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## **‘Making up for lost time’: Neoliberal governance and educational catch-up programmes for disadvantaged students during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Barbara Gross, Peter Kelly und Susann Hofbauer

**Abstract:** The neoliberal governance of education and the import of values such as economic productivity are changing schools in Europe to different degrees. Understanding the effects of this on disadvantaged students is especially critical during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, given their greater need for catch-up support. In this paper we analyse national government policy guidelines and reports concerning catch-up measures in Italy, Germany and England and illuminate debates between various actors using news and education media reports. We find that while catch-up measures in the studied countries promote equality of access, for instance through extending schooling to make up for lost time, the undifferentiated universal provision promoted by neoliberal logics is inequitable towards socio-economically, linguistically and ethnically disadvantaged students.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, catch-up programmes, neoliberalism, disadvantaged students

### **„Die verlorene Zeit aufholen“: Neoliberale Steuerung und Aufholprogramme für benachteiligte Schüler\*innen während der COVID-19-Pandemie**

**Zusammenfassung:** Die neoliberale Steuerung des Bildungswesens und der Einfluss von Werten wie der wirtschaftlichen Produktivität verändern Bildungsinstitutionen in Europa in unterschiedlichem Maße. Das Verständnis der Auswirkungen auf benachteiligte Schüler\*innen ist während und nach der COVID-19-Pandemie besonders wichtig, da diese Lernenden einen größeren Bedarf an Aufholförderung offenkundig werden ließen. In diesem Beitrag analysieren wir nationale Richtlinien und Berichte über Aufholmaßnahmen in Italien, Deutschland und England und beleuchten Debatten zwischen verschiedenen Akteur\*innen anhand von Nachrichten- und Medienberichten. Dabei zeigt sich, dass die Aufholmaßnahmen in den untersuchten Ländern zwar die Zugangsgleichheit fördern, indem beispielsweise die Schulzeit verlängert wurde, um „versäumte“ Zeit nachzuholen, dass aber das undifferenzierte universelle Angebot, das durch neoliberale Logiken befördert wird, eine Benachteiligung für bestimmte Schüler\*innen darstellt.

**Schlagwörter:** COVID-19, Aufholmaßnahmen, Neoliberalismus, benachteiligte Lernende

## **Introduction**

In this paper we consider how equitable<sup>1</sup> educational catch-up during the COVID-19 pandemic is in Italy, Germany and England. These three countries differ in the extent to which they have embraced neoliberal reform and their histories and socio-political constructions of migration. While our interest firstly was on students with a migration experience, we soon recognized that comparisons in this area are problematic because of national differences in (i) the complexity of migration flows shaping the cultural-linguistic and legal-citizenship diversity and associated needs of migrant populations, (ii) the categorisation frameworks used that affect data collection and analysis (Horvath 2019), (iii) the terminology used in official, public and media discourse, and (iv) the limited number of bespoke educational measures and policies for this target group during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is why we analyse the catch-up support following the COVID-19 school closures offered to the broader group of disadvantaged learners including those with low socioeconomic status, and/or those officially categorised as learners with a migration background (either by law or self-identification with minority ethnicities) and/or non-native language speakers. Thus, in this paper – whilst we are aware of the inclusion, exclusion, overgeneralisation and stigmatisation that every categorisation entails and the interrelation between class, origin and racism as structural problems – we consider these students as “disadvantaged students”.

## **The neoliberal governance of education in European countries**

From the 1990s, educational reform in Europe was increasingly influenced by a neoliberal agenda that regarded markets as the best way to promote human flourishing, although this has many critics (e.g., Harvey 2005; Bourdieu 1998a; Robertson 2007). This was accompanied by a view that it is not possible to govern public service delivery through legislation and statute alone (Moos 2009). Rather, service improvement should be steered by government using flexible forms of regulation and involve the active participation of a range of actors including, in the case of education, school leaders and teachers (Pollitt/Bouckaert 2011). Especially in England, governance took on a neoliberal character which soon spread elsewhere. To survive in conditions of output evaluations based on comparative measures of collective student performance and school inspections, of privatisation of services to schools, and of quasi markets

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<sup>1</sup> Educational equity is a complex and author-dependent concept (e.g., Ainscow, 2016). Here, it involves tailoring provision to students depending on their needs to promote success for all. Equal provision can be inequitable by not recognising the needs of specific students and may increase educational inequality by widening gaps in outcomes between different groups.

that were introduced in which schools competed for students, schools took on the practices of business in what was called the *New Public Management* (Hood 1991).

