

Ensuring equitable opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Italy and Austria during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative analysis of educational policy documents

Garantire eque opportunità a studenti con svantaggio socioeconomico in Italia e Austria durante la prima ondata della pandemia COVID-19: un'analisi qualitativa di documenti di politica educativa

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed the limitations of current social structures, with school closures exposing marginalized population groups to further threats and disadvantages. During the first wave of the pandemic, schools needed to pay special attention to the most vulnerable and marginalized pupils to counteract growing social and educational inequity. Against the background of the differing educational governance and emergency management in the neighbouring countries of Italy and Austria during the first wave of the pandemic, this paper investigates how policy initiatives and regulations helped to tackle inequities in schools between February and August 2020. The aim of this analysis is to understand the differences between the educational policy measures adopted by Italy and Austria in order to be better prepared for future crises and to work toward more equitable education systems. Educational policy documents were subjected to qualitative content analysis and discussed using the lens of critical pedagogy. The results illustrate the extent to which educational policy documents supported students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse learners during the first wave of the pandemic. The data show the different dynamics of systems' responses to the pandemic: while in Italy there was a stronger focus on digitalization as a means of ensuring equity of educational opportunities, for example, Austria put more emphasis on supporting children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: equitable educational opportunities; qualitative content analysis; critical pedagogy; educational policy; COVID-19.

Riassunto

La pandemia da Coronavirus ha messo in luce i limiti strutturali dell'attuale sistema sociale. La chiusura delle scuole ha esposto settori emarginati della popolazione a ulteriori minacce e svantaggi. Durante la prima ondata della pandemia, le scuole sono state chiamate a prestare particolare attenzione agli alunni più vulnerabili per contrastare la crescente disuguaglianza educativa. A partire da retroterra differenti in termini di misure politiche e strategie di gestione della crisi nei due paesi confinanti, Italia e Austria, durante la prima ondata della pandemia, questo articolo esplora il modo in cui le politiche educative hanno supportato il contrasto alle disuguaglianze a scuola da febbraio ad agosto 2020. L'obiettivo di questa analisi consiste nel comprendere le differenze tra Italia e Austria per quanto riguarda le misure di politiche educative sia per essere meglio preparati a eventuali future crisi sia per contribuire ad un sistema educativo più equo. I ricercatori hanno esaminato documenti di politiche educative attraverso l'analisi qualitativa del contenuto e hanno poi discusso i risultati attraverso la lente della pedagogia critica. I risultati evidenziano come, durante la prima ondata della pandemia, tali politiche abbiano sostenuto soprattutto gli studenti provenienti da ambienti socioeconomicamente svantaggiati e quelli culturalmente e linguisticamente diversi. I dati mostrano le diverse dinamiche delle risposte sistemiche alla pandemia; mentre in Italia si è posta maggiore attenzione sul ruolo della digitalizzazione quale mezzo per garantire eque opportunità educative, in Austria si è posta maggiore enfasi sul sostegno ai bambini con un diverso background linguistico e culturale.

Parole chiave: eque opportunità educative; analisi qualitativa del contenuto; pedagogia critica; politiche educative; COVID-19.

1. Introduction: COVID-19 and educational inequity

In the blink of an eye, hundreds of thousands lost their lives (WHO, 2020) and millions of people their jobs (Tcherneva, 2020). While all members of society may have been affected individually, COVID-19 is an amplifier of existing systemic inequalities and its consequences are likely to hit the most vulnerable and marginalized hardest (UNESCO, 2020a; OECD, 2020a). Even before the lockdown, inequality in educational opportunities was an unresolved issue for many countries. According to the large-scale PISA 2018 study, 9% of 15-year-old students do not have a quiet place to study in their homes (OECD, 2019). However, the pandemic has further widened the educational gap. The impact of COVID-19 on schools – showing that vulnerable and marginalized students are at risk of falling further behind – is addressed in a remarkable number of studies in the two countries that are the subjects of the present study (for Italy e.g., Kelly, Hofbauer & Gross, 2021; Save the Children, 2020a, 2020b; Fiorin et al., 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2021; for Austria e.g., Huber & Helm, 2020; Hascher, Mansfeld & Beltman, 2020; Schwab & Lindner, 2020; Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021; Pelikan et al., 2021).

