This report describes the collective learning experiences of speakers and participants during a series of high-level webinars organized by European Schoolnet entitled “Re-imagine school education beyond Covid-19” between December 2021 and June 2022. The webinar topics include quality digital resources, (digital) assessment and monitoring of school systems, student and teacher well-being, schools as part of wider communities and key priorities for the school education of the future. The report aims to foster reflections and exchanges about how the future of school education beyond Covid-19 could and should look like. Discussions during the webinar series re-iterated the need for schools to prepare students to live and work in an unpredictable future but also to participate in decision making on global challenges such as the climate crisis. Embedding schools more in wider communities (e.g., parents, researchers, other community services) would support schools in this task. These communities could engage in active exchanges on what schools need to teach children. To actively participate in society, students need not only academic achievements but also skills such as the ability to collaborate in diverse teams. Strong personal connections remain key also in digital learning environments. Such connections should be a key focus of more general school strategies with a focus on well-being. Collecting data at different levels will enable communities to base their reflections on how to improve teaching and learning on concrete evidence.
Introduction

This report brings together the collective learning experiences of speakers and participants during the webinar series “Re-imagine education beyond Covid-19”. The series ran from December 2021 to June 2022 and facilitated an open exchange between policy makers, researchers, and practitioners on what kind of school education they want for the future. 19 speakers from 11 countries discussed their research and insights from policy making and practice during six webinars with invited participants. 15 to 40 participants joined each invitation-only webinar.

The focus topics of this report are digital quality resources, (digital) assessment and monitoring of school systems, student and teacher well-being, schools as part of wider communities and key priorities for the school education of the future. The report invites the reader to reflect on their own vision of the teaching and learning of the future and to exchange about that vision with other actors in education, as advocated by leadership expert and webinar series speaker Koen Marichal in the first webinar series, arguing for actors to take the time to reflect together to build a common vision of the future.

An earlier report “The future of schools beyond Covid-19” summarizes discussions from the previous webinar series “The impact of Covid-19 on schools” that ran in 2020/21. This first report focused on more immediate challenges education systems faced due to Covid-19 and ways forward. Webinar speakers advocated that there was a momentum to discuss real change in school education. The period of remote and hybrid teaching due to Covid-19 was a huge challenge to all education actors, but it also opened a window of opportunity for an open exchange on what kind of school education different education actors want. This report summarizes key findings from exchanges during the second webinar series on what the future of school could look like.

“Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive.”
Margaret Wheatley
American writer, teacher, and speaker

“Change and innovation need to happen now, otherwise people start to settle in and we lose the momentum.”
Sarah Howard
University of Wollongong

1 Australia, Estonia, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, USA, United Kingdom
2 Policy makers, researchers, regional inspectors, school heads and teachers from European Schoolnet member countries
How to design the (digital) assessment of the future?

During this webinar dedicated to assessment, Peep Küngas observed that teachers’ workload increased significantly, largely because they had to provide feedback to students. He commented that this unusual situation fostered an understanding that learning can happen almost anywhere, but ways to organize distance learning still need to be further explored. For Marc van Dongen, this period of distance learning made the close link between student learning and well-being more apparent (see also the section: How to design digital education promoting student and teacher well-being?).

What is assessment?

Dylan Wiliam made the point that many people think of assessment as testing, but he suggested instead that we should think of assessment as a procedure for drawing conclusions. When taking such a broad perspective on assessment, everything that teachers do to find out where students are in their learning becomes assessment. The terms “formative” and “summative” describe two ways of drawing conclusions instead of two different assessments. If a teacher decides that a student has mastered a particular topic, that is a summative conclusion. If a teacher, however, concludes that the same student has difficulty with a specific concept, this is a formative conclusion. Peep Küngas added that teachers need to start their teaching from where students are and the only way to find that out is formative assessment. Dylan Wiliam described learning as a long-term change in capability and assessment as a bridge between teaching and learning.

Webinar speakers
December 2021

Dylan Wiliam
Emeritus Professor of Educational Assessment, UCL Institute of Education, United Kingdom

Peep Küngas
Education and Youth Board (HARNO), Estonia

Marc van Dongen
Augustinianum school, Netherlands

How did Covid-19 change our views on learning and assessment?

Assessment is simply a procedure for drawing conclusions.

Dylan Wiliam
learning. It is only through assessments that teachers can find out if their teaching has resulted in an increase of capability in their students.

For Peep Küngas formative assessment and assessment in general require new tools and technology and possibly new methodologies and Dylan William argued that teaching is too often still a linear process, where students listen to teachers, and some will learn well, while others will not. The idea of student results being distributed on a bell curve with only some of them achieving good results is often taken for granted. The American educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom argued already 50 years ago that we should not accept this bell curve of student results. Such results mean that teachers did not do their job to teach everyone and need to provide more support to some students.

In any assessment system, there will be trade-offs between different goals, as Dylan William noted. A balance is needed between national examinations and teacher assessments because the latter can be biased. While information needs to be collected periodically, there is a need for examinations at the end of the school year. Dylan William concluded that assessment must be manageable for teachers and trusted by parents and employers.

Peep Küngas observed that the purpose of national examinations – currently widely discussed in Estonia – is to evaluate the education system or schools but not individual learners. In the past, getting assessment data was expensive which resulted in some countries resorting to less frequent national exams, which, however, did not satisfy the need for more granular feedback. New technologies provide great opportunities to make assessment more continuous, he suggested.

What is good feedback?

“Memory is the residue of thought.”
Daniel Willingham, Psychologist, University of Virginia

One challenge with measuring learning is that what teachers usually measure is students’ performance and not their long-term change in capability. Feedback that tells learners what to do to improve their work helps them to carry out their tasks more effectively but does not necessarily encourage actual learning. Dylan William quoted Robert Bjork, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles and one of the world’s leading researchers on memory. Bjork has shown that if learning environments do too much work for learners, they do not struggle in their learning tasks and are more likely to forget their learning quickly. High levels of performance in a learning task are often equated with low levels of learning (Bjork & Bjork, 2009). Some degree of struggle is essential to learning. Dylan William concluded.

To emphasize this point, Dylan William quoted psychologist Daniel Willingham who said that “memory is the residue of thought” (Willingham, 2009). The goal of good feedback is not to improve the work, but the learner, as Dylan William put it. Peep Küngas reacted by stating that while it is always easier to measure performance, measuring actual learning is also possible. This requires different methods and approaches. Feedback should tell students how well they are coping with a learning task and in which direction they should move to get better. Good feedback works towards its own redundancy as it equips the learner with the skills needed to improve their learning, Dylan William added. He described good feedback as detective work. For instance, a teacher checking a piece of mathematics homework could mark five out of 20 equations as incorrect. They could also give the student the task to find the five incorrect equations which would turn the feedback into a detective work for the student. Dylan William suggested that teachers could think about feedback as a task that learners engage in rather than simple information. Marc van Dongen commented that while teachers at his school do use formative assessment practices, they usually do not provide feedback at the level discussed in the webinar, so there is still a lot to learn and room for growth.

How to personalize student learning based on feedback?

On a related note, Peep Küngas highlighted the need to personalize learning to take students’ strengths, weaknesses and learning preferences into account. He argued that in a class of students with very different academic ability, differentiated teaching will save teachers time and prevent them from focusing only on students who are struggling.

Dylan William advocated for personalizing learning based on prior academic achievements. He argued that catering for students’ different learning styles, however, did not seem to benefit student learning (Pashler et al., 2008). He explained that while differentiation in terms of prior achievement was essential, splitting a class into different groups along these
lines was not a good idea. When teachers group students and give them different activities, it may not benefit weaker students (Deunk et al., 2018). He proposed that teachers should make use of “inclusive differentiation” in which the teacher sets the same task for everyone and goes around to support weaker students and challenge higher achieving ones. This approach is not based on any prior assumptions of the students’ performance of the task at hand.

Peep Küngas added that blended learning settings can provide interesting opportunities to support differentiated and personalized learning. The teacher can teach the same content to all students but give differentiated tasks or support individual students, for instance as part of extra-curricular settings or additional meetings between peers or with the teacher. Technology can help to assess where students are at different stages. The teacher becomes a guide on the side.

Dylan Wiliam argued that when teachers involved students more in their own learning, they needed to be aware that students did not always know what was good for them. For example, students consistently express a preference for immediate feedback, while delayed feedback can be more efficient (Butler et al., 2014). When students get more autonomy, they need support to reflect on how learning works best for them.

How to support teachers to provide feedback?

The March 2021 webinar concluded that teachers still have significant questions as to how they can use formative assessment to support learning (see “The future of schools beyond Covid-19”). Speakers at the December 2021 webinar reflected further on how to support teachers in that task.

Dylan Wiliam suggested that encouraging teachers to use simple techniques like asking a multiple-choice question in the middle of the lesson can be very powerful. What is key is that teachers ask the right question which really goes at the heart of the concept they are teaching. Teachers need to realize that they cannot make good decisions unless they get evidence from every single student in their class. Getting teachers to understand that better evidence leads to better decisions which leads to better learning is a powerful way of getting teachers to reflect on what they put into the process and what students get out of it. Once teachers make that shift in their mindset from “What did I do?” to “What did my students learn?”, they usually never go back.

Marc van Dongen argued that teachers needed more training, as they hold differing views about formative assessment – at least in his school. Peep Küngas agreed that both teachers and policy makers needed to gain more data literacy skills to understand data and use them to improve teaching and learning. Marc van Dongen added that some teachers in his school were excellent at assessing continuously where students were with their learning. At the same time, the teachers were not able to explain how they did it; in other words, the teachers were “unconsciously competent”. Dylan Wiliam agreed that teachers indeed often naturally decided what to do but could not explain their decisions. He added that the organizational theorists Nonaka and Takeuchi proposed a “knowledge creating cycle” to develop teachers’ silent or tacit knowledge to improve teaching practice (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Teachers make their knowledge explicit by sharing it with colleagues, trying out new ideas with their students and discussing experiences together. Such a framework helps to find a common language which supports everyone involved in improving their teaching practice.

“We need to teach learners to be open to uncomfortable experiences because if they choose things, they are comfortable with, they end up learning less.”