The extent of neoliberal governance in each country depends on the combination, make up and impact of the approaches – termed governance technologies (Ball 2021) – used. Schools in Italy and Germany also saw a reorientation from process to output evaluations, most dramatically, in Germany’s case, following the disappointment of international comparative student assessment results in the early 2000s (Waldow 2009). However, unlike the high stakes accountability framework in England, test and inspection data have a largely formative role in both Italy and Germany, providing feedback for school leaders and teachers to act upon in school improvement. Even so, both countries have, to different degrees, rethought the relationship of education to the state, economy and society, as private or non-governmental actors such as foundations, companies or consulting experts have proliferated and the imperative towards greater digitalisation has increased (Hartong et al. 2018). This has been especially observable during the COVID-19 pandemic, rekindling questions about equity in education.

There have been numerous critiques identifying the divisive nature of neoliberal educational reform (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Popkewitz/Lindblad 2000), where learning and success are evaluated through economic logic. In this logic inputs and outputs are related to productivity, and schools are required to produce *knowledge* and *skills* that favour the economic order and provide students with the tools to compete in the labour market. These conditions pose serious risks for the most disadvantaged pupils, as the inequality of students under these conditions is largely legitimised (Ball 2021). Bourdieu was already concerned by the economic field’s subversion of education (1998b), which is clear in economisation discourses about optimising (increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of) input to output relations in schooling and opening up aspects of education provision to market competition. Yet some years earlier, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) had argued that, by fitting people into the labour market and masking the socioeconomic determinants of educational outcomes, schools were already implicated in economic matters.

### **Public policy during COVID-19**

Governments try to maintain social unity by emphasising shared interests and rights and claiming “to state the public good, to be the public good and to appropriate public goods” (Bourdieu 1989-92/2014: 86). However, the public good is contested by individuals and groups with differing interests, priorities and values, and those with the most resources to deploy have

a greater say over what it constitutes. Nevertheless, those doing state work, whether directly or through state funded agencies, are trusted if they are believed to work for the welfare of all without undue personal benefit or privileging the interests of some over others. Viewed through this lens, negotiations about education and the public good differed considerably between England, Germany and Italy during the first wave of the pandemic, with economisation, marketisation and digitalisation playing different roles in shaping policy responses (Kelly et al. 2021). Yet in all three countries, school closures prompted subsequent calls for catch-up initiatives.

Here we consider the consequences of these initiatives for the most disadvantaged students; those most at risk of falling further behind when schools reopened (e.g., Gross et al. 2021; Kelly et al. 2021; Helm et al. 2021; UNESCO 2021). To do this, we compare policy responses aiming to support student catch-up following periods of school closure during the pandemic and their relation to neoliberal governance by using Bourdieu's (1971; 1986) account of the reproduction of inequality. Institutions such as schools are powerful actors that reproduce inequalities through latent mechanisms, for example through school cultures and by using educational language that is not equally accessible to all. With increased market orientation, the selective function of performance measurement is hidden because, formally, all learners have the same opportunities. Hence, the possibility of recognising systematic discrimination is denied to students who blame themselves for their failure and see themselves as unsuited for higher intellectual pursuits. However, the reproduction of social inequality through school should not be regarded as determining. Even though performance and economic discourses have the power to legitimise the legacy of social status, we renounce simplistic views of such phenomena as one-dimensional cause-effect relationships. Rather, in this paper we analyse how economisation discourses construct learning, how neoliberal orientations influence who receives catch-up provision and how the support provided contributes to the configuration of (un)equal opportunities.

## **Method**

To compare debates on how to compensate students for their missed schooling following school closures between countries, we drew on national government guidelines, reports, surveys, news and education media reports divided equally between the three countries (see Table 1). Media and public discussions adopt, shape, contrast and negotiate issues and contest different perspectives on those issues. We used a discourse analytics-inspired approach in corpus creation in which we were less committed to certain media formats, looking instead for

repetitions of thematised problem situations, the emergence of speaker positions and the stabilisation of topics and discussions (Potter 1996). Of this data we asked the following research questions: (a) How were concerns about socioeconomic and educational inequalities reflected in public debates? (b) What were the resulting policy responses and their consequences for disadvantaged students?