Around the world, differing policies, legislation, and public investment have an impact on access to equitable educational opportunities. Although general government expenditure on education is not the only factor determining the quality of education, it still needs to be considered. While Sweden and Denmark invest 6.9% and 6.4% of gross domestic product (GDP) respectively in education, Austria spends only 4.8% and Italy only 4% (Eurostat, 2020). Of the countries studied, Italy invests the lowest percentage of total government expenditure in education (8.2%), and Iceland the highest (17.4%). UNESCO (2020b) assumes that COVID-19 will further cut government expenditure on education, having greater consequences for education than the great financial crisis of 2007-2008.

While some nations supported disadvantaged children and families during the first wave of the pandemic, for example, by providing devices or by guaranteeing financial assistance (OECD, 2020a; 2020b), teachers and schools were generally not prepared for the emergency – either in terms of the core business of teaching and improving students' learning (Agostini, 2020), or in terms of support for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. New technologies allowed for effective distance learning, but could not replace school teaching (UNESCO, 2020a); as early as the first weeks of the lockdown, there was increasing evidence of the digital divide with regard to connectivity, access to devices and competencies (Burns, 2020). Whilst 95% of students in Austria had access to computers to use for their schoolwork (WEF, 2020), online learning in Italian schools during lockdown was accessed by only 80% of students due to a lack of technical equipment, and the remaining 20% of students were excluded. A survey conducted by Save the Children (2020b) shows the (economic) consequences of COVID-19 for family life in Italy: almost half (44.7%) of all interviewed families with children between eight and 17 years of age had to reduce food costs and their consumption of meat and fish (41.3%). This figure is even more alarming considering that before the lockdown, children from 41.3% of the most vulnerable families were taking advantage of school canteen services and for almost all of them this service was free of charge. The socioeconomic situation in Italy rendered it difficult for families, and especially for women, to combine family and career. Particularly during the first wave of the pandemic – when there was little or no support available – many families faced the enormous challenge of coping with a lack of childcare services and limited public assistance.

Italy was one of the first countries to deploy digital remote learning solutions on a large scale, under a strictly enforced lockdown, and the remote learning experiences reported by children and parents reveal significant difficulties. Three million Italian children were unable to engage with remote learning due to a lack of internet access or adequate devices. There were also considerable inequalities between families who were able to use the internet, with 6% unable to take part in remote learning due to poor internet connections and 27% reporting that they did not have enough devices to support remote schooling and/or work needs (Mascheroni et al., 2021). In March 2020, schools also closed in Austria, switching to distance learning to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The lockdown of schools in Austria posed great challenges for the school system and especially for teachers of at-risk students and marginalized learners themselves (Huber & Helm, 2020; Pelikan et al., 2021). The results of a study of 3,467 teachers from all nine Federal states in Austria, for example, indicate that during the first home learning period teachers' attitudes towards students with low socioeconomic backgrounds were more negative than towards students with low skills in the language of instruction or students with special educational needs (Kast et al., 2021).

As predicted by the World Bank Group (2020), unless drastic remedial action is taken, the effects of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic – globally, a school shutdown of five months could generate learning losses that have a present value of \$10 trillion – will likely result in a substantial setback for the goal of halving learning poverty by 2030. The report underlines the need for swift policy responses to support learning through more equitable and resilient education systems post-COVID-19.

The international literature (e.g. Fiorucci, 2020; Gogolin, McMonagle & Salem, 2019; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009; Gross, 2019; Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017; Winker & Degele, 2011; Schwalbe et al., 2000) reveals a range of factors that (re)produce educational inequalities – for example, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, language, culture, social class, school systems, religion, globalization, privatization, war, politics and neoliberalism – and the intersectionality between different factors. However, in the present paper our focus is on marginalized students, and especially on socioeconomically disadvantaged students and learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. As the above-mentioned studies show, when it comes to the generation of social and educational inequality there is intersectionality between socioeconomic disadvantage and cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from those of the host country. Although we are aware of the limitations inherent in simplifying the complex phenomena of educational inequity, it was necessary to narrow down the field in order to conduct in-depth analysis. This paper compares educational policy documents in Italy and Austria, and considers whether and how policies guaranteed equitable educational opportunities for marginalized students during the first wave of the pandemic between February and the end of August 2020. It also considers the contribution of educational policy to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 17 globally agreed targets for the eradication of poverty by the end of 2030 (UN, 2015) in the countries under study. The pedagogical themes and challenges from selected policy documents are hence discussed from the point of view of critical pedagogy and in the light of selected SDG targets (see 2. and 3.).