Dylan Wiliam
How will assessment look like in the future?

Dylan Wiliam quoted Danish physicist Niels Bohr to stress how difficult it was to predict the future. When reflecting about the potential of Artificial Intelligence in education, the work of the British-American psychologist Robin Miles Hogarth provides interesting perspectives, as Dylan Wiliam suggested. Hogarth talks about kind and wicked learning environments (Hogarth et al., 2015). In kind learning environments, learners know quickly if a certain action was a good thing to do or not. Chess and tennis are examples of such kind learning environments. In wicked learning environments, the right thing to do in one context can be the wrong thing to do in a very similar context and if an action was a good one only becomes evident later. Classrooms, he argues, are wicked learning environments.

A specific action can even appear to be good in the short term but turn out to be unsuccessful in the long run. A classic example is Carrell and West’s study of the US Air Force Academy that looked at 20,000 students learning calculus (Carrell & West, 2010). The students with the highest scores at the end of semester test did worse in follow-up courses than their fellow students. Some tutors made learning easier for students as they mainly prepared them for this first test. Other tutors made learning more difficult as they prepared students for the long run. Ironically, the first group of tutors got the highest ratings from students. Hence, the real challenge for artificial intelligence is that feedback loops in education are incredibly long.

In the US, there is often an obsession with multiple choice questions which are easy to score by machines, as Dylan Wiliam argued. In his opinion such cheap assessments have done huge damage to educational systems. Scoring engines, however, also get trained to assess students’ answers to conceptual questions and already produce good agreement with what teachers say. Software can assess student essays as accurately as humans, according to Dylan Wiliam. “That sounds impressive until you realize how bad humans are at assessing essays. The state of the art is that the difference in score between humans is usually greater than the difference between the human and the machine”, he claimed.

Peep Küngas stated that in general there is a lot of confusion about what Artificial Intelligence can do. He and his personalized learning path team at the Education and Youth Board of Estonia conducted a pilot study in spring 2021. Simple user information was collected e.g., when a student visited a learning resource or completed a given task and if the task was completed correctly. The goal was to understand if it was possible to provide recommendations for additional study materials and build a predictive model on learning behaviour on that basis. The difficulty was that learning materials are developed in large chunks based on which only general recommendations can be generated, which are often not very helpful for learning. They concluded that while learning materials and education technology do not provide sufficient data yet to provide this level of granularity, with a more granular understanding of what students and teachers do quite accurate predictive models could be developed.

Dylan Wiliam predicted that within the next five to ten years artificial intelligence should be able to support teachers in tasks like putting students efficiently in groups for collaborative learning. Based on information collected while students work online, systems could suggest to group students together that struggle with the same concept or propose mixed groups. In the more long-term future, artificial tutoring systems might gain more prominence. They are still very difficult to develop. For Dylan Wiliam the best example so far is a cognitive tutor for algebra developed by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University (What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). It teaches two lessons of algebra a week in grade nine. After about three decades of work, the system is still only better than 60% of teachers.

In the next 10 to 20 years, good assessment will become less expensive which may enable rapid progress, according to Dylan Wiliam. He could imagine high-quality assessment to be available at the end of schooling where students engage in authentic tasks and scoring is not done only by teachers. Teachers will become rather coaches than judges of the process. They will help students to do as well as possible in assessments and become their allies in that process. Peep Küngas took this reflection further in suggesting that there may be a future in which teachers no longer provide student feedback. Dylan Wiliam provided the example of ETS, an online writing evaluation service.
Key take aways for policy makers

1. Assessment could be described as a procedure for drawing conclusions. When taking such a broad view on assessment, everything that teachers do to find out where students are in their learning becomes assessment. Then the terms “formative” and “summative” describe two ways of drawing conclusions instead of two different assessments.

2. The rationale behind formative assessment is that teachers need to start their learning from where students are and the only way to find that out is formative assessment. Formative assessment approaches necessitate a more continuous collection of information from all – not just the vocal – students. To get relevant information teachers need to ask the right questions that go at the heart of the concept they are teaching.

3. Constructive feedback is a key component of formative assessment. Teachers could think about feedback as a task that learners engage in rather than simple information.

4. Teachers are often naturally able to purposefully decide how to assess students in the classroom but may not be able to explain their decisions. Sharing knowledge with colleagues, trying new ideas with students, and discussing experiences together can help teachers to make their knowledge explicit and to find a common language which supports everyone involved in improving their teaching practice.

5. While new technologies provide great opportunities to facilitate this process, there is a lot of confusion about what artificial intelligence can do. Once learning materials and education technology will provide more granular data, quite accurate predictive models on student learning could be developed. These future possibilities necessitate policy makers and other actors in education to carefully consider which tasks of a teacher they want technology to take over and which ones not.

The future of (digital) assessment beyond Covid 19: Voices from webinar participants

“Covid-19 exposed the fragility of our usual assessment process.”
Hugo Caldeira
Another Step, Portugal

“Covid-19 allowed examination systems to explore new methods of assessment.”
Louise O’Reilly, Ireland

Sandra Ebejer, MFED, Malta observed that teachers and students could conduct assessment online and remotely. Many more multimodal forms of assessment were used which led to greater inclusive practice, notwithstanding the obvious challenges that the digital divide also created, according to Michael Mc Namara, PDST, Ireland.

Louise O’Reilly, NCCA, Ireland said that her experience during Covid-19 allowed (rigid) examination systems to explore new methods of assessment out of necessity. For her, assessment should be student centered (rather than system focused), adaptive, responsive, relevant, and evolving. For Portuguese teacher Luís Filipe Ribães Monteiro assessment should be simple and modular, and adapted to the specific times and interests of each student. Zelinda Pontes, Camões, I.P, Portugal, called for more formative assessment practices.
How to develop the future of schools together as part of wider communities?

Webinar speakers March 2022

Jacob Chammon  
CEO, Forum Bildung, Digitalisierung, Germany

Sarah Howard  
University of Wollongong, Australia

Eszter Salamon  
Director, Parents International

Daniel Toms  
Harrogate Grammar School, UK

How should the future of schools look like beyond Covid-19?

“Schools should open up to their communities.”  
Eszter Salamon

Covid-19 supported a move towards a more digital education, as Jacob Chammon observed. He would like to see more project-based learning to teach children digital skills, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. “The world is full of problems waiting to be solved. This is what children need to learn.”, he suggested. Eszter Salamon advocated a broader view on education as a common good – with a responsibility and opportunity to learn for all, in line with the recommendations of the UNESCO 2015 Global Monitoring Report. She pleaded for schools to become open spaces also run by local communities.

For Jacob Chammon school buildings should be designed differently to cater for students’ needs. Sarah Howard agreed and put forward the need to address the question of how to capitalize on the potential of online, blended and community spaces. The idea of “connected communities” describes the goal that young people become more engaged in their communities. Several programs aiming for this goal exist in Australia. “I would like to see students operate in a flexible and self-driven way in their communities. Students should learn according to their own interests and choices but also be able to rely on teachers for help.”, Sarah Howard suggested.

During remote teaching due to Covid-19 Daniel Toms invited students from other schools to join his Computer Science class virtually. About half the schools in England do not offer Computing at advanced levels, often due to a lack of resources and specialized teachers. The option of schools continuing to collaborate so that students can take Computer Science lessons at another school is currently being piloted.

“The last two years stressed the importance of strong communities around schools.”  
Sarah Howard
Why is creating change difficult?

Jacob Chammon noted, from his previous role as school head, that creating a common vision in a school was very time consuming. Giving schools time and space for change is key. He concluded that schools want to improve but find it difficult to find the right support with the available time and resources. In Germany, all 16 states have their own school systems, and each state creates their own vision. A key question for him was how to create a common vision together at school, municipality, and state level. Sarah Howard replied that while the different steps in creating a vision were well-known from research, putting them in practice was often a different story. She added that the change fatigue when it comes to technology related changes has been going on for a long time: “Covid-19 brought a massive change and mostly all we are is tired”.

For Sarah Howard one tension between creating and implementing a vision often stems from the timeline on which change was expected to happen. Real change takes three to five years which is often unappealing to policy makers. She gave the example of a large state-wide one-to-one laptop program in Australia about 10 years ago which handed out 80 000 laptops a year. As project evaluator Sarah Howard identified a statistical change in teachers’ usage of computers as well as students’ perceptions and achievements after four years. At that point policy makers had already decided that they could not wait any longer and changed the entire program right when it started to produce results. “This happens a lot and is a problem because it causes fatigue and mistrust, devalues the change process and disenfranchises the community and the work they have done.”, Sarah Howard concluded.

How can we create change?

For Sarah Howard stakeholders need to clarify expectations and collaborate to create change. “We could break change down into ‘light weight changes’ that are digestible for our communities.”, she suggested. When change did not come as a massive disruption, it was easier for education actors to scale it into their practices, she argued. “We must think more strategically about the rate at which we implement change and be more creative about how we introduce it.”, she concluded.

For Jacob Chammon schools in the first place need to want change and be enabled to find the right support. Schools often do not know how to find support, even though excellent support organizations exist. For him it was school leadership that needed to provide a focus. In Germany, a recent joint declaration of all 16 states called for schools to open up to digital or analog support and views from the outside. Sarah Howard commented that school leaders are often not trained for this kind of work.

Jacob Chammon and Eszter Salamon argued for including parents in change processes but acknowledged that this requires more time. “Every time you involve another group of stakeholders, the discussion gets bigger. This is something we must acknowledge and embrace.”, Jacob Chammon suggested. Eszter Salamon argued that parents were more ready to get involved in their children’s education since they took over some of teachers’ tasks during the pandemic. According to the Brookings Institute parents see schools also as places for social and emotional learning and acquiring civic skills through participatory processes (Winthrop et al., 2021).

How does a common vision support change?

One change that came about from teaching remotely during Covid-19 was the development of a comprehensive scheme of work for Computing education at all stages by the NCCE. It was not planned from the start and would have probably been met with resistance from teachers and educational organizations. This de facto work scheme for England offered new opportunities, as Daniel Toms explained. For
instance, with readily available learning units and lending libraries, primary teachers are more ready to teach physical computing.