We subjected documents to a qualitative media content analysis (Mayring 2014; Ehrenspeck et al. 2008), characterised by an inductive and deductive procedure. After an initial thematic corpus creation (which predominantly used the term *migration* in relation to COVID-19 and catch-up programmes), the corpus was modified on the basis of an initial analytical review and comparison, and subjected to further analysis. Because of theoretical, terminological and migration policy inconsistencies among countries we had to extend the search and included diverse facets of disadvantages, including also *socioeconomically disadvantaged* and *different linguistic background*, in documents published between September 2020 and August 2021. We were specifically interested in this period because of discourses on reopening after school closures and its consequences for specific student groups. In England a total of 67, in Italy a total of 64 and in Germany a total of 64 news media reports and other documents, including guidelines and reports, were identified and used (see Table 1 for an overview).<sup>2</sup>

Answers to the first research question were largely descriptive whilst for the second we engaged in a process of analysis using Bourdieu’s accounts of social reproduction (1971; 1986; 1998c; Bourdieu/Passeron 1990).

Sources	England		Germany		Italy	
	Examples	Σ	Examples	Σ	Examples	Σ
National guidelines	DFE Ofsted	2	KMK	12	Italian Government Ministry of Education	39
Newspaper websites	The Guardian	20	Der Spiegel Die ZEIT	22	La Repubblica	11
Education media reports	TES	35	Das Deutsche Schulportal News4teachers	12	Orizzontescuola La Tecnica della Scuola	4
Reports, press releases and other documents	Policy think tanks Teacher unions	10	Parent unions Forum for migrants Teacher unions	18	Teacher unions Save the Children	10
Total amount		67		64		64

Table 1. Overview of sources used

<sup>2</sup> We are aware that the diversity of publication formats and delimitation of the time period brings problems when comparing media and political negotiations. Our analysis aimed to capture a reasonably comparable corpus, which again provided a challenge. To achieve this, we had to make some contextualised choices. For example, we drew on a smaller number of sources when the media coverage of relevant issues was strong (as in England), but analysed reports from a greater diversity of formats when (as in Germany) coverage was more diffuse. Further, the large number of guidelines in Italy reflects strong national regulation.

## **Results**

We divide our analysis into two parts. On the one hand, developments regarding school closures and public debates are presented on a descriptive level, and we compare how follow-up problems to school closures are discussed in all three countries. The second part focuses on policy responses and their consequences for disadvantaged students, which are analysed and categorised using Bourdieu's theoretical tools. In reporting the results for reasons of space, we have not cited the data sources (see examples and numbers in Table 1).

### ***School closures and public debates***

School closures occurred in several regions in Italy in March and April 2021. Support was offered to workers with young children or those in quarantine, and distance learning materials were provided, whilst in some areas students with disabilities and special educational needs could attend school in person, a measure that teachers, parents and educational policymakers criticised for endangering participants and potentially helping spread the virus. Learning difficulties were exacerbated by the long months of lockdown, and although almost all students progressed to the next class, one parent in five felt their child was not ready to tackle the programme because of their missed learning. Looking at student grades, two thirds maintained their performance, one fifth recorded an improvement in their end-of-year grades (more than a quarter, in the case of high school students) and the remaining 15% reported worse grades. In addition, economic conditions worsened; one parent in ten believed they could not afford all of the textbooks required and seven out of ten worried about the possible suspension of canteen services. Moreover, 8% of parents reported that their child was thinking of choosing a vocational course over high school enrolment because of their family's financial difficulties.

A third national lockdown closed schools in England in January and February 2021. There was already concern in October 2020 that children in the poorest areas of England were missing the most schooling, whilst research suggested that during earlier lockdowns children receiving free school meals, from single-parent households, with less-educated parents and with Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage spent significantly less time on schoolwork at home than their peers and had less access to digital provision and the internet. With fewer opportunities to communicate with native speakers, particularly in curriculum contexts, school closures were also likely to have had a significant effect on students working in a second language. As a result, teacher survey data about the amount of time spent on schoolwork for different groups collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggested in September 2021 that schools in the most

socioeconomically disadvantaged areas suffered the greatest loss of learning. This substantiated an analysis of student tests provided by an assessment tracking company widely used in primary schools published in November 2020.