2. Critical pedagogy and COVID-19

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000; 1998; Giroux, 1988; 2010). A critical perspective going beyond the simple description of inequalities in education enables us to identify and systematically discuss the impact of policy documents on the social issue under study. Critical pedagogy deals with education's relationship to social structures, power, knowledge, authority, political interests, social control, and oppression. While many researchers use this framework to study teacher-student relationships and taught knowledge (e.g., Giroux, 1988; Bartlett, 2005), it is also used to consider education and related policy documents that facilitate (or complicate) the liberation and freedom of individuals (e.g., McInerney, 2009; Giroux, 2010). Critical pedagogy assumes that education is not objective or value-free and should aim to promote social change, social justice, and democracy.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the risk of marginalized students falling further behind was increasing, there were increased calls in most countries for restructuring and innovation in school systems. Critical pedagogy provides a valuable framework for questioning educational systems and policies, for example in the context of the apparently infinite potential of new technologies in neoliberal education systems. With regard to neoliberalism, Paulo Freire (1998) argued against “an immobilizing ideology of fatalism, with its flighty postmodern pragmatism, which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is anyway. The most dominant contemporary version of fatalism is neoliberalism” (p. 26-27). Society is a function of education and vice versa; thus, education is always a political act and its normative outcomes determine the configuration of the social space and its value references and conceptions of the world.

3. The challenges of COVID-19 to the Sustainable Development Goals

This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on goals 4 (quality education) and 10 (reduced inequalities) of the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; UN, 2015). UN Deputy Secretary-General and Chair of the Sustainable Development Group Amina Mohammed observed at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 that COVID-19 is “exposing the fragilities and inequalities of our societies” (UN, 2020a). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), for instance, warned that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy – nearly half of the global workforce – stood in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed. The UNDP (2020) data dashboards reveal huge disparities between countries' abilities to cope and recover. However, the global crisis could and should kickstart efforts to achieve the SDGs by creating a more just and healthy world (UN, 2020a). Nevertheless, it is arguable that this was already happening. Thus far, as the UN worldwide report underlined, “The pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and, in some cases, turned back decades of progress” (UN, 2020b, p. 5). With regard to targets 4 and 10 in particular, we read that school closures kept 90% of all students out of school, reversing years of progress on education (SDG 4) and that at-risk people such as older

persons, individuals with disabilities, children, women, migrants and refugees are being hit hardest by the pandemic (SDG 10). The Italian and Austrian reports show alarming results. With regard to implementation, Italy is currently ranked 30th and Austria 7th out of 166 countries in the SDG Index (UN, 2020c, p. 26). In addition, a COVID-19 index has been compiled, dealing with the management of the pandemic in the individual countries; here, Italy is in 29th place and Austria in 16th (ivi, p. 20).

Differing policy initiatives and regulations hindered the tackling of inequalities in schools and put at risk the achievement of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those concerned with equity. It is therefore the aim of this paper to investigate how educational policies in different but related contexts are impacting equity of educational opportunity during the pandemic, with a view to enabling progress towards more egalitarian schools for the future. The paper addresses the following research question: How has educational policy in Italy and Austria fostered equitable opportunities for marginalized children during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis?

4. Methodology and materials

We adopted an inductive-deductive qualitative content analysis methodology and applied it to educational policy documents (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2004; 2014; 2015; Pandey, 2019).

Qualitative content analysis allows for deductive and inductive categorization of textual material in need of interpretation. It is a suitable approach for this research since such rule-based interpretation leads to the promotion of “methodologically controlled procedural standards” (Mayring, 2015, p. 130, translated by the authors). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is able to synthesize two contradictory methodological principles such as openness and theory-guided investigation (Gläser & Laudel, 1999). For these reasons qualitative content analysis is a suitable form of data analysis for our study, which starts from theory and aims to contribute further to it.

Mayring (2015) derives 15 principles for qualitative content analysis from a series of background theories. In this context, there is often criticism that he compiles his principles in part from very different research traditions, without discussing the details of the differences between their basic methodological assumptions (e.g., Stamann et al., 2016): the naming and use of interactionism, (objective) hermeneutics, quantitative communication science, ethnomethodology, semiotics, and a cognitivist to constructivist “psychology of textual understanding” (Mayring, 2015, p. 26ff., translated by the authors). Although basic methodological assumptions beyond an indication of background theoretical eclecticism are omitted (Stamann et al., 2016), in the context of our study, the content analysis method is considered adequate, as it is compatible with critical pedagogy, which belongs to the epistemological paradigm of social constructivism (Siebert, 1999).

