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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student voice

Findings and recommendations

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SHORT SUMMARY

Prioritizing student voice: An imperative post COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided major disruptions in the education of young people. This study by UNESCO and the Council of Europe assesses the effect of school closures on opportunities for student voice in Europe, Middle East and North Africa, as well as explores the implications for democracy and inequalities in political engagement.

The vast majority of young people, lost out on opportunities to have their voice heard and to learn the competences to assert their rights as a result of the pandemic. Student decision-making regarding school life was deeply impacted, with about one-third of teachers saying that students were never given the opportunity to participate in decision-making during lockdown. While school closures reduced the physical spaces for freedom of expression and civic participation, the study provides insights into how student creativity thrived online during that time.

This study provides a reflection on the overall loss in opportunities and learning on student voice during the pandemic, as well as recommendations for school directors and personnel, teachers, educators, policy-makers and young people on how to address this loss. It highlights the importance of prioritizing student voice, especially for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to counter inequalities and promote healthier democracies.

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

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Introduction

Education can play a key role in helping young people to address global challenges by giving them the requisite competences and teaching them how to engage in decision-making from an early age. School leaders and teachers set the tone – by not only teaching about democracy, rule of law and human rights, but also modelling fair rules and encouraging students' active participation in their classrooms, schools and communities.

To counter the erosion of democratic values and promote trust in government institutions, greater investment in student voice is necessary. This is critical to promote greater support for democratic societies at a time when 57.5% of the global population has expressed dissatisfaction with democratic politics (the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2019).

The right to participation is at the heart of two flagship policy initiatives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Council of Europe. For UNESCO, global citizenship education aims to develop skills that enable learners of all ages to understand the interconnectedness between global and local issues and to become active promoters of more peaceful, just and sustainable societies. For the Council of Europe, the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture aims to equip young people with the knowledge and critical understanding, skills, values and attitudes they need to be able to contribute to a more democratic, inclusive and fair world.

As part of their effort to promote quality education, both organizations acknowledge the difference that schools can make by promoting students' voices, involving them in decision-making and encouraging their active civic participation, both in school and beyond. To achieve this, teachers should focus not only on teaching what civic participation and engagement is, but also on providing students with the opportunity to effectively engage in their own classrooms, schools and even communities.

The rapid advent of the digital age, through the increased spread and use of the Internet, social media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in people's lives, is providing students with new ways to participate, mobilize, cooperate and innovate. With this in mind, both UNESCO and the Council of Europe consider it essential that education in the twenty-first century, in particular schooling, take into account these new opportunities, but also risks, emerging from the widespread use of digital technologies to promote student voice and encourage the active civic participation of students, both in school and beyond.

The current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused very serious consequences, further exacerbating existing challenges in the education sector and, more broadly, in society. The impact of the pandemic on young people has been systemic, deep and disproportionate –in terms of not only education but also mental well-being, rights, social activism and livelihoods (ILO, 2020). Schools, school leaders and teachers have had to find innovative ways to continue to provide quality education, while also caring for the welfare and well-being of their students, often at a distance or through remote/online learning.

At the same time, some of the exceptional emergency measures put in place to contain the spread of COVID-19 have had a negative impact on the fundamental rights and freedoms of students. Continuing to promote student voice during the peak of the pandemic has been particularly challenging. This has given rise to a concern that the pandemic conditions could risk further exacerbating some students' pre-COVID-19 feeling that their voices were not being heard and listened to by adults, inside and outside school. For example, in a global survey carried out in 2019, only 53% of young people said that their teachers often asked them to give their point of view and share what they thought (WISE Global Education Barometer, 2020). Yet, at the same time, there has been a growing sense that the current pandemic could provide an opportunity to reshape education and societal norms, by also involving the full participation of young people in the development process (UNESCO, Futures of Education, 2020).

In that regard, in 2020, UNESCO and the Council of Europe decided to collaborate on a research project with a view to examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student voice and particularly the consequences of the subsequent school closures on student voice opportunities in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This study is both timely and important as it provides a reflection on the overall loss of education for students in 2020, as well as recommendations on how to address this loss. Identifying how student voice was affected and how the loss of education can be addressed enables those interested

in supporting young people's voices to participate in the national education debates.

The research project consisted of a teacher survey (with over 1000 respondents) and eight case studies across Europe and MENA. The mixed-methods research drew on the responses to an online survey provided by teachers from secondary schools in Europe and the MENA region. The majority of teachers were part of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) and the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network, which are schools where student participation is likely to be encouraged. In addition, the qualitative findings of the research are drawn from case studies that were developed by local researchers in schools in France, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Portugal, Romania, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. Through these case studies, the researchers had access to the voices of both students and teachers from schools where student voice projects continued to be undertaken.

The results of the study were presented and discussed at the UNESCO and the Council of Europe online conference "From making student voice heard to active civic participation in the digital age: The role of schools during and after the pandemic", held from 23 to 25 November 2020 and which brought together 500 young people, teachers, policy-makers and researchers from 60 countries, mostly in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The feedback from the conference was taken into account in the preparation of this report.

