

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

EDUCATION AT ALL COSTS

Distance Learning: Georgian Experience During the Pandemic

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“The reality is quite different from what they imagine. As you may know, we have students from villages come all the way here because they did not have Internet access or computers. I can remember times when I called my students on their cell phones to get them to come to a class.”
(Teacher, Kobuleti)

“I think if I had a room, I would study better.”
(Student, Kutaisi)

Abstract

General education in Georgia is characterized by rampant inequality. The problem of inequality has taken a new form in the wake of the global pandemic. The growing demand for access to technology, the Internet, and studying from home has reinforced the role of households and their socio-economic status, highlighting the link between families' income, parents' educational level, occupational prestige, and students access to general education.

In Georgia, the issue of general education during the pandemic has not been adequately studied from a social and economic perspective, globally as the topic is relatively new. From a social and economic perspective, this makes it difficult to link access to general education, family income, and overall student performance. As the learning process has shifted from schools to students' family homes, their living environment has become an important factor, which practically determines students' full participation in the learning process, the quality of education, and their outcome. Because of the complexity of general education, learning in a school setting is not limited to teaching skills and students' socialization. The school environment provides a significant amount of opportunities to expand equality by providing opportunities for students from low socioeconomic status to achieve success in education.

All students should have the same conditions and opportunities to receive a general education, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds, the standard of living, or other external or internal factors. The social reality initiated by the pandemic requires compensatory conditions to reduce the obstacles students face and the potential aggravation of inequality.

The research illustrates that the realization of the right to general education is closely linked to institutional problems such as social policies, economic conditions, and even housing policies.

Main Findings

- To pursue online education, families had to provide their children with cell phones or computers and give them uninterrupted Internet access. This placed an additional burden on families, especially low-income households.
- For some classes, a cell phone was not enough, and assignments required a computer or laptop. For students coming from low-income families, the barriers to access to education have become even larger.
- Lessons for students were sometimes inconsistent because they had to use their parents' cell phones or share a laptop or computer with other family members in order to participate in classes.
- The cost of Internet access became a financial burden for families.
- Internet access in Georgia, especially in the highlands, is a problematic issue that prevents some students from participating in online classes.
- In families with two or more children, the cost of participating in distance learning increases. A lack of electronic devices makes it difficult to participate in the learning process. Often, families have to make a decision on which children will participate in the educational process. This generates another form of inequality within households that have two or more students in a family.
- Disturbing factors of distance learning were highlighted, such as housing density, a lack of personal space, noise, helping younger siblings learn or caring for other family members, a lack of heating in winter, and a lack of the necessary learning materials.
- Access to the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education (MES), as well as Microsoft Teams was also a problem, as some students' devices could not support these platforms. In addition, a large amount of internet was required, for which additional funding was essential.
- Teachers do not see themselves as part of the educational process or the decision-making process to reform the education system. The policies designed for the education system do not correspond to the reality in schools, and these policies have alienated teachers from the educational process.
- Before the global pandemic, schools played a compensatory role for students from families with low social and economic status, however, this function was abolished after mandatory regulations were introduced for the pandemic.
- Students mentioned several duties of school, including school as a substitute for the family and a combination of family functions. School is considered one of the most safe and secure spaces where they receive care and attention outside of the family.
- For families with several students who did not have the required technical means to participate in the learning process, teachers tried to organize the learning process in such a way that members of the same family attending different classes did not have classes scheduled at the same time.
- With the introduction of distance learning, students and teachers have learned to use the internet and various educational programs themselves. Groups were formed within social networks, and they shared their knowledge during working hours and even after, leading to an additional burden and stress.
- In some cases, school communities and teachers mobilized their resources to provide mobile internet to students from low-income families, mostly relying on their own financial resources and free time.
- During distance learning, teachers' working conditions have deteriorated and workloads have increased dramatically.
- In General, The school plays a compensatory role and in addition to education, meets the basic needs for students' well-being. Due to limited mobility and isolation during the pandemic, benefits for students were severely limited. Moreover, due to parents' busy schedules and poor housing conditions, the role of the school and teachers in the teaching process was expanded.

Methodology

Based on a methodological framework, two main questions were developed:

1. What are the main functions of schooling for students and teachers? Have these functions changed during the pandemic?
2. Is there a relationship between socio-economic status and school performance for students and their families?

To answer these questions, we examined the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of students and teachers in order to understand inequality in the general education system during the pandemic from a sociological angle. In order to fulfill the aims of this study, the following objectives were set:

- To analyze the general education system in the broader societal context through expert interviews;
- to investigate challenges to general education through group interviews with students and teachers; and
- to analyze existing reports and data relevant to the research topic.

The qualitative research methodology was used to thoroughly investigate the research objectives, namely: desk research, group interviews, and expert interviews.

- The desk review evaluated reports and surveys from the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, reports from local nongovernmental organizations and education-related institutes, and studies from international organizations. These reports and studies were focused on the problem of inequality in the education system, especially during the pandemic.
- As part of the research, 8 in-depth expert interviews were conducted with representatives from the following fields: (1) researchers in the field of education; (2) representatives from the fields of educational psychology, law, and philosophy; and (3) representatives from various state education agencies.
- In addition, 11 focus group interviews were conducted as part of the study. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of the stakeholders involved in the educational system.

Table 1.1.
Detailed breakdown of the group interviews

Group #	Object	School Location	Classes	Subject / Profile	Number of respondents
1	School Student	Tbilisi	11-12		8
2	School Student	Batumi	9-10		8
3	School Student	Kobuleti	10-12		8
4	School Student	Kaspi	9-12		7
5	School Student	Kutaisi	9-11		8
6	School Student	Partskhanakanebi	10-12		8
7	Teacher	Tbilisi		Mixed	6
8	Teacher	Kutaisi		Mixed	7
9	Teacher	Kobuleti		Mixed	6
10	Teacher	Kaspi		Mixed	8
11	Teacher	Partskhanakanebi		Mixed	7

The selection of schools for focus group interviews was based on the principle of maximum variation. The principle of maximum variation makes it possible to obtain the necessary information about different circumstances based on the main parameters of variation. Based on the objective of the study, the variation differences were geographic location and school size. Geographic location was divided into capital city, large city, medium city, small city, and village. School size was divided into two groups: schools with 1-500 students and schools with 501 or more students. After defining the variation indicators, certain schools were selected according to the principle of random sampling.

The research was conducted from March 2021 to August 2021.

A limitation of the study is that because of its methodological nature, the study does not claim to cover all impacts and experiences related to the pandemic.

Introduction

In March 2020, the educational process in Georgia’s public schools was interrupted. Spring break, which should have started on March 16, began a week earlier on March 8, and from April 1 the learning process officially changed to a full distance-learning model. The reason for this decision was the worldwide pandemic COVID-19, declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11,¹ 2020, and the state of emergency in Georgia that was declared on March 21.²

At the outset of the pandemic, the biggest challenge facing Georgia’s education system was the provision of continuing education. As outlined in the 2020 report, the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science (MES) considered this task a success.³ According to the Ministry’s data, by the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, 579,995 students⁴ (public and private) completed distance education (out of a total of 592,900⁵). As noted in the same report, however, 12% (63,272) of students did not have internet access at home, and 14% (71,796) did not have their own computers. In addition, most students across Georgia participated in classes via their cell phones. The above quantitative data on student participation in distance education does not show the costs to students, their families, neighbors, and the social environment in order to provide distance education. From the available data, it appears that the continuity of the learning process was maintained at the expense of the family’s socio-economic resources and teachers since the government did not provide adequate support mechanisms.

The issue of general education during a pandemic has not been adequately studied in Georgia from a social and economic perspective. The relevance of this study is that it

examines the digital divide and overall inequality in terms of the social and economic status of families. The predominant questions of the study were (I) what were the most important functions of schooling for students and teachers during the pandemic, and (II) what is the link between student achievement and the socio-economic status of their families?