Sarah Howard described a new initiative in New South Wales in Australia as another interesting example. The central level proposed a few key priorities and formulated them broadly. Schools can choose a system priority and integrate it into their own plans for excellence. Schools provide data about their work to the central level, which enables central monitoring of the implementation of key priorities across schools. While the years to come will tell if the approach works, it is interesting in principle since it combines a top-down initiative defining key priorities with providing schools with a range of ways as to how to address them at their level. One key challenge that Sarah Howard identified was to find the right tools for schools to demonstrate change to be able to monitor change at system level.

**How to create change in diverse contexts?**

Karen Triquet, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, made the points that it is important to specify that there is not one vision of education but a variety of actors, visions, and needs, including those of companies with a stake in education. The real question is how to come to a balanced vision that caters for the various perspectives and needs. Eszter Salamon noted that not all parents are equally inclined to join the debate. Similarly, Jacob Chammon observed that reaching teachers beyond the group of the most interested ones is a challenge. His organization Forum Bildung Digitalisierung e.V. fosters change by bringing education actors together in formats like webinars, community courses, bootcamps and speed dating.

Sarah Howard concluded that the need to give enough room at all levels for actors to come up collectively with the best solutions for their own context.

Patricia Wastiau, European Schoolnet, advocated for abandoning a one-size-fits approach to innovation. “We need to give enough room at all levels for actors to come up collectively with the best solutions for their own context.”, she suggested. Jacob Chammon agreed that every institution needs some flexibility as to how to develop themselves within a given framework.

For Sarah Howard the need to cater for the heterogeneity in education is one of the biggest roadblocks to bringing about change. “We need to embrace heterogeneity, while sustaining and scaling up changes that are worthwhile.”, she said, stressing that scaling up an innovation does not mean replicating it. In her view a vision of the future broad enough to cater for heterogeneity and leadership at all levels is needed. The message should be that it is fine for teachers to move at different speeds and for changes to happen in different ways.

Ildikó Csordás, Educational Authority, Hungary, concluded the webinar by sharing her view that teachers will implement change if they learn about it from another teacher. She concluded that what policy makers could do is to create possibilities for teachers to network with one another.

“Whose vision is it that we are discussing?”
Karen Triquet

“The real question is what different actors need and want and how to bring it to them.”
Sarah Howard

“We cannot regulate everything but need to trust as well.”
Jacob Chammon

“It is networks of teachers that can implement change.”
Ildikó Csordás

“Covid-19 caused people to re-think education. Faced with such a situation, people either revert to traditional roles or they move forward and adapt!.”, Sarah Howard explained. Some schools and local communities are better placed to re-think education and learning spaces than others. Depending on their educational priorities, some schools worry more about issues like student learning loss during Covid-19 than fostering change. How to best engage in change can only be answered by the people in each community and then good leadership could extend this change, as Sarah Howard concluded.

Sarah Howard argued that when stakeholders resist change, one needs to think about what they are asked to engage in rather than questioning their resistance. She challenged the framing of actors as being “resistant to change” and suggested to think about what actions would be more valuable to them than the ones proposed instead. Offering different steps and compromises can be a way to bring people into an initiative for smaller or bigger change. “We often try to implement change homogeneously. We need to consider different contexts and the people that we are asking to join us.”, she said. Sarah Howard concluded that the real question is what different actors want and need and how to bring that to them.

“There is a tension between possible gains and what has been lost over the last two years.”
Sarah Howard

“We need to embrace heterogeneity, while sustaining and scaling up changes that are worthwhile.”
Sarah Howard

Re-imagine school education beyond Covid-19
Key take aways for policy makers

1. Distance and hybrid teaching due to Covid-19 have stressed the importance of strong communities around schools. The idea of “connected communities” describes the goal that young people become more engaged in their communities.

2. There is not one vision of school education but a variety of actors, visions and needs, including those of companies with a stake in education. The goal should be to come to a balanced vision of the future of education that caters for these various perspectives and needs.

3. To create change, different actors in education need to clarify their expectations and collaborate. Parents and others need to be part of change processes. Everyone should acknowledge and embrace the fact that involving more actors in the process requires additional time and resources.

4. Policy makers should decide more strategically at what rate they introduce change and find creative ways to start change. It can help to break change into “light weight changes” and offer different compromises that are digestible to communities and correspond to their specific needs and context.

5. One key question when creating change is what different actors need and want and how to bring that to them. When education actors resist change, policy makers need to reflect about what they asked them to engage in rather than questioning their resistance.

6. One tension between creating and implementing a vision often stems from the timeline one which change is expected to happen. Real change takes three to five years.

Re-imagine school education beyond Covid-19
How to build stronger education systems based on stronger monitoring?

“Online schooling due to Covid-19” was an extraordinary event in the history of education. This situation was completely new and therefore difficult to assess, said Elena Mosa. As Italian schools have some autonomy, their responses to the pandemic varied. This made monitoring even more important, Elena Mosa explained. The Italian national research institute INDIRE launched two surveys to understand how schools organized teaching and learning during Covid-19 (see the previous report “The future of schools beyond Covid-19”, in Italian: INDIRE 2021, INDIRE 2022). One finding was that teachers’ and students’ digital competences increased. Due to Covid-19 more Italian schools are equipped with electronic boards and virtual platforms. This means that a lot more learning happens online and can potentially be tracked. “We now have huge amounts of data that can tell us interesting stories.”, she suggested.

The systems that fared best had knowledge ecosystems in place to use and share data from monitoring and evaluations widely to think about change, according to Melanie Ehren. Such systems did not rely only on one type of measure and had structures in place for rapid exchange of information and sharing of good practice. In Wales, a structure was in place for district inspectors and school heads to discuss the consequences of the school closures across regions, potential difficulties in moving to online teaching and what support was needed. “This structure with good monitoring data and connections between actors helped to address some consequences of school closures.”, she noted.

What are lessons learned from Covid-19?

“Education systems with knowledge ecosystems in place fared best.”

Melanie Ehren
Professor in Educational Governance, Director of research institute LEARN!, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Honorary Professor at University College London

Elena Mosa
Researcher at INDIRE, the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research in Italy

Morten Søby
Senior policy advisor, Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

Webinar speakers March 2022

“Online schooling due to Covid-19” was an extraordinary event in the history of education. This situation was completely new and therefore difficult to assess, said Elena Mosa. As Italian schools have some autonomy, their responses to the pandemic varied. This made monitoring even more important, Elena Mosa explained. The Italian national research institute INDIRE launched two surveys...
What do we mean by monitoring?

Melanie Ehren argued that monitoring is a broad term which includes school inspections but also student assessments, school self-evaluations, peer reviews and standardized assessments. “From a Norwegian perspective, monitoring means identifying success factors in digital compulsory education,” said Morten Søby. Success factors include curriculum assessment, quality of teaching, leadership and school culture, teacher education and digital infrastructure. A focus on such factors is important since academic outcomes do not provide information on what changes are needed, according to Melanie Ehren. For Elena Mosa there is a need to distinguish between at least two kinds of data. The first is “objective” data that is easy to collect and understand, e.g., the number of digital devices in a school, but the second, “impact data”, is more difficult to grasp, especially when moving away from only measuring academic outcomes. Skills like critical thinking are also difficult to measure because the answer is always mediated by the perception of the respondent and “very often we fail to give voice to the students.”, as Elena Mosa observed. It some cases it can be useful to triangulate data from different stakeholders (e.g., teachers, management staff, students) on the same topic in order to get different perspectives. An example is the SELFIE tool developed by the European Commission that helps schools and policy makers to reflect about digital technologies to support learning. “Improving practices is difficult. We need to think of monitoring as the use of multiple measures that address success factors and outcomes to support learning and improvement across the system.”, as Melanie Ehren noted, adding that multiple monitoring measures are key to triangulate data and get an accurate measure of schools’ performance.

Why do we monitor education systems?

The purpose of monitoring is to collect data and understand school quality to improve teaching and learning, according to Melanie Ehren. Monitoring needs to be embedded into thinking of education systems as knowledge ecosystems. Monitoring aims to inform decision making processes and collaboration and sharing to improve learning at all levels. For teachers monitoring means to think about how to use formative and summative assessment to inform their teaching. Schools use aggregated monitoring data to work towards concrete improvements based on an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. School boards and municipalities use data to understand which schools do well, how performance changes over time and where schools need more support. Without knowledge and research, it is not possible to develop a digital education system, said Morten Søby. “If we want to foster innovation, we need to monitor national and local governance, school leadership, teacher capacity and digital infrastructure more effectively.’, he suggested. Melanie Ehren added that measures such as school self-evaluations also build schools’ capacity. Elena Mosa emphasized that collecting the data is only the first step in the process. Collectively reflecting on the monitoring results and translating them into concrete actions to improve teaching and learning need to be the next steps. Monitoring provides a snapshot of school education which is key to improve school education at any level. For example, at school level, there should be more information, awareness-raising, and training actions on the culture of data-based improvement.

“Monitoring means identifying success factors in digital education.”
Morten Søby

“We need knowledge and research to develop digital education.”
Morten Søby

“A national platform allows for more advanced monitoring.”
Morten Søby
New single-entry platform in Norway

In Norway a new way of monitoring is planned to be developed in connection with the Norwegian Digital Action Plan. The centralized identity management platform Feide is in place to share data easily and safely with students, teachers, school owners, municipalities, publishers and Edtech companies. All Norwegian municipalities use the platform and almost all digital resources are in the system.

The updated single sign on FEIDE 2.0 is used by all municipalities in Norway. Most digital learning resources and services that are in use in Norwegian education use Feide as a login solution. In 2021, the platform provided access to over 280 different services, digital learning resources and products. Key services provided are UDIR (a planning tool in curriculum display), as well as digital examinations and test completions. A new national test and examination system including adaptive assessments is also under development.

A long-term goal of the National Digital Action plan is to develop research into learning analytics at national level that allows for advanced multi-level monitoring. Policy makers at national and regional level, municipalities, school leaders and teachers will be able to retrieve data at their level.