This publication is organized as follows: it begins with a description of the context of the study, followed by an explanation of the methods used. The findings are then provided, followed by a set of recommendations for school directors and personnel, teachers, educators, policy-makers and young people.

▶ WHAT IS STUDENT VOICE

Student voice is the right of students to have a say in matters that affect them in their schools and to have their opinions taken into consideration. It encompasses all aspects of school life and decision-making where young learners are able to make a meaningful contribution, adapted to their age and stage of development. It stretches from informal situations in which student express an opinion to their peers or staff members to participation in democratic structures or mechanisms, such as student parliaments and consultations.

Student voice is rooted in the concept of children's rights and human rights in particular, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes the right of every child to have a say in matters which affect them, whether in or out of school, as well as to be involved in decisions that affect them. More generally the CRC includes other articles that seek to increase student voice, including the right to seek and receive information, to express their own views and to associate with others.

Source: Council of Europe. 2021. More information on student voice can be found at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/making-children-and-students-voices-heard

1. Context

Any crisis creates challenges to the way our societies are governed and highlights weaknesses in these processes. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed governance and the relationship between the citizen and the state to its limits. Responsible governance, safeguarding human rights, ensuring transparency, developing and building trust and having a fair process for listening to the voices and needs of citizens became paramount in promoting inclusion and willingness to cooperate with the secure response measures. Education and schools play an important part in developing the competences of individuals to promote a culture where good governance can thrive and where young people can learn to assert their rights and uphold the rights of others. In fact, student voice within the education system can play a vital role in providing learning that supports the future health of democracies. Nevertheless, access to quality education was deeply affected by the school closures that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, nearly 1.6 billion students worldwide were affected by school closures (UNESCO 2020) and, due to the lack of preparedness of education systems, schools and teachers were forced to adapt to new teaching and learning methods almost overnight. At the same time, parents also found themselves unprepared to deliver online learning, often lacking the skills, equipment and time for home schooling (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; OECD, 2020). These experiences are expected to significantly affect this generation's earnings and life opportunities (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020). Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are said to be the worst affected by school closures (Andrew et al., 2020) and are the most likely to suffer the worst long-term impact on their educational outcomes (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020). There is little research to date that explores the effect of school closures on opportunities for student voice or its long-term impact on democracy and increasing inequalities in political engagement. This study is the first step in addressing this knowledge gap.

Both the Council of Europe and UNESCO have focused their response to the pandemic on the right to quality education, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the 2030 Agenda which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. The Council of Europe has been working with its Member States on this topic by emphasizing the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights and ensuring equal access to quality education for all through the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018). The UNESCO Global Education Coalition, encompassing more than 150 members from United Nations agencies, civil society, academia and the private sector, has launched the campaign #LearningNeverStops to support countries and, in particular, disadvantaged communities, to be able to continue their education during the pandemic, by focusing on the implementation of SDG 4 on education (UNESCO, 2020). As part of this response, UNESCO, in cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has stressed the importance of teaching awareness of human rights and the rule of law during the pandemic. The research project "Student Voice During the COVID-19 Pandemic" has opened new avenues for cooperation between UNESCO and the Council of Europe and forms part of their joint educational response to the pandemic. After the pandemic, there is no guarantee that emphasis will be placed on student voice opportunities in the education system, and arguments will have to be made and reiterated when governments and education systems create strategies for addressing the loss of education and the need for student voice.

The research conducted for this report aimed to provide evidence on the extent to which opportunities for student voice were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures and to identify factors that enabled some student voice projects to continue to exist.

2. Methods

The methods used to collect the data for this study were an online survey and case studies carried out in different national contexts. An online teacher survey was administered to secondary school teachers in Europe and MENA. The survey asked teachers about the situation in their schools with regard to student voice (formal representation in school decision-making through a governance body, having their voice heard in class and opportunities for student-led change in the local community) six months before the schools were closed due to COVID-19 and what was subsequently offered with regard to student voice during the period of school closures and lockdown – implemented in many schools and countries from about March 2020. The survey was carried out between July and September 2020 and was sent to schools through the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) and the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network, as well as through social media beyond the schools in these networks. Just under 60% of teachers who responded were part of ASPnet while 10% belonged to the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network and just under 5% of respondents were part of both networks. Just over a third (34%) of teachers who responded to the survey did not identify as working at a school that belonged to either network. The survey was made available in Arabic, English and French and was answered by 1036 teachers (some 60% from Europe and some 40% from MENA). About three quarters of the teachers worked in public (state) schools (73%) while about one quarter worked in private schools (25%) and a wide range of subjects were taught.

The second method used is based on case studies in different national contexts. These case studies were undertaken by local researchers investigating schools that managed to sustain student voice projects during periods of school closures. Teachers and students were interviewed by local researchers in September and October 2020 and were then asked to complete a template that focused on the resilience and quality of the practices. Case studies were conducted in France, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Portugal, Romania, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. The case studies from France, Greece, Portugal and Romania were from schools that belonged to the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network. The case studies from Jordan and Lebanon were from schools that belonged to ASPnet.