The studies conducted in Georgia on general education during the pandemic illustrate that the participation of students in the education process is mostly limited to their involvement in online classes. Several studies focus on the quality of instruction education and mastery of the program while ignoring other factors such as the social and economic status of families, their standard of living, access to technology and the internet, (un)employment, and family structure. Emphasizing students’ online participation and academic achievement without considering the socio-economic status of their families does not allow this issue to be adequately examined. The above-mentioned factors directly or indirectly affect student achievement, learning outcomes, teacher workload, motivation, engagement in the learning process, and the quality of education in general.

The transition to distance education made the term “digital divide” relevant. The “digital divide in education is the gap between those who have sufficient knowledge of and access to technology and those who do not”.⁶ An example of digital inequality would be students who did not have access to the Internet during distance learning and had to use a cell phone or family computer, and those students who had a high-end PC and Internet. As a result, there is a big difference between the quality of education at that time and their academic performance. This is the beginning of the digital divide, which then manifests itself in socio-economic differences and is exacerbated by factors such as household structure and income, living conditions, etc. The increasing demand for distance learning has shown that access to computer technology and the Internet has become a basic requirement for general education.

1 WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March; 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WGgPYb>

2 The state of emergency in Georgia has been declared for a month; Radio Free Liberty; 2020 <https://bit.ly/38tpzTK>

3 Pandemic and General Education in Georgia; Ministry of Education and Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia); 2020; <https://bit.ly/3jxvaPg>

4 Ibid.

5 Number of students for the 2019-2020 academic year; National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat); <https://bit.ly/2WEFhct>

6 School of education of online programs: 2020; ACT Center for Equity in Learning; <https://bit.ly/3Qdl8QA>

International and local studies have highlighted the structural inequalities in Georgia's educational system, even before the pandemic. The study most often cited on this topic was conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to Program for International Student Assessment The results show that Georgian students have different levels of achievement across several demographic dimensions".⁷ As indicated in the study, these characteristics in the index of PISA also include economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS), which allows for an assessment of students' socio-economic backgrounds based on several variables such as the parents' education, occupation, and household ownership. The same report shows that in 2015, disadvantaged students in Georgia scored 78 points lower than advantaged students, equivalent to about 2.5 years of schooling. This data is from before the pandemic, but the global pandemic and limited resources for access to education have likely worsened existing inequalities, and the digital divide has widened them.

Research with a similar focus, however, has shown that efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) have proven ineffective at ensuring access to quality education. In order to understand the challenges facing general education in Georgia and to present the complexity of the realities created by the pandemic, this study aims to untangle these issues in light of general, social, and economic trends and contexts in the country, as well as the basic functions of education (schooling in general), which means that the focus is not only on the learning process or the cost and accessibility of distance education.

Our starting point for the research was the belief that schooling is more than just a process of learning and improving subject knowledge. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the focus has been on student participation in distance education and on the quality of education. This discussion has overlooked the social and economic benefits that students and their parents derive from the education system. The results of this study show that schools not only have an educational, social, and developmental function but also play a social and economic role for students and their families. The school as a physical institution combines the function of educational infrastructure that also ensures the creation of an equal learning environment for students. This study aims to show a clear link between schooling and the social and economic function of schools and how students, parents, and their teachers manage to participate in the general education cycle despite their low economic status or other obstacles they face during a pandemic.

7 OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Georgia; 2019 <https://bit.ly/3R1Dqv>

1

UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURAL FACTORS OF INEQUALITY IN GENERAL EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

Because of the complex nature of general education, issues are not limited to educational competencies and student socialization. Schooling offers significant opportunities to increase equality.⁸ The concepts of equality and access to education refer to reducing the impact of students' low socioeconomic status on their educational achievement.⁹ According to this understanding of equality, students should have equal conditions and opportunities to receive a quality general education regardless of social and economic conditions, the standard of living, and other external or internal factors. An equal learning environment and accessible education should compensate for low social and economic status. In order to increase equality in the educational system, it is important to review the factors that directly or indirectly affect the educational process and possible inequalities. In the present study, several such factors were identified that have an impact on the educational success of students and, consequently, on the problem of inequality in the learning process. The study found that general education and related inequalities include factors such as household social and economic status, the standard of living, family structure, and psychological and cultural factors, which were exacerbated in the pandemic by Internet access and low technological skills. This chapter discusses key factors that emerged from group discussions that directly or indirectly affect access to general education, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

1.1 SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in 2020, the official average monthly income was 1191.0 GEL¹⁰ and the unemployment rate was 18.5%.¹¹ The reality

behind this data is more complicated, as the methodology of the National Statistical Service of Georgia for employment and average salaries cannot fully describe the actual indicators in the country.¹² Moreover, according to unofficial calculations, unemployment rates are higher and average monthly income is significantly lower.

The economic impact of the social distancing and mobility restrictions introduced since the beginning of the pandemic was also reflected in the rise in unemployment, as people lost their wages and thus their income. As a result, the number of people dependent on state aid has increased. In addition to declaring a state of emergency during the pandemic, the government developed an anti-crisis plan that provided for certain social and economic benefits, including three-months reimbursement of utility bills, subsidized loans for tourism businesses, stable prices for various products for citizens, a government price insurance policy for nine of the most in-demand products, etc. Despite these efforts, the anti-crisis plan did not touch the education sector or provide Internet tax subsidies for students and teachers.

This study deals with the reality created by the pandemic and shows the influence of social and economic factors on general education. After the transition to distance education, technology, and the Internet have become a prerequisite for students to participate in distance education. In order for students to participate in the educational process, families have had to provide their children with cell phones or computers and provide them with uninterrupted Internet access. This has become an additional financial burden for families, especially low-income households.

The first problem related to families' economic challenges is equipping students with technologies and gadgets. Before the pandemic, the school attendance rate was almost 81% for the poorest children aged 15 to 18 and 98% for the richest children in the same age group (UNICEF, 2018). In Georgia, one in five children from poor families does not have access to general education by age 15 (UNICEF,

⁸ The Power of Education to Fight Inequality How increasing educational equality and quality is crucial to fighting economic and gender inequality; 2019; OXFAM; <https://bit.ly/3qfUT13>

⁹ Social and economic factors contributing to inequality in test results; <https://bit.ly/3BdLspm>

¹⁰ Employment and Wages 2020; National Statistics of Georgia; <https://bit.ly/3BdaDsd>

¹¹ Employment and Unemployment 2020; National Statistics of Georgia <https://bit.ly/3eneNoq>

¹² როგორ ითვლიან საშუალო ხელფასს საქართველოში – მხარეთა დამატებითი არგუმენტები, 2018; Pertaia; <https://bit.ly/3RmiZmI>

2018). During the pandemic, these numbers increased. A total of 12% (63 272) of students did not have Internet access at home and 14% (71 796) did not have a computer (MES; 2020) to participate in online classes.

In the group discussions, students and teachers spoke about the challenges associated with the transition to distance education. Students noted that they did not always have access to computers. They often used their parents' phones or shared a laptop or computer with other family members to participate in classes. As a result, classes were inconsistent for students. In some classes, a cell phone was not sufficient and assignments required a computer or laptop. For students from low-income families, the barriers to accessing education have become even greater. According to a 2021 NDI survey, 25% of respondents said they lost their jobs (13%) or had their income cut (12%) because of the pandemic.¹³ Families experienced economic and social hardship due to loss of income or deprivation. Accordingly, basic needs such as meals or medical care were prioritized and adequate educational conditions and access to computers and equipment were relegated to the background. Such experience has a detrimental effect on student engagement and achievement.