After the gradual reopening of schools in Germany following the summer break, a second period of closure began in December 2020, with partial reopening in March and April 2021. These partial school closures along with individual quarantine measures affected educational participation, although this varied between federal states, particular locations, school types and even particular classes. As a result of the uneven impact of measures on provision, empirical studies providing an overview of the actual consequences for student learning, wellbeing and stress were difficult to conduct. Representative studies that focused on learning times rather cautiously, concluded that learning outcomes might have been negatively affected with negative consequences for students' future earnings.

As a consequence of national lockdowns and school closures, families in all three countries had to cope independently with tasks normally partly or fully delegated to educational institutions. The loss of support services, including early childhood, educational and sports provision, coupled with difficulties in involving people outside the immediate family as carers, brought major changes to family life particularly for those with few cultural and economic resources. This was difficult for parents, especially women, balancing family needs with work commitments, despite initiatives such as the possibility of taking ordinary paid leave or using vouchers for baby-sitting services in Italy.

In all three countries, although more pronounced in Italy and Germany than in England, the consequences of school closures for children and parents were subject to media scrutiny (Kelly et al. 2021). In policy debates, coalitions of educationalists, psychologists and doctors highlighted the impact of the pandemic on families and the cognitive development of students as well as more broadly on their mental health and wellbeing, but only rarely focused on disadvantaged students. In all three countries, educational actors worried about learning deficits and mental health needs stemming from the pandemic, all with potentially long-term consequences. However, they were also concerned with the intensity of catch-up proposals, believing that additional teaching in the afternoons and weekends or during holidays would affect their children's wellbeing. Those in Italy and Germany expressed anxiety about the limited provision during lockdowns and lack of digital competences of teaching staff, whilst teachers agreed that learning deficits would increase as distance learning continued and were concerned about the increasing numbers of students leaving school early.



Although rarely mentioned in early policy debates, concern was expressed largely for students with low socioeconomic status in all three countries. They were regarded as already disadvantaged compared with their better off peers, and further disadvantaged by home schooling and social isolation with negative consequences regarding language learning (an argument made more strongly in Italy and Germany). While studies, scientists, politicians and sometimes teachers, pediatricians and psychologists were well represented in the media, the voices of students and especially disadvantaged students were rarely included. In England, concern was also expressed *for* students from ethnic minorities. This also applies for the concern expression *for* a range of students in Germany and Italy including those already identified as low-achievers before the school closures and those categorised as having a migration background. The policy response, which we will turn to next, provided access of disadvantaged students to support and catch-up measures, although the initiatives themselves were not or just partly tailored to meet their specific needs.

### ***Policy responses and consequences for disadvantaged students***

Our thematic analysis collected national policy responses into six broad categories. We present these below and consider the consequences of policies within each group for disadvantaged students primarily using Bourdieu's theoretical tools.

#### *(1) Catching up on lost time*

In all three countries there was considerable focus on extending schooling to make up for lost time, especially in England, where this was almost the entire policy focus. In all cases, specific provision was included for those regarded as most disadvantaged by the school closures. Following closures in Italy, a number of initiatives were proposed to compensate for the lack of learning and consequences of social confinement. These were particularly aimed at students whose families lacked the necessary economic resources and other support opportunities. However, the various catch-up strategies subsequently provided by ministry addressed the entire school community and involved extending school hours. They included the possibility of lessons on Saturdays and a revised annual school calendar with an extension of the school year in June. Some catch-up initiatives focussed on the South of the country and summer initiatives took place in specific institutions in the most disadvantaged areas, although the number of students they catered for was limited. In all, the Italian government's summer plan funded 32,500 projects aimed at recovering 1,650,000 hours of school lessons, and focussed on linguistic, mathematical and some social activities.

Almost all of the suggested approaches to catch-up in England provided additional teaching to make up for *lost-learning*, a term that was widely used. Initially, much of the early debate was about extending the school day, but after this was rejected a Department for Education (DFE) plan for summer schools was more successful. In March, summer schemes lasting for two-weeks and aimed at students transferring to secondary schools that autumn, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose education has suffered most during the pandemic, were proposed. Teacher and student participation were voluntary, and they included daily English and maths lessons. However, by far the most important catch-up initiative was the National Tutoring Programme, announced by Prime Minister Johnson in June 2020, which we discuss later.

