

# Inequalities in education during the COVID-19 pandemic: health and education professionals' perspectives

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## Background

Cycles of school closure and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with remote learning, led to concerns about increasing inequality in education that persist in 2024. The aim of this abstract, within a wider study of safe school reopening, is to explore health and education professionals' perceptions of inequalities among students during the pandemic.

## Methods

In 2021, online semi-structured interviews were conducted in 6 languages with education and health professionals. They explored the: 1-effect of the pandemic on schools/pupils/teachers; 2-reorganisation of schools; 3-experience of implementing infection control measures in schools; 4-intersectoral working; 5-important resources for keeping schools open.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where needed. A deductive qualitative analysis was undertaken using the conceptual framework developed by the United Nations H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-Being. Domain 3 (safety and supportive environment) includes consideration of equality.

## Results

62 interviews were included in the analysis (22 health and 40 education professionals from 28 countries). Professionals perceived greater negative impact on education for specific groups of students. Those with chronic illness stayed out of school for longer than others. Good access to distance learning was difficult for students from rural areas (lack of internet/electricity), disadvantaged families (lack of electronic equipment) or larger families (less learning space at home).

## Conclusion

Professionals perceived that school closures intensified the disadvantage experienced by certain groups of students, exacerbating inequalities in education. Targeted catch-up strategies are still needed.

Key message 1 : School closure during the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated inequalities in education.

Key message 2 : In future health crisis impacting schooling, targeted catch-up strategies would be needed for certain groups of students.