2.1. Limitations

Just over 1000 respondents participated in the survey. While this is a healthy number of participants, it should be noted that the survey was not conducted on a random sample of teachers across these regions, so caution should be exercised in interpreting the results. Similarly, applying statistical testing is not appropriate and descriptive statements apply only to the sample and should not be inferred to the wider population of schools. This was an unavoidable restriction given the lack of a sampling frame and timescale for the project. While the sample contains a cross-section of teachers of different subjects and from different countries (50 countries in total), the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. It may also be useful to keep in mind that the survey was taken by teachers rather than students. The survey therefore does not capture the students' own experience and their perception of how student voice was affected. The case studies offer some balance in this regard as researchers were able to speak directly to students.

3. Results

3.1. Widespread loss of learning on student voice

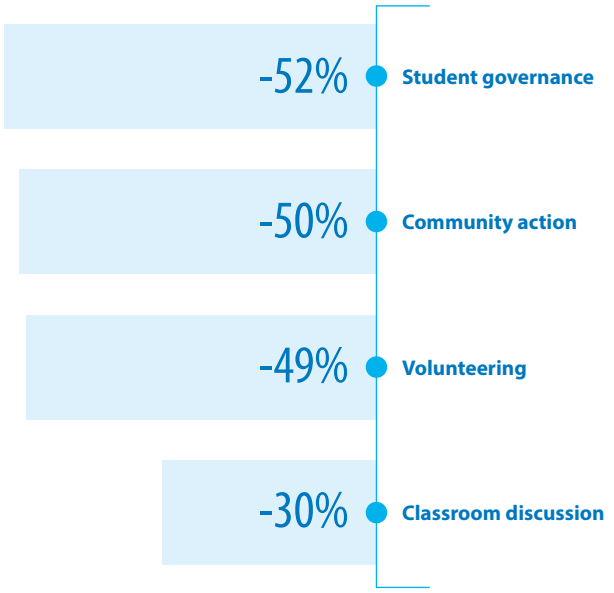

Figure 1. Percentage drop in the number of student voice opportunities offered during school closures in comparison with pre-pandemic levels in Europe and MENA countries.

This figure was created based on the results of the undertaken survey 'Student voice during the COVID-19 pandemic' by UNESCO & CoE in 2020.

Despite large cultural, social and economic differences between Europe and the MENA region, student voice appeared to be similarly affected. The results of the survey indicate that **the vast majority of young people, regardless of whether they live in Europe or MENA, lost out on opportunities to have their voice heard and to learn the competences to assert their rights as a result of the pandemic**. **More than half of formal governance structures such as school councils (52%) were suspended during lockdown** according to the teachers who participated in the survey (see Figure 1). **Student decision-making regarding school life was deeply impacted, with about one-third of teachers saying that students were never given the opportunity to participate in decision-making during lockdown**. This contrasts with about 10% of teachers who said that this had never been available for their students in the pre-COVID-19 period. Student voice in classroom discussions – the main opportunity for student participation, with 76% of teachers suggesting they offer this most of the time or all the time in the classroom – dropped by 29 percentage points to less than half during school closures. This represents slightly less than a 40% drop in the number of teachers who reported offering these discussion opportunities to students (see Figure 1).

At the start of 2020, in a small school in France with less than five hundred students, a theatre project was led by two teachers (of French and moral and civic education) along with an actor/director. The objective was to develop students' expressions of how they viewed the student-teacher relationship. Before the lockdown, students held a debate on the theme and used it to draft sketches for a play. Unfortunately, the students did not have the opportunity to perform their play in view of the national lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the performance was cancelled and replaced with online exercises asking the students to express how they understood the teacher-student relationship. One student expressed his dismay stating, "it's difficult – we are not used to participating in front of the camera and talking alone from our room or living room".

Community engagement and social action projects were particularly badly affected. Before the pandemic, the majority of teachers reported that their students participated in school activities in their local community. This included creating student-led change in their local community (pre-pandemic period: 60%; pandemic period: 30%), visiting government institutions (pre-pandemic period: 74%; pandemic period: 18%), participating in debates (pre-pandemic period: 79%; pandemic period: 40%) and volunteering (pre-pandemic period: 78%; pandemic period: 33%). Participation in these activities was reduced by at least half – for example, opportunities to visit government institutions fell by three-quarters during the closure period. **Overall, the results demonstrated a significant loss in opportunities and learning on student voice during the period of school closures.** Using the data from this study, it is not possible to state precisely the long-term effects of this loss of learning on the quantity or quality of these students' future democratic participation. Nevertheless, we do know from previous longitudinal research that involvement in these types of participatory activities does increase the chance of future political engagement (Keating and Janmaat, 2016), therefore, we can say that the loss of learning for these students is likely to have long-term consequences in reducing their chances of future political engagement.