In addition to educational technologies, Internet fees are a challenge for families. Internet penetration in Georgia, especially in mountainous regions, is still a problem.¹⁴ To ensure universal access to education, the Government of Georgia developed the "Teleskola" project. Although universal access to the Internet and computers is still a challenge in Georgia, the "Teleskola" education project was launched on March 30.¹⁵ "Teleskola" cannot be an alternative to the existing system, as it lacks several features that a full-fledged classroom should have: there are no forms of feedback and assessment, and interaction between students and teachers is excluded. "Teleskola" can be evaluated as a tool and not as a real alternative to school or even to distance learning.

In the group discussions, respondents talked about how the function of the school was perceived before the pandemic. For students, school is not only a place for education, but also a place for socialization, the development of interpersonal relationships, and a place where they can build social circles and make friends with common interests. During the research, teachers were asked the same question. The teachers' answers were more complex due to their experience. They critically evaluated the existing reality and talked not only about the educational system, but also about the social and economic status of students'

families, the role of parents, and the general economic situation of the country. In addition, teachers were able to identify the psychological condition of students whose parents have irregular working hours, are engaged in labor migration, or are particularly vulnerable economically.

"The main problem is the social conditions, so parents are forced to abandon their children, which severely affects their mental health. There are numerous examples of parents who have difficulty spending time with their children, and this greatly affects their children, their education, their behavior, and other important things."

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

As for general education, students' opinions were divided into several groups. Some students believe that the school should provide them with basic education to orient themselves in society, while others believe that the school should prepare them for their future professions and careers. These conversations were always followed by a discussion of the belief that "those who want to learn will learn," meaning that motivated students will always find a way to educate themselves by taking advantage of every opportunity, despite the hindering factors. Some teachers also held that "if a student is interested in learning, he/she will learn", which has the same meaning as "whoever wants to learn will learn". Respondents cited various examples to support the validity of this approach. Such assessments testify to the availability of access to general education and the transfer of its results as the individual responsibility of each student.

Other students and teachers mentioned that books, computers, private rooms, the Internet, and a quiet environment were necessary for study. Although two different opinions were observed during the discussion, the respondents ultimately agreed that "whoever wants to learn will learn" is an exception and not a general norm, and that socio-economic factors such as parental unemployment, family income, and labor migration affect student motivation and actual learning opportunities.

To summarize this chapter, the social and economic status of families and their income influence the educational conditions of students. The social reality resulting from the pandemic requires compensatory conditions to mitigate the obstacles students face and the exacerbation of potential inequalities. Individual efforts are indeed important to obtain an education, but overcoming collective barriers requires effective intervention.

1.2 LIVING STANDARDS

Prior to the pandemic, household living environments and resources were among the factors that contributed to worsening educational inequality. As the learning process has shifted from schools to homes, their living environment has become an important factor that virtually determines students' full participation in the learning process,

13 საზოგადოების განწყობა საქართველოში 2021 წლის თებერვლის სატელეფონო გამოკითხვის შედეგები; NDI; CRRC; <https://bit.ly/3eoORZx>

14 Internet Usage and Accessibility Tendencies in Georgia, 2020; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI); <https://bit.ly/3KJ74x7>

15 Covid 19-ის წინააღმდეგ საქართველოს მთავრობის მიერ გატარებული ღონისძიებების ანგარიში, 2020, □□.41-42.; <https://bit.ly/3QI0RZg>

the quality of education, and their achievement. Characteristics of the student's domestic environment, such as having books at home (e.g., Brunello et al., 2016; Sikora et al., 2019); good nutrition (e.g., Belot and James, 2011; Florence et al., 2008), and access to technology (Biagi & Loi, 2013; Luu & Freeman, 2011) greatly determine students' motivation and achievement.

One of the main themes in the study's focus groups was the students' living environment and its compatibility with distance learning. Middle and especially high school students recognized the importance of the home environment and its connection to the quality of education. In their discussion, students emphasized the connection between the quality of education and the standard of living, family structure, the size of the home, the presence or absence of personal space and infrastructure, and the inadequate size of rooms and houses. The students noted that these conditions prevented them from pursuing quality distance education. All of this aggravated their psycho-emotional state and led to conflicts and tensions within their families.

"It was a big problem. We did not have separate rooms, so sometimes we got annoyed by the noise of the TV my father was watching, or grandma barging into our room asking if we were hungry, and other ridiculous situations that often became the subject of an argument."

(Student, Batumi)

"I think if I had a room, I would study better."

(Student, Kutaisi)

In the teacher focus groups, the standard of living of families and its impact on education was also discussed. From the screens of computers and phones, teachers could easily see the tensions in students' family environments. Before the pandemic, teachers were able to compensate for these family problems in the classrooms, and school infrastructure compensated for poor living conditions. In addition to attending classes in noisy homes and completing homework via cell phones, students were required to perform household chores, such as helping younger siblings study or caring for other family members.

"I think that a private space is extremely important because you cannot concentrate when there are people around you and it's too noisy! The thing is that sometimes children have to do chores, take care of their younger siblings..."

(Student, Batumi)

In the focus groups, it became clear that moving the learning process to the private sphere hindered the realization of the right to education during the pandemic. However, data collected during the research indicated that the realization of this right was linked to systemic issues such as social policy, the economic system, and even housing policy. During the exchange of experiences on distance education, however, disruptive factors were highlighted, such

as housing density, lack of personal space, noise, lack of heating in winter, and lack of necessary educational equipment. These are all additional barriers that have a greater impact on the educational success of certain groups than others.

"In winter, one of the students had the following problems: heating was available only in the room where the whole family was gathered, so in order to avoid the noise, the student had to go elsewhere, to the balcony or to a cold room. Additionally, in some places in the villages, there is no internet access. He could not sit in a cold room all day; he could only bear one lesson in such conditions."

(Teacher, Kaspi)

Family structure, such as the number of children, the technical equipment of all children at home, and the size of the house, has affected the level of education more than ever. Poverty in Georgia and, consequently, its negative impact is stronger in households with more than one child. In 2017, 33% of households had at least one child. As the number of children in households increases, the relative and overall levels of poverty increase as well. For instance, 27.2% and 24.5% of single or large families live below the line of relative and general poverty. In the case of households with three or more children, the level of relative poverty rises to almost 39.9%, and in the case of general poverty - to 33.4% (UNICEF, 2018). With two or more students in a family, additional costs increase, and the computer technology barrier makes it difficult for them to participate in distance learning.

Forms of self-organization also occurred in lesson planning when teachers did not follow a standardized approach but had to take into account the individual needs of students and their families by adopting a differentiated approach. In the case of families with several students who did not have the necessary technical resources, teachers tried to customize the curriculum so that students from the same family could attend different classes at different times.

"...When it came to scheduling, we planned it so the classes they attended did not coincide in time, because they only had one computer at their disposal, which was a problem, so we planned the schedule that way."

(Teacher, Partskhanakanebi)

In the discussion, students considered school as a kind of substitute for a combination of family functions. Students talked about instances of possible domestic violence and lack of family care, especially when students' parents work unregulated hours or when their parents go abroad for workers. Focus group students believe that school should be a place where they feel safe when they cannot do so in their families. The students noted that before the pandemic began, they spent most of their time at school and, in a sense, considered it a second family. In their opinion, the problems that exist in families should be compensated by the school.

“If the home is not a place of rest and safety, then school is such a place, especially if you are with your friends or others – they are your second family. If the first family disappoints you, the second should work out and school is just that.”

(Student, Tbilisi)

This view was also shared by the teachers. They stated that they often have to play the role of a parent or family member for their students. The main reason for this is the social and economic conditions families face in the country. During the pandemic, students’ mental health conditions were particularly noticeable. Special care was provided for students with parents whose working hours were not regulated and for parents who emigrated. For example, students who did not have technical equipment and a private cell phone could not participate in online classes. The solution to this dilemma was for teachers to call their students in the evening when parents returned from work and cell phones were available to make up for classes missed during the day.