Implementing this vision in practice is complicated because of questions around ownership and access to data. Data needs to be scaled up and down with communication between each learning resource and those resources need to be tagged to curriculum goals. The technical implementation itself is tricky and there are challenges around ethics and privacy, as Morten Søby explained.

The expert group for digital learning analysis will provide the Minister of Education with a better basis for decisions about digital learning analysis in basic education, higher education, and higher vocational education. The group will assess educational, ethical, legal and privacy issues when using digital learning analysis, and give advice on the need for development of the regulations and input on good practice. Norway is investigating the possibility of annual surveys of school owners and school leaders, teachers and students and developing a digital system to retrieve data from providers of content and service.

School self-evaluation in Ireland

In Ireland, school inspections are not only evaluations, but also collaborative self-evaluation exercises for schools (see previous report). Schools choose their priority areas for development for the next years. School inspectors evaluate the self-evaluation process that schools engage in. They look for instance at how the school arrived at setting a certain goal, e.g., whether parents and students were involved (further information are available here). A school could for example decide to focus on teacher collaboration. The Digital Learning Framework provides statements that schools can use to work towards achieving certain goals.

Who collects data and for whom?

“People collect data for different reasons”

Morten Søby

Morten Søby. Elena Mosa agreed that schools were overwhelmed with the number of surveys that ministries, universities, and other organizations asked them to fill in. In such a setting, individual surveys are less likely to reach sufficient response rates which means missing out on reliable information from such surveys. It also happens that several organizations ask for the same kind of information.

One question to reflect on is at what level the capacity for monitoring should be organized, said Melanie Ehren. Morten Søby made a case for organizing monitoring centrally and Melanie Ehren agreed that central monitoring has advantages because it is likely to use a good digital infrastructure, a national body can be a lead in expertise, support schools and identify good practices, and some standardization in monitoring schools also allows for benchmarking progress over time between schools.

However, central monitoring requires – at least to some extent – a national curriculum. In the Netherlands, for example, a national curriculum only exists for mathematics, reading and writing in compulsory education, so how to support schools in assessing areas that are not part of the national curriculum? Furthermore, national assessments tend to provide a broad picture of performance which is not always relevant for teachers. Teachers need more detailed data to understand how to improve their teaching. They need to understand their students’ misconceptions and which skills
they do not master. Finally, the goal should also be to build monitoring capacity at local level that improves teaching. “We need to think about monitoring from a multi-level perspective where assessment outcomes cater for different information needs at different levels.”, Melanie Ehren concluded.

“Ministries of Education or national agencies must develop a system to retrieve data from content providers and all services for research and monitoring”, said Morten Saby. He argued for education actors to take a stronger stand when it comes to collaboration with EdTech companies. “The question is how to build a monitoring infrastructure across the system.”, suggested Melanie Ehren. Good examples already exist such as collaborations between teachers and researchers to evaluate and improve teaching practice and school leaders’ visiting each other for peer reviews.

What are the challenges related to monitoring?

Tony Weir, school inspector for the Irish Education Ministry, reflected on challenges related to central monitoring. Using a central platform can create tensions between data that can be collected, data that should be collected, data useful for individual schools and data useful at national level. Central systems may not help individual schools to design tests suitable to their own contexts. Individual tests run by schools may capture better what students know, Tony Weir argued. Another tension he mentioned is around big data. Ministries need to establish the right to collect and analyse data through centralised monitoring. Morten Saby agreed with Tony Weir and added another perspective: currently, Edtech companies like Microsoft and Google often get better monitoring data than national authorities or schools. This situation calls for a national monitoring policy.

There are also challenges related to the schools’ monitoring capacity. Italian schools are asked to produce a self-assessment report and to establish collectively a benchmark for the level of improvement they want to reach in a year, as Elena Mosa explained. Schools tend to put this benchmark low so that they are sure they can reach it. Many schools still experience monitoring as an administrative activity rather than using data to inform future planning. ‘Reflection is needed on how to build a monitoring structure across the system and which agencies can act as liaison officers in using monitoring data for school improvement’, as Melanie Ehren concluded. Inspection agencies could play a role in connecting good practices across schools but also in fostering a better understanding of areas where support was needed through national reports.

Does monitoring make schools “teach to the test”?

Antoine Bilgin, European Schoolnet, asked if national exams and school inspections incentivized schools to focus on doing well during exams and inspections rather than improving themselves. Melanie Ehren replied that teachers may structure lessons a certain way because an inspector is visiting the classroom. School leaders equally game their self-evaluation or have protocols in place just to satisfy the external inspection agency. She commented that such unintended consequences happen across systems but are more likely where stakes were high for schools. They are one of the reasons why some countries have abolished final assessments and moved towards more qualitative, nuanced reporting of school outcomes. How far such unintended consequences occur also depends on the wider culture of how school inspectorates work with schools towards improvements. An alternative approach is to encourage and support schools in assessing themselves (see also textbox: School self-evaluation in Ireland).

In Ireland there is a school leaving exam at the end of secondary school education. The tendency is for schools and teachers to use this test as the guiding principle for everything they do. We are constantly fighting against this trend by promoting good teaching practices outside of teaching to the test.’, Tony Weir commented. The big criticism of the final examination is that it is being used as a filter for students going into university so that has become the dominant – unintended – purpose. He reflected that there was the danger for other valuable learning to be lost.
What is the future of schools based on monitoring?

“The vision for monitoring needs to be embedded in a vision for knowledge ecosystems that enable learning and sharing of good practices to improve education”, as Melanie Ehren argued. New examples and processes need to be created. Such processes could for instance connect school self-evaluations to inspections and create follow-up processes for funding and schools’ work for improvement. “When you build a knowledge ecosystem and structure of monitoring with joint practice development or peer-to-peer reviews, you create a continuous cycle of using monitoring for improvements.”, she suggested.

Much teaching pre-Covid 19 tended to be one-size fits-all in schools, reflected in teaching to the test. For Morten Søby regional digital education systems with interdependent and interconnected communities of stakeholders are the way forward. Such communities include school staff, families, national agencies, municipalities, EdTech providers and publishers. Interaction might be fostered by a central platform. They will allow for more advanced monitoring and more flexible schools with better learning outcomes. Developing such an ecosystem will, however, take some years, he said. Elena Mosa agreed that an integrated vision of monitoring within knowledge ecosystems was the way forward. In the near future, artificial intelligence will help to interpret big data and analyze texts. She pleaded for more reflection on issues around ethics and privacy before moving further with artificial intelligence. “Once such issues have been addressed, artificial intelligence will help to provide useful data without burdening schools with surveys”, she suggested. Finally, to improve the culture of evidence-based improvement, more information and awareness raising is needed.

Key take aways for policy makers

1. The systems that fared best during online and hybrid teaching due to Covid-19 had knowledge ecosystems in place to use and share data from different monitoring and evaluations to think about change.

2. Monitoring is a broad term which includes school inspections but also student assessments, school self-evaluations, peer reviews and standardized assessments. Monitoring refers to the use of multiple measures to address success factors and outcomes to support learning and improvement across the system.

3. Monitoring is to inform decision making processes, collaboration and sharing to improve learning at all levels. The collection of data needs to be followed by collective reflections on the results and translating them into concrete actions.

4. Traditional monitoring is often organized through surveys which can be a burden to schools which in turn can lead to unreliable data due to insufficient response rates. A way forward is for ministries of education or national agencies to develop a system to retrieve data from content providers and all services for research and monitoring. While central monitoring has its merits, monitoring needs to take place and cater for different information needs at different levels.

5. Policy makers need to tackle challenges that are directly or indirectly related to central monitoring. It needs to be established what data ministries should have the right to collect and analyze through central examinations and monitoring. Ministries and other actors need to take a stronger stand when it comes to collaboration with EdTech companies. Edtech companies currently often get better monitoring data than national authorities or schools.

6. Reflection is needed on how to build a monitoring structure across the system and which agencies can act as liaison officers in using monitoring data for school improvement. Capacity building needs to take place at all levels. Schools often still experience monitoring as an administrative activity rather than using data to inform future planning.

7. The vision of monitoring needs to be embedded in a broader vision for knowledge ecosystems that enable learning and sharing of good practices to improve education. New examples and processes need to be created. Such processes could for instance connect school self-evaluations to inspections and create follow-up processes for funding and schools’ work for improvement. Policy makers need to reflect on issues around ethics and privacy before moving further with new monitoring possibilities that artificial intelligence offers.
How to design digital education promoting student and teacher well-being?

Has Covid-19 changed our thinking about well-being?

“We are only beginning to really see the impacts of two years of teaching with Covid-19.”
Rebecca Goodhue

Dr Rebecca Goodhue
Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Australia

Since March 2020 Rebecca Goodhue has been involved in analysing data regarding the well-being of tens of thousands of Australian students, using the *ei Pulse* student check-in tool that Educator Impact developed. Students are asked to digitally “check-in” regarding their wellbeing every week. Data collected via the tool showed that two out of five students felt very anxious, and three out of five students worried a lot about making mistakes. What she found surprising during the Covid-19 pandemic was peoples’ strong belief that physical health was more important than mental and emotional health. Cathleen Beachboard emphasized that both teachers and students went through difficult times because of losing family members or family members losing their jobs. She was surprised that children with high socio-economic backgrounds were strongly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, probably because they were usually more protected from difficult experiences. (Phillips, 16 May 2022). Cathleen Beachboard also noticed that in the US many teachers left the profession due to the additional pressure when teaching during Covid-19.

With the outbreak of Covid-19, digital tools became necessary for online teaching. Remco Pijpers found it surprising how strongly people believed in technology as a solution for everything. “While digital tools provide huge benefits, certainly during the pandemic, they also create problems around online harassment, bullying and sexting.”, he explained. Problems that may affect the well-being of children are also embedded in the technology itself. The algorithms used may affect students’ autonomy or personal relationships. New digital tools like adaptive learning systems
became more popular. Such systems help children who already do well do even better. Children who have more difficulties in learning also benefit from adaptive learning systems, but they make less progress. That means that the gap between groups grow bigger and the advantage for privileged children grows even more, so Remco Pijpers.

