sufficiently demonstrated through logic-connections of material and intangible social considerations – in line with 'intellectual mapping'. Here I zoom into 'decisions' in order to show the scope within which individual and family decisions are made in Africa. It all points to a notion of 'an informalized African'. An informalized African is one who has been shunned from formal schemes of innovation, through alienation of local conceptual and cognitive schemes that frame social life and material sustainability. An informalized African is assigned a status in the formality in value chain only at the frills of acquisition and distribution of products whose innovation is linked to other continents through complex patents and contracts that are hard to entangle. Let me

<sup>4</sup> Nxumalo, S.A. & Edwards, S.D. (2020) 'On Universalising and Indeginising the Meaning and Practice of Love post COVID-19' in *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*. Special Edition: COVID-19 Life Beyond, Sept 2020.

explain this in relation to the African youth in two ways: provision for the family; and innovation and advancement of the family. These two elements (provision and advancement) will be used here to demonstrate the limited threshold of maneuver imposed by the pandemic on the African youth – thanks to the colonial history and impact of the pandemic put together. Although the material and social challenges experienced by the youth in Africa are the same as those of youth elsewhere, the status of ‘the informalized African’ infantilizes the African youth, so that they become the tame middle-class required by global social injustice.

Decision-making environment on provision for material needs: Within government and development space, a couple of products/packages are thrown towards what is assumed to preoccupy the youth – stadiums, events, sporadic training, funds with impermeable coding, and even institutions of rehabilitation in situations of ‘alienation gone wild’ and social behavior gone astray.<sup>5</sup> The quality of education in a context where education is associated with Westernization lives a lot to be desired in terms of building confidence towards innovations and local solutions.<sup>6</sup> On its own, this is a subject of a separate article. It is clear that social mobility through education is intricately trapped in the politics of ‘lacking provisions’ and ‘missing means of learning’ – in the context of a digital divide. During the Covid-19 pandemic this instrumental void creates a diversion from creativity and innovation to a watered down notion of education where ‘having just enough access to fulfil requirements’ becomes an end in itself (see Tsakeni, 2021). Institutions competed for the supply gadgets by global markets; internally within countries socio-economic issues created for unequal access to digital tools of learning.

Covid-19 came to worsen environments where equity and justice had been lacking, The social evolution of capitalism and colonialism had taken away parents from the African child. Generations have been raised by part-time parents and through make-shift arrangements between family members. Migrant parents strive to get closer to the designated environment

<sup>5</sup> Local government (municipal) plans are littered with these provisions for the youth.

<sup>6</sup> In an interesting article on involving volunteer youth workers (VYW) to undertake a research project, Brear and Tsotetsi (2021) describe how the youths found the rigid technical prescripts of the University Ethics Committee difficult to follow, including the rather incomprehensible translation of the survey form into their own language, Sesotho. They cite one of them complaining: “‘I didn’t like the Sotho, the way it was written ... it was very hard” (Brear and Tsotetsi 2021: 9).

conducive for the foreign investor in order to work. For the working-class African family, there has never been a fair balance between providing jobs and conducive localities that are kind to social nurturing of families. Literature has been capturing the contestations within capitalism – in terms of material and intangible assets that should have involved socio-economic redress – from the livelihoods debates (see Lipton et al 1996) to notions of ‘democratic capitalism’ (see Southall, 2006). There is abundant literature that demonstrates the persistence of previous advantage afforded by placement in the old racial ladder in South Africa (see for example Singh 2004) – even while the economy has also produced ‘redress millionaires’ who have used the democratic rhetoric to their material gain.

Decision-making environment on personal growth and advancement of society: The scope of decision is limited to using (or not using) what is provided for people. For the youth, it is an environment of growing up in a society which, at best, mimics others – professionally and in terms of consumables. The ‘mastery of mimicry’ is the best route to achievement of upper-class status in the society. The Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by lockdowns that curtailed survivalist economic pursuits associated with the informal economy; the government was forced to address the question of economic survival as well. Social grant packages were offered – through a temporary increase in social grants already offered and through introducing new relief. While the social relief of distress has been welcomed as a good idea, it is fraught with administrative hurdles that make disbursement complicated and delayed – quite contrary to the urgency that it was meant to exercise. The disillusioned masses, some of whom have waited for close to two years, have watched while the self-centered system evolves: to strive to be paperless and to eventually link up with banks so it can double-check that people have no other income. It has led to complete mockery of poverty through making demands that do not recognize the digital divide, let alone illiteracy. The government’s self-centered technocracy through regulations and mismatched digitalization expectations from potential beneficiaries has led to the unhappiness of civil society.<sup>7</sup>

This is the context in which the resistance to vaccines must be understood. The issue is not about an ‘uncivilized’ mind easily contaminated by

<sup>7</sup> “Grant squeeze: New Social Relief of Distress Grant regulation puts ‘millions’ at risk of hunger – activists” 24 April 2022 *Daily Maverick* (Mark Heywood); “The social relief of distress grant – where it began and why the state is still dithering on payments” 27 June 2022 *Daily Maverick* (Zukiswa Pikoli).

conspiracy theories. Rather, science is part of a formalistic environment that is perceived to not listen to people, but hurries to advise and direct. Vocational bigotry characterizes the relationship between local scientists and society; and yet society sees that formal local science merely mimics others and is trapped within science capitalism.<sup>8</sup> This is an environment of

<sup>8</sup> The manner in which Covid-19 discussions were not open to critical engagement was unfortunate. Because the emergence of Covid-19 was unfortunately accompanied by conspiracy speculations, any critical thinking around its cause, management and vaccines as the main intervention was seen in negative light – making science dominance and pharmaceuticals a suspicious duo even to those that can tell the difference between cheap conspiracies and sensible interventions. There were many issues that communicated mixed messages around Covid-19 and vaccines:

- Local and indigenous public health methods slow, coy and sometimes waning: “SA scientists testing traditional medicine to fight Covid-19 – with promising early results” 21 February 2021 News24 (Zakiyah Ebrahim). This is after the discourse of all other indigenous medicines research fizzled out into thin air
- Loans and capital wars: “Documents expose to kill Africa’s Covid vaccine project” Common Dreams 10 February 2022 (Jake Johnson); “South Africa gets \$750 million loan from World Bank to fight Covid-19” IOL (Siyabonga Mkhwanazi).
- Class matters – structures of officialdom not displaying accessibility yet making pronouncements based on privileged few: “Two deaths in South Africa after Covid 19 vaccination” Africanews africanews.com 14 September 2022
- Silence on continental differential impact of Covid until reluctant admissions: “Breakthrough deaths comprise increasing proportion of those who died from Covid-19” 11 May 2022 ABC News (Arielle Mitropoulos); “Covid-19 death in Africa fall by nearly 94% in 2022 says WHO” IT News Africa.com www.itnewsafrica.com (Luis Monzon)
- Important effects being investigated while vaccine promotion goes ahead: “Show us the documents, organisation against minors receiving Covid-19 vaccine tells SAHPRA” 11 February 2022 News24 (Tebogo Monama); “Covid boosters do not provide protection against Omicron, study finds” 19 January 2022 Fortune – fortune.com (Antony Sguazzin and Bloomberg); “New study finds organ recipients rejecting transplant after receiving Covid vaccine” 13 September 2022 in WishTV Medical (Dr Mary Gillis); “Study explores new-onset tinnitus after Covid-19 vaccination” 15 September 2022 in www.news-medical.net (Bhavanna Kunkalikar)
- Contradictions: “Scientists debate how lethal Covid is. Some say it’s now risky than flu” in Public Health, 16 September 2022 (Rob Stein) VS “‘Blood on your Hands’ if world steps back on tackling Covid-19 now – WHO official” Daily Maverick 26 September 2022 (Reuters)
- Prominent public figures reserve right of choice: “Novak Djokovic willing to miss tournaments over vaccine” 15 February 2022 BBC News (Amol Rajan); “‘Don’t rape me with a vaccine’ – SACP leader slams forced Covid vaccination” IOL 17 February 2022 (Sihle Mavuso).



mistrust that predates social media and the current conspiracy theories. It is important to raise these things because, other than financial strains experienced by students, describing this cognitive tension also explains why the Higher Education sector is receiving more suspicion than excitement from its youthful clientele in South Africa. The Fallism movement<sup>9</sup> articulates a lot more than material inequalities and need for assistance to access Higher Education. The rejection of Covid-19 vaccines, the sharing of traditional medicines and home remedies will possibly have limited scope to be accessed for research – because many people were careful to dodge the judgmental space of officialdom as they shared their options.<sup>10</sup>

The scope to decide and determine the future for children and the youth in Africa is socially narrowed by the over-exerted formalistic environment on the individual family. Rather than nurturing the youth and local families, that formalistic environment is loyal to imperialism. In the end families are not really making decisions; they are maneuvering. An argument could be advanced that life is about maneuvering anyway and that decisions are made in the context of maneuvering. However, the argument in this paper is that in the African continent, at least based on the observations presented here, the scope to maneuver is limited by an individual-family-society relationship infused with too much patronage over the family. The weight of that patronage on children is worrisome in a society where poverty, culture, formal sphere – all give little room for voice, choice, and the thrill of self-determination by the youth and children.

This is a global socialization precinct in which the African family and the African youth are groomed. Hence when the youth in South Africa speak of “being woke”, this is what they are talking about. They also know that the system creates a self-taming African – because it pushes the individual into needs, debt, and intensifying pressure to satisfy needs. The suction into the middle-class mentality is inevitable. Thus, the system imagines interventions for the middle-class; not for congested ghettos and taxis. The aspirations of children and the youth are also imagined in terms

<sup>9</sup> The national movement of students rising for access to education through #Fees must Fall. ‘Things falling’ became a slogan of protest by youth for many other issues.

<sup>10</sup> The most interesting group in the social media prayer groups were the nurses, who straddled the ‘medicine terrains’ but took great caution (blinding their identities and sharing anonymous voice notes) as they shared other forms of help, including when during sickness to seek for that help – as nothing much could be done when people were already locked into hospitals.

of what the ideal middle-class family should have in spite of limited local assets. All this then sees political leaders begging for foreign investment as the only way to sustain local economies – and the cycle of acquisition, mimicry, and ‘deciding’ on use of goods provided by broader imperialism must self-perpetuate.

## F. Conclusion

The harsh influence of the global village on problems of one country has already been uncovered by Mkandawire, et al. (2021) in their careful tracking of the negative impact of globalization on Malawi. They have tracked how structural adjustment policies have affected the social milieu towards creating a fertile environment for the spread of HIV/AIDS. They have compared that with how political bickering and government being perceived to be pining for external resources through attention to Covid-19, created mistrust between government and citizens. In fact, just like the intellectual mapping done in this paper, they ended up timid of a potential perception of a ‘stretch of the argument’ at first impression. They argue:

To cite global connectivity as the driving force behind the spread of a disease in a country that barely registers on the global economic and geopolitical map, seems some-what far-fetched. However, such is the power of globalization that it brings even the poorest and remotest geographic enclaves into the world’s economic, social, cultural orbit... (Mkandawire et al. 2021: 2).