“They also need moral support, especially in their teens, and often we have taken on the role of a mother and father who need to support them, but who are far away at the moment.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

Thus, students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the school’s role as a second family coincide. The main motive for this is security and care, but parents’ busy schedules and poor housing conditions reinforce the role of the school and teachers.

Due to parents’ unregulated work schedules or their absence, group discussions focused on the children’s living environment and nutrition. Poverty can also be a cause of child malnutrition. In Georgia, 83,065 adolescents use a “Child’s food card”,¹⁶ which means that they receive 50 GEL (Approx. 15 USD) in assistance, of which 30 GEL (Approx. 8 USD) is transferred to the “Child’s food card”, and 20 GEL (Approx. 6 USD) is transferred to the family’s bank account, per month. Given this situation, the country does not have adequate social support mechanisms for students, including child nutrition. A balanced diet throughout the day contributes to students’ success in and out of the classroom. Studies have shown that school meal programs play an important role in promoting students’ overall health and achievement by improving children’s nutrition and combating hunger.¹⁷

In Georgia, children in kindergartens are fed three times or at least once a day,¹⁸ but the country has no experience

with school nutrition at the general education level. Most schools are fed by commercial companies whose prices are regulated by market principles. Since the pandemic, the operation of similar commercial buffets has been restricted. At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories; Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia; and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia developed recommendations for the availability of lunch in schools.⁴ The protocol was that food had to be carried in a container and an eating place was set up in the classrooms. This rule did not work for many students because not all students could afford to bring food from home to school. Consequently, only some students could eat in the classrooms, while the rest were left without lunch.

The issue of student nutrition and social inequality has repeatedly come to the attention of experts concerned with schooling. Some researchers agree that the negative effects of socio-economic inequality on children are reduced when all children receive free, healthy food at school.¹⁹ During the research discussions, teachers recalled that the new protocol developed by the Georgian government in the context of a pandemic caused classroom inconvenience - some students brought their lunches from home, while others did not. Because of the pandemic and the resulting restrictions, students were not allowed to leave the classrooms, which resulted in some students not being able to open their lunch boxes out of shame because their classmates had nothing to eat.

“... The children were confronted with the fact that some brought food, and some didn’t. I noticed that some wanted to eat but did not have food. The only thing I did was to ask all the parents to bring the children rolls or khachapuri and not different foods. I achieved that to a certain extent.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

Providing free meals to children is one of the most important ways to reduce social inequality in schools and achieve better academic performance. When we spoke with students about this issue, their responses were brief. One student said she was hungry most of the day, which did not surprise other students. However, nutrition did not prove to be a favorite topic among teens.

This chapter concludes with a consideration of the new reality created by the pandemic and subsequent regulations, the role of living conditions, family structure, parental (un)employment, nutrition, and other aspects related to social issues. The study shows that the school plays a compensatory role for students from families with low social and economic status. The school was equipped with housing infrastructure such as heating in winter, teaching materials, and sports equipment. In addition, at school,

¹⁶ საქართველოში 83 065 მოზარდი „ბავშვის კვების ბარათით“ სარგებლობს, 2020, რადიო თავისუფლება <https://bit.ly/3mKtiQB>

¹⁷ School Nutrition Statistics; School Nutrition Association; <https://bit.ly/3Bn7lxj>

¹⁸ საქართველოს სკოლამდელი აღზრდის დაწესებულებათა აღწერის მონაცემები დაწყებით განათლებსა და ბავშვთა

დაცვასთან დაკავშირებით, 2013, გვ.55; UNICEF; <https://uni.cf/3T-JOed0>

students receive the care and attention they lack outside the classroom (due to parents' unregulated working hours or their absence for professional reasons, etc.). Due to limited mobility and isolation during the pandemic, the aforementioned benefits were severely limited. Despite the efforts and self-organization of teachers to hold one-on-one sessions and find experimental ways to teach their students, the hard work and diligence involved in teaching online is not an alternative to school.

1.3 LEARNING LOSS AND ITS SOURCES

Before the pandemic, schools had no experience with active and systematic use of the Internet in teaching and learning. Most students and teachers did not associate the Internet with the learning process, and because of the situation created by the pandemic, they had to become familiar with teaching and learning on the Internet without professional support. This, as it turned out, was problematic.

After the introduction of distance learning, students and teachers learned to use the Internet and various educational programs by themselves. Later, they gained some experience with distance learning by creating groups on the social network Facebook, where they shared their software knowledge during and outside working hours. This represented an additional burden and stress for them.

First, students cited the problem of Internet access and owning the equipment needed to participate in distance learning. Students attempted to participate in class using a cell phone, laptop, tablet, or computer. Access to the Ministry of Education's official platform, Microsoft Teams, was also a problem, as some students' devices could not support these platforms.

"I also had a problem with the Internet and I know several students in my class with the same problem. The whole family, in which there are 3 children, had one laptop. Or they log in with the phone using mobile internet. This is congested, cumbersome, and a hindrance because some phones could not download Microsoft Word at all. If a student had to give a presentation and did not have a laptop, the cell phone could make them more nervous. Several times I have had to download a Word file, and it's terrible; almost impossible, and many other students have encountered this problem."

(Student, Tbilisi)

Internet access is a problem throughout Georgia. Internet access is not equally available in all cities and regions of Georgia due to the uneven distribution of access to computer equipment and the Internet. In some cases, most students used mobile Internet, which added to families' monthly bills. However, not all families had access to the Internet, so some students were not engaged in the learning process.

The Law of Georgia On General Education¹⁹ postulates open and equal access to education for all persons. After the transition to distance learning, access to online schooling has become increasingly dependent on household income and the availability of technology at home. To meet the growing demand, the MES, as part of the agreement with major Internet providers in Georgia, has managed to offer teachers and students special educational prices for an Internet package, 20 GB of mobile Internet for 10 GEL²⁰ (Approx. 3 USD), which, as the MES and other experts claimed, should be sufficient for the Internet needs of online teaching for up to one month. Despite this benefit, the cost has become a burden for some families. As a result, the school community and individual teachers have done their best to mobilize funds to provide mobile Internet to their students. In this study, students indicated that the quality of their education had deteriorated due to distance learning and poor Internet access.

Learning loss is a general term and a general phenomenon. But with the pandemic, it became a central issue since most education systems faltered to some degree. With the outbreak of the pandemic, education experts and researchers began to discuss the dangers of a possible learning loss caused by the closure of schools on one hand and the transition to distance learning on the other. The term "learning loss" is defined as a specific loss of knowledge and skills or a delay in academic development, mainly associated with the discontinuation of the educational process and/or the deepening of inequalities between opportunities. This loss may be related to the social situation caused by the severance of relations with the school community. Another type of loss could be psycho-emotional, which is usually related to a violation of the school routine and regime. Our research showed that the learning loss of students is related to the knowledge of the material that they had to acquire over a certain period of time.

The study found that respondents viewed learning loss as a personal responsibility. Students held the view that professional competencies are compromised in distance learning and that it depends on their individual efforts and ability to compensate for these losses. The faculty expressed relatively pessimistic views on this issue. They felt that the only way to compensate for the loss of learning was to self-study the material during summer vacation, although they were still skeptical about this approach.

"...Almost half of the semester has gone to waste. At first, there were not many opportunities to get an education, but then gradually everything was sorted out. This year, the quality of education has increased to some extent."

(Student, Batumi)

19 Law of Georgia on General Education, 2005; Parliament of Georgia; <https://bit.ly/3wVV8IS>

20 საჯარო და კერძო სკოლების მოსწავლეები და მასწავლებლები მულაგათიანი ინტერნეტ პაკეტით ისარგებლებენ; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia; 2021; <https://bit.ly/3KJrQg0>

According to students, there are three solutions to learning loss. The first is to hire tutors and make up for missed classes and thus knowledge. Second, those who do not have access to a private tutor should make up the losses on their own during the summer holiday, and third, they should simply get used to the existing reality. In any case, such a challenge is a great burden for families – especially for the students, and may hurt their attitude towards their future.