**What do we mean by fostering well-being in a digital world?**

Rebecca Goodhue’s organisation ARACY developed The Nest, the first evidence-based framework for national child and youth wellbeing in Australia. This framework categorizes well-being in six domains: valued, loved and safe, material basics, healthy, learning, participating, and a positive sense of identity and culture. Children have their overarching well-being, when all six areas of well-being are supported. Rebecca Goodhue highlighted that the term well-being sometimes becomes meaningless with too many different understandings and interpretations of the term around. In Australia much emphasis is put on defining well-being as an umbrella construct. Rebecca Goodhue encouraged the use of specific language such as the term “mental health” when discussing mental health rather than using “wellbeing” to mean only “mental health”.

Remco Pijpers agreed that all six domains mentioned by the Nest framework were important. “The way we relate to children, and they relate to each other, and their teachers is particularly important.,” he said. During online teaching due to Covid-19, the importance of personal connections was often overlooked. One issue for children with the digital world is that it is created by grown-ups – by developers, commercial designers, and schools. Schools decide what digital tools children should use. This new digital context necessitates a discussion about values such as personal connections but also resilience and hope, as Remco Pijpers concluded.

**How to discuss well-being in a digital word with children?**

“We need to listen to children and to teach them to listen to others and to themselves.”

Remco Pijpers

Kennisnet have created a Value Compass for digital transformation of education and tested it with several schools. The tool facilitates a dialogue with students starting from their values. At one school, Remco Pijpers and his colleagues talked to six students and their school director. The school director asked students whether it was ethical for the school to collect their data to help them get better results. At the beginning of the exercise students had no objection to their data being collected. When students were asked to note down their values, they wrote down values such as autonomy, privacy, and freedom. The group defined the exact dilemma together and looked at it starting from students’ values. The discussion helped students to realize that learning online means that their school knows when they only spent 10 minutes on their homework and was ready to use such information to intervene to help them.

Students suddenly found that their values were negatively affected. They felt that if the school collected all that data about them, they should be entitled to get the same kind of information. One student had noted down the value “pureness”. He explained that pureness for him was doing good for others without expecting anything in return. He reasoned that when his school collected his data, it should be only for his benefit and not for instance to get more money from the government when he got his degree faster. “This would be not sincere and wrong”, he said. At the end of the exercise, the school promised to take the input they received from students very seriously. This promise was quite unique as most schools tend not to discuss such issues with students.
Teachers and anyone in the education sectors need sufficient time to cater for student well-being as well as their own, said Rebecca Goodhue. She advocated for every educator being provided with three well-being days every year, with no questions asked what that time is used for. Cathleen Beachboard agreed that teachers and anyone else working with children needs to take care of their own well-being to be able to care for children. “If a flower is not blooming in a certain environment, you do not rip the flower out but change the environment. It is important to change the environment and provide children with guidance so they can flourish.”, she said.

Children learn strategies to cope with difficulties from their parents. If parents do not cope, their children will also find it hard to cope, said Cathleen Beachboard. A whole school approach helps to address the issue. For Rebecca Goodhue a whole school approach should focus on students, parents, teachers, and other adults that could have a positive relationship with a young person. That might be front desk administrators, sport coaches or parent volunteers. Such a comprehensive approach should be implemented in partnership with young people to create a richer picture of well-being together, according to Rebecca Goodhue.

Rebecca Goodhue emphasized the importance of properly defining well-being. The Nest framework can be used by anyone as a starting point to develop their approach to foster student well-being. She argued that a holistic approach to foster well-being is needed, addressing all six dimensions of well-being. Such an approach should include schools but also health, community, and social services. Rebecca Goodhue advocated for a general child-centered approach rather than a specific program to foster well-being. A combination of a bottom up and top-down approaches is key, involving policy makers, school leaders and school teams to bring forward a child-centered, strengths based, collaborative, and holistic approach, according to Rebecca Goodhue.

Measuring and using aspects of psychological hope in the classroom helps children recover quicker and be more resilient, according to Cathleen Beachboard. More information is available on her website. Everyone is born with hope and that hope came with goals, pathways, and agency. It is a powerful cognitive asset that helps to build intrinsic motivation. A 90-minute intervention can start raising a child’s hope score, according to Cathleen Beachboard. Free tests to check children’s scores exist online (e.g. Thrively). Cathleen Beachboard took her students’ hope
scores and then moved the high hope students to sit next to low hope students which she found in her research can quickly boost hope scores over 6 to 8 weeks (Beachboard, 2022).

**Cathleen Beachboard** and her colleagues also teach children about well-being. Teachers and students write self-care plans when they enter school that focus on setting goals related to mental but also physical health. With the help of such plans, teachers support students to identify strategies to feel better such as listening to music before a mathematics test. Schools should identify, celebrate, and enhance students’ strengths but also help them in their areas of needs, so **Rebecca Goodhue**. **Cathleen Beachboard** also argued for an asset-oriented approach that makes students feel valued and cared for.

An authentic dialogue with students is key, where adults genuinely listen and act upon the information they receive, as **Rebecca Goodhue** put forward (see also textbox: How to discuss well-being in a digital world with children?). Conversations with young people should identify not only existing issues but also potential issues. Engaging in prevention can be very cost-effective. “We cannot enter into a real dialogue if we tell students that we are the experts that will fix them.”, she argued.

The **ei Pulse** student wellbeing check-in is an example of a tool that can foster dialogue. A percentage of students used ei Pulse to reach out for help to a school staff member they trusted. Schools were aware of most students that signaled the need for help. However, there was also a small proportion of students reaching out for help that had not been on schools’ wellbeing radar. Those students felt comfortable to signal their need for help via a digital tool. Such an approach can be very powerful provided schools are equipped to have best practice wellbeing conversations with students following them reaching out for help.

**Rebecca Goodhue** suggested that the status of teachers needed to be raised financially but also when it came to appreciation and training opportunities. “We really need strong teachers that have the necessary digital skills but also the right working conditions such as good salaries.”, as **Remco Pijpers** advocated. Teachers also need support in protecting themselves online. During Covid-19, many teachers were insecure with students filming them or taking screen shots of them teaching online to make fun of them in chat rooms etc. Such student behaviour negatively affects teachers’ well-being, said **Remco Pijpers**.

Anecdotal evidence highlights the potential of technology and in particular artificial intelligence to foster student well-being. However, opportunities that digital tools provide need to be combined with a relationship-based approach, said **Rebecca Goodhue**. **Remco Pijpers** agreed that the datafication of learning entails possibilities for learning, but also risks. He argued for the need to consider potential effects on student well-being when developing digital tools. “Schools should be autonomous in their teaching. With new technical developments, there is risk of learning being dictated by data and algorithms.”, **Remco Pijpers** argued. When students do all exercises online, there is a tendency to turn all exercises into tests. “We should make more efforts to look at digital environments from a children rights perspective.”, he added. **Remco Pijpers** concluded that children and parents needed to be involved in a dialogue in how far technology should go in supporting learning.
Key take aways for policy makers:

1. The Covid-19 pandemic affected students’ and teachers’ well-being and put additional pressure on teachers. With the outbreak of Covid-19, digital tools became necessary for online teaching. While digital tools provide huge benefits, they need to be combined with a relationship-based approach, more focus is needed on ensuring inclusion and avoiding possible negative impacts of for example in-built algorithms on students’ autonomy and personal relationships.

2. It is important to clarify what we mean by “well-being”. An example is provided by the Nest framework which is based on the voices of thousands of children, young people and experts includes six domains (valued, loved and safe, material basics, healthy, learning). During the Covid-19 pandemic the key role of personal connections with children seemed to sometimes be overlooked.

3. Kennisnet created the Value Compass for digital transformation of education, a tool which facilitates a dialogue about well-being in digital learning environments and tested it with some schools. Their experience was that facilitated discussions helped students to develop their own – informed, and often more critical opinion – about their own learning with technology. Initiating an authentic dialogue with students is key.

4. Webinar speakers recommend an asset-oriented approach that identifies and celebrates students’ strengths and makes them feel valued and cared for. Teachers can teach students to foster their well-being. (e.g. in some schools teachers and students write self-care plans that focus on setting goals for their mental and physical health).

5. Several ways to better promote teacher and student well-being can be envisaged starting from the need to give dedicated time to teachers to care for their own and their students’ well-being. Rather than introducing a program focusing only on well-being, the focus on well-being should be part of a whole school approach that includes students, teachers, parents, and other adults that have positive relationships with students. Such a general approach should also involve relevant workers from the health, community, and social service sector.

6. Webinar speakers argued that framework conditions for teachers needed to be improved. Teachers need higher salaries and more quality professional development and trainings that enables them to teach with digital tools while ensuring their students’ well-being.

7. Anecdotal evidence highlights the potential of technology and in particular artificial intelligence for future learning but also risks. It is important to consider potential effects on student well-being when developing digital tools.

How has Covid-19 changed webinar participants’ views on teacher and student well-being?

Vulnerabilities were more exposed but not all were necessarily catered for, stated Mariella Galea, Directorate for Learning and Assessment, Malta. The new situation created more awareness about the importance of mental health, suggested Dalila Salomé Roxo Vicente, Associação de Artes, Portugal. For Vítor Batista, DGE, Portugal, it became clear that the welfare of teachers needed to be the priority. “It is important to focus on well-being to ensure that every individual in the schools feels safe and welcome and can engage with learning and with people”, suggested Chris Kelly, Department of Education, Ireland. Conceição Aleixo, Teacher Training Center of the Association of Schools of Alto Tâmega and Barroso, Portugal shared similar views. For her fostering students’ and teachers’ well-being meant being able (together) to establish an educational environment in schools that encourages everyone’s personal and social learning and development.

“Teachers and students need to feel that they belong to a bigger school community”, as Professor Dulce Franco, IE, Portugal put it. “Online learning has exposed different realities within home environments and has shown that the needs of individuals, both students and teachers may vary”, as Miriam Bugeja, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, Malta, stressed. The Portuguese Master Student Sofia Lourenço dos Santos suggested that teachers should spend more time with their students’ families.

“The outbreak of Covid-19 has created change and uncertainty.”

Chris Kelly

“Covid-19 has brought teachers closer to their students’ homes.”