A school in Lebanon uses sub-committees to allow students to take control of any project they would like to implement. While most activities moved online during the pandemic, an exception occurred with the student response to the devastating Beirut Port explosion, as they organized a philanthropic mission to clean up a damaged school. Taking part in the Beirut relief mission is an example of how the school listened to its students and seriously considered their ideas. Students were free and safe to express their feelings, needs and suggestions; they were also provided with material and emotional safety. No one expected the explosion and so the philanthropic relief mission was unplanned. Face shields, gloves and other protective materials were urgently provided as aid to the ACP Coordinator and she herself distributed them to students, parents and teachers. "We are really like a family… we were figuring it out together" was a sentiment shared by one student.

3.2. Socio-economic barriers to participation

Previous research indicates that socio-economically disadvantaged students are those who benefit the most from citizenship learning opportunities in school, as they typically have fewer opportunities than their more advantaged peers to learn these skills at home and in the wider community (Hoskins and Janmaat, 2019; Campbell, 2008). Research has shown that more educated parents with higher levels of cultural capital and economic resources typically provide a more open learning environment in the home and develop young people's skills to have their voice heard (Calarco, 2018). These more middle-class home environments are referred to as "negotiation households" in which children are encouraged to express their opinions, make independent decisions and provide reasons for their preferences (Calarco, 2018). School becomes the crucial location for less advantaged students to catch up on learning these skills. Nevertheless, despite the importance of these learning opportunities for less advantaged learners, the teachers in the survey who worked at schools with a greater proportion of disadvantaged students[1] already said before the pandemic that they were doing fewer student voice activities than those who reported having more advantaged students. This could be the case for a number of reasons. First, schools with less advantaged students often deliberately prioritize the learning of what is referred to as basic skills (native language and mathematics), teach to the test in order to get students to pass examinations and place high importance on strict discipline rather than student voice (Hoskins and Janmaat, 2019). Second, schools with less advantaged students may have less access to financial resources to support student voice activities.

Nevertheless, the proportional drop in student voice opportunities, such as class discussions and community activities, does not appear to be significantly different in schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged students compared to schools with a higher intake of advantaged students. Nevertheless, there is some indication that **formal school governance structures, such as class councils, were more likely to be suspended during the pandemic in schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged students** (a drop of 4 percentage points).

1 The measure used to capture disadvantaged students was a self-reported measure of the teacher's perception of the proportion of disadvantaged students in the school at which they taught.

When looking at a different measure of socio-economic advantage, namely, the distinction between public and private schools, there is a similar trend with regard to democratic student governance structures, with slightly more continuing to function in private schools during school closures than in their state-run counterparts (3 percentage point difference). Nevertheless, **there is a greater distinction between private schools and state schools in relation to the ability to continue community projects. Compared to state schools, private schools were much more likely to find ways to continue student citizenship activities such as advocacy campaigns (10 percentage point difference), volunteering (10 percentage point difference) and community action during the pandemic (7 percentage point difference)**.

It is important to recognize that the survey provides school-level data, and that the more disadvantaged students within each school (whether public or privately funded) are suggested to have fared much worse compared to their more advantaged peers in the same school, as a result of not having the same digital access and home learning environment (Andrew et al, 2020; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020). The qualitative aspect of the research indicates this, with many teachers using the open questions in the survey to describe specific barriers faced by their disadvantaged students. These include more limited access to technology to view online classes (in particular when there was more than one child in the family), weak, slow or no Internet access at home (for example students in refugee camps) and, in some countries in the MENA region, a poor and unstable electricity supply.

"We have had to provide laptops and wireless Internet for many of our most disadvantaged families. We also delivered food hampers for families who were struggling to put food on the table" (teacher, online teacher survey, United Kingdom).

"During the lockdown I couldn't think about that, as I had to think about myself first and get used to the new situation. But now I know that not all students had access to the online courses and meetings" (student, Greece).

Nevertheless, the most acute student needs extended beyond the technological aspect, as some schools across Europe and MENA had students who did not have enough food to eat at home. In addition, there can be considerable disparity in the level of self-discipline and organizational ability of students, which become critical when learning is more self-directed, as seen during the pandemic (OECD, 2020). When parents were also unable to provide this discipline and structure, students could easily miss out on this by simply not turning up to online lessons, not submitting work or not being fully engaged. In summary, **young people who live in the most complex and deprived family situations have poorer access to technology, more serious distractions at home and less learning support**. It is broadly for these reasons that teachers who responded to the survey felt that their most deprived students suffered the most.

A school in Jordan witnessed effective participation in digital activities among many students, from online Independence Day celebrations to virtual meetings on civil rights. However, several pre-pandemic initiatives specifically targeted at refugees and other students in need could not be continued, in view of concerns over their level of inclusion in distance learning. Most teachers and students also noted that student participation in activities and events and the learning process had improved with the continued use of devices and technological applications. One teacher said that the pandemic had opened the door to various initiatives, including the "I participate project", an initiative that provides students with basic skills training in social and civil rights and duties. This initiative, targeting students in grades eight to ten, contains several themes, including: taking responsibility, teamwork, elections, human rights, non-violent communication, citizenship, justice and equality, decision-making and issue resolution.