In April 2021, several German municipalities, concerned about the acute and long-term consequences of the pandemic for students, especially the educationally disadvantaged, called for catch-up plans. A catch-up programme initiative agreed with the federal states was set up in May 2021 and included voluntary summer tutoring and discussions about streamlining curricula and increasing school attendance. The resulting catch-up package, which received €2 billion in funding, had four components. The first aimed at reducing learning gaps and received half of this funding – not with direct addressing – but with the hoped-for expectation that students with migration experiences (almost 40% of the under-15s) are reached by these measures. To achieve this, implementation took place in cooperation with foundations, migrant associations, adult education centres and commercial tutoring institutes. In Hamburg, the ZEIT Foundation planned their own *Anschluss* learning support programme. Launched in March 2021, this offered student teachers learning support training as mentors. Starting in August, they led voluntary courses that were free of charge and aimed at the lowest 20% of achievers in school transition classes, especially children suffering serious losses in motivation and performance due to the pandemic. Other provision offered included learning vacations and learning support at all types of schools. At the same time, North Rhine-Westphalia made funds available for a programme of extracurricular education and care services, which included provision not only during the vacations, but also on weekdays and weekends, and was open to all students regardless of age or attainment. The federal state of Hesse organised *Löwenstark*, which includes heterogeneous support measures. Initiatives were criticised by the teachers' association for staff shortages, the linking to learning assessments and the promotion of the private tutoring sector.

The strength of the response in England partly relates to the high-stake inspection and test-based output orientation there. Consequently, the policy response reflected a view of knowledge

transmission and acquisition formed through years of privileging test-centred instruction, which led to a greater focus on time lost than in Italy or Germany. Nevertheless, approaches in all three countries are firmly rooted in a simple acquisition view of learning, and align with the distinction, proposed by Taglietti et al. (2021), between the linear and developmental time of traditional schooling and the multiple and uneven times of distance learning. The focus on time lost fits with the dominant meritocratic *doxa* (Bourdieu 1972) that through hard work, which combines time spent and effort made, all can succeed, coupled with economisation logics of productivity that relate how efficiently – without wasting time or resource – production inputs are transformed into outputs. In contrast, Bourdieu (1971; 1986) has a more participatory view of learning, where habitus – the embodied inclination to think and act consistently across different tasks and settings – is formed largely through informal interactions at home and plays an important role in shaping formal participation in school. This has two implications. First, differences in home environments disadvantage students who have fewer experiences to draw upon that can benefit them when they are in school, and who receive less support when schooling takes place at home. Second, viewing the acquisition of knowledge as a benign process and linking success to the time and effort given to school work ignores the ways in which students' earlier experiences shape their engagement with and understanding of knowledge, including their capacity to demonstrate their understanding when tested. Viewing school learning as a common process for all, which proceeds in the same way irrespective of how it takes place, however, precludes the need for targeted and bespoke interventions depending on student needs or circumstances.

## (2) *Home inequalities shape home learning*

Concerns were expressed in each country when calling for catch-up programmes that learners living in precarious conditions fared worse than others in the pandemic because of their limited economic, social and cultural resources, which Bourdieu (1986) calls capitals. Catch-up initiatives that do not attend to these differences are inequitable and will most likely perpetuate existing inequalities in education. However, anxieties about lost student learning during school closures in Italy and Germany were set in a wider debate that recognised the need to support families and students' mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, a common theme from both educationalists and citizens in Italy was the urgent need to close widening gaps and help students to catch-up, not only in academic subjects but also socially and emotionally (Francesconi et al. 2021). Hence, in addition to those already mentioned, initiatives for the 2020/21 school year, included the provision of 8,000 psychologists to provide a total of 125

