

Lessons from Home-Based Learning:

The Educational Experiences of Students with Low Socioeconomic Status and German as an Additional Language in Austrian Middle Schools during COVID-19

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As a result of the global COVID 19 pandemic, teachers and students in Austria, as well as other contexts across the world, experienced an unprecedented period of enforced home-based learning between March-July 2020. Commentators anticipated that existing inequalities would increase and that long-apparent problems in the school system would only be heightened (Burns, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). As one of Austria's leading educational journalists, Melisa Erkurt, noted:

The poorest will become poorer in this crisis, and the socio-economically weakest children, who were already disadvantaged at school, will be thrown miles backwards as a result of learning at home (Erkurt, 2020, our translation).

At the same time, many speculated that the radical re-organisation of teaching and learning during the home-based learning period would offer opportunities for new perspectives on learning and ways of working outside of the current, 'rigid' education system (e.g. Kopp, 2020).

A number of researchers quickly responded to school closures and designed studies investigating the educational experiences of students, teachers and other education stakeholders in the German speaking world during the home-based learning period. Much of this research was reviewed at [the World Education Leadership Forum](#) in September 2020. The following studies included a focus on the educational situation in Austria:

- Huber and Helm (2020a) led a meta-study of 53 studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.
- Huber and Helm (2020b) also conducted a school barometer survey in the German-speaking world to explore descriptions of the home-based learning situation, from a variety of perspectives: 2222 parents, 2152 students, 1949 school staff, 655 school leaders, 58 school authorities and 80 members of the school support system.
- Resch et al. (2020) conducted an online questionnaire with 3467 teachers in Austria which assessed teachers' perceptions of students' development during the home-based learning period, and their self-efficacy in relation to students. A quarter of the sample consisted of MS teachers. The study focused on students facing various types of disadvantage, including low SES and GAL, but also those with special education needs.
- Spiel et al. (2020) conducted an online questionnaire with 1759 teachers in Austria with a focus on how they managed remote teaching, aspects which were more and less effective, opportunities which arose and the well-being of teachers.

- Holtgrewe et al. (2020) conducted an online questionnaire with 342 students in Austria, 10% of whom were MS students (compared to 59% from academic secondary school, lower and upper combined). The questionnaire surveyed student attitudes to school, their experience of home-based learning, the physical resources and pedagogical and emotional support available to them at home, their digital competencies, the content of activities, feedback from teachers and the effort they invested.
- Steiner et al. (2020) surveyed over 3000 secondary school teachers in Austria, using an online questionnaire and phone interviews, to investigate the home-based teaching and learning situation, successes and challenges of e-learning and the conditions and support available for students.

A review of this research confirms fears that the situation of home-based learning in Austria has exacerbated existing educational inequalities. It also points to disruptions from the ‘normal’ schooling routine that may have inadvertently had a positive impact on students from low SES and GAL backgrounds and their learning. However, in the findings so far available it also becomes clear that the experiences of MS students with low SES and GAL, and their families and teachers are under-represented. As most studies employed almost exclusively online questionnaires in German, voices of the ‘hard to reach’ were often not included. Indeed, none of the 53 educational research studies conducted during the home-based learning period focused on students with GAL (cf. Huber and Helm, 2020a). While some attempted to gain such insights through online questionnaires, by for example translating the questionnaire into migration languages, response rates from low SES parents from migration backgrounds were low (Heller, 2020).

Educational challenges during home-based learning during COVID-19 in Austria

Collectively, the findings of available research indicate that the majority of students did not face limiting issues with regard to access to ICT and the vast majority of teachers were found to be delivering content. However, at the same time, for a minority of students (which makes up a substantial number in real terms), education was extremely limited during the home-based learning period. In one study, teachers reported that during lockdown they were not at all able to reach 12% of students and 36% disadvantaged students (Steiner et al., 2020, see also Brandhofer et al., 2020). The studies allude to three factors which may have contributed to the limited participation of some students: students’ access to and competence using technology; a lack of pedagogical concept in the materials delivered, particularly with regard to students from low SES and GAL backgrounds; and the emotional and pedagogical support available at home.