What I have done through the concept of ‘global socialization precinct’ is to show how this apparently far-fetched connection is actually discernable from everyday maneuvers and decision-making of nations, families and individuals – particularly in choices of provision for and advancement of the youth. The format and substance of provisions, as well as the environment for innovation and advancement are all devoid of civic self-determination and leave a lot to be desired.

While she was analyzing globalization, and spurred by an observation of foreign communities taking over entrepreneurial spaces in full view of locals whose economic ability was stunted, Gillian Hart (2002) used the notion of ‘multiple trajectories’ to expose that globalization is not just an innocent modernizing trend for countries to consume. She argues:

... I want to advance an understanding of multiple trajectories as spatially connected sets of practices – with their associated discourses and power relations – that actively *produce* and drive the processes we call ‘globalization’. By insisting that we understand the multiplicity of historical geogra-

phies not simple as *effects* of the global flows and processes but as *constitutive* of them, the concept of multiple trajectories and the method of relational comparison fundamentally disrupt impact models and open the way for more politically enabling understandings and critical practices (Hart, 2014: 14 – emphasis hers).

It is within this framework that during the pandemic, the entire epistemic understanding of ‘health’ and ‘economy’ was yet again thrown into the political tactics of ‘access’ and ‘assistance’ discourse that is predatory over some stakeholders.

The other issue that needs to be confronted is one of the cutting-edge diagnoses of these connections by African intellectuals and Africanists from other parts of the world, but thin influence into the policy-making forums and no influence on drivers of globalization. Somehow analysis seems to be an end in itself, and the whole analytical exercise seems to confine African intellectuals to ‘protest existentialism’ (Sithole 2009) with a little bit of applaud for the diagnosis. This tallies with the manner in which one of the movements of protest against political injustices, the Black Consciousness Movements (BCM, see More 2014) actually stops at ‘waking up the African’ and not pointing at the deeds of the global village in terms of continued ‘beneficiation of the African’ for comforts of some in the globe. BCM conceptualized philosophical tools for the struggle in a specific era. The delay in the rest of global justice practitioners in terms of seeing that the injustices have mutated and modernized with the concept of ‘globalisation’ is the fundamental point of quibble in this article.

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# THE PANDEMIC AND THE CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

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The incredible speed with which medical and biological scientists developed vaccines and treatments for Covid-19 has not been matched by social scientists in our work to identify the impacts of the pandemic across the social and demographic characteristics of its victims. This is mostly due to the lack of data on the social impacts of Covid. Social scientists have been racing to measure the impact of Covid across age, sex, race, ethnicity, geography, and occupational status. We have only begun to measure its differential impact in terms of generation and immigration status. Yet social scientists have demonstrated that this pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and caused greater harm and suffering to those at the bottom of societal hierarchies, even while the global elite has grown more wealthy and more powerful as investment soared.

The children of immigrants are a disadvantaged group who have suffered disproportionate harm from the pandemic. In many rich countries, the children of immigrants are a large portion of those under age 18. In the United States for instance, one in four children in the United States is the child of an immigrant (18 million children).[1] There are many characteristics of immigrant families that put them at risk for greater harm from the pandemic. Immigrants are often racial and ethnic minorities in predominantly white societies leaving them subject to racial discrimination and exclusion. Immigrants are concentrated in occupations and housing configurations that put them at greater risk of the disease and prevent them from working from home or otherwise avoiding infection. Immigrant families are more likely to be poor than natives and unauthorized status keeps many immigrant families from qualifying for or accessing government aid and health care. Immigrants are also often isolated from extended family and community support and this is exacerbated by language isolation. The children of immigrants are more likely than the children of native parents to suffer from schooling interruptions, partly because they have already experienced great disruption in schooling through the migration process, because they are already behind many of their peers because of the challenges of learning a new language and a new curriculum, and because

school is not only a place for learning but an opportunity for immigrant children to integrate and create connections to other children and adults that eases their successful adaptation to a new society. Finally, throughout history, immigrants and minorities have been blamed for diseases.[2] The fear of infection leads many to blame the stranger, leading to a rise in xenophobia and hate crimes, often intensified by politicians wishing to exploit fears and prejudices for political gains.

It is also important to note the resilience that immigrant families bring to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Immigrants have great strengths that can be marshalled to cope with the changes wrought by the pandemic. They are often ambitious and courageous people who have left home, either by choice or because of danger in the home country, and they have been forced to adapt to new circumstances, changing rules and requirements, and creative responses to new challenges. These are the human characteristics societies need to confront the sudden changes the pandemic engendered.

The challenges of the pandemic have not only demanded that individuals change and adapt, but they have also led to public policy innovations. Many of these innovations were short-lived but they demonstrate that there are better ways we can manage immigration and poverty policies.

### **Mortality and Morbidity in Immigrant Families**

Although children and teens generally do not suffer from severe Covid and rarely die from it (Jha, 2021), they still experience many negative physical and mental health effects, most especially when their parents or grandparents fall ill or die. Immigrant parents have been at much higher risk of contracting Covid and of experiencing severe disease and death. Most countries do not have Covid-specific disease and death rates by nativity status. But the few that do point to much higher rates of illness for immigrants. Testing data are available by immigration status in a few countries and in those countries, immigrants are vastly overrepresented among those testing positive relative to their representation in the population. In the period from the beginning of the pandemic to May 2020, 32% of the people testing positive for the virus in Sweden were migrants; in Norway, 42% of those testing positive were immigrants. In the province of Ottawa in Canada, migrants composed 44% of those testing positive for Covid in the period of March 2020 to June 13, 2020. In Italy, immigrants were more likely than natives to be diagnosed late, hospitalized, and admitted to an ICU.[3] Migrants from lower- and middle-income countries had

worse outcomes when they did get sick in Sweden; “adjusting for socio-demographic characteristics, migrant men from the Middle East and north Africa had a 3-times higher mortality from COVID-19 than people born in Sweden”.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the United States data on Covid by nativity is mostly unavailable but data by race and ethnicity shows that Latinos and Blacks have higher rates of infection and death than whites: Compared to Whites, Hispanics have 1.3 times the case rate, 3.1 times the hospitalization rate, and 2.3 times the death rate.<sup>[5]</sup> Analyses of excess deaths and resulting changes in life expectancy demonstrate the shocking racial and ethnic inequalities in the effects of the pandemic. Life expectancy fell overall in the United States in 2020 and 2021 by 1.7 years for females and 2.1 years for males. White males lost 1.5 years, but Hispanic males lost 4.5 years and Black males lost 3.6 years, a very stark and unprecedented reversal in American health trends.<sup>[6]</sup>

Nationwide, Covid rates by nativity are not available but one study examined county-level correlations between immigration status and Covid rates. They found U.S. counties with more immigrant residents had more Covid cases during the period 2019–May 28, 2020. Rates were particularly high in counties with high numbers of immigrants from Central America.<sup>[7]</sup> In one of the few studies of mortality by nativity status at the individual level, researchers were able to compare deaths from Covid-19 among immigrants and natives in the state of Minnesota.<sup>[8]</sup> Because immigrants tend to be younger than native born Americans it is important to control for age and when you do so immigrants had twice the mortality rate for Covid than natives. Foreign-born Latinos were particularly hard hit and young working-age men had the highest rates of mortality.<sup>[8]</sup>

Why would immigrants and racial ethnic minorities have higher rates of Covid? First, immigrants in rich countries are overrepresented in high-risk occupations. Immigrants are much more likely to work in the service industry, in jobs that cannot be conducted from home, and that put them in greater contact with other people and thus at risk for this airborne disease. Based on 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data for a report on Covid-19 impacts, 69% of all immigrants in the U.S. labor force and 74% of undocumented workers were reported to be essential workers, compared to 65% of the native-born labor force; 70% of refugees and 78% of Black refugees are essential workers,<sup>[9]</sup> with non-U.S.-citizens making up 9% of the labor force but 22% of workers in the agricultural industry.<sup>[10]</sup> In New York, the hardest hit U.S. city during the first wave of the pandemic, 50% of non-governmental frontline workers are migrants.<sup>[11]</sup> Health

care is another high risk industry where immigrants are 17% of the overall workforce but 29% of all physicians and 38% of all home health aides.[12]

While office workers were able to work from home, people working in health care, agriculture and meatpacking, and food services continued working. In Europe 74% of employees in the top wage quintile could work remotely, compared to only 3% in the bottom quintile.[13] In the U.S., among high-income workers (income greater than \$100,000) 45% were able to work from home compared to 18.4% of employees with income below \$50,000.[14]

Self-employed immigrants and people working in the informal economy or in low-wage jobs are much less likely to have paid sick leave and are therefore more likely to work when they are sick, putting them at greater risk to contract the virus at work. In the United States immigrants are less likely to have health insurance than natives. While 93% of natives have health insurance, only 71% of those without citizenship are insured. Undocumented immigrants are specifically excluded from The Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) and often lack any health insurance or access to care except for emergency medical care at a hospital. Without health insurance immigrant workers did not seek testing for the virus and put off any treatment until they were very ill and required emergency care in a hospital, often in the ICU.

All of these factors mean that children in immigrant families were more likely to have their caregivers contract Covid. Immigrants disproportionately live in multigenerational households with elderly parents and grandparents,[15] where workers who contract Covid could spread it to more vulnerable elderly relatives.

Higher mortality among working age and elderly family members means that immigrant children were more affected by the death of a caregiver than native-born children. From April 2020 through June 2021, globally 1,134,000 children lost a primary caregiver (parent or custodial grandparent) and another half million lost a co-resident grandparent. This has many negative consequences for children: “losing a primary caregiver increases the risk for children of mental health problems”, physical, emotional and sexual violence; and family economic hardship. These adverse experiences increase risks of suicide, infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, adolescent pregnancy, and chronic diseases”.[16] In the United States, in the same period, 140,000 children lost a parent or grandparent caregiver. Hispanic and Black children were much more likely than white children to experience the loss of a primary caretaker (Hispanic and Black children



account for 32% and 26% of all children losing their primary caregiver compared with 19% and 13% of the total population).[17] Hispanic children were 2.4 times more likely to lose a caregiver than whites, black children were 1.8 times as likely. Asians were slightly more likely (1.1) times. The highest rates of loss were for Hispanic children living near the border.

These estimates are only for the first year of the pandemic and are likely conservative underestimates because they only include deaths officially from Covid. Some amount of Covid deaths are misattributed to other causes, and other deaths are indirectly caused by Covid – due to overwhelmed hospitals, exacerbation of underlying conditions or postponed medical care. Excess mortality that compares mortality during a Covid year to the average baseline mortality for a non-Covid year leads to much higher estimates of death rates. As of March 2022, the Center for Disease Control estimates over a million excess deaths due to Covid-19 in the U.S. since the pandemic began.