“We had to make up for the gap in the learning material that is left unstudied and learn everything while relying on our own effort.”

(Student, Batumi)

Although the content is arbitrary for teachers because of the curriculum, subject matter competencies should be acquired, and it is not a must to cover all the material. Some may argue that students and especially teachers do not understand the main concept of the curriculum. However, for teachers and students, this is perceived as a loss. This also raises the question of the extent to which curriculum content is a loss - if competencies have been developed, it is absolutely fine to omit certain material. However, further research is needed to determine if students were able to develop the core competencies required by the curriculum.

In summary, distance education has its limitations, especially if it is not a “casual” distance education. Therefore, the expectation that everything will be exactly the same as in offline classes is exaggerated. There are also limits to the self-compensation resources of students and faculty to manage the acquisition of Internet skills on their own or to adapt to the economic challenges of constantly providing Internet and allocating additional hours to the instructional process. During the pandemic, students who did not have the appropriate technological equipment and Internet could not participate in online classes, but teachers knew they had to ensure that these students were included in the learning process at all costs. Teachers’ efforts to include all students in distance education were likely motivated by the assumption that they would face increasing inequity among students if traditional instruction resumed. The distance education experience has complicated the financial situation of families, teachers, and students. Access to technology, software skills, economic hardship, and the purchase of debt-laden equipment was ultimately beyond the control of official policy. Failure to analyze these problems and take appropriate action can lead to frustration and demotivation in the school community.

2

EDUCATION POLICY AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS DURING THE DISTANCE LEARNING IN PANDEMIC

Since this study dealt with the context of the pandemic, the stress and frustration of teachers and students was evident. The isolation caused by the pandemic and new experiences led students and teachers to be more critical of the existing education system.

The lack of shared decision-making has long existed in Georgia's educational system. Studies of the history of the Georgian education system show that education policy since Georgia's independence has been predominantly vertical. The only exception is the reforms initiated from 2004-2005, under which new "National Goals for General Education" were developed.²¹ Research conducted by the Education Coalition indicates that the school community was highly involved in the development of this document. Feedback was solicited during the development of the document, which served as the basis for formulating goals and adapting them to the new realities of general education.²² The involvement of the school community in the development of educational policy has decreased significantly since then.

2.1 TEACHER PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT, RESILIENCE, AND TRACES OF SOLIDARITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

In interviews, teachers expressed negative views about the forms of decision-making and the process of reforming the education system. It was said that stakeholders and decision-makers are not familiar with the school at the practical level, that school realities and their views are not studied locally, and that education policies are elaborated or developed separately by "outsiders." As a result, policies designed for the education system do not correspond to the existing reality in schools. Instead, they alienate education policy and teachers.

"What is designed for a big city does not work in the countryside."

(Teacher, Kaspi)

In the context of educational policy, teachers evaluated compulsory education organized by the Ministry of Education. According to the current scheme of professional development of teachers and career growth, the head teacher must complete at least twenty interactive hours of training, the leading teacher at least twelve hours, and the teacher-mentor at least six hours.

The agency responsible for the professional development of teachers and consequently, for the organization of training is the National Center for Professional Development of Teachers. In 2021, a report by the State Audit Office was published,²³ which assessed the activities of the National Center for Professional Development of Teachers. According to the report, in 2017-2019, the center spent 33 695 924 GEL. Given this information, the teachers participating in the focus groups of the study expressed dissatisfaction with the training organized by the Ministry. The reason for dissatisfaction in a number of cases was the quality of education, its duration, the assignment of classes outside working hours, and the directive nature of education, which teachers believed was related to the lack of participatory elements in educational policy. In the context of the pandemic and "distance learning in emergencies," the flexibility of teacher training opportunities must support teachers in these specific issues.

Nevertheless, respondents expressed a desire for better training and for training infrastructure materials that meets their needs. Teachers spoke of the importance of self-improvement; not in terms of mandatory training, but in terms of opportunities to improve their professional skills.

During distance education, teachers' working conditions deteriorated, workloads increased, and education experts began to discuss the risk of "professional burnout" among

21 „ზოგადი განათლების ეროვნული მიზნების“ დამტკიცების შესახებ; საქართველოს მთავრობის დადგენილება; 2004 <https://bit.ly/3cJVIII>

22 სასკოლო განათლების ისტორია 1990-2020; გვ.62-63; ქანტურია, ქადაგიძე, მელიქაძე; <https://bit.ly/3wUPlga>

23 State Audit Office of Georgia. (2021, March). მასწავლებელთა პროფესიული განვითარების 2017–2019 წლების ეფექტიანობის ანგარიში; <https://bit.ly/3qdfSSu>

teachers. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education (MES) continued to offer mandatory in-service training to teachers, with which they were often overwhelmed. In addition, meetings on the “Model of a New School” project continued as a part of general education reform, without taking the pandemic reality into account.

“There were times when we attended training 7 days a week, including weekends. It was physically impossible to schedule a single day. From Monday to Sunday we participated in the training.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

Teacher burnout is a psychological condition that leads to exhaustion, alienation, and decreased teacher performance and self-esteem. Teachers associate the increased workload during the pandemic with general demands and worse working conditions. This dissatisfaction increased after the switch to distance learning. Teacher burnout can have serious consequences, such as qualified personnel leaving the workforce. The interviews conducted during the research revealed the difficult psycho-emotional situation of teachers. Some of them even stated that they would not recommend anyone to become a teacher.

“...We are exhausted. I would not recommend anyone to become a teacher, whereas I used to be a preacher telling everyone how good it was and advising them to start a career as a teacher. What’s so great about being a teacher, sitting in front of a computer for 8 hours? I never want to do that again because my eyesight has deteriorated, my old glasses do not fit me anymore.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

The threat of the above-mentioned “professional burnout of teachers” and subsequent departure from the system is a theoretical framework that is less in line with the Georgian reality, as it is almost impossible and unthinkable for working teachers to give up their social status and the benefits that this profession brings. In the Georgian context, being a teacher means having a salaried status that comes with some social benefits and health insurance, a small but stable income, and possible additional income from private tutoring. Consequently, teachers are forced to accept strenuous and irregular working hours and follow unrealistic guidelines. Considering the high unemployment rate (21%; 2021²⁴) and poor working conditions in Georgia, people have to choose between rest and hunger, or work and an inability to rest (Shippen, 2014). Teachers are no exception.

Conversations with teachers show that frustration and distrust are not only among towards education policymakers and their framers, but also towards among the broader public such as researchers, media, experts, politicians, and society as a whole.

“The worst thing is that the politicians and journalists who criticize us the most are just laymen who are so bad that I do not accept any criticism from them.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

In Georgian society, there is a very critical attitude towards teachers. There are many reasons for this, but blaming teachers for the shortcomings of educational policy is only one side of the coin, which is why their opinions are not heeded. From interviews with teachers, it is clear that they are critical of education policies because they do not see themselves as co-creators of these policies, but only as executors. Working conditions, low pay, the general social and economic background, the rapid variability of educational reforms and approaches, the cascade of upstream reforms, and the disregard for real needs in planning educational policy are only a small sample of the problems that define the reality of the Georgian educational system. Teachers occupy only one place on this list.

As the above data and audit report show, the financial and human resources allocated to professional development for teachers are significant. It also shows that programs of this magnitude are not responding to the reality that teachers are trying to adapt to, including pandemic stress, distance learning, technological innovations, and busy work schedules. As a result, teachers are critical of the department’s initiatives. They believe that the requirements of the Ministry of Education (MES) do not correspond to reality. The in-service training programs for teachers do not meet their real needs, and the goals to be achieved exceed the material or other capabilities of their students. Their alienation from educational policies, and especially from the reforms implemented, is because they are not actively involved in the planning of educational policies. They do not see tangible, ongoing changes, which increases their workload and makes their work more bureaucratic than student-centered.