Miriam Bugeja
What are ways forward to foster well-being in schools?
Voices from webinar participants

For Portuguese teacher Judite Carvalho Covid-19 made it clear that students needed to learn how to be together, work in teams, help each other and reach common goals. Belgian teacher Hakima El-kharoiti suggested to ask students what they needed. Dalila Salomé Roxo Vicente, Associação de Artes, Portugal, agreed that teachers needed to make time and space to listen. Portuguese teacher Maria José Estevez Mira advocated for implementing spaces and times for relaxation and exchange. “Schools will cater for well-being when everyone has the opportunity and ways to effectively have a voice of their own”, as Conceição Aleixo, Portugal put it.

“Students and teachers feeling safe will reduce the impact of stress and anxiety”, explained Chris Kelly, Department of Education, Ireland. She added that the less stressed a person is, the more they can think, plan, engage and learn. Dulce Franco suggested investing in project work and activities in non-formal spaces involving teachers and students. Sofia Lourenço dos Santos also supported creating more green spaces and more activities within the communities outside of the classroom. Melanie Casha Sammut, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, Malta, suggested investing in support platforms and training related to strengthening emotional intelligence. For Isabel Barroso learning needs to be approached in a more holistic, integrated, and balanced way. Finally, Mariella Galea, Directorate for Learning and Assessment, Malta, put forward the idea of promoting a healthier lifestyle, offering programs and resources.

“What are ways forward to foster well-being in schools?”
Voices from webinar participants

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“Ask students what they need.”
Hakima El-kharoiti

“Promoting the wellbeing of school communities is a fundamental element of Education policy in Ireland.”
Chris Kelly
How to ensure equal access to quality digital resources for all?

Webinar speakers June 2022

Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker
Education consultant, Netherlands

Patrick Coffey
PDST Technology in Education, Ireland

Gerard O’Sullivan
School head of Coláiste Chiaráin, Croom, Co. Limerick, Ireland

What is a quality digital learning resource?

For Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker a digital learning resource should be of proven quality, ideally according to a quality label. A learning resource must be accurate, well-structured, easy to understand and save teachers’ time, according to Patrick Coffey. He is responsible for the Irish portal Scoilnet. It needs to be topic, age, and skills specific and relevant to the curriculum. It is essential that resources are factually strong and correct and it must be obvious for teachers at first glance what the resource is about. In the Scoilnet portal, every resource is tagged to the national curriculum which makes it easier for teachers to use the repository. The Scoilnet portal is an example of a public Ministry initiative that enables teachers to share free open resources.

For Gerard O’Sullivan good digital learning resources must be accurate, interactive and user friendly. In big content archives digital resources should lead learners and scaffold their learning. During distance teaching due to Covid-19, mathematics teachers at his school started to create and curate their own content archives. Gerard O’Sullivan reported that students enjoyed engaging with relevant content in the same style as their teachers’ presentations. He added that digital learning resources needed to be easily sharable. Scoilnet is a centrally curated digital archive of learning materials that is specifically developed for this purpose. Teachers also use digital tools like Google and Microsoft 365 to share resources. Marthe Straatemeier, Kennisnet, Netherlands, advised using open technical standards for the digital infrastructure, as commercial content can often not be used on all platforms.
National repositories, commercial publishers and also teachers themselves create and share digital learning resources. While in Ireland, teachers are free to select any resource they want, in other countries ministries direct teachers more in their use of resources. Commercial publishers provide carefully created and edited learning resources, Gerard O’Sullivan said. Patrick Coffey agreed that commercial publishers provided highly accurate digital resources with direct links to the curriculum.

The Scoilnet portal is an example of a public Ministry initiative that enables teachers to share free open resources. The portal started in the early 2000s by engaging several teachers to create resources. From 2004, the focus was more on identifying already existing resources and linking them to the curriculum. For instance, the BBC produced a range of free open educational resources at the time. However, materials for more specific topics like Irish language were not available. In 2014-15, a facility allowing teachers to share their own resources was added. “It was a big game changer as teachers were empowered to share their own resources.”, commented Patrick Coffey. He explained that when this facility was launched, there was a belief that teachers would not share resources, since especially post-primary teachers were protective of their work. In reality, it was post-primary teachers in particular who shared their resources. Scoilnet is the only national example of collaboration on open content in Ireland. Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker stressed that UNESCO advocates for access to open digital resources for teachers and students (UNESCO, 2019). In the Netherlands, there is a national platform wikiwijs and the project Impetus Open Learning Material is investing in open digital resources and increasing repositories. “We already have teachers creating very nice contents. The aim is to better coordinate these efforts and to provide a platform for teachers to share contents more easily.”, as Marthe Straatemeier, Kennisnet, explained.

Increasingly, teachers also create their own resources and share them informally. Gerard O’Sullivan shared the experience at his school where two mathematics teachers used iPads to build and record all their lessons. Students valued the possibility to pause, rewind and recall lessons. O’Sullivan highlighted how teachers could be effectively trained in using a workflow around creating their own content. He encourages teachers to collaborate to create resources and share them with colleagues. Gerard O’Sullivan suggested that such an approach could be scaled up: “Could you imagine 100 schools dividing the work according to topics and share resources that are also curated? That would be an amazing collaborative effort.”

Patrick Coffey observed that teachers who are confident about their technical abilities and the quality of content they created are more inclined to share their resources with others. Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker shared her impression that Dutch teachers are often reluctant to share. She assumed that teachers do not find their materials good enough or do not want to share them for free since creating digital resources was time consuming. Patrick Coffey said that in Ireland only a minority of teachers share their resources through the national portal, possibly because they do not receive incentives to do so. He said that on the Flemish teacher platform KlasCement teachers get credits for sharing resources, which seems to work well.

Gerard O’Sullivan’s impression from encouraging teacher colleagues at his school to collaborate is that reciprocal trust is key. “Once quality materials are shared, people have a positive experience which creates trust.”, he explained. School departments already build their own content archives. Professional networking is at the heart of teacher
and management training in Ireland. He can also share any query with his informal group of 150 Irish school heads where he usually gets quick responses. “I think it is a cultural thing and the more people give, the more people get it.”, he concluded.

Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker asked for examples of involving students in the creation of digital resources. Students do not directly contribute to the Scoilnet portal. In the past, national competitions were organized with a prize to publish students’ work on Scoilnet. In the Northern Ireland competition, Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland schools developed high-quality resources through history projects together. “If you are serious about student participation, then every resource should be engineered with a feedback loop.”, Gerard O’Sullivan suggested. Such feedback could focus on students’ learning experiences but also on learning outcomes and achievements. He could also imagine senior students developing quality resources themselves. One obstacle to this way of working would be the pressure on teachers to deliver the curriculum in time.

In conclusion, for Patrick Coffey paid and free digital learning resources co-exist in today’s world. Resource collections curated either by ministries or commercial publishers and teachers creating their own resources all have their own advantages, as Gerard O’Sullivan reflected. “Publishers play a remarkable part and always have done. At the same time there are good open-source examples that can be further mainstreamed.”, he suggested. In his opinion publishers could provide better visually attractive, video-rich interactive content archives, if they worried less about the strict licensing of their products. Patrick Coffey considered that some publishers already offered attractive interactive digital resources. For Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker one concern was that commercial publishers are profit driven and have a different vision of education than public actors.

How to ensure the quality of digital learning resources?

Teachers need to know that they can rely on the quality of a learning resource, as Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker observed. Consultants for digital learning resources are sometimes more concerned with quantity than quality, as Patrick Coffey noted, saying that identifying digital resources that have proven to be effective is a challenge, as what works for some teachers might not work for others. He explained that ensuring factual quality is a challenge for everyone managing repositories, especially for those that allow teachers to upload resources without going through an editorial process. For him being able to produce double-checked resources is one of the strengths of commercial publishers.

Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker added that some materials received quality labels which required agreement on quality standards. Patrick Coffey explained that the quality of resources is always a concern for Scoilnet. Because there is no editorial check in place, teachers are free to publish and put resources “live” – this can lead to quality concerns. But it is really a question of trusting teachers. Klascement is an example of a portal with an editorial team in place to check resources. The Klascement platform seems to work very well and has a lot of user engagement in Belgium Flanders, so Patrick Coffey. However, such an editorial process is also time-consuming and creates a time lag between teachers creating resources and their publication. Gerard O’Sullivan added that some platforms provide the possibility to rate resources with the highest rated resources trending after some time. This could also be used as a starting point for identifying quality standards. Patrick Coffey said that in his experience the possibility of rating resources or commenting on them was often not used by teachers.
“We are in a real golden age to discuss the future of digital learning resources because challenges around the digital infrastructure have been resolved.”, said Gerard O’Sullivan. Ensuring the connectivity and infrastructure is key because, if technology does not work every time, teachers will not use it. Now that most Irish schools have better digital infrastructure, teacher training remains key, so Patrick Coffey.

Chris Kelly, Ministry of Education, Ireland, was involved in developing the recently published Irish Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027. The Irish Digital Strategy for Schools contains a roadmap on the way forward for investment in the use of digital technology in schools for covering school infrastructure development and software to cater for learners’ needs, including the Scoilnet portal. Chris Kelly stated that the strategy puts a focus on building confidence for teachers and school heads in using digital technology, as some teachers are still not confident in using technology in the classroom. “If there is a silver lining out of Covid, it was that a lot of people had to get involved with using technology they never had before and suddenly were able to say with confidence that ‘I can do this’.\”, she concluded.

Gerard O’Sullivan reflected that some teachers were naturally motivated to use digital resources, but others needed training to inspire them. He added that technical advances have made creating digital resources easier. Chris Kelly highlighted initial teacher training as one focus for the next years. There is currently no requirement to include a core element around the use of technology in the classroom in initial teacher training. Including such an element would be a game changer over the next couple of years. Also enabling collaboration among teachers beyond their school is another key aspect that Chris Kelly highlighted. “Learning groups or networks can be extremely helpful in building experience, confidence and competence.\”, she emphasized.