### **Poverty, Unemployment and Food Insecurity**

Immigrant families in both the United States and Europe experienced high unemployment, rising poverty and increasing food insecurity. These trends were addressed with aggressive and relatively generous government aid, but this assistance was too often denied to undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers. Unemployment figures are often not available for immigrants, but low-wage workers and Hispanics are found to have disproportionately lost jobs. From January to mid-April 2020 employment decreased by 14% for high earners, but by 37% for low earners.[18] Census Bureau surveys found that “by early April of 2020 nearly six in ten nonelderly Hispanic adults had a household family member who experienced a decline in work hours or work-related income or lost their job because of the pandemic and nearly one in two had experienced material hardship in the preceding month”.[19,20]

The U.S. government deployed a series of relief provisions under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, & Economic Security (CARES) Act to ameliorate the financial hardship caused by the pandemic. Americans received direct relief payments, unemployment assistance was extended, and an Emergency Rental Assistance program was created to assist households with difficulties paying rent or utilities.[21] However, the law was designed to exclude not only undocumented immigrants, but anyone, including citizen children, who lived with an undocumented person. Because undocumented immigrants can use an individual taxpayer identification number

to file taxes, only people with a social security number on their tax returns were eligible for relief payments. Even if an adult had a social security number if they lived with someone who only had a taxpayer identification number they were denied the benefits. Immigrants also had to provide evidence of work authorization to qualify for the expanded unemployment benefits.<sup>19</sup> While many undocumented people correctly perceived that they were ineligible, other immigrants who could have qualified for aid were either misinformed that they were ineligible or were too frightened of the government to receive the aid.

Many documented immigrants and even U.S. citizens did not seek out government aid, and even tried to return money to the government.<sup>[22]</sup> In a particularly cruel turn of events the Trump administration announced an anti-immigrant public policy – the enforcement of a public charge rule, just as the pandemic was beginning, in February 2020. This administrative action sought to block immigrants from getting permanent residence if they received any government benefits including Medicaid or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) (food aid). This rule was immediately challenged in court. At least nine lawsuits were filed challenging the rule, and while they were ongoing it was not put in place. In 2020 the Biden administration announced they were withdrawing the regulations. However, the Trump administration threat was widely talked about in immigrant communities and a great deal of confusion and fear surrounded the issue. Most people heard the words “public charge” but were unclear about what it would do to their or their families’ futures to be labeled as such. With a lack of specific information many respondents were wary of any contact with the government. For the undocumented this fear of government contact was exacerbated by a fear of any contact with any institution which might share information with ICE and lead to their capture and deportation. The twin burdens of poverty and fear of ICE led some people with Covid to avoid testing and to work while sick, thus endangering public health. Vaccine hesitancy was also widespread especially at the beginning of the program because of these same fears.

The lack of access to cash aid, the rise in unemployment, as well as the fear of accessing government aid because of the public charge rule, means that many immigrant families faced a lack of adequate food. Schools which usually provide breakfast and lunch for poor children were closed, and many churches that provided help to immigrant families were also closed in the spring of 2020. An Urban Institute survey conducted in December 2020 found that more than 41% of adults in poor immigrant fam-

ilies reported food insecurity in the previous year.<sup>19</sup> 43% of low-income immigrant adults reported that they were worried about having enough to eat in the next month. These families included citizen children and parents with documentation status, but the families did not access government services because of fear of the immigration authorities and the chilling effect of the public charge rule.

Scholars working at the intersection of the biological and social sciences have explored the effects of childhood adversity, including hunger, exposure to violence, natural disasters and other disruptive events on life-long and even intergenerational health outcomes. The economist Hilary Hoynes and colleagues studied the rollout of food assistance in the U.S. in the period from 1961-1975 and found that children who had more food assistance in utero and in childhood had better adult health outcomes and higher incomes in adulthood.<sup>[23]</sup> Tobi and colleagues examined DNA methylation among people who had been in utero during the Dutch famine of 1944 and found that there were epigenetic changes owing to the famine – that certain genes were turned off during that period and this affected their health 70 years later and also have the potential to affect the health of their children and grandchildren.<sup>[24]</sup> These studies, and others with similar findings, should raise alarms about the everyday harms that poor children endure, but also suggest that the pandemic and the resulting privation may have long-lasting effects beyond those caused by the virus, including negative effects caused by government failure to provide for poor children and their parents.

### **Immigration Enforcement and Policies Towards the Undocumented**

In both Europe and the U.S. individuals without documentation face heightened risks of Covid-19. In the United States there are an estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants. As of 2018, six million U.S. citizen children lived with an undocumented family member. Unaccompanied minors are children arriving in the U.S. without a parent. In 2021 a record high number, 122,000, of unaccompanied minors were taken into custody and held in shelters and immigration facilities. In Europe there are an estimated 1.9 to 3.8 million undocumented people, with the greatest numbers in Germany, the UK, Italy and France.<sup>[25]</sup> In addition to the risks outlined above from concentration in the informal labor economy, working in high-risk occupations and lacking access to medical care and insurance, the undocumented and asylum seekers experience higher risk from Covid-19 through immigration enforcement.

Many families attempting to cross the border between Mexico and the U.S. are denied entry even if they try to claim asylum. The “Remain in Mexico” program begun by Trump and continued by Biden until August 2022 forced migrants to wait for an asylum hearing in overcrowded and unsafe tent cities at the border. Those who crossed unlawfully and were apprehended were held in ICE facilities where outbreaks of Covid were frequent. By December 2021 there were 31,000 cases of Covid in detention centers, and the infection rate in these centers was more than 3 times the overall U.S. infection rate.[26] The facilities do now allow for social distancing and there are numerous charges of inadequate medical care for adults and children in detention.[27] The children of the undocumented were already at risk from the omnipresent fear of deportation of a parent, and there are many established negative health outcomes from the heightened enforcement policies enacted in recent decades and amplified greatly by the Trump administration.[28] The European Union also reported outbreaks of Covid among immigrants in migrant reception and detention centers.[29]

Both the United States and some countries in Western Europe reacted to the beginning of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 by releasing some individuals from detention in order to prevent transmission of the virus. In the U.S. the number of people in detention fell from a peak of 55,000 under the Trump administration before the pandemic hit to just over 14,000 in the spring of 2021. Alternatives to detention were offered to people seeking an asylum court date. These alternatives include electronic ankle monitors, calling in to ICE authorities each week and phone trackers. In Europe Bandariz and Fernandez-Bassa called the summer of 2020, the “short summer of abolitionism” because many countries released significant percentages of their immigrant detention populations.[30] There were declines during this period of immigrants held by governments in Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Spain declared a moratorium on detention and closed all their facilities for the spring and summer of 2020. In the UK, widespread release policies reduced the number of immigrants in detention by 70%. Unfortunately, these declines were short-lived overall and the numbers of people held in detention has been growing again.

### **School Closing and Isolation**

Covid has had a strong negative effect on mental health world-wide. Immigrant children and youth are at heightened risk relative to native children. Previous trauma, which is high among immigrant children, is a

risk factor that makes the stress from the pandemic even more dangerous to mental health. In addition, immigrant children are often isolated from the wider community, many are linguistically isolated, and most do not have extended family available to help. When the pandemic began borders were closed around the world cutting off migrants from extended family and sometimes from absent parents.

The closing of schools around the world has hurt children everywhere but there is reason to think that children of immigrants have been set back a great deal. It is estimated that 95% of the world's children lost access to in-person schooling at the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. This is the largest interruption of schooling in history.

School policy is very decentralized in the U.S. and whether schools opened or not was decided by governors of states and individual school districts within those states. From March to June of 2020 almost all schools were closed and provided only online instruction, if any instruction was provided. In the fall of 2020 approximately half of K-12 students attended fully remotely, 19% attended in a hybrid fashion, and 28% attended fully in person. Black, Latino and poor students were the least likely to attend in person.[31] Scholars are only beginning to measure the effects of school closures on children and the stresses on the parents who had to suddenly provide support for instruction, often without support and in a language they did not speak.[32] One study of students in the Netherlands points to large negative consequences for learning. While schools were only closed for eight weeks in the Netherlands, scholars were able to examine testing which took place before and after the lockdown on the same schedule as testing that took place three years earlier without school closures. Comparing the learning that occurred between tests three years previously to the learning that was measured during the Covid school closures researchers found that students lost the equivalent of one-fifth of a school year of learning, exactly the amount that the schools were closed. In other words, the average child was measured as learning nothing during the school closures. And students from less-educated homes showed 60% greater loss than those from more advantaged homes.[33]

While studies of learning loss are only now emerging, and none directly measure immigrant children's learning loss, there are many reasons to expect that children in immigrant families will fare worse than nonimmigrant families. First, online learning, especially for primary school students, requires parental involvement to monitor and help students master the material. As noted above, more immigrant parents were in occupations

that did not allow them to work from home. Immigrant parents often are not able to speak the language their children are being taught in. This severely limits the abilities of parents to help children learn the material. But even when language is not the issue, immigrant parents often do not know the school system, the material being taught or the kinds of help their children need. In a pre-pandemic study of pressures for immigrant parents to help their children succeed in school, Antony-Newman surveyed 40 studies of immigrant parent involvement in schools and concluded that both language facility and knowledge of how the schools worked put immigrant parents and children at a great disadvantage, concluding “Increased pressure on parents to be more responsible for the educational performance of their children may lead to further educational inequalities among diverse groups of learners”. [34] This is not to say that immigrant parents do not help their children to succeed academically. They definitely play a role in immigrant children’s academic success by imparting values and discipline around learning and by helping students when they can. [35] However it is still true that immigrant parents face much larger hurdles than native born parents in the world of online learning when parents are called on to teach as well as parent, many of whom worked in low-income jobs that they could not do at home. [36]

While all children suffered from school closures and mental health of children declined, with rising depression and isolation, the closure of schools also has no doubt effected the successful integration of the children of immigrants. Schools are places where children “Learn a New Land”. [37] Teachers, peer friendships, athletic teams, playground activities, lunch-room chats are all places where immigrant children learn English, learn American culture and values and learn to “fit in” in their new country. The important work of integrating into America is also mirrored in what is lost for native-born children, who are also isolated from the immigrant kids who teach them new games, words, and ways of being in the world. The isolation of kids in online learning leaves little time or space and most importantly severs the connections that eases the two-way integration of natives and immigrants that is necessary for a healthy society and for children’s well-being.

