Childcare-policy responses in the COVID-19 pandemic: Unpacking cross-country variation

Sonja Blum, University of Hagen
Ivana Dobrotić, University of Oxford


Source: www.pixabay.com
COVID-19 and ECEC/school closures

ECEC/School closures
in most countries as of mid-March 2020; some until new school year

Care & Home-schooling responsibilities ‘shifted fully onto parents’ (Yerkes et al. 2020: 4)

Increased risk of social exclusion & growing social inequalities in children’s educational opportunities (OECD 2020)

Gender-equality concerns (with nuanced evidence emerging) → increased pressure on working mothers & fathers

National ECEC/school closure ‘strategies’ playing a vital role

→ Increased risk of social exclusion & growing social inequalities in children’s educational opportunities (OECD 2020)

→ Gender-equality concerns (with nuanced evidence emerging) → increased pressure on working mothers & fathers
Pandemic childcare-policy responses?

Striking cross-country variation in immediate crisis responses (Capano et al. 2020; Yerkes et al. 2020)

**ECEC/primary schools** (up to age 12)

- variety goes far beyond ‘closure’ (e.g. Italy) vs. ‘no-closure’ (e.g. Sweden) (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2020)

- hybrid approaches’, varying from lenient to strict, but also from universal to selective closures/re-openings (i.e. allowing certain groups to keep access or re-enter earlier)

A conceptual framework that allows to unpack and classify variations in the design of the immediate pandemic childcare-policy responses

- Focus on education- and care-services up to age 12 approximately (parent’s care & home-schooling more intensive)

- Theoretically-informed, yet informed by the variety of empirical realities in 28 EEA countries (FRA 2020; OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020; Hale et al., 2020)
**Argument:** Childcare-policy responses result from country-specific combination of pandemic prevention strategy and childcare policy concerns

- Strong ambiguity in chosen responses, and they are contentious *either way*

- High-risk (i.e. targeted) vs. population-approach to prevention (Rose 2001) → regarding ECEC/school closures:
  - Population approach: likely to translate into full closure
  - High-risk approach: likely to keep these services open

**In between:** room for *hybrid approaches* that aim at balancing public-health and core education/childcare concerns (e.g., work-care reconciliation, enabling graduation)
Figure: The pandemic childcare-policy responses

Source: own figure, Dobrotić and Blum 2020
Modes of closure/re-opening in selected European countries I.
(preliminary data; FRA 2020; OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020)

**Sweden**
- **March**: Fully open
- **April**: ...
- **May**: ...
- **June**: ...

**Italy**
- **March**: Fully closed
- **April**: ...
- **May**: ...
- **June**: ...

**Denmark**
- **March**: Full closure (emergency care)
- **April**: ...
- **May**: ...
- **June**: Full re-opening

**Norway**
- **March**: Full closure (emergency care)
- **April**: Partial (targeted) re-opening (ECEC & children 6-10 first)
- **May**: ...
- **June**: Full re-opening
Modes of closure/re-opening in selected European countries II.
(preliminary data; FRA 2020; OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020)

**Austria**
- Targeted closure (open for key workers & working parents)
- ECEC: Targeted re-opening (e.g., dual-earners, pre-school year)
- PS: Two weeks later
  - Reduced re-opening (part-time for all children)

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**Czechia**
- ECEC: No (ordered) closure
- PS: Targeted re-opening (ages 6-11; optional attendance); graduate years earlier
- PS: Full closure

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**Germany (with local variation)**
- Full closure (emergency care)
- Targeted re-opening (e.g. last pre-school year)

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**UK (with variations)**
- Full closure (emergency care)
- Targeted re-opening („transitional years“)

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- Reduced re-opening (reduced hours, closed groups)
- e.g., England → Targeted re-opening
Outlook: A view at the empirical side

Hybrid policy approaches – will require a further ‘unpacking’ through developing detailed indicators able to grasp their **prevalance and sequencing** across countries

→ Work in progress, database construction
→ Data on modes of closure/re-opening in 28 European countries

Childcare policy responses – coherence (or not) with pandemic leaves/benefits?

Drivers and effects of different childcare policy responses (e.g., education-focused vs work-care balance focused)
Thank you for your attention!