

New study explores variation in COVID-19 school and childcare policies across Europe ^[1]

Author: University of Oxford, Department of Social Policy and Intervention

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

New research has unpacked the different ways countries across Europe have handled the issues of childcare and schools during the coronavirus pandemic.

While some countries – such as Sweden – kept primary schools and early childcare facilities open, and others – such as Italy – opted for closures, many pursued hybrid or variable approaches.

Writing in the journal *European Societies*, the researchers argue that the differences in responses result from a country-specific combination of pandemic prevention strategy (focused either on high-risk groups or the whole population) and childcare-related policy concerns (for example, educational goals or the balance between work and family life).

This research provides a framework, say the study authors, for future research into the cross-country variation in responses (including the effectiveness of those responses), as well as the gender and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research looked at data from 28 European countries and was carried out by Dr Ivana Dobrotić of Oxford's Department of Social Policy and Intervention, and Dr Sonja Blum of FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany.

Dr Dobrotić said: 'Cross-country variations in childcare policy responses to COVID-19 initiated a lot of discussion on how to balance public health with education and childcare-specific goals. It also raised a concern about the implications of various approaches for work-family conflict and gender inequalities, risk of social exclusion, and growing social inequalities in children's educational opportunities. With this work, we developed exact types of childcare and school closures and re-openings, which is a necessary step towards understanding their social and gender implications.

'We are continuing our work on this topic, and are further exploring hybrid approaches that tended to prioritise different groups of children re-entering the schools and childcare facilities. We also aim to see whether childcare closures were integrated into a coherent approach with accompanying (pandemic) leaves or benefits, allowing parents work-care balance. It will also be interesting to see how the pandemic affected childcare systems. For example, there is an indication that in some countries the pandemic raised the importance of childcare for the economy and gender equality, and put it higher on political agenda. However, in others, including the UK, it has also highlighted the existing challenges and raised fears of the permanent closure of some capacities.'

Dr Dobrotić's contribution to this study is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme.

Related link: Childcare-policy responses in the COVID-19 pandemic: unpacking cross-country variation ^[3]

Region: Europe ^[4]

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