2.2 CHALLENGING LABOUR CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS, EXTENDED TASKS AND SELF-ORGANIZATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Prior to the pandemic, technology was seen as a tool to diversify the learning process and not as the main tool to generate and transfer knowledge. Covid-19 and its limitations have led to radical changes in the learning process. The new reality created by distance education is fundamentally different from many traditional learning concepts; mainly related to the changed unity of space, time, and action in the learning process. The sudden transition to distance education caused a “shock effect” in education, which later manifested itself in an inconsistent process to which teachers had to respond individually. In order to communicate with students, teachers had to immediately log into platforms and electronic portals that they had not known before.

²⁴ Unemployment rate in Georgia 22.1%; 2021, National Statistics Office of Georgia [official data]; <https://bit.ly/3q9bHqz>

The new reality caused teachers to use self-organized social practices. Such a process can be seen in the context of organic solidarity, but instead of shrinking boundaries, as is usual for solidarity, the process took on a universal dimension (Durkheim; 1984:68-86). Self-organized practices can evolve based on a changing social environment. Instead of a functionalist interpretation that describes the reproduction of society, social self-organization is about forms that determine the practices of cooperation, participation, solidarity, and responsibility in a changing environment. Such a political definition of self-organization produces social practices that distance themselves from the system (including the legal/administrative framework), which may be due to a desire to influence a changing environment, or to the need to change the environment.

Teachers talked about distance learning and recalled facts while looking for different ways to maintain continuity in the learning process. First, through collaboration and mutual learning, teachers mastered the electronic platforms needed to continue the learning process at a distance. Teachers from different regions also recalled learning Microsoft Teams independently without professional support.

“When we started getting involved with Microsoft Teams, we knew nothing about this platform. We had no preparatory training when it was first introduced to us. We were on the phone late at night with our colleagues, confused because we did not know what to do, and asking each other questions. By the time training started, we had trained ourselves.”

(Teacher, Tbilisi)

We have seen self-organization and mutual solidarity not only at the local level and at the school level, but also in the virtual space. In the early stages of the pandemic and distance learning, before the Ministry sent detailed instructions to schools, group chats and groups on Facebook served as platforms for receiving and sharing information, organizing teachers' work, sharing knowledge, and encouraging and helping each other.

“...We are members of several groups on Facebook. I learned how to use Microsoft Teams in one of those groups. Every time I have a question, I visit the group and get relevant information there. There is the answer to my problem - I say. We learn from there, and then we share our knowledge with others. What else can I say, this is collaboration, we learn from each other. That's how we learned Teams.”

(Teacher, Kobuleti)

To enable students to access distance education, teachers found individual solutions, mostly relying on their personal financial and time resources. For example, teachers made phone calls at their own expense to students who did not have access to the Internet or computers at home. In addition, teachers transferred the amount needed to purchase an Internet package to students so that they could participate in distance learning.

“I have met many of my colleagues who have done the same for their students; I am not the only one who has done this. I transferred money to my students so they could at least use Messenger to attend class... There were good students whom I knew were eager to study but had no means to do so. I transferred money to such students several times to give them the opportunity to attend classes.”

(Teacher, Kutaisi)

Experience with the differentiated approach for students during the pandemic showed that schools and teachers, including the Ministry, should primarily consider the social and economic status of families, housing situations, teachers' work schedules, and family members' school schedules. These issues highlighted the important role of education, which goes far beyond the function of general education and knowledge transfer. At the same time, the socio-economic status of students and teachers proved to be a crucial factor in education.

In the discussions, students and teachers also shared positive experiences they had during online learning. In the study, we called this the practice of self-organization, which is divided into the active involvement in the learning process and the school culture of teachers, students, and their families. This gave teachers more confidence and respect for their profession since parents and students saw teachers trying to overcome barriers to online teaching. Regardless of whether these practices received material or other support from teachers or neighbors, they were viewed positively. The distance learning that began during the pandemic, the number of barriers, and the temporary curtailment of schooling eventually allowed the connections between teachers and students to strengthen. By taking into account each other's needs, social status, and abilities, they developed an organic form of solidarity.

Even though the sense of solidarity between teachers and students seems to have increased, some issues remain problematic. As mentioned earlier, one issue is the actual participation of teachers and students in the development of educational policy. The existing changes are formal in nature and do not take into account the needs of the school community, its reality, the differences between cities and villages, small and large schools, and other important distinguishing characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Inequality in Georgia's general education system is not a new phenomenon. Official policies developed at different times partially acknowledged the existing inequality and set appropriate tasks to solve the problem. The global pandemic that began in the spring of 2020, on one hand, revealed the existing inequality in Georgia's general education system in all its intensity, and on the other hand, created new forms of inequality.

In particular, the geographic location of students and teachers (capital city, major cities, regions, highland settlements) affected their participation in online learning due to low Internet coverage in the country, suggesting inequality by location. Another form of inequality was the "digital divide." Some students did not have the necessary equipment to participate in distance learning, or their technical equipment was not sufficient to receive a quality education. In addition to traditional forms of inequality, the pandemic exacerbated the problem of families with many children who also had to participate in online classes. The process of online learning showed the impact of housing infrastructure on the possibility of receiving education: poor housing conditions, lack of personal space, and lack of educational resources (family library, auxiliary or compulsory books, and other educational literature) negatively affected students' participation in online learning. Finally, the research found that the emergence of new forms of inequality is influenced by the social and economic status of students' families, including parents' education, employment, income, and even working conditions. Before the pandemic, schools were able to compensate for the low social and economic status of families and students to reduce existing inequalities. Mobility restrictions introduced during the pandemic limited access to school infrastructure, so schools lost their ability to reduce inequality among students, and families had to take over this role.

The study also found that the problem of inequality in general education also affects teachers. A large percentage of teachers lacked both the digital skills needed to work online and the technical resources needed to deliver instruction. Teachers had to cope with these dilemmas on their own and without official support, which led to a discussion of the problem of professional burnout. Under the conditions of compulsory online teaching introduced at the beginning of the pandemic, teachers were assigned new functions and tasks in addition to their existing ones. Teachers still had to fulfill their role as a "traditional teacher" and impart knowledge to students, while the new role of "online teacher" required them to quickly master technologies, develop individual solutions through self-organization, develop their own technological skills during non-working hours, and quickly adapt to the new reality. Although the involvement of a large part of the students in the learning process has been possible thanks to the private initiative of the teachers, the teachers' self-organization is not enough to reduce existing or new forms of inequality or to compensate for the low social and economic status of families.

Individual efforts cannot be seen as the answer to systemic challenges in general education. Moreover, new policies are needed to address existing learning losses as well as old and new forms of inequality caused by COVID -19.

3

RESEARCH REVIEW

As the study has shown, the impact of the pandemic on the field of general education includes more than just the decline in students' academic performance and the deterioration of the quality of education. The pandemic has created a new form of inequality in the general education system, affecting the process of the psycho-emotional development of students and the working and living conditions of teachers and parents. Based on the research, the opinions of experts from different fields (law, pedagogy, and psychology) were elaborated to help readers understand the research topic from an interdisciplinary perspective.