A substantial minority of students was found to have issues of access and limited competence using technology: 13% of students have difficulties using a computer, 20% have difficulties with online meeting tools, and 37% report difficulties using learning platforms (Holtgrewe et al., 2020). Access to ICT was also a problem for some students: 3% do not possess a computer (7% in non-academic families); 6% do not have a quiet learning environment at home; 8% have limited access to a computer (12% for students whose parents were also working from home); 1% do not have an internet connection; 5% only use their smartphone for home-based learning; and 25% share their computer with others (Holtgrewe et al., 2020).

While teachers were found across the board to be responding to the demand to provide content and materials to their students, some studies alluded to the lack of pedagogical concept in the materials (Heller, 2020; Müller, 2020), and this is an additional factor leading to gaps in learning. The overwhelming majority of teachers reported being aware of the home-situation of their students (e.g. 83% of teachers responded they knew the extent of support that their students received at home). However, over 31% of teachers reported not individualising ‘learning packages’ based on this knowledge (Kast et al., forthcoming; Resch et al., 2020). While teachers may have suspected that a large number of students did not receive the necessary support to complete assignments at home (an estimated 40% in Steiner et al. (2020)), a large number of them reported not being able to compensate for this in their teaching approaches. Teachers reported needing more support (73% in Steiner et al., 2020), particularly with regard to ‘at risk’ students. Kast et al. (forthcoming) and Resch et al. (2020) show that teachers held negative attitudes towards the development of students with low SES, in comparison to other at-risk characteristics. In addition, low levels of teacher self-efficacy was associated with teaching students with GAL. Adding to this picture, Spiel et al. (2020) found that only 7% of teachers reported being able to transmit the lesson’s content well for lower-achieving students.

The availability of emotional support available to students also appeared to differ along socio-economic and cultural-linguistic lines. While 35% of students overall reported feeling insecure or overwhelmed, this figure rose to 48% of low SES students, 45% of students living in single-parent households, 39% of students living in multilingual households, 44% students with unemployed parents, and 39% of students with parents who are both employed.

Educational benefits during home-based learning during COVID-19 in Austria

The studies undertaken not only identify some of the obstacles associated with home-based learning; they also give limited insight into some positive innovations which may have benefitted students from low SES and GAL backgrounds, and which could improve their experience of school, beyond the home-based learning period.

With regard to the use of digital technologies, Spiel et al. (2020) found that teachers perceived that most students increased their independence, self-organization and technological skills during the home-based learning period. Holtgrewe et al. (2020) even found that students with GAL were more confident handling online platforms than students with German as a first language. Based on these experiences, teachers in both studies were keen to continue using digital learning platforms and communication tools, and to further encourage independent and individual learning in the future.

With regard to student-teacher relationships, Spiel et al. (2020) found that teachers felt they were able to maintain relationships with students. Lindner et al. (2020) found that over 75% of teachers reported being more interested in the private circumstances of their students, and over 85% responded that they take the private circumstances of students more into account as a result of their students being based at home. In addition, these studies indicated

that teachers' communication with parents improved and teachers noted that parents were more involved in their children's learning.

Some social aspects of the home-based learning period also seemed to benefit students with low SES and GAL: In the study conducted by Holtgrewe et al. (2020), students from lower SES (35%) and with GAL (21%) were more likely to indicate feeling relieved that social interactions were minimized. It was also found that 58% of students who attend German support classes reported enjoying home-based learning, although, paradoxically, they also indicate being most insecure and overwhelmed (Holtgrewe et al., 2020).

While these findings indicate some positive aspects of the home-based learning experience, insights are limited due to the overwhelming reliance on quantitative methods and the small number of participants with low SES and GAL. Further investigation into the educational challenges and benefits experienced by these students is vital to better understand learning 'gaps' and how they may be narrowed; to identify factors which limited the access and participation of these students; and to ensure that resources and innovations which supported their learning are captured and further developed for home-based and school-based learning.