3.3. Digital citizenship

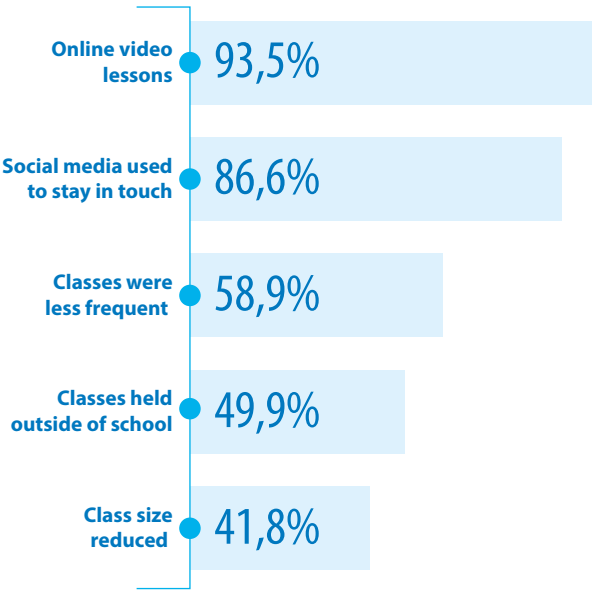

Figure 2. Percentage of schools surveyed in Europe and MENA countries making each adjustment during the first lockdown period in 2020.

This figure was created based on the results of the undertaken survey 'Student voice during the COVID-19 pandemic' by UNESCO & CoE in 2020.

The pandemic led to an unprecedented uptake in the use of technology for remote teaching, with 94% of teachers reporting that they delivered lessons through videoconferencing and 87% also using social media to stay connected with students and parents. While many teachers had already started to incorporate technology into their classroom teaching as a means of promoting student voice (through live class polls and quizzes for example), these practices have increased with the shift to remote teaching, with 54% of teachers doing so in "most" or "all" lessons, namely a 19 percentage point increase from pre-pandemic levels. The case studies give a sense of the explosion of creativity in this area, including social media challenges in Lebanon, virtual art exhibitions in Lebanon and Tunisia, the creation of student experience films in Greece and Tunisia, interactive online seminars with leading community members in Romania), video link-up between schools in different countries, in Portugal and Montenegro, and online civil rights and domestic violence campaigns in Jordan.

Students in a school in Greece who produced a collaborative film on COVID-19 and everyday life valued the time spent on reflecting and speaking about their experiences. At the beginning, a social media group was created to share pictures, ideas, and thoughts. In addition, one day per week, a filmmaker organized an online meeting with the students where they had the chance to work in groups to talk about their feelings and their experience at home during the lockdown. The film-maker used the opportunity to also discuss the film-making process and the people involved (cameraman, sound mixer, actors, etc.) and encouraged them to try different roles each time. "I really enjoyed participating in the project, as we decided together to make a video on our everyday life during the lockdown period" (student, Greece).

In a school in the United Kingdom an "angelic troublemakers" community action programme was reorganized so that students would produce an informal journalistic piece on a social issue of their choice after discussion with family members. The resulting blogs, podcasts and animations were subsequently uploaded onto a dedicated webpage.

"I'm quite bubbly and chatty by nature, so I did a podcast, because I wanted it to be funny as well, because that's me and I thought people would like to listen to it more" (student, United Kingdom).

However, the shift of student voice activities to the virtual environment was seen by teachers as necessary rather than desirable and some concerns have come to the fore regarding inequalities in digital citizenship. First, there is a disparity in the availability of technology and technical support within the home environment. Second, not all students are equally at ease with online communication, particularly videoconferencing. Third, inequalities are likely to have arisen through the prominence of subgroups of peers in leading the student voice activities. The success of online student voice practices seems to rest in part on the strength of existing "real world" bonds. **Finally, there was little evidence in the case studies of schools using technology to involve students in governance decisions at the institutional level during the pandemic.**

3.4. Resilience factors in student voice projects

Student voice projects that are more likely to continue during a crisis have ready access to reliable technology that allows them to move elements of the project online. While videoconferencing software is widely available, access to high-speed digital infrastructure varies between countries, within countries and even between students in the same class. While some schools have a limited capacity to provide laptops or tablets to the most disadvantaged students, the home environment is key in providing children with a reliable connection, private space, encouragement to involve themselves in school projects and support in resolving technical issues that may arise. Notwithstanding that, student voice projects can be undertaken even in low-tech environments, where there are other factors promoting a culture of participation.

Beyond the home environment, schools with the strongest civic cultures were best able to protect student voice during the crisis. More specifically, students who were well accustomed to being encouraged to give their opinions, teachers who were used to running citizenship projects and schools with good links to community organizations were best able to find a way to creatively provide students with channels for their expression, even during the most difficult times.