hours of psychological counselling per school and available to students, teachers and parents. In Germany, half of the catch-up package in May 2021 was divided between three components that focussed on promoting early childhood education, vacation camps and extracurricular activities, and additional support for children and young people in everyday life and at school. Amongst those targeted by the package, which associated a lack of language skills and low achievement with social poverty and cramped living conditions, were children with a *migration background*. In addition, families dependent on welfare payments or with a low income were given a one-time payment of €100 to support family vacations or sports and pedagogically supervised leisure activities. Many of the state support packages focussed not just on subject consolidation, but also on supporting independent, creative and cultural learning. Consideration of broader social needs was more limited in England. Nevertheless, the proposal for summer schools with a largely academic focus had been criticised in an open letter by psychologists and child development experts from the campaigning group *PlayFirstUK*, and they called for play-based summer projects to promote children's mental wellbeing. Although this was not taken up by the government, summer schools that ran in August 2020 included activities promoting wellbeing and helping to build positive relationships. The greater recognition of the need to support families and students' mental health and wellbeing in both Italy and Germany reflects the slightly lesser importance of knowledge acquisition for testing there, even though their policy response included some focus on time lost and remediation initiatives. Further, given the extent of neoliberal reform, it is possible that the limited social consideration in England stems from the privileging individual over social responsibility.

Clearly, concerns that differences in time spent on home learning widens the learning gap between different groups, the primary motive for targeting catch-up support at disadvantaged students, ignores issues affecting quality. As Bourdieu (1971; 1986) suggests, home inequalities shape home learning. Some groups of parents or carers are less able to offer appropriate academic support or provide additional technical and cultural resources, for example, laptops, books or a suitable workspace, which economic capital affords. This raises particular questions about the suitability of home learning for non-native speakers, where language support may be lacking. Similarly, a focus on improving the attendance rates of specific groups on reopening does not consider the social and cultural factors that contribute to reducing presence, such as childcare demands that some social and ethnic groups place on older siblings. Here, homes are largely presented as neutral and benign spaces rather than places that provide opportunities for engagement or progress for some whilst limiting these for others.

### (3) *Existing difficulties come into focus*

In the context of longstanding underfunding, the policy response in Italy recognised the need for long-term investment and development to reduce regional variation and increase early childhood and digital provision, amongst other things. Although there were also calls for change in England and Germany, this was less pronounced as education there has long benefitted from steady investment (OECD 2021).

The financial resources committed to long-term investment and development in Italy were remarkable. One decree in March 2021 provided approximately €32 billion to alleviate the social and economic impact of measures adopted to contain the pandemic, with planned interventions divided into five main areas including fighting poverty. Another decree in May 2021 provided resources for *youth, school and research*. A further important initiative, the *Recovery Plan*, aimed to ensure equal opportunities for the welfare and development of all. The plan provided €28.49 billion from the *European Union's Next Generation Fund* for schools and education, with €16.72 billion of this earmarked for the *enhancement of competences*. However, for each of these initiatives there are significant challenges that need to be overcome, including filling gaps in early childhood services, reducing regional differences in the quantity and quality of education, where Southern Italy is a particular concern, digitalising education, increasing competences in STEM and multilingualism and specifically improving the education of women. However, it will be some years before these plans are fully enacted and even longer before their effects, particularly on the most disadvantaged students, can be evaluated.

Bourdieu (1989-92/2014) suggests that crises – such as the pandemic – exacerbate existing antipathies and tensions, and provide an opportunity for change. Whilst a small number of actors sought to maintain the status quo and focus on consensus-building in Italy, the government recognised the urgency of, at the very least, being seen to act in addressing the many inequalities that were exposed.

### (4) *Searching for a digital solution*

Education in England has seen considerable long-term investment in educational technology, while digital development has not been prioritised in the same way in Germany and Italy, where the use of educational technology is patchy. Both had aspirations for technological solutions but recognised the obstacles preventing them.

It was inevitable, when schools closed in England, that a technological solution would be sought. The Oak National Academy online teaching platform announced in May that it had created free to use resources for summer schools or for teachers. This comprised video and

associated resources designed by subject specialists. In June, the DFE announced that the platform would remain government funded in the autumn and maybe thereafter. For socioeconomically disadvantaged students unable to access online provision, the DFE announced further laptop and tablet in January in addition to the many already delivered to schools and an ongoing scheme providing free internet access. They also identified minimum standards for remote learning and the amount of online lessons provided by schools.