The research material consisted of policy documents. We decided to analyze policy documents in Italy and Austria because of the differing approaches to educational governance and emergency management in these two adjacent countries, especially during the first wave of the pandemic (Health Europe, 2021; EC, 2021a). These differences can mainly be explained by the different courses taken by the pandemic during its initial months and structural as well as organizational differences between the two education systems. We thus expected to find differentiated or even slightly opposing approaches to the promotion of equitable educational opportunities in the two contexts. We collected and analyzed Italian and Austrian educational policy documents published during the first wave of the pandemic, from February 2020 to the end of August 2020, and applied the same approach to the study of differences in support for students’ wellbeing during the first wave of the pandemic (Francesconi, Gross & Agostini, 2021). Documents were selected from the two countries based on their comparability. We first ran an exploratory policy search within the main sources of policy in the two countries, namely institutional websites, archives, and governmental, parliamentary, and other repositories. We observed that both countries had published a similar number of official decrees and communications in the period under study and were thus amenable to comparison. The documents analyzed are listed in Table 1.

Italy	Austria
16 Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (first dated February 23, 2020, last dated August 7, 2020): ITI.1-16	7 Decrees of the National Council and 11 Decrees of the Federal Minister of Education, Science and Research (first dated March 15, 2020, last dated July 31, 2020): ATI.1-18
50 Communications of the Ministry of Education, University and Research (first dated February 8, last dated August 29, 2020): ITII.1-50	54 Communications of the Ministry of Education, Science and Research (first dated March 12, last dated August 17, 2020): ATII.1-54

Table 1: Policy documents analyzed. Acronyms used: AT: Austria; IT: Italy; I: Decrees; II: Communications

As is standard for deductive qualitative content analysis, we took previous research findings, theories, and conceptual frameworks relating to the phenomenon of interest as sources for developing our main category (Armat et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014; Mayring, 2015), namely support for equitable educational opportunities. This category was derived from previous theoretical and empirical studies that have highlighted its relevance (Fiorin et al., 2021; Furceri et al., 2020; Kelly, Hofbauer & Gross, 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2021; Symeonidis, Francesconi & Agostini, 2021). Data analysis was based on this category, and then informed the creation of subcategories and codes as the analysis progressed. The two subcategories that emerged from the data were 1) support for marginalized and vulnerable students, and 2) the contribution of digitalization to equity of educational opportunities. This paper will thus shed light on these two categories, which are in line with the trends evident in the growing body of international scientific literature and institutional policies on the social impact of the pandemic.

The stages of the qualitative content analysis were as follows:

- 1st step: The research team examined two documents from Austria and two from Italy, checking for the occurrence of the main category.
- 2nd step: Within the research team, the main category was discussed, defined, and confirmed.
- 3rd step: Two researchers reviewed all the material for inclusion and exclusion and generated preliminary subcategories and codes.
- 4th step: The research team discussed and redefined subcategories and codes, agreeing rules that guided the assignment of codes by size and comparing their decisions to ensure the reliability of the qualitative coding (Campbell, Osserman & Pedersen, 2013).
- 5th step: Two different researchers – one for the Italian, one for the Austrian documents – undertook a separate content analysis, assigned codes, and then compared their categories, codes, and results, constantly evaluating the extent to which they made similar coding decisions as they assessed the characteristics of the texts.
- 6th step: A third researcher subsequently revised all the results and discussed them with the research team to homogenize and further refine the results.
- 7th step: In a final step, the researchers discussed the results and identified similarities and differences between the national documents in the two contexts.

5. Results: Educational policy documents on equitable educational opportunities during the first wave of COVID-19

5.1 Italy

5.1.1 Support for vulnerable and marginalized students

Prior to COVID-19, the Italian school system already was showing strong inequities with regard to families with low socioeconomic status and/or lower levels of educational attainment, and those facing language barriers and/or material deprivation. Two months before schools were locked down, Save the Children (2020a) highlighted the three most pressing issues: 1. social and domestic segregation (influence of socio-geographic conditions and the resulting isolation of learners); 2. school segregation (segregation of learners based on origin and socioeconomic background); 3. concentration of educational inequalities (certain schools offered fewer educational opportunities). The difficulties that the Italian school system has been facing for decades became even more evident in many respects during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Save the Children, 2020b).

Analysis of the decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers and communications from the Ministry of Education has shown that official documents indicated the need for children with disabilities to be given special

consideration in the planning and implementation of online teaching and learning processes (ITI.2-5, 10-12, 14, ITII.8, 13) and also with regard to the reopening of schools (ITII.29). Some support measures were envisaged, for example the webpage on “inclusion via web” (ITII.7). Additional resources were also allocated to provide over 425,000 students with disabilities with free books and digital devices, the aim being for these to be supplied directly by schools in September 2020 (ITII.49). However, there were fewer references to socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils and to other forms of diversity. Thus, while most documents emphasized that school heads needed to provide distance learning methods that also took into account the specific needs of pupils with disabilities while teaching in schools was suspended, only a few documents addressed disadvantaged children and how educational institutions should support them during the first wave of the crisis (ITII.13). The ministry document ITII.13 emphasized that all learners must be involved in sessions. It also said that all pupils, in particular disadvantaged children and those who are considered less engaged, should be increasingly stimulated and encouraged. There was reference to the potential need to involve children’s families and/or other reference persons, and to the need for assignments to be set at different levels of difficulty to ensure that each child could succeed. The State Examination for secondary school was adjusted to ensure fairer opportunities for all students. Students were assessed by teachers who were familiar with their progress and with what they had been taught during this particular school year (ITII.9, 12, 17, 21-22).

It is also important to consider efforts to reopen schools when assessing the extent to which educational policies during the first wave of the pandemic delivered equitable educational opportunities for all students. While other institutions were partly re-opened and economic activities were resumed, schools remained closed. However, at the same time, it is clear that educational structures and inadequately equipped buildings that were ill-prepared for emergencies presented a major challenge. In this regard, alongside the preventive health and hygiene measures required before schools could reopen (ITI.16), a number of organizational and infrastructure measures had to be implemented to enable schools to operate under the prescribed conditions. This may also have contributed to the decision to leave schools closed until September – although some regions introduced an emergency service in mid-May for children whose parents had to work. Actions to ensure schools could reopen safely included the purchase of up to 1.5 million traditional single-seat desks and up to 1.5 million chairs (ITII.44) – and the reduction of geographical disparities in education (ITII.42), as well as changes to school buildings (ITII.11), at a cost of 30 million Euros (ITII.25, 39).

The Italian government decided to continue with distanced teaching and learning until the end of the 2019/20 school year and planned to reopen schools in September 2020 (ITII.26, 27, 30, 35). 1.6 billion Euros were assigned to measures intended to ensure that schools could restart in September (ITII.39). These focused on the following aspects: sanitized and safe schools, more space to ensure social distancing, greater use of team teaching and greater flexibility, priority for pre-school children (ITII.46) and pupils with disabilities (see also ITII.29) who had suffered most from the closure. Disadvantaged pupils were only given specific consideration and allocated assistance for the 2020/21 school year: for example, 236 million Euros to guarantee disadvantaged students’ right to study in secondary schools and to substantially reduce family expenditure (ITII.38), and to focus on learning recovery (ITII.48, 50). In addition, the intention was to use the resumption of schooling, which coincided with the compulsory introduction of civic education (law 92/19), to take schools into the future, making them more modern, sustainable, and even more inclusive (ITII.33).

Moreover, the resumption of face-to-face schooling, in compliance with the measures aimed at preventing contagion contained in the Technical Document, which was drawn up by the Scientific Technical Committee and approved on 28 May 2020, emphasized the need to achieve a complex balance between safety (in terms of containing the risk of contagion), the socio-emotional wellbeing of all students and school employees, the quality of learning environments and processes, and respect for the equitable rights of all students to health and education enshrined in the constitution (ITII.46). Taking an optimistic view, the documents stressed that despite the difficulties associated with the resumption of school activities, the situation could be an opportunity to relaunch the school system.

5.1.2 Contribution of digitalization to ensuring equity of opportunity

During the first school lockdown, Italian guidelines (ITII.13) underlined the rights of children to education as laid down in Art. 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: students should be provided with age-appropriate learning through distance learning. The guidelines emphasized that teaching during school closures, where social isolation can be a source of stress and discomfort, should provide virtual support for children and adolescents, so that learning could take place. Financial support for digitalization was soon discussed (ITII.20) and some online platforms (e.g., “Scuolab”) were released free of charge to promote learning for all students (ITII.5). A few weeks after schools closed, 85 million Euros were allocated to the support of distance learning (ITII.6, 19).

In the first days of the lockdown, efforts were already being made – albeit in the face of considerable challenges – to provide distance learning (ITI.2); this was also encouraged by the Ministry of Education (ITII.3, 4, 13). The document ITII.3, for example, published in May 2020, instructed teachers to inform learners who did not own a personal computer that they would receive support from the government. In the meantime, teachers were encouraged to consider alternative options, such as phone calls or encouraging students to share notes with their classmates. Documents emphasized that headteachers needed to provide distance learning that took into account the specific needs of pupils with disabilities while teaching in schools was suspended (ITI.4, 12).

The implementation of distance learning was largely delegated to individual schools and teachers. Educational institutions at all levels responded to the lockdown by immediately offering online teaching via a range of platforms and instruments. This posed great challenges at all levels from primary to tertiary education, especially with regard to the integration of marginalized children. Ministry of Education activities and initiatives – such as “smart classes” for higher secondary schools (29 million Euros, see ITI.32, 41) – provided financial support to educational institutions. Schools could apply for funding for the purchase of technical equipment to be made available to marginalized students, especially learners with disabilities, to ensure distance learning could take place (ITII.49). Moreover, the Ministry funded 1,000 technical assistants in the first cycle to support the use of multimedia platforms for teaching and to ensure the functionality of the IT equipment (ITII.39). The need for in-service teacher training was also recognized, to accelerate the digitalization of schools. The “Formare al Futuro” program trains school employees in the use of digital tools, with the aim of enhancing the experience and expertise gained during the months schools were closed, especially with regard to support for marginalized students (ITII.43).

5.2 Austria

5.2.1 Support for vulnerable and marginalized students

Prior to COVID-19, the Austrian school system was already showing inequities with regard to educational background/class, migration, and gender. According to Statistic Austria (2019), 16.9% of Austrians (around 1.4 million people) are at risk of poverty or marginalization and 2.6% are significantly materially deprived. Women (especially those aged over 65) are more at risk of poverty than men. A quarter of all individuals in poverty are children; these tend to be the children of non-national migrants, unemployed people, single (female) parents or those on precarious incomes. The structural causes of inequity in Austria are strongly linked to employment and education. Tracking is still in use from the age of 10, for example, permitting the transfer of social status from one generation to another – which is one of the key factors for inequality (Ökobüro, 2019). A number of school reforms have failed, for instance the “New Middle School” (NMS), introduced in 2008/09 and initially intended to integrate NMS and AHS schools (grammar schools). Certain types of schools with challenges pertaining to socioeconomic inequality, such as the NMS and also vocational schools, were particularly affected by COVID-19.

By order of the Austrian government, from 16 March 2020 onwards schools had to be closed. The Federal President wrote a letter to parents in twelve languages on 12 March 2020, to inform them officially and personally about school closures during COVID-19 (ATII.1). In the following days, the Ministry of Education, Science and Research set up its own crisis management system in order to keep all stakeholders in its area of responsibility continuously updated about developments with COVID-19 and provide recommendations (ATII.1-54). A number of follow-up communications were issued, with general information about school closures and offering thanks for the good cooperation between teachers and parents (ATII.2-10). These were followed by more detailed information about different groups of learners (ATII.11-19). A special care period of up to three weeks was granted to individuals who were obliged to provide care (ATI.4), and children who could not be looked after at home were authorized to continue to attend school – an emergency school service – supervised by selected teachers (ATII.9-10). In addition, for families who were struggling financially, additional funds amounting to 30 million Euros – including the Third COVID-19 Law dated 4.4.2020 – were established (“Familienhärtefonds”) (ATI.2-5, 14, 17-18). However, the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network criticized the fund eligibility requirements for excluding 80,000 children living in socially precarious situations (FRA, 2020).

Due to COVID-19, all school events were cancelled pursuant to section 13 of the Austrian Education Act (SchUG) from 11 March 2020 until the end of the 2019/20 school year. In order to relieve schools and parents of related costs, the Austrian Government set up the COVID-19-School Event Cancellation Hardship Fund (ATI.13, ATII.52). Contributions for certain schools and student accommodation were suspended for the duration of the closures (ATII.25). The government increased the budget and experts agreed that this was a strong signal of its intention to continue the global fight against poverty. However, the political momentum from the 1970s is short on

clear commitments. Together with other nations, Austria has committed itself to meeting the UN target of dedicating 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to development activities. This goal has not been achieved so far. Despite more economic aid, it is still unclear if the commitment – to provide comprehensive “development assistance” – will remain unfulfilled (Oead, 2020).

By the end of March 2020, regulations and circulars on the organization of (final) examinations had been issued, especially in relation to special subjects, health risk groups, evaluation deadlines, supplementary lessons and with a strong focus both on hygiene regulations (ATI.8-9, 11, ATII.21, 28-29, 32) and on students with culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (ATII.45). On April 24, 2020, the Ministry announced the plan for the step-by-step re-opening of schools. Teaching was undertaken in shifts to ensure that not all students attended class at the same time (ATII.30-31, 35), first for core subjects, and then for ancillary subjects such as physical education (ATII.42, 45). From May 4, 2020, Matura students and all graduating classes in the VET sector returned to school, followed on May 18 by pupils at primary schools, lower secondary schools (AHS), NMS, special schools and all classes with a shortened year of instruction at vocational, middle and higher schools. On June 3, 2020, classes at the polytechnic schools, the AHS upper cycle and all other classes at VET schools and colleges followed.

It was decided that primary school pupils would not have to repeat classes from the 2020/21 school year unless parents wished them to do so (ATII.30). Students received less support since the Foreign Language Assistance Program ended early in the 2019/20 school year (April 30, 2020) due to the COVID-19 crisis (ATII.12). Implementation of the staged plan for reopening schools took account of risk groups, pupils with special educational needs and pupils receiving support with their German. For the latter, an alternative assessment was provided that met COVID-19 restrictions. Support services, e.g., for homework, could still be used if necessary, regardless of the re-opening of the schools (ATII.39).

At the end of April 2020, regulations were issued by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research to deal with the consequences of COVID-19 for the school system in 2019/20 and 2020/21, starting with the vocational school system. Regulations in particular covered digital communication, hygiene, and also German language support for pupils whose first language was not German (ATI.10, 12, 15; ATII.33-34, 37). On 18 June, the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Research issued an ordinance on the provision of supplementary education in the form of summer schools, which were intended in particular for pupils whose mother tongue was not German (ATI.17).

5.2.2 Contribution of digitalization to ensuring equity of opportunity

At this point, it is important to mention the Ministry of Education’s “Master Plan for Digitization in Education”, on which work started in the summer of 2018, and which was completed with the assistance of other ministries and experts by the beginning of the summer semester 2019. The three major fields of action are: (1) software – pedagogy, teaching and learning content, (2) hardware – infrastructure, modern IT management, modern school administration, and (3) teachers – training and further education. The aim is to implement the plan and its projects and actions by 2023 (BMBWF, n.d. a). This meant Austria was at least partially prepared for the switch to distance and/or blended learning.

School closures meant children had to be instructed and examined at a distance (ATI.2). To support distance learning the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research lent laptops to students from higher general and vocational schools for the duration of the period. This measure was criticized by the opposition (SPÖ) for excluding primary school and NMS pupils, and subsequently, different governmental and private initiatives provided IT equipment and other support such as free data (FRA, 2020). However, improved methods of communication between teachers and students, such as whole-class video calls and the sharing of pre-recorded videos, were promised by the Minister of Education in press releases and letters to school headmasters (ATII.23).

To bridge the temporary school closure period, online materials were provided by the Vienna Department of Education (2020). Online training extended online services and a range of guidelines were provided to facilitate the switch to distance learning and support teachers (ATII.20, 22-23). On June 17, 2020, an 8-point digital teaching plan was introduced, and was intended to represent the next step in the nationwide rollout of digitally supported teaching and learning, and of a broad range of innovative teaching and learning formats. This digital package was formulated as eight priority fields of action based on the latest scientific findings, in particular relating to learning during COVID-19 and a wide range of practical experiences; it was also intended as preparation for the 2020/21 school year. The eight points for a forward-looking education system are: the Digital School portal, standardization of platforms, teacher training, alignment of the Eduthek learning platform with curricula, seal of approval for learn-

ing apps, expansion of basic school IT infrastructure, digital terminals for pupils and digital terminals for teachers. As part of this, the intention is to ensure that all educators are well prepared for teaching in blended and distance learning environments using information and communication technology. A MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) was therefore launched in August 2019: a new virtual continuing education and training program on digital teaching within the BMBWF's 8-point plan (BWBWF, n.d. b).

It is notable that digitalization infrastructures were not the predominant issue in the conversion to distance or blended learning (ATII.51). However, the implementation of distance learning, especially at the beginning of the lockdown, was largely delegated to individual schools and/or teachers (ATII.2-3), posing great challenges for them. In particular, headteachers were identified by the Ministry of Education as the individuals responsible for the implementation of distance learning (ATII.2-3, 20). In order to provide the best possible personal support for headteachers, especially with reopening schools, the Federal Ministry offered individual advice sessions on the implementation of the various guidelines (especially those relating to hygiene and examinations) (ATII.40).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

COVID-19 poses ongoing challenges, and our analysis of policy documents in this paper aims to evaluate and possibly support the improvement of the education systems in Italy and Austria. Our results show the different dynamics of the responses of education policies to the COVID-19 pandemic in the two countries.

The OECD has suggested that, besides the need to provide vulnerable students with extra services, this crisis is also an opportunity to establish an inclusive culture in schools (OECD, 2020c). However, our analysis has shown that there are considerable barriers to equitable educational opportunities in both contexts. Access to equitable educational opportunities has already been impaired by school closures and the length of these. Italy and Austria took different action in terms of the start and the duration of school closures. While both countries shut down schools on different dates in different regions – the first in late February in Italy and the last in late March in Austria – considerable differences can be observed with regard to reopening. In Italy, schools only resumed face-to-face teaching in September while in Austria a step-by-step reopening began in early May. Schools were opened according to presumed need: first Matura classes, then schools with at-risk-students. However, the social context of the two educational systems also has to be taken into account: in Italy, in contrast to Austria, the number of deaths increased rapidly, especially between February 21 and the end of March 2020 (Alicandro et al., 2020), and this may have led to more severe restrictions and policy measures than in Austria, such as longer school shutdowns. However, in both countries school closures have led to significant disadvantages for marginalized students – and these have been more pronounced in Italy due to the length of the shutdowns.

Although a democratic approach and support for marginalized students was hampered in both contexts during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, there were differences between the two countries: whereas Italy placed a stronger focus on supporting children with special educational needs, Austria gave more attention to linguistic and cultural diversity. The Austrian policy documents revealed a stronger focus on supporting students with a migration background and/or diverse linguistic background, and a range of stakeholder groups with diverse needs were addressed more specifically than in Italy. The government developed a specific strategy for supplying relevant information in several languages. The same cannot be said for the Italian policy documents that we analyzed, which do not indicate any specific commissioning of translations of relevant documents. However, it must be said that the particular attention paid by Austrian educational institutions to foreign students also has a negative consequence; the acquisition of the German language, which is supported to ensure students integrate into society, leads to the widespread neglect of their first language(s). Our analysis has shown that the Italian system provided and articulated numerous policies aimed at integrating and supporting students with disabilities and special educational needs. Moreover, the Italian government seems to have taken the pandemic as an opportunity to overhaul school infrastructure, as shown by the purchase of up to three million desks.

Educational policies in Austria to support culturally and linguistically diverse pupils, and the largely absent response in Italy in this area, reflect what Catarci (2014) has already emphasized: the issue of social integration is usually understood from a 'one-way' assimilationist perspective. Whether individual diversity is given adequate space and whether equitable educational opportunities are provided remains questionable. In this context, it is essential to consider, appreciate, include and support the diverse backgrounds of students, as has been suggested by many scholars (e.g., Fiorucci, 2020; Gogolin, McMonagle & Salem, 2019) and recognized by national ministry guidelines in both countries (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007; MIUR, 2014; BMBWF, n.d. c) – before,

but even more intensively during and following the current crisis. Delivering this ambitious vision will, of course, require additional financial and human resources.

On the contribution of digitalization to ensuring equity of opportunity, Italy and Austria had strongly differentiated responses. However, it is worth noting that the two systems started from different baselines. As is well demonstrated by comparative studies and reports, Italy and Austria perform differently in terms of digital infrastructures, services, and literacy: Austria is among the foremost adopters in Europe (EC, 2021b). Our analysis shows that during the period under review, Italian policies paid careful attention to filling the digital gap in strategic social sectors. In particular, institutional policy promoted the immediate adoption of online learning methodologies and provided financial and logistics support to schools and families. The Austrian policy documents were less focused on digital strategies during the first wave of the pandemic. It is assumed that in this regard the Austrian system was better prepared already before the pandemic took hold. Digitalization infrastructures seem to be largely in place in Austria already, especially when compared with Italy (EC, 2021b). Our analysis has revealed an especially strong interrelation between education and society (Freire 1970/2000; 1998; see also Dewey, 1916/2009) as a result of these efforts towards digitalization. It is evident that the goal of a sustainable and inclusive society (SDGs; UN 2015) can only be achieved if digital infrastructures have been introduced and digital literacy achieved, and if educational policy documents take into account different forms of diversity in order to counteract inequities (Fiorucci, 2015); otherwise, schools will continue to create the illusion of equitable opportunities while (re)producing inequities. Moreover, our analysis has shown how the differences between the measures introduced by the two governments are related to the specific socio-cultural context of the educational system in question. For the future, appropriate measures need to be internationally aligned so that school becomes a place “that thinks, that participates, that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says yes to life” (Freire, 2008, p. 212).

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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