A school in Portugal built on its strong sense of community to carry out a range of activities. After the school closed on 20 March, the administration built a consensus-based methodology for all online education environments. Google Classroom platforms were adopted as part of the learning-by-doing approach and television was used for those without Internet at home. The Building Bridges interactive project linked issues of media literacy and journalism with international projects (digital citizenship education "Digital Bridges"). Students developed portfolios and newscasts, created media and debated fake news. They also worked on a video link-up with a school in Montenegro. Students also used Building Bridges as a channel to share messages and feelings during the lockdown and also to discuss problems and solutions.

A more detailed examination of the projects typically shows charismatic, committed and enthusiastic leaders (usually the teachers, but occasionally outstanding students) who provide the impetus and imagination for the project. But their ability to do so rests on the strength of the pre-existing relationships between the teacher and students, and between the students themselves. The case studies have shown that successful student voice projects do not arise in a crisis, but rather are more resilient to the crisis, drawing on remembered emotional bonds from a close classroom community, with the expectation that online activities will in time reconnect to the "real life" social world.

A school in Tunisia with a strong track record of using art as a practical way of teaching tolerance, human rights, and democracy was able to creatively adapt these programs to help students through the pandemic, thus encouraging the expression of unconscious feelings through art and supporting the production of a film on free speech.

"Our model of inspiration is really the manager of the club and one of the best Arabic teachers in this high school" (student, Tunisia).

In a Romanian school an online youth success academy carried out a series of interactive conferences with students taking on well-defined leadership roles. Adults from the local community were invited to speak at the events which were organized around the principles of education, fun and games. "We are so lucky that our teachers have an open mind and see the big picture… They let us try things out and learn from our own mistakes" (Student, Romania).


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4. Recommendations

Building on the research findings, school directors and personnel, teachers and educators, policy-makers, students and young people are encouraged to pursue the following recommendations and actions. Considering the lessons learned during the pandemic, it is critical that the whole education community work collectively towards promoting societies that are guided by human rights, with student voice and participation at the centre.

4.1. Recommendations for school directors and personnel, teachers and educators

1. Build a strong and lively participative culture within and outside the school. This culture can be promoted by ensuring student voice is present in formal governance structures, everyday school activities and community and social action projects, both online and offline. Students should be actively encouraged to participate in formal governance structures with the help of trained educators who guide them in learning about democratic processes. The case studies showed that schools that managed to continue student voice projects during the pandemic already had a strong participatory culture with a wide range of student voice projects underway in the class, across the curriculum and within formal representative structures. Many of the case study schools also benefited from their links to local community organizations, which enabled creativity and innovation in student voice practices and enabled students to become involved in their own community.

2. Develop a monitoring framework to measure the progress of student voice and participation. As a key first step to building this strong and lively culture, it is necessary to carry out an extensive audit of the strengths and weaknesses of existing student voice and participation activities both in and beyond schools to know what steps and measures are required to bring about progress and cultural change. This audit should engage students in the development of a baseline of what works and what does not work with regard to student voice. Furthermore, schools could set up a monitoring framework with indicators, supported by this baseline to monitor the progress of student voice and participation over time. The research results highlighted little evidence of online projects that involved students in important school-level decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, building a strong and lively participatory culture should be measured over time by assessing the extent to which student voice has led to change in schools or decision-making structures.

3. Promote the development of democratic culture competences, similarly to other competences such as literacy and numeracy. Learning about and practicing participation and civic engagement is clearly not only about theoretical knowledge of democratic citizenship but also – and mainly – about developing the values, attitudes, skills, and critical understanding that prepare young people for life as active citizens. For example, student voice projects such as newspapers, radio broadcasts and expression through theatre contribute significantly to building students' confidence in expressing themselves and learning to make their voices heard.

4. Prioritize student voice in initial and continuous training for teachers and head teachers. The Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018) and UNESCO Global Citizenship Education texts (see UNESCO, 2015 and UNESCO/UNODC, 2019) provide useful reference points for teacher training in developing the democratic competences of students. A Checklist has been developed by the Council of Europe to encourage primary and secondary schools to discuss with teachers, students and their parents ways to promote a democratic culture (see Annex 1).

5. Prioritize and engage with hard-to-reach students for participation in student voice projects by not relying solely on volunteers. Considering that children and young people who volunteer for citizenship projects in schools are typically from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, there should be a conscious effort to include students who are less likely to engage. This would be true in particular for students who are more likely to be discriminated against

within the school – either because of their socio-economic or cultural background, gender, disability, language barrier, or status in the case of migrants and refugees. Resources and time need to be invested to ensure that all students get the same chance to practice student voice. Targeting of these students must be a priority so that everyone may learn to have their voice heard, including by setting up specific support structures in schools and individual student mentoring.