### **Prejudice against Immigrants**

Throughout history epidemics have led to scapegoating and xenophobia. Jews were blamed for the Plague in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. [38] Immigrants have repeatedly been blamed for spreading dis-

ease and hate crimes go up when people are frightened. Covid-19 was no exception. Because the virus was first discovered and probably originated in China, anti-Asian sentiments and worry about Asian people spreading the virus began almost immediately after the virus was found to be circulating in the U.S. Irresponsible politicians such as Donald Trump blamed Chinese people for the virus calling it the “Chinese virus” or the “kung flu”. Hate crimes against Asian Americans rose quickly in the U.S. The Asian American Pacific Islander Equity Alliance, a nonprofit group based in California, monitored hate incidents between March 2020 and September 2021 and found 10,370 incidents across the U.S. including verbal harassment, refusal of service in businesses, online abuse, assaults and property damage. Perliger examined anti-Asian hate crimes from 1990 to 2021 and found an average of 8.1 crimes per year until 2020. During 2020 and 2021 there were 163 attacks or 81.5 per year; more than 11 times the previous average. These attacks were targeted at Asian Americans regardless of immigration status.[39]

Latino and Black immigrants were also blamed for spreading the virus. Republican Governor Abbot of Texas and DeSantis of Florida each blamed the high virus counts in their states on immigrants bringing the virus across the southern border. A survey by the Kaiser Foundation found that 55% of Republicans blamed immigrants and tourists for spreading the virus.

This toxic anti-immigrant environment is likely to persist especially when politicians deliberately lie to the people to cast blame on immigrants for an illness that is affecting the entire world. While studies have not yet studied schools and children’s interactions for evidence of this, there is no doubt that the children of immigrants will also face these anti-immigrant and racist beliefs and behaviors.

### **Policy Lessons**

There are two policy responses to the pandemic that were not long-lasting but did show that we are capable of dealing with people in a more humane and generous way. The CARES Act and the child allowance that was a part of that and subsequent legislation cut child poverty in half in the U.S. This generous cash assistance is something progressives have been advocating for decades. It was put into practice relatively easily and in a way that got assistance to families with limited administrative burdens. It was cruel and punitive that mixed status families including citizen children with anyone who was unauthorized in the household were excluded from this aid. This did not have to be the case. Ireland, for instance, introduced

unemployment assistance that was made available to all, including those without legal status.[40] But for working poor immigrant families with legal status this assistance was very effective and evidence that the American government is more than capable of helping poor families. Unfortunately, the child allowance was not renewed and ended at the end of December 2021 and like clockwork child poverty is once again rising.

The other short-lived policy demonstration was the sharp reduction of immigrants held in detention facilities in both the U.S. and Europe.[41] Most immigrants who are held by these governments have not committed any crimes other than immigrant violations. They are not a danger to the society and clearly alternatives to detention were found quickly once public health authorities deemed it necessary. It is very clear there was no need to be holding immigrant families and parents in detention and societies functioned very well once they were released. The fact that this was a brief interlude and detention numbers are rising again is deeply disappointing. The pandemic should have taught us that children can be united with their parents in the community and there is no need to separate immigrant families while they wait for asylum hearings or to keep children in detention.

One clear policy lesson from the last two years is that all children will need extra help catching up with the learning that was lost while in-person instruction was shut down. Immigrant children in particular will need help catching up to their peers, both in terms of language instruction and in terms of overall academic and cultural and social learning. Schools should not be merely going back to “normal” but investing in the most at-risk children.

It is also clear that health statistics and public health planning need to take immigrant origins into account. Plans for the pandemic did not generally include any specific planning for immigrant families, even though we now know they experienced higher infections and worse outcomes than other families. There should be universal access to health care, health insurance and public health messaging in the languages of immigrant communities. There should also be clear public messaging from political and social leaders that fights against the tendency to look for someone to blame for a pathogen and that focuses on immigrants and minorities.

Immigrant children and families bring great resilience and strength to receiving nations. They have experience coping with uncertainty, they are able to adapt to new situations and constraints. Immigrants have helped one another and through their essential work they kept our societies and economies functioning through the worst of the pandemic. Immigrant



children should not have to face the illness and loss of caregivers, the loss of learning in school, the poverty and hunger that resulted because they were excluded from government aid, and the continuing discrimination and racism that has been targeted at their communities. Unfortunately, the past two years have brought many of these challenges and difficulties to their young lives. The least we can all do is try to heal the harm that has been done and create more opportunities for these young people to flourish and reach their potential.

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# PEDAGOGIES OF BELONGING: LESSONS FROM REFUGEE EDUCATION FOR TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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*“I really love to sit alone. To think of many things, about the future, about what will happen. At the same time, I tell myself: maybe there’s no tomorrow. I live the details of each day and try to make the best of it. I try to live day by day, but I also strive a lot for the future, a lot”.*

– Wadad, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019

In 2019, Wadad<sup>1</sup> was a student in Grade 9 in a public school in Lebanon. At that time almost 18, she had arrived in Beirut when she was 13, having fled a suburb of Damascus, Syria where she grew up. Her school there was “just normal”, and she described living in “an area where there wasn’t a lot of things happening”. One day, a bomb fell in the school compound, and everything changed. Wadad said she knew “that we couldn’t stay there [in Syria]” but she also expected she would return to her school in the following semester. “The plan”, she said, “was for us to go back [to Syria]”.

Five years later, Wadad finds herself constantly embedded in the dissonance between her reality of long-term displacement in Lebanon and the plan she had five years ago, which is the one she still has now: to return to her home in Syria. Wadad now prefers not to think about the geography of her future, explaining she has come to realize how powerless it makes her feel to dwell on what she cannot control. She explained with some resignation, “It doesn’t make a difference where [my future] happens, but I prefer a place where I’m most comfortable in my job, my family... A place where I have people I love, not a place where I’m alone”. What Wadad has not given up, and is adamant that she will never give up, is a focus on this future. Yet maintaining it was a constant challenge for Wadad and her Syrian classmates. They found much of their education instead centered

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

on what Wadad described as the “details of each day”, of getting by in the present.<sup>2</sup>

Wadad’s experience of disconnects between present and future echoes refugee education across time and place. Once displaced, refugees now typically live without permanent homes for between 10 and 20 years (Devictor 2019; Devictor and Do 2017). Yet despite this long-term displacement, the dominant narrative was until recently that refugee education was temporary, a “holding ground”, designed to create stability in the present but not to create futures (Dryden-Peterson 2016, 2022). Short-term planning, stop-gap measures, and promises of imminent ‘return to normalcy’ were unfortunately the same approaches that dominated most educational planning and practice during the Covid-19 pandemic. We see in refugee education, as we have seen around the world during the pandemic, that this kind of emergency education does not meet the purposes communities have for education during times of uncertainty, particularly as related to what Wadad has learned she will not give up: a focus on the future.

In this essay, I examine lessons from the field of refugee education for times of uncertainty, including current and future pandemics. For many young people, especially those who experience marginalization and including refugees, uncertainty in education is not new. Yet the Covid-19 pandemic has made more visible for more people how uncertainty shapes education (Vavrus 2021). Importantly, rather than conceiving of uncertainty as only a negative state to circumvent, educators, students, and families have been forced to reckon with the idea that uncertainty is increasingly unavoidable and that we must find ways to learn from and within it. Expanding on conceptualizations of the resonance of lessons from refugee education from early in the Covid-19 pandemic (Dryden-Peterson 2021a, 2021b) and drawing on newer empirical findings (Salem and Dryden-Peterson 2022; Dryden-Peterson et al. Under Review; Dryden-Peterson 2022), I outline three elements of “pedagogies of belonging”: pedagogies of predictability, adaptability, and future-building.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Wadad was a participant in a multi-school study of Syrian students’ experiences of education in Lebanon. This study was collaborative with Vidur Chopra, Joumana Talhouk, and Carmen Geha.

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to the 84 students and teaching team members, based in 21 countries, of the Fall 2020 course “Education in Uncertainty” at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for deepening my thinking on these questions.

Pedagogies are practices of teaching. They embody envisioned purposes of education and the theories and values behind these purposes (Alexander 2001; Schweisfurth, Thomas, and Smail 2020). Belonging is integrally tied to ideas of “home”, including stability and feelings of being oneself, not only in private spaces but also public ones (e.g., Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006; Hovil 2016; Bloemraad 2018), including schools. In our research with refugees, we find that belonging is also integrally tied to being able to link together one’s past, one’s present, and one’s future and to capacities to contribute as an individual and as a member of a collective (Chopra and Dryden-Peterson 2020; Dryden-Peterson 2022).

This essay explores, in turn, pedagogies of predictability, adaptability, and future-building, all dependent on relationships and oriented toward belonging. Our research finds that refugee young people describe these pedagogies as important to them as they seek to learn in the present and build their futures. These lessons from refugee education are relevant for the continued educational, economic, and political uncertainty so many students face in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and for anticipated future uncertainties related to pandemics, conflict, and climate change.

### **Pedagogies of Predictability**

Pedagogies of predictability, as I have described elsewhere, include “the safety created through knowing, understanding, and trusting” (Dryden-Peterson 2021a). These pedagogies are particularly important in contexts of uncertainty, where much is, by definition, unpredictable. This lack of predictability can relate to both the “day by day” elements of education and the future-oriented elements of education, as Wadad described them, and is both pragmatic and existential. Pragmatically, knowing that school begins and ends at the same time each day and counting on the same person to be your teacher each day supports young people to build a sense of routine. These small elements of routine can help to create some stability. For example, in my long-term research in Uganda, refugee students described the volatility they felt in not knowing if their refugee status might be taken away at a moment’s notice, echoing Wadad’s sentiment that “maybe there’s no tomorrow”. What countered this constant fear was the knowledge that each day, at least in the meantime, could hold the predictability of going to school and finding the same teachers (Dryden-Peterson 2006, 2022). In research in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic, one recently arrived refugee student described how knowing that a teacher would pop up on his computer screen at the same time each day helped him to create

some kind of order from what otherwise felt like endless chaos at home.<sup>4</sup>

Syrian students in Lebanon identified pedagogies of predictability as essential not only for routines and this sense of stability, but also for learning that could support them in their long-term educational goals. Students identified predictability in how lessons would take place and what would be learned each day as a way to ensure they would finish the curriculum, especially in the year of a high-stakes exam. Their anxieties around lack of predictability were particularly accentuated when teachers' pedagogies came in the way of doing so. For example, Mira, one of Wadad's classmates, found too much time being wasted during her English classes, especially in what she observed to be the teacher's futile attempts to discipline the class by changing the seating plan frequently. "Not a month goes by without her switching our seats", Mira said. "She makes a poster with our new seating... She wasted two lessons just over the seating". For Mira, this was precious time where she found she "loses English". Mira worried about this experience in English class limiting her opportunities for passing the high-stakes Brevet exam that stood as a gatekeeper into further education and thus the future she imagined.

### **Pedagogies of Adaptability**

Pedagogies of adaptability involve "capacities to analyze, renegotiate, pivot, and transform" teaching and learning to meet both short-term and long-term goals, especially as conditions and needs shift. Predictability and adaptability can be at odds with each other, and essential to pedagogies of adaptability is transparency about why the adaptation is needed and co-construction of these adaptations. The same school in Uganda where students deeply valued the predictability of coming to the same place each day faced a situation where the leader of the church where the school was located asked them to relocate. In this situation, the teachers synthesized pedagogies of predictability and adaptability. Even as they moved the school, the teachers looked for a space in the same area where children would follow similar, and known, routes to school; they maintained the same teachers; and they supported students to understand that the school was the people who made it up, not just the building (Dryden-Peterson 2006, 2022).