Irish curricula became more open. They specify only learning objectives not topics or teaching materials. “Being able to use a variety of commercial and open-source materials has been a game changer from a leadership perspective but also for teachers,” reflected Gerard O’Sullivan. Open curricula provide more flexibility and portals like Scoilnet can cater to that by providing a range of teaching resources for each learning outcome the curriculum specifies. However, there has also been a discussion with teachers about this junior cycle reform for the last decade, Gerard O’Sullivan explained. More open curricula provide teachers with greater flexibility but also brought back a national exam that is normed across the whole country. Some teachers find this way of working challenging and would prefer working with a prescribed syllabus. He observed that having more open curricula led to a decentralization of learning which offers the flexibility to provide a variety of learning experiences that engage students in their own learning. Gerard O’Sullivan concluded that the approach relied on teachers teaching to the exam but also using the flexibility offered to deliver the curriculum in whatever way they wanted.

Innovative examples already exist; the challenge is to mainstream them. It “takes time, a vision and someone or an organization who can take the lead, coordinate and do quality control\.”, Gerard O’Sullivan concluded. He added that one challenge was to build a capacity behind that of teachers who were ready to share resources. “We need to see how we incentivize teachers to contribute. We need to empower teachers and by doing so, we would have a wonderful scenario where students and parents could work with children on open content archives.\”, said Gerard O’Sullivan.

Finally, Rola Hulsbergen-Paanakker argued for more exchange of learning resources at European level and for national and European criteria for quality resources. Patrick Coffey pointed out that the European Schoolnet project Learning Resource Exchange will end this year. The project aimed to find resources that travel well between countries. This has proven to be challenging, as learning resources need to be curriculum specific and available in different languages. Mathematics and science-based subjects have a greater general applicability, while other subjects like languages are more country specific.
Key take aways for policy makers

1. Quality digital learning resources should be of proven quality, accurate, well-structured, easy to understand and save teachers some time. They also need to be topic, age, and skills specific and relevant to the curriculum. Ideally, learning resources are user friendly and interactive.

2. Both national repositories and commercial publishers share digital learning resources. Increasingly, teachers also share their own resources informally. Teachers are free to select their teaching resources for example in Ireland, while ministries in other countries direct teachers more in their use of resources. According to webinar speakers, paid and free digital learning resources co-exist, each with their own affordances.

3. Generally, only a minority of teachers are happy to share the resources they created. Teachers with a confidence in their technical abilities and the quality of content they created might be best placed to share, and reciprocal trust is key for sharing resources.

4. Ensuring the quality of learning resources is a challenge and a learning resource that has proven effective for one teacher might not work for another. Ensuring the quality of teachers’ resources without an editorial process is difficult and putting such a process in place is both time consuming and resource intensive. Quality labels may be a way forward but require agreement on common quality standards.

5. In some European countries like Ireland curricula became more open and provide more flexibility to teachers to select the teaching resources that suit their needs. More open curricula come with challenges such as a need for a stronger focus on national examinations and dealing with some teachers’ resistance who prefer to work with a prescribed syllabus.

6. Many innovative examples of good digital learning resources exist but the challenge is to mainstream them. To mainstream innovative examples, time, a vision and someone or an organization taking the lead, coordinate and doing quality control is needed. More exchanges of learning resources at European level and national or European criteria for quality resources could be envisaged.
The future of school education: What priorities for the future?

Has Covid-19 changed our vision of school education?

John Hattie said that in the pre-Covid-19 school system it was teachers talking most of the school day. He estimated that 40% of children were happy with the system, another 40% coped while 20% did not. He asked whether Covid teaching changed this balance and what we can learn from any changes to improve the dominant grammar of in-school teaching. The outbreak of Covid-19 forced teachers to change the way they teach. Many teachers worked more collaboratively, and some students realized that they could do their school day’s work in a few hours.

Gert Biesta agreed that Covid-19 made it clear that some students do their schoolwork very quickly. He stressed that the value of public education went beyond enabling academic achievement. Schools bring mixed groups together to collaborate. Using class time to teach students to work in teams and have self-respect and respect for others is crucial and a demand from the employment market, said John Hattie. With distance teaching, more teachers realized the need to teach their students how to work alone, in groups and with technology. While some students thrived when learning online, others did not. “Some of the usual winners in schooling did not do well during Covid, and vice versa.”, as John Hattie said. He noticed a tendency for schools to go back to teaching as they did before Covid-19. His vision for the future of schools would be to create a new model that serves more students, learns from the best in Covid and in-class teaching to serve more students more effectively and efficiently.
Olli-Pekka Heinonen observed that Covid-19 amplified the importance of collaboration and trust in the wider community. Schools that collaborated well and shared a common vision about schooling with parents fared better than others (see also section: How to develop the future of schools together as part of wider communities?). Physical and online learning spaces are often described as contradicting each other. Olli-Pekka Heinonen reflected that there was a need to find ways to integrate and combine both, also to create more personalized and collaborative learning opportunities. He called for providing specific online collaborative spaces suited to the needs of education. Gert Biesta agreed that online options used during Covid-19 remained basic. He added that many people thinking about such technology relied on simplistic ideas of education.

Already before Covid-19, there was a trend to narrow down what counts in education to a small number of outcomes. Gert Biesta argued that Covid-19 has reinforced this trend, also because not all activities were possible online. Narrow views on education often focus on teaching as an intervention, learning as an effect and research on effectiveness. In Biesta’s view, a broad humanistic and democratic approach to school education is needed.

How can school education be more equitable?

For Olli-Pekka Heinonen Covid-19 made the huge differences in children’s’ needs more visible. He argued that equity was a key principle in education which could only be ensured by considering students’ different needs and starting points when they entered school.

John Hattie noted that every child has a right to progress which goes beyond the current over-focus on academic achievement, arguing that schools are still too often structured around giving the winners more and making losers responsible for their own learning. Ensuring equity should not be defined only as supporting groups but also individual learners, he added. Every student, no matter where they start, is entitled to at least a year’s learning for a year’s input. More dialogue is needed about what a year’s learning means, how to create schools and classes to enable all to undertake such learning, and to value those teachers and schools who achieve this goal.

No one could disagree with the fundamental assumption that every child has a right to good education. The real question is how to define such a right and how to implement it, as Gert Biesta argued, saying that while a focus on equity and equality is needed, both are sometimes discussed only in terms of school achievement. He added that in today’s unequal societies the question of equity is a societal one that goes beyond the responsibility of schools. Both schools and societies need to provide more equal access to learning and career opportunities.

Italian teacher Monica Giansanti wondered how to put equity in practice in the classroom. In her experience differentiated learning paths increase differences between students. John Hattie agreed that grouping students with different activities was indeed the opposite of how the expert on differentiation Carol Ann Tomlinson defines it (see also section: How to design the (digital) assessment of the future?). For Tomlinson every child deserves the same kind of outcomes, and it might take children different approaches and times to achieve them. “The question of equity in education is one of the most difficult ones also because societies have an interest in maintaining certain inequalities.”, Gert Biesta reflected.

Reflecting about equity in education also means reflecting about educational values, as Gert Biesta stated. For instance, educational values seem to be more democratic in Scotland than in England. Finland has a very inclusive policy in its legislation: students stay in the same groups in Scotland than in England. Finland has a very inclusive in their legislation: students stay in the same groups instance, educational values seem to be more democratic in Scotland than in England. Finland has a very inclusive policy in its legislation: students stay in the same groups while at the same time every child has the right to special support, if needed. The aim is to avoid grouping students in a way that stigmatizes their future, as Olli-Pekka Heinonen explained. Olli-Pekka Heinonen suggested that organizing more peer review, peer support and collaborative teaching could help to support individual students when taught together in a diverse group.
Is there a real will for change?

Jan de Craemer, Flemish Ministry of Education wondered what speakers thought about the possibility for real change. He shared his impression that many schools and education systems went “back to normal” very quickly. At the same time there is also the hope that new action plans would effectively support a real digital transformation of schools, he added.

John Hattie responded by saying that he was sceptical of much having been learnt, as he saw resistance to change from various education actors at least in Australia, a rush back to the pre-Covid model of teaching and learning. “This idea of ‘going back to normal’ seems to come with the idea of control, as if times before Covid were in our control which we lost due to Covid and can claim back now.”, Olli-Pekka Heinonen reflected. With the war in the Ukraine the world appeared to be a more uncertain place. European countries might react to this uncertainty with a wish to increase control over schools, he added.

For Olli-Pekka Heinonen it is not control that is at the core of education but the teacher-learner connection. Education systems should create enabling constraints for that relationship and the community around. This requires an entirely different approach to understanding the system and the trust needed in the system for it to function. Gert Biesta reacted by arguing that in education a good balance was needed between freedom and control and solutions provided at system or school level.

Can trust replace some control in education?

Olli-Pekka Heinonen suggested that policy makers need to foster the connection and trust between different actors in education. For him trust consists of credibility, reliability, and intimacy: Credibility that actors have the capacity to carry out the tasks they are responsible for, reliability that they will act as they say and intimacy created by the different actors in the system knowing each other’s tasks and problems well enough to be trusted. Olli-Pekka Heinonen observed that in Finland there was often a disconnect between excellent national education strategies and the reality in schools where strategies were not always implemented. To bridge this gap between policy and practice, national actors and teachers need to come together to discuss the abstract terms of the core curriculum and to find shared interpretations of what they mean, he argued. Gert Biesta added that thinking about education only in terms of outcomes quickly leads into control cycles. Clearly defined learning outcomes are important but so are principles such as fostering a democratic mindset. “Learning to live in a democracy is not a question of learning outcomes but a question of where we can touch each other and realize that we have to try to live together, even if that is difficult”, Gert Biesta suggested. Olli-Pekka Heinonen reflected that the way forward could be to focus on school communities as central to achievement in education. Curricula and school cultures would become the same thing and school culture more important, he suggested.