6. Incorporate, at school and in the classroom, factors that enable student voice and participation to thrive from a young age. The research has highlighted the importance of factors such as strong leadership, trusting relationships between teachers and students and a strong civic culture. A strong civic culture could be promoted through the cross-curricular teaching of democratic culture, class councils/student unions and other safe communication channels for student voice and student involvement in the planning of school projects. These factors should be promoted through the existence of a clear citizenship strategy that introduces these activities from an early age so as to provide students with early experiences of student voice that result in positive change to help build their trust, confidence and competence.

7. Equip schools with access to technology and resources to enable online student projects. This would be particularly important for public (state) schools since private schools, which often had better access to technology, were more likely to sustain such projects during school closures, according to the survey. This requires a minimum level of digital infrastructure within schools. Furthermore, new opportunities offered by digital learning should be utilized, including: acceptance of student work through various formats (such as blogs, vodcasts and films); using moderation tools to help more students to participate in lessons; and facilitating link-ups with other institutions to build bigger virtual communities and reinforce offline activities in families and communities.

8. Ensure that blended learning is a part of the ongoing curricular activities. Projects that had started before the pandemic had a better chance to continue during the pandemic when student bonds were established and allowed them to feel secure to continue their projects online. Prior offline activities and the expectation of future "real world" interaction appeared to be crucial in underpinning resilient student voice projects in the case studies. Digital citizenship projects can be based, where possible, on prior face-to-face experiences with students.

9. Empower teachers, educators, staff, students and parents to utilize the opportunities offered by online learning to promote students' critical thinking, agency and participation in the digital world. It is essential to build their digital citizenship skills to make the most of technologies and opportunities in and beyond school, to ensure that they are safe, savvy and comfortable citizens, both online and offline. This includes being able to find, access, use and create information effectively; engage with other users and with content in an active, critical, sensitive, and ethical manner; and navigate the online and ICT environment safely and responsibly, being aware of one's own rights. Particular attention should be paid to developing the media and information skills of the various stakeholders, considering the significant rise of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech during the pandemic.

10. Tackle digital inequalities by providing socio-economically disadvantaged students with the necessary support to ensure fair access to digital learning. Particular consideration should be given to digital approaches that allow to engage with hard-to-reach students online. Case studies also suggest that online learning reinforces existing friendship networks and homogeneous identity groups and thus should be considered when using digital resources.

4.2. Recommendations for policy-makers

1. Actively promote the right of children and youth to express their views and participate as a non-negotiable "right" enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure that this right is upheld both online digitally and offline physically. This requires the development of educational policies on participation and student voice and their dissemination so that children and young people know about their rights and the organizations that help to uphold and defend them, such as National Human Rights Institutes and Ombudsmen, as well as civil society and other local community initiatives that promote their participation in public affairs.

2. Prioritize student voice by ensuring that sufficient time and resources are invested into it. The discussions on the research findings have highlighted the lack of attention to student voice despite existing commitments. Student voice should be applied across the curricula and not exclusively in specific citizenship and/or social science subjects. This means reflecting student voice and

participation across the curriculum, through whole-school approaches and community-level initiatives.

3. Invest in teacher and school leadership training in quality education, with a particular focus on student voice. Student voice needs to be prioritized in initial and continuous teacher training and also school leadership training as part of a wider effort to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, which is at the core of SDG 4. Furthermore, facilitating peer-to-peer support and the exchange of ideas and practices between teachers is essential to encourage pedagogical innovation.

4. Consult students on education policy-making and ensure that processes are adapted to encourage student voice and participation. In particular, student voice and participation should be given space for innovation and creativity when revising teaching and learning assessment methods.

5. Work with international organizations to promote student voice and civic participation with a view to achieving SDG 4 on quality education. These aspects need to be prioritized so that they are not further neglected in the post-pandemic period, taking into account the urgency of addressing gaps in basic literacy and numeracy.

4.3. Recommendations for students and young people

1. Work together to explain to adults – policy-makers, teachers, school leaders, community representatives and parents – why youth voice matters so that they understand its importance for young people now and in the future. This includes identifying topics and issues you want to have a voice on, and participate in, in your school, family and community. Ideally, there should be a dedicated space and time for debate within your school where adults are invited to attend as visitors, participants or listeners.

2. Get actively involved in student assemblies, councils and other collective bodies and activities in order to promote student voice and persuade directors and teachers that meetings should be held regularly and within the school timetable. Reach out to all students to encourage them to speak, especially young people who feel excluded or whose voices are less likely to be heard.

3. Help and mentor other young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to promote equal opportunities for student voice and participation**.** This could take different forms – such as mentoring individually students or young people who have dropped out of school, encouraging them to join debate competitions and training courses to improve their oral presentation skills, as well as engaging other young people through games, arts, audiovisual tools, role-playing and other creative activities. Mentorship programmes create a sense of belonging among students – with mentor students learning to take responsibility for others in the school while mentees gain confidence and can eventually also learn to become a mentor in the future.