3.1 EDUCATION A CHALLENGING FIELD DURING THE PANDEMIC

by Natia Mzhavanadze

While global efforts to ensure universal access to quality education have been setting various goals and objectives nationally and worldwide, the severe challenges in the education sector to be imposed by the pandemic exceeded the imagination. As the data from various multilateral and international organizations suggests, the COVID-19 pandemic left 1.5 billion students in approximately 200 countries without proper access to or limited opportunities for quality education (UNESCO, 2020).²⁵ According to UN estimates, the pandemic devastated the results of the work conducted over the last 20 years (UN, 2021).²⁶

Although education has been a field of inequality and inequity in poorer countries, disruption of some sort has been faced by schools, teachers, students, and parents regardless of the country's wealth and global status. Despite the similarity in disruption tendencies, the response to COVID-related challenges is an area in which countries differ a lot. Wealthier countries with relatively stronger education systems tackled the effects of the pandemic more effectively and systematically and managed to address the gap in education created by the global halt of education processes, while at the same time ensuring proper measures to bring the education process back on track. Unlike

these countries, the pandemic brought much more severe problems to the education sector in developing countries, where scarce resources, reduced education expenditures, and comparably limited competencies and opportunities have resulted in many severe outcomes for education systems overall and postponed the possibilities for the schools to reopen and resume normal functioning (UNESCO, 2021).²⁷

As the evidence from the professional and academic communities suggests, the major differences between countries with stronger and weaker education systems are quite complex. For instance, education systems that enjoy more effective and efficient management practices, higher autonomy, a stronger link between research and practice, and evidence-driven solutions, managed to generate essential knowledge, learned from their experience, and efficiently readjusted educational processes to ensure access and quality education. Countries with weaker education systems, including Georgia, have been confronted with exacerbated problems, worsened risks, and an emerging set of new problems both within the system, access to education, quality of online education, as well as other socio-economic and psycho-emotional problems faced by teachers as well as students and families. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, the Georgian education system failed to become one of the top priority sectors, with relevant commitment and efforts both from the governmental authorities as well as from society.

Considering the severe scarcity of resources and data, the absence of transparent and participatory mechanisms for education policy design and enactment, and a lack of evidence or the desire to admit the complexity of the challenges faced by the general education system in Georgia, the efforts of civil society organizations and researchers working in the field, as well as their attempts to analyze the dynamics, outcomes, and challenges in the education sector deserve significant appreciation. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach and brings education during pandemics into the limelight of the broader socio-economic context.

²⁵ Distance Learning Solutions; UNESCO, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3RcCHRY>

²⁶ Sustainable Development Goals, UN, 2021; <https://bit.ly/3KLO3Ck>

²⁷ Education: from school closure to recovery; <https://bit.ly/3Qg87FQ>

As the study authors indicate, the purpose of this initiative is to highlight increasing inequality in the education system, identify the specific forms it has taken, and simultaneously, contribute to and inform the policy initiatives focused on the reduction of inequality. The significance of the study besides bringing a wider socio-economic context into the analysis and discussion is that it attempts to provide a glimpse of the complexity of educational losses due to pandemics, including issues with access to education and the “digital divide” during distance learning. The analysis of the household burden in ensuring access to digital education in terms of socio-economic and psychological aspects, as well as demands of professional staff and communities is well highlighted and hopefully, will motivate scholars to study this phenomenon in more detail in the future.

Unfortunately, the formal rhetoric of both the executive and judicial branches of the government predominantly focuses on achievements and lacks the willingness to fully and completely identify and pay attention to the myriad of challenges that institutions, teachers, students, and families are confronted with. This lack of consideration has been translated into proposed education policies and action plans, and does not attempt to respond to the education losses during the pandemic. It inadvertently raises the risk that at least public education policies and strategies will not be geared towards erasing the damage done during the pandemic.

Besides the general context description provided in the study, there are several issues worth considering, including but not limited to:

- Practices of self-organization, solidarity, and support within school communities, between students, and between students and teachers. This indicates that notwithstanding the negative impact of the interrupted normal functioning of the schools, there are still support networks and other resources that might be used wisely for future interventions both on the macro and micro levels.
- Risks are not limited to socioeconomic status, but other factors such as family support, household size, the number of schoolchildren at home, family interactions, household access to balanced nutrition, etc. These are essential aspects to be considered for proper and well-targeted social interventions, which are quite scarce among the school population.
- School climate and social interactions have become more transparent and visible to communities, thus the respect towards teachers and school administrators grew. The study also offered some insight into how schools provide compensatory services for students from various vulnerable backgrounds, noting how these problems have been exacerbated during the pandemic and with the distance model of education.

Overall, the study offers an interesting overview of the issues that require more in-depth research, analysis, discussion, and response actions both from society and the government. It is a good contribution to understanding the education field as not limited to purely academic processes and bringing it out from its shell to view it in a wider socio-economic and political context. As the governmental approach and response to the pandemic leaves much room for improvement, studies and reports that focus on learning losses contribute to generating knowledge about the status quo and make recommendations for eliminating negative COVID-related outcomes in the education sector. Such studies prove to be extremely valuable food for thought in both professional and civil spaces.

3.2 THE FUNCTIONS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

by Nino Nikoleishvili

The crisis caused by the pandemic changed the form of education and thus the reality of the education system, which presented different needs and challenges to school system participants – including students, teachers, and families.

The school, as a general educational institution, is one of the most important actors related to the social or cultural status of the individual, and at the same time, plays a prominent role in the formation of the individual’s identity and the socialization process.

According to Dimitri Uznadze, the founder of the Georgian School of Psychology, learning is a distinctively complex behavior among other human behaviors. Learning is a functional human tendency and is related to inner strength and desire (Pedagogical concept 1910-1916).

The social function of learning is emphasized by Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978)²⁸. Culture, parents, teachers, and peers are collectively responsible for the development of a person’s cognitive abilities or mental functions. The foundation of learning grows in communication with others and is then integrated at the individual level. Therefore, Vygotsky assigns a crucial role to the family, environment, teachers, and peers in the realization of a child’s cognitive and personal abilities.

These and similar leading theories have focused the learning process on the needs of the individual and changed approaches to the learning process. Learning became associated with developing the strengths of the individual and supporting the socialization process.

Changing the form of learning for students is related to social-interactive, personal-motivational, and environmental factors. School is a universally designed environment

²⁸ (1978) L.S. Vygotsky: *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. London: Harvard University Press.

for the learning process and the acquisition of knowledge, which creates the mood and readiness for learning. Students depend primarily on the school structure, as well as teachers and their professional knowledge. At school, students not only acquire academic knowledge, but also establish new interpersonal relationships, but are introduced to a formal environment and learn social rules and how to deal with routines.

The shift in the learning process in the home led to the adolescents' need for self-organization, emotional self-regulation, and other skills that they could acquire during their school life. The greatest loss for the students was the lack of communication and the feeling of social isolation, which in turn led to a decrease in motivation to learn and self-efficacy.

Regarding the role of the school and its specific function, responsibility is shared between the educational structure and students, there are constructed and clear definitions of what is legitimate at the school level, and the use of differentiated approaches in teaching helps to maximize students' potential. The breakdown of this structure (loss of the physical space of school and access to face-to-face communication) is stressful for students. An environment needs to be created that allows for development when the state does not take empathetic or encouraging steps to help students deal with frustration or concerns about the future.

The pandemic also posed special challenges for teachers. They had to adapt to new practices while feeling the need to nurture and develop themselves. The behavior of teachers in a pandemic situation points to the risk of professional burnout. Professional burnout among teachers is indicated by emotional exhaustion, an educational system that offers no support to chronically stressed teachers, and a distracted, often cynical, critical attitude toward teachers' environments, students, and even families. Finally, teachers develop a sense of diminished personal accomplishment, leading to a sense of personal incompetence and a state of low professional performance.

Self-efficacy studies are found in the study of the causes of burnout. Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy as "people's belief in their ability to control the events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1989).²⁹ From the teachers' narratives, it is clear that they feel disturbed by the system's neglect of their own professional role, which causes burnout syndrome.

There is little research on teacher burnout in the Georgian population. This type of research is specific and requires cultural adaptation of the research instruments. Of course, we can recognize the dangers of professional burnout, but it is promising that teachers still have a sense of self-efficacy

and a socially valuable role. Teachers' self-organization in times of crisis has shown that teachers do not behave like professionally burned-out individuals. This self-organized process could have a positive impact on teachers' sense of self-efficacy and parent-teacher communication, and the empathy that develops between students and teachers could deepen the emotional bond when face-to-face learning resumes.