Pedagogies of adaptability also play a role in ensuring focus on the future and not only the present. The school Wadad and Mira attended in

<sup>4</sup> This study was collaborative with Esther Elonga.

Beirut, Lebanon felt limited to them by its narrow focus on the Lebanese curriculum, predictable though that was. Through useful to their present goal of passing the Brevet exam, they often found this curriculum lacking in relevance to their lives outside of school and to the futures they planned, which they imagined would be outside of Lebanon. Teachers who were part of our research at another school nearby, on the other hand, embraced pedagogies of adaptability *and* predictability simultaneously. They wanted to be sure their students did pass the high-stakes Brevet, and so followed the Lebanese curriculum closely. At the same time, to meet the needs of their students for whom English was a new language, they translated the English textbooks into Arabic. They also created ways to, as the Principal explained, ensure that students “have not forgotten about their Syrian origins”, by including elements of Syrian culture and history, and adding a religion class (Chopra et al. Under Review).

In research in Jordan (Salem and Dryden-Peterson 2022), we observed how pedagogies of adaptability enabled teachers to get unstuck from the ways they were accustomed to teaching and to re-imagine new forms of teaching and learning with their Syrian students.<sup>5</sup> Jordanian teachers learned how to enact what we call “socio-political protection” in their teaching. Jordanian teachers learned from their Syrian students about the harms they experienced in their education, including limited access to the curriculum through missed schooling and language, lack of relevance of the curriculum to their lives and future goals, and limited opportunities to practice or use what they learned in terms of social, economic, civic, and political participation in Jordan. Through relationships with their students, teachers also learned to question the structures that created these harms and, in small and incremental ways, adapt their teaching practices with goals of shifting them. For example, as one teacher recognized that his students “just wanted to be connected to their homes as much as possible”, he allowed them to use their phones in some periods of the school day to communicate with and receive news from home. Another teacher advocated for a change in school hours so that her female students could continue coming to school and not walk home in the dark. In synthesizing research across nine discrete studies and in 23 country contexts (Dryden-Peterson 2022), these pedagogies of adaptability, centered in relationships, emerged as central to refugee students’ feelings of learning, belonging, and being

<sup>5</sup> This study was collaborative with Hiba Salem.



successful in their education, particularly as they supported students to make sense of and navigate the inequities they experienced inside and outside of school.

### **Pedagogies of Future-Building**

Future-building, as I have described it elsewhere, “involves imagining, and planning for, multiple possible futures – here, there, and/or somewhere else entirely”. This process is not linear, nor “seeking some sedentary and arrived-at geographic, spatial, or social state”. Core to future-building is “cognitive mobility” – “the ways in which young people can apply what they learn in school across place and time” (Dryden-Peterson 2021b).

The concept of cognitive mobility relies less on education as bounded by geography and historical moment and more on education as enabler of opportunity across place and time. For many types of uncertainty, this kind of mobility is essential as it counteracts other forms of mobility that are restricted. In refugee education, futures have generally been categorized in three ways, all of them geographic: return to the country of origin, integration in the country of exile, or resettlement to a third country (Betts and Collier 2017; UNHCR 2021). Yet what we see in research with refugee students across contexts is that they largely reject these geographic futures, given how dependent those futures are on migration policies that they have experienced to be both restrictive and unpredictable. We have learned from them a different way to conceptualize futures in terms of opportunities (Dryden-Peterson 2022; Dryden-Peterson et al. Under Review). This means education that cultivates capacities to apply what one learns across place and time. It is education that does not set up the false choice of having to choose between the present and the future, between the kinds of learning that are deemed worthy within the education refugee young people experience at the present in one specific geography and moment in time and the opportunities this narrow education then might trade away for a future that evolves differently (vis-a-vis language, see Dryden-Peterson 2021b).

Drawing on students’ cognitive mobility and seeking ways to further cultivate it were tools some educators drew on during the Covid-19 pandemic when modalities of education shifted from in-person schooling to remote learning. In best-case scenarios, this involved educators supporting students to connect their previous experiences in schools to new ways of learning from a distance and to how this new learning connected to future learning and goals, even those futures that remained unknowable in that moment

(see, for example, Reich and Mehta 2021). Often, though, students did not find space to connect their past learning to their present situations, nor to envision the future, instead stuck in the crisis of the present. Students found themselves trying to learn in ways that both they and their teachers knew were ineffective, holding on to the ideas that someday soon all would return to “normal”. This approach promised a near-term resumption of predictability, yet this promise remained elusive. Instead of leveraging opportunities for cognitive mobility, this approach focuses on stasis.

Peter, a refugee student who arrived in the United States in 2019, described how he experienced school during the pandemic as completely devoid of the relationships that had been central to his learning in a new place: “Things have been so different since we went remote. Since we started learning online stuff. At first, before we went remote, I used to interact every single day in class with my fellow students, the teacher stuff like that. But I will be honest, it’s really, really hard to interact with people mostly like when you login on Zoom, all the screens are black. It’s hard to talk to someone that you are not seeing actually... I don’t interact with people every single day”. Yet for months and months, all this student would see on his screen was one image of his teacher and rows of blank, black boxes of his peers. “Are you all still with us”, his teacher would say in class. “Maybe give us a thumbs up so I know you are still there behind the black box”. In many cases, rather than focus on new ways to build relationships, these teachers and students treated the situation as a holding ground, just like in refugee education, until their lives could return to normal (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019; Dryden-Peterson 2022).

Pedagogies for future-building do not assume a return to normal over the near-term and open space for reimagining long-term futures. They require supporting students to connect their pasts, their presents, and their futures. We find that students attribute major roles to teachers in supporting these connections, through pedagogies of adaptability and through refusing to be stuck in present crises. Peter found some teachers encouraging students to maintain links to their past learning and activities but telling stories about their own ways of doing this. One teacher told students about the books she was reading in the evenings, even when she had to push herself to continue this hobby during the challenges of Covid-19 for her family. Peter’s classmates, Teddy, described how another teacher used this moment to re-tool herself with a new skill, how to file her own taxes. Teddy explained, “she told us, she had always filed her taxes through like some other taxing agency, I guess, or whatever they’re called. And then

this year she decided, ‘I’m a math teacher, I should know how to file my own taxes’, so she would always keep this updated on how that was going”. Through the process, Teddy and his classmates began to think about filing their own taxes, a small window into the futures they still sought to imagine and prepare for, even while learning from home.

Some teachers are also more explicit about the connections between their pedagogies and future-building. In Lebanon, we document how one teacher in a government school adapted the rigid curriculum to explicitly engage her students in thinking about the current status quo and what they wish to be different in the future. Completing the lesson, the teacher asked students to think about the meaning of the civics lesson beyond the classroom. She prompted them to think about how through engagement in civic activities they “might be able to change other people’s perspectives”. She also acknowledged how challenging this was, particularly for her refugee students who had neither rights nor power in their context of exile in Lebanon. One student, Amal, recalled how this teacher explained this dissonance: “In the end, nothing of what’s in this lesson exists. We wish it does.... It’s true you’re learning things that don’t exist but you might be the reason they exist in the future. You might do things related to politics and things like that and you can change and do the things you studied about, things related to law” (Chopra et al. Under Review).

“Navigational capacities” (Swartz 2021) can support young people in learning how to bridge this distance between what exists in the present and this type of newly reimagined future, even in the context of ongoing uncertainties. In a study with child soldiers in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2006) demonstrates the need for teaching young people not only that they need to navigate – or adapt – to new situations in order to create new futures but also *how* to navigate. Adelman (2019) finds that teachers who themselves are refugees share with students their own experiences and decision-making as examples of possible ways of navigating current situations, especially ones of exclusion, in ways that continue to hold future-building front of mind. In these ways, they support students like Wadad to “live day by day” but also to “strive a lot for the future, a lot”.

### **Implications for Current and Future Uncertainties**

Refugee education has typically been framed as temporary, an approach that characterizes much emergency response across all sectors despite the now well-understood long-term nature of conflict, displacement, and uncertainty. Education during the Covid-19 pandemic in most parts of the

world has followed similar patterns, designed to keep people safe until a return to ‘normalcy’ would become possible. Return has been elusive, and this short-term thinking has sacrificed learning, belonging, and opportunity for millions of children. In refugee education, we see that young people thrive in uncertainty when their teachers do not anticipate a return to normal, but instead prepare young people to adapt to new and ever-shifting situations and to build newly imagined futures. Lessons from refugee education point us towards a set of three pedagogies of belonging – predictability, adaptability, and future-building – that can inform education in the ongoing uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic and of future pandemics and disruptions to come. Essential to all three of these pedagogies are relationships among teachers and students that explicitly support understanding and navigating current situations of uncertainty to create futures in which opportunities are more equitable. More research is needed on how teachers learn these pedagogies and the institutional and policy conditions that enable them, with implications for our millions of students globally who experience uncertainty and disruption and whose education must support them now and into these futures.

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# RESILIENCE IN AN AGE OF PANDEMICS

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Our presentation will focus on the importance of resilience in an age of pandemics. Resilience, by which we mean the capacity to recover quickly from challenges, has always been important at an individual level, a community level, a national level and an international level. But the importance of resilience has been placed in stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic showcased how events that occur in one area of the world can have profound reverberations across the planet. And it illustrated that we are not well prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

Back in 2017, my husband Jim Stone and I sponsored a conference entitled “Ready Together: A Conference on Epidemic Preparedness”. The conference was organized by a non-profit we have been involved with for many years – Management Sciences for Health (“MSH”). The conference invited leaders from a broad range of sectors to discuss “the state of the world’s readiness to fight the next epidemic or pandemic”. Throughout the day speakers underscored the importance of preparedness and international collaboration. MSH and others had been sounding the alarm for years, letting us know that we were nowhere near prepared – not as a community, not as a nation, not as a world. And yet, here in the midst of a global pandemic, we are still ignoring so many of the issues that caused this pandemic to spiral out of control. As could have been predicted, the hardship and devastation of this pandemic has disproportionately affected the most marginalized and vulnerable in our world – those without access to healthcare, those living in poverty, and children whose lives and educations have been disrupted in consequential ways.<sup>1</sup>

There is so much to be done to repair the damage the pandemic has wrought and to address the vulnerabilities it has exposed and contributed to – insufficient educational systems, inequities of health care, poverty, and more. And there is an enormous task ahead to prepare the world for the next pandemic. But we owe it to our children and our grandchildren to

<sup>1</sup> Nishant Yonzan et al., “Available Data and Estimates of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Global Poverty”, (May 22, 2021) [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/05/Mahler\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/05/Mahler_Paper.pdf)

treat this time as a watershed moment, to do more than merely return to our work with a renewed sense of purpose. For it is the children who will live with the consequences of the choices we make today. Philanthropy can help fill the gaps that governments overlook, but philanthropy and governments must see pandemic preparedness about being much more than just public health. Environmental sustainability and economic inequality are two issues my husband Jim and I are passionate about, and they are both critical to address as we prepare for future pandemics.