4. Invest in developing your digital citizenship skills, needed to engage fully with student voice and participation opportunities inside and outside school. Ask for support and training in areas of need, such as making online presentations, engaging in discussion and debates with students and adults, and dealing with hate speech both in schools and online. Reverse roles with adults, whether parents or teachers, by preparing classes or making presentations on subjects that are of most interest to you, such as social media and new technologies.

5. Participate in long-term citizenship projects to gain experience in the physical world and online on ways to engage with problems at the local, national and international levels. This could involve coordinating talks, lectures and meetings, as well as contributing to concrete actions inside and outside school, in cooperation with NGOs, local governments and subject experts on issues such as the environment, inequalities, rights and justice.

6. Propose ideas for linking your involvement in youth mobilization movements outside school with activities within your school that promote student voice and participation to create synergies. Join efforts with students from other schools, youth organizations and NGOs on issues of local and international interest, such as environmental and humanitarian issues, to express your views and take collective action.

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ANNEX 1.

THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS NETWORK CHECKLIST, COUNCIL OF EUROPE

- **Democratic school governance – School Regulations**

Procedures guaranteeing transparent and inclusive democratic decision-making by school authorities; establishment and revision of school rules and regulations with the contribution of school community members (teachers, students, parents), respecting everyone's personality and opinion; listening to the opinion of students and respecting their dignity when pedagogic measures are taken; safeguarding the right of everyone for submission and fair examination of a complaint.

- **Teachers' communication, training and support to adopt democratic practices**

Regular organization of teachers' pedagogic meetings, discussing issues connected with school life, school climate, environment, rules and students' participation; training and empowering teachers to promote democratic principles and practices with their students.

- **Democracy in the classroom**

Promoting participatory and interactive learning methods, involving teamwork and enhancing the active role of students in the process of learning, in lessons' planning and evaluation; supporting vulnerable and disabled students to equally participate in school life and encountering their challenges; including in lessons and in related activities, human rights and democratic citizenship education, media and information literacy, health and sexuality education, respect of diversity, addressing controversial issues, sensitising on environmental issues, etc.

- **Students' assemblies and councils**

Securing dialogue among students on rules and objectives connected to school life and environment; training students, supporting and empowering them in regularly operating class assemblies and students' councils, including online communications when appropriate; entrusting coordinating roles to students and assigning responsibilities, in accordance with their age and maturity; including students' councils and representatives in planning school activities and in taking decisions on crucial issues.

- **Information sharing and opinion exchange**

Promoting regular face-to-face as well as online information sharing among school community members about decisions taken, activities organised and other issues of school life; expressing and exchanging opinions on crucial issues connected with school life in various forms (school magazines or blogs, open debates, surveys, questionnaires, polls, etc.); discussing controversial issues in a respectful way, promoting empathy and countering hate speech.

- **Co-organising cultural, recreational and sport activities**

Organising experiential activities and workshops, in the context of or separately from formal school lessons, involving students in their planning and in evaluation; promoting free expression and development of students' ideas, sentiments and talents, their mental and physical exercise and their teamwork spirit; planning and implementing cultural and sport events, celebrations and school trips, actively involving both teachers and students, and, when needed, the contribution of parents.

- **Preventing and tackling discrimination and violence**

Organising systematically activities for effectively preventing and addressing all forms of discrimination and violence, including cyber-bullying and aggressive behaviour taking place outside school among members of the school community; promoting intercultural exchange and dialogue; training groups of students in mediation; promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts with the contribution of mediating teachers and peer students.

- **Securing well-being of students**

Provision of care in collaboration with appropriate health and welfare services; organise preventive and informative campaigns and projects to promote healthy nutrition and way of living, to prevent the abuse of alcohol, tobacco and

drugs; provide counselling to vulnerable children in need and their parents.

- **Relating with local communities**

Organising activities to link schools with their local communities, services, initiatives, needs and events; promoting volunteer and humanitarian initiatives; sensitising school communities on environmental, cultural, social and health challenges of their neighbourhoods; researching and tackling prejudices and stereotypes on local community issues.

- **Exchanges and networking**

Organising exchanges with other schools at local, national or international level, with the active involvement of teachers, students and, as appropriate, their parents. Participating in networks, online exchanges, study visits and common events.

- **Parents' involvement**

Promoting parental involvement in supporting school life, using democratic principles and practices in decision-making; collaborating with school authorities and teachers; organising trainings for positive parenting and counselling.

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student voice

Findings and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had serious consequences on the education of young people and their ability to engage and participate meaningfully.

In 2020, UNESCO and the Council of Europe decided to collaborate on a research project with a view to examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student voice and particularly the consequences of the subsequent school closures on student voice opportunities in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

This publication details the findings of this study and provides recommendations for school directors and personnel, teachers, educators, policy-makers and young people to build on the lessons learned from the pandemic and help the education community work collectively towards promoting societies that are guided by human rights, with student voice and participation at the centre.

It is primarily intended for policy-makers, educators, teachers working in formal school systems. It may also be of interest to professionals working in non-formal education settings or other sectors – namely the justice, social and health sectors – working with student.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals