Investigating the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 on Existing Education Inequalities on a Global Scale

Examining cases from the United States, Argentina, Nigeria, and Israel

By Lolayemi Charles
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About the Author

Lolayemi Charles is a sophomore at New York University pursuing a Bachelor of Art dual degree in Global Public Health and Sociology. Lolayemi is also a pre-medical student with minors in Chemistry and Spanish. With a passion for health and education equity, Lolayemi has been involved with non-profit organizations such as Let’s Get Ready, an organization aimed to provide students from all socioeconomic backgrounds with the resources and support they need to reach higher education. Her previous experiences working toward equitable education include creating free tutoring programs in low-resource middle schools, creating reading programs for children to jumpstart their passion for learning, and volunteering as a college access mentor and SAT teacher at local high schools. As a part of the Youth Researchers Program, her research focuses on how pre-existing education inequalities would be affected by COVID-19. In her research, Lolayemi aimed to expand the conversation beyond the lack of technology being the major inequity students are facing. She chose to investigate how students who were already at a disadvantage in their education could potentially fall further behind as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
About the Contributors

The following professionals were interviewed as a part of this study for their experience and expertise with educational advocacy, teaching, and research. These professionals specialize in different fields of education and come from different parts of the world. A diverse set of backgrounds resulted in a diverse set of perspectives. The interviews conducted provided insight as to how education inequality is influenced by many factors in addition to shedding light on how these factors may pose additional challenges post COVID-19. Quotes used in this report were pulled from interviews with the listed contributors, statements from public political figures, and journal entries from high school students in the United States.

Dr. Jorgelina Loza

Dr. Loza specializes in the Sociology of Culture and has obtained a Doctorate in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires. Her research focuses on national and regional identities, social movements, and transnational collective action in Latin America. Dr. Loza has also worked as a consultant for multiple transnational organizations including the United Nations Development Program, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Inter-American Development Bank, and more. Dr. Loza is a member of Argentina's National Council of Scientific and Technical Research as well. In addition to her research, Dr. Loza currently teaches graduate and undergraduate courses at the University of Buenos Aires, FLACSO Argentina, and NYU Buenos Aires.

Anthony Harold

Anthony Harold is a former social studies teacher and school administrator from New York City. He completed his undergraduate studies in political science and history at Bucknell University and obtained his Master of Education in administration and supervision from the Loyola University of Maryland. Mr. Harold is a former Fulbright scholar and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) fellow during which time he focused his studies on African history, literature, and politics. Mr. Harold currently works as a College Access Program Specialist in Baltimore City where he collaborates with students, staff, parents, and community leaders to ensure access to college for all students.

Dr. Gerard O’Donoghue

Gerard O’Donoghue is a Senior Language Lecturer at New York University and a Faculty Affiliate at Rubin Hall, where he works with the co-curricular Inequality and Justice stream. Dr. O’Donoghue obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree from Trinity College, Dublin, and his Master of Studies and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from St. Hugh’s College, Oxford. He teaches Writing the Essay, International Writing Workshop, and various Freshman Seminars. In 2017, Dr. O’Donoghue won the NYU College of Arts and Science's Golden Dozen Teaching Award.
Yvonne Gabriel

Yvonne Gabriel is a high school teacher at the Science and Math Academy (SMA) in the United States. She has taught at the SMA for the last 14 years and has previously taught for ten years in Baltimore City and County. Gabriel received her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She later acquired her Master of Science in Health Education from St. Joseph’s University. Gabriel has been recognized as a 2008 Teacher of the year finalist and has also been certified by the National Board for Professional Science Teachers. Gabriel also holds many teaching certifications including, Health and Earth Sciences, Administrative Leadership, and more.

Christopher Dier

In 2020, Dier was named Louisiana State Teacher of the Year. Christopher Dier currently teaches World History and Advanced Placement Human Geography at Chalmette High School with previous experience teaching middle school education. Dier has obtained two master’s degrees in education administration and teaching from the University of New Orleans. Dier also attended Stanford University as a Hollyhock Fellow, a fellowship that allows educators to work collectively to create more inclusive classrooms. Dier has used his experience to provide an equitable and multicultural education to all his students.

Silvia Luppino

Silvia Luppino has worked in international education for many years. Sra. Luppino previously worked as the coordinator of Spanish as a Second Language for Refugees, a program run by UBA and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She has taught Spanish as a foreign language at many universities and has worked as a coordinator at the University of Buenos Aires. Sra. Luppino has worked as a language coordinator at NYU Buenos Aires for the last 12 years. Her research focuses on the relationship between language and culture, as well as the development of didactic material for non-native speakers.

Blessing Makanjuola

Blessing Makanjuola is a secondary school teacher in Kogi State, Nigeria where she specializes in social science and curricular planning. Makanjuola earned her undergraduate degree in Education from the University of Ado-Ekiti. Makanjuola has worked with schoolchildren to create as many opportunities for them under limited resources. Her passion for equitable education and public service is displayed through her efforts to advocate for her students and on behalf of all young students in Nigeria.
Wesley Carter

Wesley Carter is a secondary school teacher from Pennsylvania specializing in English Language Arts. As a graduate of Penn State University, Carter obtained his teaching certification from the Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Carter has ample experience teaching in low-resource schools and school districts in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Carter’s experience within these schools has cultivated a passion to create an equitable and inclusive environment for his students.

Omer Reshid

Omer Reshid is a recent high school graduate from Pikesville, Maryland who served as Baltimore County Student Member of the Board of Education. When Reshid moved from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to Baltimore County three years ago, he became actively involved in his community as a student leader. As the Student Member of the Board, Omer advocated for equalization of educational opportunities and focused on the well-being and mental health of the student body. Omer will continue his studies at George Washington University where he will further his passion for equitable action and helping others by pursuing his aspiration to become a medical doctor.
Introduction

Within every society lies inequality, whether that be on a social, economic, or political level. Education, however, is said to be “the great equalizer” bridging the gaps between races, sexes, and cultures of any kind. The idealistic perspective of education views education and its resulting social capital as a meritocracy. In other words, many believe that with the proper determination and hard work invested in your education, you can become successful regardless of your background. Although education is claimed to be the great equalizer, the system of education and its implementation is anything but equal. Across many nations and cultures in each hemisphere, inequities in education are observed in many forms.

Education inequality refers to the unequal distribution of academic resources and opportunities to socially excluded communities.1 Which communities are determined to be socially excluded is heavily dependent on the cultural practices and beliefs of the society in question. Education inequality, and the affected communities, are determined by the social, political, and economic state of the country and its history. Equality in education aims to provide the same resources to all students while equity employs policies that account for the disadvantages students face beyond their control. The unequal distribution of resources and educational opportunities leads to stark differences in performance outcomes amongst students. Students identifying within these socially excluded communities are the most negatively affected. These students may attend schools that lack access to funding, technology, proper textbooks, and more. As a result, these students tend to perform worse than their better-funded and well-equipped peers.

In light of COVID-19, many students across the world are facing an increased number of challenges to acquire and continue their education. Many of these challenges are not entirely new, but rather build upon previously existing inequities that students faced before the pandemic. When considering the increased difficulties and hardships students are facing during the pandemic, it is reasonable to assert that students who were already falling behind in their performance face a bigger risk of falling behind, which could potentially augment what is known as the “achievement gap”. The achievement gap is a term first coined in 1963 by Gerald Walker, a newspaper editor, who used the term to describe what he observed as the educational achievement gap between black-low-income students and white high-income students from Englewood, New Jersey (Walker, 1963). The achievement gap refers to a disparity in educational performance between different demographics or subgroups of students. Since the term’s first use, achievement gaps have been observed between students of different racial-ethnic backgrounds, genders,

1 Education Inequality. (2019, February 26). In Wikipedia.
and geographic locations among others. Since the topic of education inequality is broad and covers many forms of inequity observed between student populations, it is imperative to understand which factors pose the greatest challenge to students during COVID-19. This paper investigates poverty, social biases, structural disadvantages, social capital, cultural practices, and the political climate as factors that perpetuate inequities in education. These factors do not affect each nation and demographic equally, and therefore cannot be investigated using only one nation as context. To acquire a global perspective from countries with starkly contrasting social, political, and cultural climates, this study used information from Israel, Argentina, Nigeria, and the United States. Additionally, interviews were conducted with teachers and education specialists from these countries as well. The interviews conducted provided insight as to how education inequality is influenced by many factors in addition to shedding light on how these factors may pose additional challenges post COVID-19. Understanding the challenges students are facing is necessary to create effective policies and guidelines that will improve or eliminate any disproportionate setback certain students may face. Accounting for these setbacks will not only ensure equitable practices are in place for students to return to their respective education standards, but it will also set a precedent for addressing some of the previously existing education inequalities that were often overlooked or not addressed.

“We've seen so many issues within education that these inequities existed prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic has certainly highlighted them.”

-Chris Dier, Louisiana State Teacher of the Year 2020
Factors that Perpetuate Existing Education Inequalities

i. Poverty

Extensive research has demonstrated the relationship between poverty and the achievement gap with poverty being one of the most significant predictors for educational success (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). In general, there exists an achievement or performance gap between students from low-income backgrounds and students from high-income backgrounds. While this trend is consistent between countries, the populations and demographics most affected by poverty differ internationally. By investigating the way different countries account for the socioeconomic differences of their students, it can be seen how these school systems can address the performance gaps that arise as a result.

In the United States, public school education is handled within local governments and on a state level. Although public school funds come from a combination of federal, state, and local tax dollars, nearly half of these funds are derived from local property taxes. Consequently, the town or city that one lives in determines the funding that their school system receives. This means that communities that have higher household incomes will most likely have greater funds invested in their public education than communities with lower household incomes within the same state. This results in an unequal investment into the schools and school-age students between wealthy and impoverished communities. Students who attend schools in impoverished communities tend to lack the academic resources necessary to receive a quality education and prepare them for post-secondary education opportunities. Some of these resources include access to technology, libraries, laboratories, tutors, and other resources provided to ensure the success of all students.

This relationship between poverty and lack of opportunities is an observation that holds true internationally. In Argentina, public schools and the education system are handled independently by each province. These provinces vary greatly in the amount of wealth and economic growth they produce. As a consequence of this variation, the provinces have education systems that reflect the economic crises of the area. As of 2019, 52.6 percent of Argentinian youth aged fifteen or younger were living in poverty (Grainger, 2019). Argentina has historically had issues with high dropout rates and low post-secondary school attainment amongst poor youth.
Argentina has some of the highest dropout rates in the world. Even though their public universities have free tuition, as of 2013, Argentina had tertiary dropout rates of 73 percent (Bonasegna, 2015). Poor youth who were high school graduates also had low post-secondary education enrollment rates. Though tuition is free, many students still have to work nearly full time to support themselves financially through their studies. Many students from low-income backgrounds are unable to support themselves and drop out of university or fail to enroll at all.

Investigating the effect of poverty in the education systems of the United States and Argentina illustrates the magnitude to which poverty can affect a student’s opportunities. Yet not all opportunity gaps can be attributed to poverty alone. There are many social, cultural, and political factors that, when combined with the long-standing effects of poverty, create a system of education in which gaps and inequities persist and negatively affect certain populations in disproportionate amounts. The relationship between poverty and education inequities is cyclical in nature. Poverty exacerbates the magnitude and the form in which education inequities take place. These education inequalities suppress opportunities for upward social mobility and contribute to the continuance of generational poverty.

“We can see a great inequity through every stage of education although education is free and warranted by law. There are a lot of dimensions of these inequities. I don't think poverty is the only one. We cannot understand the type of inequity we see if we base our approach on poverty.”

-Dr. Jorgelina Loza, Ph.D., NYU Buenos Aires

ii. Social Biases and Structural Disadvantages

In the United States, school systems in low-income communities are most commonly found in large urban cities and smaller rural communities with a disproportionate number of these students being non-white. Many urban schools in the U.S. still feel the effects of the country’s history of racial segregation as public school districts in large urban cities and smaller rural communities tend to have high concentrations of black and Latinx students. Though ruled unconstitutional sixty-six years ago, the majority of U.S. schoolchildren attend racially
concentrated schools. As of 2016, twenty-seven percent of students in the U.S. attended schools in which 75% or more of the student body identified as non-white (EdBuild, 2019). Additionally, twenty-six percent of students attended schools in which 75% or more of the student body identified as white (EdBuild, 2019). Historically segregated minority communities that continue to see patterns of racial segregation persist tend to have higher concentrations of poverty. Consequently, black and Latinx students within these historically segregated communities are disproportionately affected by inequities in their education. On average, white students in the U.S. perform better on national exams than their black and Latinx peers. A recent study conducted by the Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis showed that racial segregation is associated with racial disparities in school resources, which contributes to achievement gaps observed between racial-ethnic groups.²

Segregation in schools, whether intentional or unintentional, and its negative effect on education outcomes is not a phenomenon unique to the United States. In Israel, the secondary school education system has foundations in ethnic and religious segregation. In 2015, the Israeli President stated that there are four “tribes” or education sectors known as the State-secular, State-religious, Haredi, and the Arab education system. Schools within the Arab education system serve Muslim, Christian, Bedouin, and Druze students while the other education systems serve primarily Jewish students. The only exception is the state-secular schools that primarily serve non-observant Jewish families, but also allow a small number of Arabs. Studies have shown that these school systems contribute to ideological and cultural segregation. “Thirty-five percent of Jewish students and 27 percent of Arabs said they have never interacted with peers from the other group” (Wolff, 2017). Although the Arab education system accounts for twenty-five percent of elementary school student enrollment, the Arab education system has been historically underfunded with inadequate resources. There exist great differences between the socioeconomic composition of the student bodies between each Israeli education system. On average, the socioeconomic background of Jewish Israelis is much higher than that of Muslim Arab Israelis. As a consequence of the ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic segregation in the

Israeli education system, the biggest gaps in performance and test scores in Israel are between Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab students (Wolff, 2017).

“There’s no reason why children in inner cities or rural areas do not receive the same quality education or opportunities as those in suburbs or wealthy neighborhoods. If we truly believe in giving all citizens a chance to pursue happiness and pursue their goals, then we cannot continue to marginalize entire groups of people.”

-Al Sharpton, American Civil Rights Activist

For many students and faculty who find themselves in adequately equipped schools, the school represents a controlled environment where students can access resources and knowledge that they may not receive otherwise. Wesley Carter, a high school teacher in Maryland, referred to a school as a place in which “a lot of the inequity is mitigated once you come inside the building”. While this statement holds for some cases, it does not account for the performance gaps and resource debts observed between schools, school districts, and states. Even in states that do not have school funding gaps between low-income and high-income communities, performance gaps between white students and students of color in the U.S. persist. A former high school principal and current non-profit educator, Anthony Harold attributes this persistence in performance gaps in part to expectations. In an interview conducted for this study, Mr. Harold states “If you expect a student to achieve at a high level, then they will. Much of it has to do with the expectations”. Essentially, students will rise to the expectations that you hold them to. If teachers expect a student to fail or drop out, this decreases the likelihood of said student passing, excelling, or meeting anything but that expectation.

The idea that students meet the expectations placed on them whether positive or negative, also known as the “self-fulfilling prophecy,” illustrates a problem with a common method of ability grouping that many school systems use. This method of grouping is also known as “tracking”. Tracking is a practice in which students are grouped and separated based on their perceived academic ability. Tracking can start as early as kindergarten and comes in many forms and it is
used in different magnitudes around the world. Though intended to provide catered instruction to students based on their needs or skills, students placed in a low-achieving or average track from a young age do not have expectations to achieve as much as their advanced peers which can consequently lead to reduced academic performance. Differing student expectations have been observed between different racial-ethnic groups and genders. A study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* found that when negative group stereotypes are activated in performance situations, African-Americans perform poorly on cognitive tasks and women perform “less than optimal” on mathematics problems (Beilock et. al, 2007). Tracking also creates opportunity inequality within schools by providing opportunities and resources for students in higher or more achieving tracks. In the U.S., studies have found that minority students and low-income students are overrepresented in lower tracks while higher tracks tend to be dominated by students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Burris & Welner, 2005). This can create internal segregation between low-income and high-income students.

Different education systems employ different methods of tracking. Tracking in the Israeli school system sorts students into one of four tracks: academic, engineering, technological, and vocational tracks.³ The division observed between academic and vocational education in Israel parallels socioeconomic divides. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be funneled into tracks, mainly technological and vocational, where educational opportunities are limited. Research has shown that there is a direct relationship between socioeconomic status and track assignment (Shavit et. al, 2020). Each track is supposed to prepare students to take the bagrut exam and receive a bagrut certificate which is awarded to secondary school students who succeed in achieving passing grades in a minimum set of examinations. This certificate is a prerequisite for higher education matriculation. Students who complete vocation education with only a vocational certificate have very limited opportunities to go on to higher education. While all students can take the exam, each track produces very different success rates. Existing data reveals that the academic and engineering tracks better prepare students for the bagrut exams. In 2012, only 39.9 percent of students in the vocation training programs qualified for a bagrut certificate whereas the engineering and academic tracks had rates of 82.4 and 70.1 respectively (Taub Center for Social Policy Studies, 2016). The technological and vocational track is

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associated with lower rates of bagrut certification and matriculation even when the data was controlled for socioeconomic factors and prior scholastic achievement.

It is difficult to determine whether tracking is positive or negative. That is a question that is heavily dependent on the society and government for which the system is implemented. While evidence shows tracking benefits high achieving students, it does not yield the same effects for “average” or “below average” students. Students placed in below average tracks tend to have fewer resources to attain the same knowledge and opportunities as their advanced track peers. Without proper motivation and limited expectations, these students may fall even further behind during quarantine.

“We need to train and prepare folks to expect the best no matter what their background, no matter where they come from, to understand that everyone is gifted and talented, we just have to tap into their gift and their talent.”

- Anthony Herald, College Access Program Specialist

iii. Social Capital and Cultural practices

Social capital refers to the value of resources embedded in networks of relationships within a social group, community, or family. In the context of education, social capital is in the form of family expectations, obligations, and social resources that exist within the family, school, and community. Expectations and norms that exist within a community or family significantly influence the level of parental involvement and investment. This consequently affects students’ academic success. One practical application of this concept is in the level of academic achievement of students who have college-educated parents. Acknowledging the challenges of students without college-educated parents is how the term “first-gen” or first-generation college student arose. A study published in the journal of Sociological Science shows that family wealth and parental education as forms of social capital are the most important variables in explaining differences in academic achievement (Jaeger & Karlson, 2018).
“Some students have inherited legacies of cultural capital from past generations of college educated professionals, while other students represent the first-generation of their families to navigate the university and may have no such guidance to draw on from home.”

-Ger O’Donoghue, Ph.D., New York University

Cultural pressures and practices also influence education inequities. This includes gaps in education level attainment between genders that are observed in several countries within the Global South. Nigeria is an example of a country in which women face sex-based stereotyping and in their education. This bias creates low female enrollment rates in STEM fields and contributes to higher dropout rates. A prominent cultural view in northern areas of Nigeria is that women are better suited to stay home and attend to family rather than attend school and attain an extensive education. Additionally, there lies a religious divide in Nigeria. Northern states, which are primarily Islam practicing, have enrollment rates from ten to twenty percent compared to southern state enrollment rates of seventy to eighty percent. Some religious leaders in the north argue that educating girls is “un-Islamic” (Laporte, 2018). Nigerian tradition instills ideas of male superiority and attaches higher values to the education of the male. Consequently, women face significantly higher challenges to acquire an education. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as of 2016, only 40 percent of female school-aged children were enrolled in school (UNESCO, 2019). Additionally, the female adult literacy rate in Nigeria is 59.4%, which is significantly lower than the male adult literacy rate of 74.4%. In general, educational inequalities in Nigeria, as in other countries, are perpetuated by regional, cultural, and gender-based divisions (Archer, 2014).

Other cultural pressures can be found across the globe. In Argentina, for example, cultural pressures persist amongst Argentinian women living in poverty. The cultural influence of Argentinian machismo, an ideal that favors male dominance in Argentinian society, subjects women to discrimination when defending their educational rights. Dr. Loza, an Argentinian sociologist interviewed for this study, explained that many female teenagers forgo their education to stay home and take care of their family so their parents can work. According to a
study conducted by the Observatory of Social Debt in Argentina, “19.1 percent [of young Argentinian women] have limitations to receiving education and 16.8 percent don’t even go to school” (Tuñón, 2018). Similar to Nigeria, it is not uncommon for young Argentinian women to marry early or have children at a young age. High adolescent maternity rates contribute to higher dropout rates amongst women in poverty in Argentina.

“All the girls here have less opportunities to go to school and to study what they want. The gender gap is real, but it is even more real for poor girls; it is even more real for indigenous poor girls. All of these inequities are intersected.”

-Dr. Jorgelina Loza, Ph.D., NYU Buenos Aires

iv. Political Climate

The political climate is another important factor that contributes to education inequalities around the world. The lack of research in this field suggests that this factor is often overlooked in favor of other factors that may contribute to inequalities of a larger magnitude. In reality, it is the intersection of many influences that create and perpetuate inequities observed in education around the world. Political instability can inhibit the function of critical institutions such as education. During times of political instability including, but not limited to, shifts in government, war, and economic downturns, it is difficult to sustain national education standards or reform. As a result, education instability can arise from political instability and can, in some cases, increase the opportunity costs of attaining an education.

The World Bank collection of development indicators assesses six dimensions of governance including Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism. This dimension measures the perceived likelihood of political instability or the occurrence of politically-motivated violence, including terrorism, ranging from -2.5 (politically unstable) to 2.5 (politically stable). An example of political instability inhibiting the structural growth and development of education can

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be found in Nigeria. In the assessment of Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism, as of 2018, Nigeria was a -2.2 on the scale. In Nigeria militant groups, like Boko Haram, that the government has been unable to suppress have contributed to an environment where women are discouraged or even punished for receiving an education. In 2014, 276 girls were abducted from their secondary school by the militant group. Six years later, over 100 girls are still missing. Nigeria has one of the highest percentages of out-of-school children in the world with 10.5 million Nigerian children aged 5-14 not attending school. Parental poverty contributes to high rates of out-of-school children due to an inability to pay for school fees past grade six. There have been calls for the government to put more money towards funding education, and although there has been an increase in public education investments, there have been very few improvements to show for it.

“It is only a government with proactiveness and strong will power that will be able to combat this phenomenon and come up with tangible solutions to balance the structural inequality”

-Blessing Makanjuola, Secondary school teacher, Kogi State, Nigeria

The effects of political instability on education inequality is also observed in the West Bank and Gaza as a result of Israeli-Palestinian political tensions in this region. As a result of this prolonged political tension, the West Bank and Gaza earned a -1.7 in the assessment of Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism in 2018. In the same year, the United Nations recorded 111 cases of “interference to education in the West Bank affecting more than 19,000 children.” Prolonged conflict and episodes of violence in this region pose daily challenges to the students in the area. According to a report published by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), constant exposure to conflict has created elevated levels of distress, fear, and intimidation in students trying to travel to and from school. Children who suffer from trauma and stress are at greater risk of falling behind in their education. Political instability in the form

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of war and conflict not only affects national policy, but it also affects students’ physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and ability to learn.

**Implications of COVID-19 on Existing Education Inequalities**

By investigating the existing education inequalities observed around the world, it can be identified which populations are most vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 on their education as it relates to the augmentation of previously existing education inequalities. Students in poverty unquestionably have a disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic. These students lack resources common to their high-income or middle-class peers. Students who relied on the school to access tools necessary to continue their education (i.e. books, advisors, computers, internet, etc.) no longer have access to those resources. Although many countries have made the transition to online education, it is evident that wealthier countries were more adequately equipped for this transition. In wealthier countries, some school systems are providing tablets and other forms of technological support to help students continue their education. However, some regions such as northern rural Nigeria that have higher rates of poverty have forgone primary school instruction altogether for lack of federal regulation and inability to provide resources to aid students in at-home instruction.

“U.S. based first-generation college students began to feel the economic impact of the pandemic earlier than their peers...For first-generation college students of color (especially those living in areas intensely impacted by COVID-19), the mounting evidence of structural and environmental racism in the disparate impact of COVID-19 fatalities in the US was a source of stress, grief, and anger in addition to their heightened (and realistic) concerns about their own and their family's well-being.”

- Gerard O’Donoghue, Ph.D., New York University
Due to the great variation in the methods different school systems and countries are taking in reaction to COVID-19, it is a reasonable assertion to claim performance gaps between students in low-income and high-income countries are at great risk of expanding. This is a direct result of the fact that wealthier school systems that can provide technology and resources to students will have better results in their continuance of education than systems with more poverty which have had to forgo most, if not all, of their instruction. This risk for the widening of performance gaps between low and high-income individuals and school systems is consistent on a local level, national level, and international level. In the same vein, evidence suggests performance gaps between racial-ethnic groups will persist and also are at great risk of increasing.

Students who have college-educated parents are more adequately equipped as they are more likely to have resources, in the form of social capital, at home to contribute to the continuance of their education. Parents who are invested in their child’s education are more likely to hold their children accountable for their studies, something school districts are currently struggling to do. Children with parents who can take on the role of educator, advisor, and a support system will have a better outcome in their education performance than their peers without. Students with academic, emotional, and mental support systems at home will more likely be able to stay motivated.

“[Students] would have done better if they were in the environment that allowed them to. I have definitely seen a discrepancy between the kids that were already successful that have the structure and capabilities at home to support them that typically lower-income kids don’t have access to.”

-Yvonne Gabriel, High School Educator, Maryland

Under the pandemic, many students are taking on a lot of stress and are facing more mental health stressors. As unemployment rates are increasing in many countries around the world as a direct result of COVID-19, many students are picking up jobs to financially support their families. The pressure to help support their family does not allow their education to be their sole priority. There is more pressure for youth, particularly youth from low-income backgrounds, to
be active in supporting their family. For example, Argentinian young women living in poverty will face even greater pressure to focus on family health under the COVID-19 pandemic that may consequently divert them away from pursuing their education further. Additionally, international students are less likely to continue their education remotely. The difficulties of attending school in different time zones combined with a lack of faculty support will generate increased stress that would inhibit their performance under remote learning.

“Students suffering from mental health stressors (especially less affluent students who are less likely to have diagnosed and treated conditions) may often be denied any framework that allows their health burdens to be accommodated as they pursue their academic work.”
- Gerard O’Donoghue, Ph.D., New York University

How Teachers are Responding

Just as students are facing insurmountable stress under COVID-19, teachers are also facing stress in the face of uncertainty. Increasing unease over the unknown of how the school systems plan on moving forward has put pressure on a lot of teachers. Many students are looking to teachers for answers, but in reality, they are as lost and uncertain as the rest of the public. With the possibility of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in a “second wave”, many are concerned with how they would go back to in-person learning or if they would even go back at all.

As teachers are beginning to see a disconnect between them and their students, they are witnessing short-term difficulties in their instruction that can have long-term impacts on the understanding and retention of information by their students. Since many parents are finding themselves in positions where they have to take on the role of the educator, teachers across the U.S. and around the world are calling for greater collaboration and transparency in the parent-teacher relationship. There cannot be an expectation for parents to take on the full role of the teacher. Not every parent has the time and tools to invest in their children’s education. To
properly educate students stuck at home, there has to be a joint effort on both sides to ensure students have the tools to succeed.

“We need more teamwork between the parents and the teachers... Including the parents... and making them part of the experience with their kids, would make a huge difference. Let’s bring the parents into the team.”

-Yvonne Gabriel, High School Educator, Maryland

Teachers are not only concerned with how COVID-19 will affect academics, but also the emotional and mental toll it will have on their students. As economies are struggling or just beginning to bounce back, a lot of students have picked up jobs to help with their household income. Increased financial pressure also comes with a reduction in the ability of many low-income college students to pay for their school fees or tuition. As many households are struggling to stay afloat in this economic downturn, it places low-income students in a state of vulnerability to be most impacted by economic pressures as a result of COVID-19.

“The combined stressors of health anxiety, economic anxiety, and social isolation will likely have significant psycho-social impacts across the population as a whole, but with particularly deep impact on adolescents. I expect that this will translate to increased patterns of mental health morbidity among college age students.”

-Gerard O’Donoghue, Ph.D., New York University

Teachers are also experiencing economic pressures in their households; particularly teachers in kindergarten through grade twelve education. Many of these teachers are working under new and complicated conditions. This added stress could potentially negatively impact the quality of instruction as well. Additionally, teachers are recognizing the need for a safe physical space for students in unsafe situations. Students who used school as an escape from an unsafe or tumultuous home life no longer have the school to use as a “safe haven.” Many teachers are
recognizing this increased burden and are calling for more mental health services to be made available to students when they return to school.

“We have to address not just academic gaps but also social and emotional gaps as well. We need to emphasize mental health because a lot of these students are going to be coming back with trauma they had not had before.”

-Chris Dier, Louisiana Teacher of the Year 2020

Conclusion

When looking at each factor that contributes to education inequalities, it is important to understand the intersectional nature of each aspect. In many studies on education inequality, poverty is highlighted extensively as a major contributor to many of the education inequalities observed around the world. However, education inequity cannot be attributed to poverty alone. It is also necessary to consider structural biases and disadvantages, social capital, cultural practices, and the political climate as well as historical contexts in order to understand why such inequities exist and why specific demographics are affected more than others. To eradicate education inequities, it is not enough to simply look at the people affected, we must also analyze the greater vulnerability of certain demographics within that population group.

What resources can be provided to account for inequity not rooted in economic disparities? How do we ensure that resources are equitably distributed and how do we ensure that they are not going to waste? Increasing funding alone does not necessarily guarantee long-term results, especially in communities in which monetary funds cannot alleviate the effects of the longstanding structures that suppress their prosperity. Equitable resource distribution must be accompanied by structural change in order to have long-lasting measures to combat education inequity. School systems and administrators need to account for the structures that perpetuate inequity and create policies that account for the gaps.
“Administrators need to be held accountable for translating their commitments to equity into concrete financial resources to enact equity. Administrators of educational institutions need to actively listen to students and teachers to understand how inequities are experienced and reproduced within their institutions, and to change policy accordingly. Moreover, administrators need to recognize that institutional commitments to equity are often in tension with other institutional commitments”

-Gerard O’Donoghue, Ph.D., New York University

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge for students across the globe. Millions of students all over the world no longer have access to any of the resources, however limited, allotted to them before the pandemic. Parents have found themselves trying to fill the role of the teacher, supporter, and tutor, whilst still maintaining their role as primary caretakers and financial supporters. For students without parental support, staying motivated and self-accountable can become a challenge. There is no evidence to suggest that school systems are accounting for the increased vulnerability of students who were already disproportionately impacted by inequities in the school system. Performance gaps that were observed before the pandemic, if not accounted for, could potentially be augmented as a result of COVID-19 and the negligence of school systems in failing to address the needs of their most vulnerable populations. Looking forward, it is imperative that equitable measures are adopted to address these concerns on a household, district, and national level.

Based on the increased pressures and great uncertainty students are facing as a result of COVID-19, it is necessary that moving forward, both teachers and parents need to be cognizant of the mental wellbeing of their students. For students who are able to continue their education, whether in-person or through distance learning, many will be returning in a different state of mental wellbeing than before the pandemic. There needs to be a dual effort from teachers and parents to address and alleviate emotional stressors and traumas that affect the students both inside and outside the classroom. An increased partnership and flow of communication between faculty and parents will aid in this form of support. According to Wesley Carter, a high school
teacher interviewed for this study, “teachers do not have much control of what occurs outside the school building”, with the school building acting as a controlled environment for the students. By cultivating a partnership between teachers and students, both parents and teachers can create plans and strategies that would be most suitable for the student given their personal circumstances. An increased partnership between parents and teachers would help foster an environment where students feel emotionally and educationally supported.

Additionally, more mental health professionals should be made available in public schools. For students unable or uncomfortable acquiring support from home, getting the attention they need may be difficult. The same way tutors are made available for academic support, mental health professionals should be made available for personal and emotional support. Furthermore, the cultivation of a parent-teacher partnership aids in the accountability and motivation of the student. School districts must implement methods to hold students accountable for their studies even during times of distance learning. When students have no expectations and no structure, there are less likely to have any motivation to complete their studies. Without structure and expectations, students are less motivated to work hard and achieve their full potential, even when at home.

“My motivation and productivity declined, I didn’t have a schedule anymore, and I didn’t have the daily interactions with my classmates, which I grew to learn were essential for a healthy mind.”

-Zahra H., High School Student / Journal Entry Contributor, Bel Air., Md

In the long-term, teachers, administrators, and school districts must recognize that there are students who will start off at different points in their cognitive and intellectual levels, but they should still be given the same opportunity to maximize their potential. Students classified as high or low academic ability from an early age may not have had an equal footing from the start, and therefore, it is unfair to limit their potential and opportunities from early on. Tracking in schools should not define nor limit the opportunities one has in life. A better alternative to tracking should allow for the flexibility of student growth at any level; it should account for unequal
footings based on student backgrounds as a means of inclusion, and it should allow for equal access to opportunities and resources no matter the level of perceived academic ability.

On a national level, governments must first determine which factors within their society perpetuate inequities within education the most and enact comprehensive policy to address how factors, such as social capital, affect their students. The path for national reform is not so straightforward seeing as many social issues such as poverty and lack of parent education, among others, are greatly intertwined with a nation’s economic stability and prosperity. Governmental solutions must target the root causes of their education inequality instead of passing temporary topical solutions. The answer is not simply getting more funding, but more so how can more funding be used and allocated so that it directly benefits disadvantaged communities. True equity can only be achieved when reform addresses the disadvantages students face and which students are disproportionally affected.

“COVID-19 showed school systems and schools how much support students truly needed but weren’t given. It showed we had students that needed support from educators but we’re not considered as “priority” students”
-Omer Reshid, Student Member of the Board of Education, Baltimore, MD

On a larger scale, national governments need to ensure both access and resource allocation along with distribution are equitable. Having never experienced the Nigerian, Argentinian, nor Israeli education system it is difficult to suggest with certainty, policies that would meet the needs of their education systems. However, it can be said that these policies should be unique to the needs and the socio-political dynamics of the country. In Nigeria, for example, this may include increasing government allocated funds to build more schools and push initiatives to increase public school enrollment of students from northern and rural areas. Social programs can also be used to directly impact vulnerable populations. In Argentina, social programs targeted toward increasing educational opportunities for poor, indigenous women in rural areas who may not have the opportunity nor information to acquire post-secondary education could be effective. Well-funded social programs can target a variety of issues and a variety of setbacks in every
country. Additionally, equitable funding policies in the U.S. and Israel need to address disproportionate levels of poverty in areas and communities in which racial-ethnic segregation has perpetuated resource and opportunity inequities. Essentially, national governments should invest in the communities that have been excluded from the wealth and its resulting resources. Only then can policies be enacted to specifically alleviate the hardship and disadvantages these communities have faced in education and more. With the appropriate policies, partnerships, and programs, education can become the equitable institution we hope it to be.

“At times like these, it is important to hold grace and understanding above test scores and meeting lesson objectives. It is important that we listen to our students and we always show that we are there for them even when we cannot physically be there, we can be there emotionally.”

-Chris Dier, Louisiana Teacher of the Year 2020
References


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