Scientists have suggested that there is an undeniable link between climate change and an increase in potentially lethal viruses that jump from animals to humans.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this are simple to understand, but have yet to be widely appreciated by the general public. First, the warming of our planet due to human activity, and the destruction of habitat, also due to human activity, bring more animals into contact with one another and with humans.<sup>3</sup> More contact means more chances for viruses to jump from one species to another. Second, vector-borne diseases carried by insects proliferate as the climate warms and more regions of the world become hospitable to these hosts.<sup>4</sup> The more places mosquitoes can thrive, the more are the opportunities for pathogens to spread from one host to another. Third, the reduction of biodiversity, by which I mean fewer species thriving on earth, can inhibit the resilience of the remaining species to fight against viral threats. Natural selection has provided plants and animals many tools for disease resistance we have not even discovered yet, and never will if we destroy their habitats. As a recent article by *Pro Publica* pointed out, within the United States we have seen West Nile encephalitis spread largely because of the decreasing diversity of migratory birds.<sup>5</sup> And the connections between climate change and pandemic risk go on and on.

So what can we do? We can begin by recognizing the extreme interconnectedness of our world. As we have heard throughout this conference,

<sup>2</sup> Konstans Wells, Robin Flynn, “Managing Host-Parasite Interactions in Humans and Wildlife in Times of Global Change”, *Parasitology Research* (September 6, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00436-022-07649-7>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Andrew K. Githeko et al., “Climate Change and Vector-Borne Diseases: a Regional Analysis”. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2000, <https://www.sciencelibrary.org/pdf/bwho/v78n9/v78n9a09.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Lustgarten, “How Climate Change is Contributing to Skyrocketing Rates of Infectious Disease”. *ProPublica*, updated May 7, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/climate-infectious-diseases>

we cannot study the challenges we face in siloes. We must recognize that our planet – its flora, its fauna, its waters, its lands, and its people are connected to one another in profound ways. In his recent Encyclical focused on “Care for our Common Home”, His Holiness states that “the climate is a common good”.<sup>6</sup> I could not agree more. This sentiment has underscored my life’s work on behalf of the environment. I have always believed that the climate belongs to us all. His Holiness goes on to suggest that our planet and its abundant diversity is a common good that belongs to all of us but we, as a species, are causing it irreparable harm. He writes, “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years”.<sup>7</sup> At the same as we have neglected our common home, we have also neglected the people who populate it by ignoring their basic needs. As the UN report from last August makes clear, human-induced climate change has reached catastrophic levels.<sup>8</sup> When asked about the report, Secretary-General António Guterres said we are in the midst of “a code red for humanity”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed we are. The changes to our climate system are now readily observable around the world. We see it in the rising seas. We see it in the intensifying storms. We see it in the melting glaciers. We must act now to reduce emissions and do everything we can to unite the world in a commitment to slow global warming.

But as we bolster our resolve to fight climate change, we must also work on a parallel plane to make the world and its people more resilient to the changes that undoubtedly lie ahead. Resilience means planning to live with higher seas and more frequent storms. It also means creating stability in the economic lives of people so they can weather life’s inevitable challenges. Actions we take today can, and will, affect the impact the warming climate will have on the earth and all those who inhabit it. The extreme

<sup>6</sup> Francis, *Laudato si’*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, May 24, 2015, Section 23, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Pörtner, H.O. et al. *IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 3056 pp., doi:10.1017/9781009325844.

<sup>9</sup> António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Statement on the IPCC Working Group 1 Report on the Physical Science Basis of the Sixth Assessment”. United Nations, updated August 9, 2021. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals-statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment>



connectedness of our world means that changing weather patterns, storms, fires, floods, and other environmental disasters that occur on one continent can easily cause food shortages, disease, and despair in communities thousands of miles away. It means that when homes and entire communities are washed away by the rising seas, the impacts are felt around the globe. We must act now to build more resilient communities. But this effort will require collaboration the likes of which we have probably never seen. It will require collaboration across sectors and across national boundaries. The world's governments, academics, non-profits, and communities must come together in unprecedented ways.

One effort currently underway in Boston is the Stone Living Lab. It is a partnership based at UMass Boston that unites the City of Boston, the State of Massachusetts, the Federal government of the United States, academics from multiple universities, indigenous tribes, and a local non-profit, Boston Harbor Now, to make vulnerable coastal regions adaptive to climate change while enhancing natural and built environments. The underlying goal is to identify new ways to build more resilient communities while recognizing that the only viable way forward is for humans to live in harmony with nature, rather than at odds with it. The Lab brings together scientists, policy makers, government officials, educators, and community leaders on an even playing field to address complex questions such as: how can we protect the coastline while also protecting fragile ecosystems that are critical to a healthy planet; and how can we ensure the solutions we develop also help alleviate undue climate burdens that so often fall on the most marginalized in society?

As a "Living Lab" we bring these questions out of the siloed halls of academia and corporate R&D and into the real world by creating a user-centered, open, innovative ecosystem that engages scientists and the community in collaborative design and exploration. Climate change is upon us. But what we do today can make a difference to the world we pass onto the next generation. The Stone Foundation is committed to establishing more Living Labs focused on building resilience across neighborhoods, towns, cities and ecosystems. In addition to bolstering the resilience of our coastlines, we see the protection of large landscapes as a key part of ensuring that today's youth inherit a more resilient and ecologically stable world. Stone Living Labs will bring together diverse stakeholders to address the economic, social, political and environmental challenges that prevent us from conserving the habitats we know are crucial to the viability of our planet.

Across the world, biodiversity is increasingly threatened by climate change. Within the United States alone, millions of miles of roads segregate landscapes and divide ecosystems while thousands of dams and barriers prevent water from flowing freely. This places enormous survival pressure on the natural inhabitants of our country – the diverse flora and fauna we rely on to keep our air and water clean, to keep the food chain intact, and to prevent the spread of disease. It is a widely accepted principle in the field of conservation biology that large, connected landscapes and waterways are absolutely essential for biodiversity. This is even more true in an era of climate change when entire species will be forced to migrate north in search of suitable habitat. Loss of biodiversity has, and will continue to be, detrimental for our planet. The natural world is knit together in symbiotic ways and major disruptions to that balance can have catastrophic implications for pest control, carbon sequestration, our food supply and more. As one of the most brilliant and passionate scientists of our century, the late E.O. Wilson, said, “Unless humanity learns a great deal more about global biodiversity, and moves quickly to protect it, we will soon lose most of the species composing life on Earth”.<sup>10</sup>

Future Living Labs will continue to address how to make space for all species in the midst of modern life, how to adapt farming to today’s climate realities, how to prepare for drastic changes to our water supply, and how to live more harmoniously with nature. Implicit in the work of the Lab is bringing disparate members of the community together to reach for a common goal. Jim and I firmly believe that we need to leave a more equitable and resilient world for the next generation. And as His Holiness has written, “We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature”.<sup>11</sup>

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I am pleased to associate myself with my wife’s remarks and honored to be included in this distinguished assembly. Let me take just a few minutes to add two points of emphasis related to my personal experiences. I served

<sup>10</sup> E.O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 139.

for over a decade as a director and chairman of MSH, which is devoted to serving public health needs in some of the world's poorest countries. And I now commit a share of my time to the philanthropy that good fortune in business has permitted, concentrating on a single issue – the accelerating trend toward wealth inequality. Both activities are relevant to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The mission of MSH, as it is generally known, is to provide tangible and educational tools for avoiding unnecessary deaths in countries with limited access to those tools. At the close of my service, MSH employed 2,500 people in over 40 countries, with an annual budget of \$300 million. MSH long accepted being unknown to the public; it always worked quietly, country by country, and village by village – leaving the glamour and fame to others.

Dr. Jono Quick, MSH's chief executive then, was also my tutor on epidemics. In 2000, Jono wrote a book called *The End of Epidemics*. Taken by his warning, Cathy and I sponsored the conference she mentioned to focus on the message. It was clear then that the world was unprepared for what was likely to happen. And now the COVID-19 virus has brought tragedy, illness, isolation, and anxiety to many at the individual level, transformed business, and increased xenophobia at a time when bridge-building, diplomacy, and mutual respect are especially essential. In a world where transportation modes allow vectors to be carried anywhere on the globe overnight, it is hard to envision this plague and others yet unknown disappearing as threats. Our vaccines, antibiotics, and antivirals can be only a part of the defense. As you may know, I run an insurance company, so preparatory risk mitigation is a familiar discipline in my world. But preparedness has been under-employed in global public health. Isn't it clear now that our cultures, as well as our institutions must change to provide preparedness?

My country, the United States, is in a particularly good position to protect itself and extend protection to the rest of the world. For us, though, the COVID-19 pandemic is already comparable in significance to a war. We have lost more Americans to COVID-19 than in the two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam combined.<sup>12</sup> But I fear history will judge American public sentiment as having been only half-heartedly committed to fighting the battles both at home and internationally. Our bio-science capabilities today are marvelous, but too many Americans have somehow bought into the notion

<sup>12</sup>Mary Kekatos, "1 Million Have Died from COVID in the US. Experts Wonder How This Seems Normal", *ABC News website*, May 12, 2022 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/us-nearing-million-covid-deaths-experts-normal/story?id=83863055>

that to vax or not to vax is just a personal choice, an exercise of treasured liberties. It is indeed appropriate that members of a free populace can put themselves at personal risk, even to engage in imprudent risks, if they don't harm others by doing so. It is hard to find a logic of ethics anywhere, however, to justify as a matter of solely personal choice putting innocents at risk of serious illness or monopolizing our medical resources. It is now clear that our cultural understanding of our duty to others must change.

This takes me to a last point. As one who began adulthood as an economist, I have long been interested in distributional equity. A standard high school lesson in my day proclaimed that our nation was free of the shameful inequities of Central American banana republics, European hereditary aristocracies, and ancient oriental empires. It took me only a few years, and a little learning about racial and gender disparities, to see that nothing was that simple. Now the story is clearer but sadder. Distributional equity in the United States has not only failed to march toward improvement since then, it has reversed course entirely. Today, the United States leads its peer group in income and wealth inequality. Mobility has decreased as well. And, when too much of the wealth is sequestered at the top, what mobility remains will be of diminished consequence. Inequality in family wealth is more extreme today in the United States than it has been in almost 100 years. The top 10% of Americans by income now own 70% of the country's wealth and well more than 90% of its financial assets.<sup>13</sup> Those at the very summit, the top one-percent of 1%, have a combined net worth roughly equal to that of the lower two-thirds.<sup>14</sup> Worse, we are far from unique. The UK is right behind us on the same track, the rest of Europe only a lap behind and, ironically, Russia and China are running about neck and neck with us.

If I had more time today, I might explore with you the causative vectors for the present trajectory. On my list are the expansion of technology, globalization, the financialization of our economies, and numerous examples of pernicious public policies. I carry no brief, though, for absolute leveling within nations. As E.O. Wilson put it: "Great idea, wrong species". But Europe in the Dark Ages demonstrated what comes of the opposite corner solution, where the monarch and the princes own everything. That solu-

<sup>13</sup> Michael Batty et al. 2019. "Introducing the Distributional Financial Accounts of the United States". *Finance and Economics Discussion Series* 2019(017).

<sup>14</sup>"Wealth Inequality, USA, 1913–2021", accessed September 26, 2022. *World Inequality Database*. <https://wid.world/country/usa/>

tion is even easier to reject, since it gave Europe centuries of starvation, illiteracy, and stagnation. The challenge is to identify the spot between the poles where the balance is optimized for the benefit of society as a whole.

You have already heard a bit about the economic costs of extreme inequality. But the greater threat may be to democracy. It should be obvious that a degree of economic pluralism is a precondition of democracy. As equality erodes our pluralism, and the powerful exert their influence to further enhance their relative advantages, we increase citizen alienation with the process, enhancing the power of single-issue voters, haters, and the simply delusional. This is a landscape that favors the bearers of the aggressive, heroic promises that have so often preceded catastrophe. By John Rawls's notion, a just society is one in which virtually all would sign off on its distributions pattern before knowing where on the ladder they would find themselves. Few if any nations could meet Rawls's standard today.

If you are asking how this thesis relates to COVID-19, let me suggest two connections. Most obvious is the nexus between financial inequality and access to vaccinations and treatment. Another less discussed linkage arises when a lack of distributive justice stresses the middle classes, as is very much the case today. When middle classes prosper, their prosperity nurtures a generous cast of mind toward the less fortunate, both within borders and toward the world at large. But as the rich get richer, it is not principally at the expense of the poor who have nothing to give up. It's the middle classes that lose out. And the consequence is that a society tends to lose its generosity towards its own poor and reduces its sense of duty to the rest of the world. This is why we are sponsoring academic progress towards understanding the causes and consequences of wealth inequality and it is why this effort has implications for all the issues we have discussed at this conference.

The longer the COVID-19 virus multiplies and mutates anywhere on the planet, the more cases and variants we will have to fight. For the sake of all, my country should be the leader in protecting the rest of the world, and especially those in Earth's poorer countries. Were the best angels of human nature to somehow prevail, China, Russia, and the United States, with support from a few others, would override national pride and unite to cooperate in the production and distribution of data, vaccines, necessary supplies, and treatment medications. The pandemic threat, after all, does not derive – in the manner of wars – from hostilities between nations. Rather its source is a relentlessly hostile inhuman adversary. Surely the nations of Earth would all cooperate if the threat came from fiendish inter-

planetary invaders in flying saucers. How different are those spiky virions from enemy space aliens? I am confident that science, technology, and the passage of time shall inevitably defeat this plague, but relief would almost surely be swifter, and preparedness and resilience enhanced, if we balanced healthy competition with international collaboration. A propitious re-assessment of our deep global connectedness could speed the world's return to health and normalcy, and open the gates to a host of longer-term benefits on other common issues among nations as a bonus.

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► COMMENTARY





# THE UNIVERSITY IN THE AGE OF COVID

JOHN J. DEGIOIA

48th President of Georgetown University, Washington DC

It is an honor to join you and to offer these reflections on University Research in the age of Covid. I am deeply appreciative of the opportunity to hear so many outstanding presentations.

In my reflections, I will focus on two themes: first, a possibility emerging from the experience of these past two years for a focus on ever-more challenging problems; and second, on the importance of drawing upon resources that can support and strengthen our people who are taking on these challenges.

We can count on an extraordinary global infrastructure in support of understanding the dislocations we have discussed – a global research infrastructure. As Kathleen McCartney shared in her presentation, it is nothing short of “astonishing” how much we already know about the impact of the pandemic on psychosocial development of children and adolescents. And as we have learned from all other presentations – it is equally astonishing how much we have learned about other domains.

And this is an extraordinary infrastructure that continues to strengthen. The convergence of new forces – globalization, climate change, growing inequity, new technologies – has required the development of new approaches to research – new ways of organizing research, new structures. Jeffrey Sachs is responsible for the development of one such example – the Earth Institute at Columbia – and our colleagues at UNESCO & UNICEF have supported other types of approaches that push beyond traditional disciplines and seek to connect methods and approaches in new combinations. Over the past decade, the National Academy of Sciences has proposed the concept Convergence Science to capture this dynamic that we all know well.

We should have some confidence that universities will respond to the challenges of *understanding* exceptionally well. Universities will be part of this strengthening infrastructure, primarily because the university is built on the centrality of knowledge. That is the core of our identity and purpose.

Three elements constitute the university:

First, is formation, we provide a context for the formation of young people. That is, along with the knowledge that becomes transmitted through

students' coursework and faculty engagement, we value the importance that all students explore and develop the intellectual, moral, social, spiritual, and civic dimensions of their selves.

Second, is inquiry. We support the scholarship and research of our faculty. In essence, we are contributing to the discovery and construction of knowledge as well as establishing a home for epistemic communities that establish the conditions for truth.

Third, is the emphasis on common good, as universities we contribute to common good of the communities in which we participate. There is a good we can achieve together that we could never hope to achieve alone.

Inquiry – scholarship and research – is the work that holds these elements together and differentiates the university from other places where “formation” occurs and other institutions that contribute to the common good.

The work of inquiry has been on display throughout the pandemic – we have seen examples of this astonishing work, here, together, in the presentations of our colleagues.

The work of inquiry has, in these just past times, enabled an extraordinary explosion of knowledge, actions, treatments, insights – an awesome display of inquiry. Significantly, universities have been and now are at the forefront of the effort.

And while the work of inquiry focused on pandemic particulars is ongoing, it continues also into the work of how we understand what we are doing and what needs to be done.

Analyses, treatments, policies, have emerged from our universities – collaborating in public – with one another, with the private sector, with municipal, state, and the federal governments. The emphasis has been, by and large, on “following the science”, and this is all the work of inquiry.

And now I think we must ask: given what we have learned and are learning about inquiry during this pandemic – can it be applied elsewhere? As we move forward, can we apply our learning to so-called Wicked Problems?

How can we characterize “wicked problems?”

A term that captures a range of problems that, whether by definition, interpretation, inability to confront – are defined as “wicked”. Here’s how that appellation was originally described and displayed:

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber – from the Abstract of their 1973 paper:

*“The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail because of the nature of these problems... Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing*

*like the indisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about 'optimal solutions' to these problems... Even worse, there are no solutions in the sense of definitive answers".<sup>1</sup>*

They identify ten characteristics of wicked problems:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation"; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The social planner has no right to be wrong. (i.e., planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate).

Others have used different terms to describe this idea. Russell Ackoff, writing in 1974: "*Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems...I choose to call such a system a mess*".<sup>2</sup>

Is this helpful? Can this characterization of "wicked problems" enrich our capacity to expand, enrich, deepen our work of inquiry? Does this concept help to explain why some of the problems we have discussed seem

<sup>1</sup> Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (June 1973): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Lincoln Ackoff, *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems* (New York: Wiley, 1974), 21.

so intractable? Why are some of the issues we have discussed so intractable? Can this concept enrich our understanding of the nature of inquiry?

These are challenges that universities, in their inquiry roles, take on as a matter of course. What is “problematical” is examined as part of the work of the university. I believe some of what we have learned through these past twenty-four months in response to the pandemic has strengthened the capabilities and capacities of our universities to take on these ever-bigger problems.

### **Discernment**

I wish to close with a reflection on those who do the work – those members of our university – our faculty, our scholars, graduate students, post-docs, increasingly undergraduates – those who engage in inquiry – those who will be taking on these ever more challenging problems. As we have strengthened our universities, are there steps we can take in support of our people?

A convening like this, held in this location, opens up the possibility of a discourse drawing upon more resources – spiritual and moral resources – that might be more challenging to explore in our more typical academic conferences. I offer these reflections from the oldest Catholic and Jesuit university in the United States and wish to share one element of a 500-year-old tradition that animates our community.

Early in the interview that perhaps more than any introduced to the world the way of proceeding of Pope Francis, Father Antonio Spadaro asked the Holy Father the following question: “*What does it mean for a Jesuit to be elected pope? What element of Ignatian spirituality helps you live your ministry?*”<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis responded with the word: “*Discernment*”.

He replies: “*Discernment is one of the things that worked inside St. Ignatius. For him it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely*”.<sup>4</sup>

St. Ignatius is the founder of the Jesuits. Discernment is a transformative practice outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises* – a guidebook he wrote for the practice of discernment. For Ignatius, we must pay attention to our interiority – with special attention to the feelings – to the affect – that we

<sup>3</sup> Francis, Interview with Pope Francis, interview by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., September 21, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html)

<sup>4</sup> Francis.

are experiencing – movements – within us. For Ignatius, the beginning of his insight came in convalescence from an injury suffered in battle. He was a courtier whose leg had been shattered when hit by a cannonball.

More than his leg, his entire world was shattered. His self-identity, one whose, in his words from his Autobiography, “*chief delight*” was “*in the exercise of arms, with a great and vain desire to gain honor*” was hard to sustain.<sup>5</sup> But not without trying. In convalescence, he asked for books that would feed this identity – requesting “*tales of chivalry*”. With none to be found he was limited to two sacred texts: “*a life of Christ and a book of the lives of the saints...*”.<sup>6</sup>

What emerges in the interiority of this young man is an experience that might have resonance with each of us: there were interior movements that brought him joy. And there were interior movements that brought sadness, a heaviness, even dread. He gave us words that describe these contrary interior movements – consolation and desolation. In his convalescence, when he reflected on reading sacred literature and allowing his imagination to flow: consolation. When he reflected on his life as a courtier – desolation.

For Ignatius, we are not to ignore or reject or run from these interior movements: we are to try to interpret them. What are they telling us? What could they mean? Where are they leading us? If they are leading us toward “consolation” than they can be trusted and we need to reflect with them. And if the contrary, they need to be resisted. What is this work of interpreting these feelings? This is discernment.

Ignatius encourages careful attention to our interiority – especially to the “affect” we experience.

One more term. The word is *sentir* – an Ignatian word that is difficult to define. Here is Father Brian O’Leary:

“*Sentir is...a key concept for...Ignatius...it defies any efforts to force it into either an intellectual or an affective category; it successfully spans both. Hence the difficulty of translating it by any single word. Phrases like ‘to have a felt understanding’ of a truth, or ‘to have an experiential and affective knowledge’ of a person or a thing, are awkward; but they are often necessary circumlocutions to bring out the rich spiritual meaning of the original*”.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ignatius et al., *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of The Spiritual Exercises*, Penguin Classics (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ignatius et al., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Brian O’Leary, *Pierre Favre and Discernment: The Discernment of Spirits in the Memorial of Blessed Pierre Favre* [2nd ed.] (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 86.