Family member engagement is critical to a student's educational success, however, in a crisis situation where families are facing major economic challenges, parents cannot help their children, since help requires a certain level of knowledge and mental preparedness on the part of the parents.

The psychoeducation of parents and their involvement in school life was a hot topic even before the pandemic, and concern for the psychoeducation of parents is the responsibility of teachers working in the system. Parents' involvement in school life is determined by positive communication with teachers and the administration. It is a fact that parents were not able to participate in school life even before the pandemic due to social and economic problems, and therefore, in times of crisis, were not equipped with the skills that would help their children cope with stressful situations and promote a quality learning experience for their children.

The problems posed by distance education are complex, and each link makes an important contribution to their solution. The crisis caused by the pandemic in the educational system has shown the need for professionally strengthening teachers in terms of pedagogical approaches and mastery of modern teaching methods. The subject of this research, however, is whether it is possible to speak of a motivated society and other educational goals (such as the development of social and communication skills, civic identity, and other social roles) when the highest priority is still equal access to education.

3.3 ACCESS TO THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

by Lela Gvishiani

Access to quality education plays a vital role in a person's life. The quality of primary and secondary education and equal access to it significantly determine the future of people and play a pivotal role in reducing social inequality. Quality education determines the involvement of the individual in social, economic, and cultural life on equal footing and reduces the risk of social exclusion, the latter being essentially related to the issue of the proper provision and enforcement of the right to education by the state.³⁰ The right to education is a clear example of the fact that the

²⁹ Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, 44(9), 1175–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175>

³⁰ L., Jootaek., 'The Human Right to Education: Definition, Research and Annotated Bibliography', *Emory International Law Review*, 2020, pp.750-752.

adequate realization of social rights is inherently related to the availability of public spending and its enjoyment is a source of universal public goods.

A number of international instruments reinforce the commitment of states to ensure lifelong access to quality and continuous education: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly states that all human beings have a fundamental right to access education and its universal nature, which should be directed towards the development of the human personality.³¹ The Charter of Social Rights considers access to education to be an important aspect of the social, legal, and economic empowerment of children and young people, the protection of children from poverty, and social exclusion.³² The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the importance of equal access to quality education for children.³³ The right to education is enshrined in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as an enabling and empowering right, as it is the primary means by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can escape poverty and participate fully in public life. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, access to quality education implies a commitment by states to create an available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable education system that addresses the needs of all vulnerable groups.³⁴

The Constitution of Georgia, as the supreme legal and political document, considers the right of access to education within the framework of fundamental human rights.³⁵ The Law of Georgia on General Education and the Code of the Rights of the Child in several articles emphasize the obligation of the state to provide a quality and accessible general education system and an inclusive and equally accessible educational process for each student. The educational system should take into account the individual needs of students, which will consider the factors of territorial access; improve material-technical settings, educational programs, and human resources of public schools; as well as ensure a safe learning environment and the unhindered functioning of the learning process.³⁶

The school education system in Georgia is associated with many challenges. Problems related to educational processes, inadequate infrastructure, sanitation, drinking water, a non-inclusive educational setting, the environment for

children with disabilities and special educational needs,³⁷ as well as the large-scale violation of teachers' labor rights are only a fraction of the existing challenges.³⁸ Problems in the education system affect both the quality of education and the attendance of children.³⁹ At the same time, when talking about education policy, it is especially important to address issues related to child labor, child poverty, early marriage, other reasons for dropping out of school, and youth who are out of school, which have not been fully addressed by the state.⁴⁰

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the education system of Georgia, which has already been facing many challenges, is threatened with completely unprecedented and large-scale problems. The pandemic made it clear that the insurmountable obstacle for some students and teachers was the lack of ICT infrastructure, devices, and an internet connection, which is required for engagement in the distance learning process. Due to the global problem of access to digital learning, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on states to direct efforts for the benefit of children who have limited access to technology and an internet connection, in order to minimize inequalities.⁴¹

As of 2020, 600,000 schoolchildren were involved in distance learning in Georgia. Given the scope of internet coverage in the country, studies have shown that 15% of school-age children did not have access to school resources during the pandemic. Moreover, socially vulnerable families were at risk of being cut off from social assistance for owning computers and other electronic devices.⁴² Studies have shown that in terms of access to internet resources and the necessary equipment, a particularly large problem was observed among large, socially vulnerable families and children living in rural areas.⁴³ By early 2021, there was an expectation that inequality in the digital and distance learning processes would deepen and that approximately

31 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art.26, available at: <https://bit.ly/3enQsPI>

32 European Social Charter, Signed by Georgia: 01/10/2005. available at: <https://bit.ly/3Ba6QMe>

33 Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 28, available at: <https://bit.ly/2l1pFc>

34 General Comment No. 13: The right to education (article 13) (1999), available at: <https://bit.ly/30orYK1>

35 Constitution of Georgia, Art. 27. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KJufR2>

36 The Law of Georgia on General Education, Article 7, available at: <https://bit.ly/3QitiH8>

37 See 'Preliminary Results of Monitoring the Implementation of Human Rights Strategies and Action Plans - Children's Rights, Disability Rights, Gender Equality and Women's Rights, EMC, PHR, Sapari 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/3A5yWVN>

38 See the 2018 report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the state of protection of human rights and freedoms in the country, p. 250-252, 2019; 'Access to Water and Sanitation in Georgian Public Schools', Public Defender of Georgia, 2018.

39 Note: According to PISA results, Georgian students lag significantly behind the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. 'OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment', available at: <https://bit.ly/3A6F7sN>

40 Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the state of protection of human rights and freedoms in the country in 2019, p. 328-329.

41 The Committee on the Rights of the Child warns of the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and calls on States to protect the rights of children; 8 April 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3Baph3p>

42 The Digital Divide: How the Pandemic Has Exposed Inequalities in the Georgian Education System', 29/04/2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/3C2Obja>

43 "What should we consider for the 2020-2021 academic year. Recommendations of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports", Education Coalition, EFA, 2020, p.5, available at <https://bit.ly/3z0gpsC>

50,000 children would not be engaged in the learning process.⁴⁴

Specific measures were taken by the state during the pandemic to manage the distance learning process - the creation of an electronic library and e-portals with national curriculum-based instructions and thematic resources for public schools; and a “teleschool” education program, translated into the Azerbaijani and Armenian languages. These measures alone cannot be considered proper enforcement of the right to education, as this process has left out a significant portion of vulnerable groups from access to education.

Despite the scarcity of assessments and research data, we can say that distance learning in Georgia has met significant challenges and the accompanying difficulties of this process have fully exposed the problems caused by inequality and social barriers in the country. The state has not only failed to fully ensure adequate and equal provision of the distance learning process, especially in the case of socially vulnerable and poor children from large families living in rural areas but also undermined the provision of continuous quality education to children and their full inclusion in the general education process.

⁴⁴ School reopening must be prioritized in lifting the restrictions, UNICEF says', 01.02.2021, available at: <https://uni.cf/3l7Ej0A>

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EDUCATION AT ALL COSTS

Distance Learning: Georgian Experience During the Pandemic



Disturbing factors of distance learning were highlighted, such as housing density, a lack of personal space, noise, helping younger siblings learn or caring for other family members, a lack of heating in winter, and a lack of the necessary learning materials.



Access to the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education (MES), as well as Microsoft Teams was also a problem, as some students' devices could not support these platforms. In addition, a large amount of internet was required, for which additional funding was essential.



The school plays a compensatory role and in addition to education, meets the basic needs for students' well-being. Due to limited mobility and isolation during the pandemic, benefits for students were severely limited. Moreover, due to parents' busy schedules and poor housing conditions, the role of the school and teachers in the teaching process was expanded.

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