Idiko Csordás, Educational Authority, Hungary, asked how to balance academic achievement with a happy childhood. New approaches to fostering learning and well-being simultaneously are needed because both are strongly interconnected, said Olli-Pekka Heinonen. John Hattie pleaded for a more holistic approach to children’s development. Schools should change in a way that invites more children to come to school to learn. School cultures need to foster equity as well as a sense of equity and belonging. Gert Biesta argued for caution when discussing how to enable children to flourish. Schools should help children develop their talents but not sell a wrong notion that everyone can achieve anything. For Biesta helping...
children to acknowledge their limitations is also a task of education. Olli-Pekka Heinonen shared his experiences from the working group “High performing systems for tomorrow” in which he had participated. The working group had looked for three years at five education systems that were identified as high performing by the OECD PISA results: British Columbia in Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The goal was to understand why such different systems were high performing. “The conclusion of this process was that we need to entirely rethink what a high performing education system is”, said Olli-Pekka Heinonen. One conclusion of the group was that future education systems should enable human flourishing and support each child to grow into humanity. Heinonen mentioned the UNESCO report “Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education” which advocates for a new kind of social contract for education.

What are ways forward in school education?

Elisabetta Mughini, INDIRE, Italy, asked if educational values need to be rethought entirely. Gert Biesta replied that a new social contract would be fantastic but was not realistic. Biesta argued that school curricula should not become too crowded with new tasks. He quoted the political philosopher Hannah Arendt pleading for children to keep some time to “fall in love with the world”, even if this world could be difficult. “Some of the qualities needed for such a take on life are difficult to get hold of but are still important to keep in the educational conversation”, Gert Biesta concluded. He argued that school education needs to “go back to better basics” which necessitates a careful discussion on what are basic skills and how to teach them.

For John Hattie one key message was the need to value, identify, sustain, and develop the expertise of teachers, school leaders and other actors in education. Discussions on how to continuously improve teaching while appreciating what children can already do need to be continued. Olli-Pekka Heinonen suggested opening up discussions about education: “Big challenges such as the climate crisis cannot be solved by elites of policy makers, or scientists, or innovator or business leaders. They need the engagement of all of us as they are connected to the way we act as human beings, which makes them educational challenges,” he argued. He said our generation should act in a way that ensures more alternatives and opportunities for future generations: “The well-being of individuals and the well-being of the planet are often one and the same thing and a lot of mental and well-being issues are caused by the lack of planetary well-being.”

Key take aways for policy makers:

1. Some students thrived learning online during Covid-19 while others struggled. Covid-19 has amplified the importance of collaboration and trust in wider community. Schools that collaborated well and shared a common vision about schooling also with parents fared better than others.

2. There is a need to find ways to better integrate physical and online learning spaces and combining both, and to create more personalized and collaborative learning opportunities.

3. Covid-19 has emphasized the need to discuss the core focus of public education. A broad democratic and humanistic approach to school education is needed. Schools not only need to ensure students’ academic achievements but also to teach students to collaborate in mixed groups.

4. Covid-19 made the big differences in children’s’ needs more visible. To ensure equity in schools, students’ different needs and starting points need to be considered when they enter school. Schools are still too often structured around giving the winners more and making losers responsible for their own losing. Ensuring learning and career opportunities is a task both for schools and societies.

5. Webinar speakers noticed a tendency for schools to go back to teaching the way they did before Covid-19. The idea to “going back to normal” seems to come with the idea that it would be possible to go back to being in control, which was temporarily lost due to Covid-19. However, not control but the teacher-learner connection and an enabling community around it should be at the heart of education. A
good balance between freedom and control and solutions provided at system or school level is needed. 

There is sometimes a disconnect between excellent national education strategies and reality at schools, where the strategies are not always implemented. To bridge this gap between policy and practice, national actors and teachers need to come together to discuss the abstract terms of the core curriculum to find shared interpretations of what they mean.

One key message is the need to value, identify, sustain, and develop expertise of teachers, school leaders and other actors in education. There is a need to open up the discussion about education and to prepare students to participate in decision making about global challenges like the climate crisis.

Tasks for international organizations like European Schoolnet

Webinar speakers shared ideas on the role that international organizations like European Schoolnet could play in preparing schools for the future. For webinar speaker Olli-Pekka Heinonen tasks of organisations like European Schoolnet could be to drive a discussion and help countries and ministries to find concrete ways to balance an academic outcome-based approach with a broad humanistic approach valuing the holistic growth of children. European Schoolnet and other organizations could help countries and ministries understand what it means to move from school systems to education systems. Relevant questions to discuss are, for example: How to bridge the implementation gap between national education strategies and the reality of schools? What are the new ways of policy, roles, processes that are needed to transform education systems? What role could technologies play in this transformation? Olli-Pekka Heinonen suggested that European Schoolnet and others should facilitate a discussion on how to connect curricula and school cultures with the main global challenges that are endangering the future of mankind.

John Hattie suggested that European Schoolnet and other organizations could support more research on what we learnt positively from Covid-related teaching, and how to assimilate these successes into the regular school. For example, schools should cover less and go deeper, teach students how to learn alone and with others and how to interpret their progress and make decisions about “where to next” and be more efficient as well as effective at their school tasks. John Hattie also suggested the OECD and other international organizations should change the current model of releasing PISA (or similar) achievement scores by country and instead release a profile based on a “basket of goods” including achievement, levels of progress over years, well-being, sense of safety, belonging, wanting to come to school, equity, development etc. This would provide a more rounded notion of school success and raise debates about more critical factors of being a child in our schools than the current over-emphasis on achievement alone.
How could the future of schools look like beyond Covid-19?
Voices from webinar participants

For Italian teacher Monica Giansanti, Covid-19 gave the opportunity to discuss future scenarios and finally to introduce the complexity dimension into the learning process. Her school took part in a project to develop students’ vision of the future. “Not only Covid-19 accelerated change, but also other global events and problems make us realize that the young generation will need something different to be able to face the complexity of the world.”, according to Italian teacher Sara Brunno.

Heli Aru-Chabilan, Harno, Estonia stressed that there was a danger for schools to fall back to old comfort zones. Teacher Sara Brunno observed a backward trend in Italy aimed at “restoring” the old school, despite interesting pedagogical innovations in some places.

Portuguese teacher Cristina Domingues said that Covid-19 forced schools to reflect on if what they offered was what students needed. Her impression was that “few schools have taken this incredible opportunity to devote time for profound reflection” and many went back to teaching as they did before the pandemic.

While Cristina Domingues feared that an important opportunity for change has been missed, she remained optimistic about the future. “Covid-19 has shaken the foundation of teaching as it forced schools to use technology. In the future, the use of technology could become a tool to achieve means instead”, she reflected.

Heli Aru-Chabilan highlighted the potential to guide education systems to make learning more personalized. Tony Weir, Ministry, Department of Education, Ireland suggested that schools should be more agile, flexible, and adaptable to the needs of individual learners.

For Anna Chinazzi, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, “it is high time for schools to stop neglecting the socio-emotional aspects of the educational process”. A main constraint she sees is the “narrowness of pre-service and in-service teacher training, especially for secondary teachers.”

Chris Kelly, Irish Ministry, Department of Education stressed that it was important not to lose this momentum when developing educational systems in the future, also as digital tools could foster self-directed learning. “The Covid-19 pandemic has provided students with the opportunity to develop skills towards independent learning, she explained. These skills should be further enhanced in the coming years, suggested Miriam Bugeja, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, Malta.

Anna Chiara Mastropasqua, PhD student, University of Padova, Italy, stressed that schools needed to become more inclusive. Schools should continue to make use of online forms of learning to provide teaching to vulnerable individuals and students who require additional support, suggested Miriam Bugeja, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, Malta.

Tony Weir, Ministry, Department of Education, Ireland, saw the future of school education as one where interdisciplinary learning could take place in many different places and formats.

“We need to see education as a lifelong journey where learning is integrated from many disciplines and can take place in many locations and formats.”
Tony Weir, Ireland

“A more human education with an extended sense of belonging and everyone participating in decision making is needed.”
Susana Caires, University of Minho, Portugal

“I often fear that we may have lost the opportunity of a lifetime.”
Cristina Domingues, Portugal
Conclusions

The webinar series “The future of schools beyond Covid-19” invited policy makers, researchers, practitioners, and others to build on lessons learned from schooling during Covid-19 to share their visions of the future for schools. This report summarizes the collective learning experiences of 19 webinar speakers from 11 countries and 27 webinar participants. This report urges, as did the previous one, policy makers and others to take time to reflect on lessons learned during Covid-19 to re-think and re-shape school education. In February 2022, Russia started a war in the Ukraine which caused many refugee children to enter European schools, and which has unforeseeable consequences for the people in the Ukraine, Europe, and the world. The war in Europe, rising prices for energy and other costs, and continued worries about climate change make the world a more uncertain place. This situation leaves little time for actors in education to take a step back and reflect about the future they want for schools. Some schools across Europe have reverted – quite understandably given the daily challenges they face – to teaching as they did before Covid-19. This means that innovations and lessons learned from teaching during Covid-19 might be lost. However, if there is one lesson to learn from recent events, then it is that the future is unpredictable, and that we need to help schools to prepare students for this unpredictable future. School education systems therefore need to become more resilient and flexible.

Discussions during the webinar series reiterated the need for schools to prepare students to live and work in an unpredictable future and to participate in decision making on global challenges such as climate change. Embedding schools more in wider communities (e.g., parents, researchers, other community services) would support schools in this task. These communities could engage in debates about what schools should teach. To actively participate in society, students need not only academic achievements but also skills such as the ability to collaborate in diverse teams. Strong personal connections remain key also in digital learning environments. Such connections should be a key focus of more general school strategies with a focus on well-being. Collecting data at different levels will enable communities to base their reflections on how to improve teaching and learning on concrete evidence.

Creating such a change with all education actors will be a huge challenge. European Schoolnet and other organizations need to support education actors to occasionally step out of their challenging daily routines and reflect together on what kind of a future they want for schools. We need to mediate a dialogue that includes the variety of visions and needs of different actors. The goal is to come to a balanced vision of the future of education that caters for various perspectives and needs.

European Schoolnet will continue to support dialogue between ministries of education and national agencies across Europe on their vision of the future of schools and how to create change. Between October 2022 and May 2023, we will organize a new webinar series focusing on how digitally processed data can foster student learning. It will address a range of topics around trust and safety aspects, ownership of data, interpretation and usability of data, exchange of data and the ethical use of data, as well as aspects of inclusion and equity and implications for ecosystem governance, technical infrastructure, and continuous professional development.

“As you start to walk on the way, the way appears.”

Rumi
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