There is a powerful idea at work – that we can attain “felt knowledge”. Knowledge that we just know, in the deepest parts of our beings, is true. We have both our intellect and we have this practice – of discerning the affect that we have in each of our interiorities. Ignatius asks us to privilege the significance of our “inner lives”.

Colleges and universities are dedicated to the acquisition and dissemination, the discovery and construction, the interpretation and conservation of knowledge. Together, these knowledge-developing activities determine the orientation of the university.

Can we draw upon additional resources, like those offered by Ignatius – discernment, consolation, *sentir* – to assist us, to support who take on this work, as we build upon the work of these past twenty-four months and seek to tackle the most complex social problems?

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# REMARKS ON THE ROLE OF MORAL FUSION COALITIONS IN THE STRUGGLE TO END POVERTY

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I am honored to be here at the Vatican on the feast of St Francis to share with you on behalf of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival in my home, the United States of America. As St Francis once walked this land proclaiming good news to the poor, the poor and rejected of my country march and sit-in today to declare the good news that a moral economy is possible in our time.

The Holy Father embraced St Francis' vocation when he chose his pontifical name, and he has endorsed the work of the Holy Spirit in today's poor people's movements in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. So I have come to share what we have learned and are learning in our campaign as a way of contributing to this ongoing work of proclaiming God's good news that the poor and rejected of society are blessed to lead us in the revolution of values that the world so desperately needs.

The Poor People's Campaign has adopted a moral fusion framework for organizing poor and low-income people. It is guided by a particular theology and sociology, both of which grow out of the faith-rooted freedom struggles of generations. Let me first outline some of our basic theological commitments.

The prophet Isaiah declares, "Woe unto those who legislate evil and deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?"

Isaiah 58 teaches that when we attempt to engage in religious activity without losing the bands of policy wickedness and refuse to honor the image of God in all persons, especially the poor, a nation sets up its own destruction and disables its ability to be an enlightened nation that can repair its breaches.



We understand that if retrogressive legislation and a refusal to act can rob the poor, then legislation can also correct the robbery and restore the real purpose and possibility of society. Systemic poverty is not the cumulative result of individual failures. People in power have made choices and written those choices into tax policy, war policy, and government budgets. The extreme disparity between the one tenth of one percent who have more money than they could ever spend and the half of the world that struggles to survive every day is the result of policy choices that the Bible condemns over and over as sin. We must be clear that it is the job of religious leaders today to condemn them also.

A second theological conviction that informs moral fusion organizing is that religious leaders have too often endorsed predatory activity, and there is a need for prophetic witnesses to stand in the gap. The prophet Ezekiel challenged the political leaders of his day, saying that they ravaged the poor like a wolf ravages its prey. But he did not stop there. He went on to say that the religious leaders whitewashed the evil politicians' deeds, giving them a veneer of religiosity. Our campaign is very clear that religious nationalism today presents an existential threat to poor people because it offers theological and spiritual cover for a policy agenda that treats corporations like people and people like things. To build a moral movement for a moral economy, a diverse and prophetic witness of religious leaders must stand in the gap and challenge the policy violence that religious nationalists endorse.

A third theological conviction at the heart of our work comes directly from Jesus, who began his public ministry in Nazareth by proclaiming good news to the poor – and specifically to those made poor by unjust systems. This is not work that the church, with all of its worldly wealth, can do on behalf of the poor. No, the poor must be at the center of public ministry. Religious leaders are not called to speak for the poor, but to stand alongside people's movements that are already lifting God's call for justice in the earth.

Fourthly, we have learned that the narrative in Amos 5 offers a principle that must be put into action: in order for justice to roll down like waters, there must be a remnant of people who are willing to nonviolently interrupt unjust systems. In that text, God promises divine assistance for the poor who cry out for justice. It says, "Go into the streets. Cry out in the marketplaces". Nonviolent direct action to expose the violence of systemic poverty is necessary for any movement to end poverty.

It is also a theological conviction that God wants to end poverty. This is the witness of Pentecost. When the Spirit fell on the people and they were empowered to live the way that Jesus had shown them, the Bible

says that “no one among them had need”. The Holy Spirit ended poverty among the early Christians because that is God’s desire. And not just for the church, but for all people.

Our final theological conviction is that *nations will be judged by how the least of these are treated*. This is what we read in Matthew 25, but too often the Last Judgement is read through an individualistic lens. This is not the story of Dives and Lazarus. Matthew 25 does not say that the rich man will be judged by how he treated the poor man at his door (though this is also true). Matthew 25 says that at the Last Judgement every nation will be judged by how we chose to either welcome Jesus or reject him in the poor, the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned.

These theological convictions remind us again and again why a poor people’s campaign anywhere must be a moral movement. It must be a national call for moral revival. But we are also guided by several sociological insights, which inform our efforts to build fusion coalitions among the poor and across the lines of race, class, borders and sexuality that so often divide the poor and pit them against one another.

First of all, we agree with the UN Declaration of Human Rights that many things that some nations have treated as privileges are in fact human rights. If, as a society, we fail to meet these basic needs for some people, we are creating a disparity that will lead to violence. It is an act of violence to let a child go hungry. It is an act of violence to deny quality healthcare or education to poor people. And when we allow policies that perpetuate this violence, we are sowing the seeds of migration, war, mass migration and climate catastrophe.

Secondly, we agree with the Holy Father in *Fratelli Tutti* that so-called market values that put profit above the lives of people are deadly and threaten the natural world itself. Our experience leads us to question the economics of limitless growth and the faith in an “Invisible Hand” that will work out the disparities that inevitably arise from it. In simplest terms, we know that the way things are is not the way things have to be. We can choose to organize ourselves and our resources differently. This sociological insight suggests that movements for social change have an important role to play not only in changing policy, but also in changing the narrative about what is possible within society.

Thirdly, we know from our study of history that wedge issues will always be used to try to split coalitions of poor people who want to bring about justice in society. In the US context, which has shaped the global economy since the 20th century, the lie of race was used to justify the ex-

ploitation of some people for other's economic gain. But the lie that made poor Black people slaves did not benefit most poor White people. It simply told them that they may not have much, but they were at least better than a Black person. Fusion coalitions of Black, White and Brown people must work together to expose these lies that are used to divide poor people and demonstrate how policies that lift from the bottom of any society benefit most people.

From the US perspective, our Declaration of Independence offers a precedent for people who have suffered a "long train of abuses" to rise up and reorganize a government that will serve the people.

Based on these convictions, we organized in 2018 to relaunch the Poor People's Campaign that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others had launched 50 years earlier in 1968. And in almost every US state for the past three years, we have been organizing people from moral analysis, moral articulation, and moral action that commits to use every form of nonviolence to challenge extreme inequality and insist that we can reconstruct a broken economy. We believe there are interlocking injustices which must be addressed simultaneously: systemic poverty, racism, ecological devastation, denial of health care and housing, a war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism.

In our work, we have developed these 14 steps forward together that we hope may have some level of transference around the world.

#### **14 Steps Forward Together to a Third Reconstruction**

1. Engage in indigenously-led grassroots organizing across the state.
2. Use moral language to frame and critique public policy, regardless of who is in power.
3. Demonstrate a commitment to civil disobedience that follows the steps of nonviolent action and is designed to change the public conversation and consciousness.
4. Build a stage from which to lift the voices of everyday poor and low-wealth people impacted by immoral policies.
5. Recognize the centrality of race and racism worldwide. We must challenge the continuing harm in thinking and policy whose roots trace to sinful notions of manifest destiny, the Doctrine of Discovery, and race-based chattel slavery.
6. Build a broad, diverse coalition including moral and religious leaders of all faiths.

7. Intentionally diversify the movement with the goal of winning unlikely allies.
8. Build transformative, long-term coalition relationships rooted in a clear agenda that doesn't measure success only by electoral outcomes.
9. Make a serious commitment to academic and empirical analysis of policy. Have a core of scholar activists who constantly footnote and make the case for the demands and critique of the movement. We must actually write the policies that will need to change – not just say that they need to be written. Our campaign has presented a Moral Budget<sup>1</sup> to the US Congress and pushed a House Resolution for a Third Reconstruction<sup>2</sup> to end poverty and low-wealth from the bottom up.
10. To shift the narrative and to build concern and power, coordinate use of all forms of social media: video, text, Twitter, Facebook, and so forth.
11. Engage in voter registration and education.
12. Pursue a strong legal strategy. Whenever there are legal forums to challenge systems of oppression and death dealing poverty making policies use those forums.
13. Engage the music hymns poverty and cultural arts in service of the movement.
14. Resist the “one moment” mentality; we are building a movement!

The church must have a prophetic moral outcry and must help foster another way of seeing the world. A movement with poor and low-wealth people, moral religious servant leaders, and academic social advocates must push a penetrating moral imagination. One of the first works of a prophetic movement is to cause a change in moral imagination. We have learned from our reading of sacred texts, our study of history and our engagement in struggles for justice that moral leaders have a unique ability to proclaim truth in the face of deceit. We must break the spell that oppression seeks to have over humanity and its belief about what is possible.

<sup>1</sup> “Poor People’s Moral Budget”, [www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/poor-peoples-moral-budget/](http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/poor-peoples-moral-budget/)

<sup>2</sup> “H.Res.438 – Third Reconstruction: Fully addressing poverty and low wages from the bottom up”, [www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/438/text](http://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/438/text).

In words that are often attributed to St Francis of Assisi, our movement has learned to pray:

May God bless you with discomfort  
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
So that we may live deep within your heart.  
May God bless you with anger  
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.  
May God bless you with tears  
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them  
and to turn their pain to joy.  
And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
To believe that you can make a difference in this world,  
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

From this place we handle the truth that poverty doesn't have to exist. It's our creation, not God's. The truth is, we shouldn't be asking, "How much does it cost?" to address poverty, but how much is it costing us NOT to?

The truth is: moral policies are also good economic policy.

We need a worldwide Poor People's Campaign and a global call to moral revival. On June 18, 2022 we are planning a Mass Poor People's Low Wage Workers Assembly and Moral March on Washington that we hope others will join in their countries around the world. We don't know of any major transformation that didn't result from a moral movement, from abolition in the US to labor movements in the US and Europe, to the movement to end apartheid in South Africa and people's movements for democracy in the former Communist bloc. Religious leaders must join with the poor and engage in the public square; not simply in confines of sanctuary. And so I pray with you the words of the hymn writer:

Cure thy children's warring madness;  
bend our pride to thy control;  
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal,  
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

Save us from weak resignation  
to the evils we deplore.  
Let the search for thy salvation  
be our glory evermore.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
For the facing of this hour.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “God of Grace and God of Glory”, public domain.