The belief that digital platforms and tools can widen access without the need for face-to-face attendance during lockdowns and be the basis for some additional teaching on reopening reflects a degree of technological optimism (Reynolds/Szerszynski 2012). For governments the main obstacle appears to be poor digital access for those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and they intervene by the provision of free devices and online access. However, as digital developments reflect the same dominant assumptions about teaching and learning, provision is largely concerned with facilitating knowledge acquisition in an efficient manner, regardless of the varied experiences and understandings that students bring or differences in the ways in which they engage with digital content. As such, undue faith is placed in technology, whatever form it takes, which is considered neutral, benign and providing equal benefit to all, without considering who is using it and where or how it is used. This leaves the digital solutions offered open to the Bourdieusian critiques (1971; 1986) that whether participation in learning activities is successful or not depends on both the habitus of learners and the capitals available to them.

##### *(5) Market response and market failure*

Even at its launch in November, English teacher unions including the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and National Education Union (NEU) were dismissive of the National Tutoring Programme (NTP), raising concerns about timing and quality control, and schools were slow in taking up support. The roll out of the NTP began in January and with 75% of the costs covered by government funding, schools chose from a list of thirty-two private providers employing an estimated fifteen thousand tutors, some doctoral students and volunteers and many without teaching qualifications, who would deliver tuition and provide specialist support to low attaining groups as academic mentors. From the outset, the take-up was low especially amongst low-income families. By April, the Association of School and College Leaders said teachers were having difficulty finding suitable tutors, and the NAHT worried about a shortage of tutors amid unease about their low pay and rapid turnover. Shortly after, the government announced that most tutoring funding would go directly to schools from September, allowing

them to hire their own tutors, whilst, Ofsted said that inspections would examine how well schools used tutors to support education recovery. Whilst provision of specialist academic tutors was possible under the revised NTP, few providers offered this. Instead, the generic catch-up provision did little to address the specific needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged or students whose first language was not English.

Given the dominance of privatisation and competitive tendering in education for more than two decades in England (Ball 2021), a market response to tutoring provision was predictable. There were many options for schools purchasing tutoring, with considerations of quality largely reduced to considerations of convenience and cost. The potentially high demand for tutoring increased the numbers of tutors required, compelling employers to relax the level of qualifications and experience they regarded as acceptable. Tutoring agencies are business-like, with costly overheads, who seek at least to break even on their investment. This meant that huge investments by government and schools often translated into minimal tutoring provision. In such situations, students' interests are marginalised as companies provide services that primarily cater for the needs of teachers, who follow their own interests as purchasers by privileging the likes of ease of administration and guaranteed evidence of student progress. Approaches marketed as common sense and without risk, tapped into the familiar knowledge acquisition *doxa* already discussed and critiqued (Bourdieu 1971; 1986). Ultimately, the general need for catch-up led to market failure, as the needs of majority students dominated and there was little specific provision that recognised variations in previous experiences, current understandings and preferred ways of working for low attaining and non-native language speaking students.

#### (6) *Equality over equity*

Catch-up approaches and materials in all three countries were not designed with particular groups of students in mind, even when these groups were also targeted to receive it. Instead, initiatives were pursued for support for student catch-up for all, although with additional provision for low achievers, non-native language speakers, and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners. Such catch-up provision was more extensive, market-based and made greater use of digital resources in England than in Italy or Germany. However, the poor design of digital provision and the many obstacles to market responses limited its impact on students. The universal design and availability common to most of the catch-up initiatives discussed here, inevitably benefit privileged groups disproportionately as the specific needs or requirements of those with (sometimes multiple) disadvantages remain unaddressed. The result is a high degree

of personal commitment and individualisation in the compensation of learning deficits on the one hand, and the need for a high degree of psychosocial resilience on the other. In all cases, universal provision that ignores socioeconomic and other constraints but appears to provide equal opportunities for all risks exacerbating pre-pandemic inequalities. By focussing on equal treatment, universal provision for all ignores differences in student dispositions to learning as embodied in habitus and the capital resources available to them (Bourdieu 1971; 1986), allowing the divide between already advantaged and disadvantaged students to widen. This universalism, evident in all countries, irrespective of whether there is market or state provision, also relates to the invisibility of some student groups in data, in comparisons or in recognition of needs and circumstances requiring bespoke initiatives.

### **Discussion: Making up for lost time**

Bourdieu helps us to understand that people's capacity to benefit from everyday interactions, including those of schooling, depends on the wider childhood experiences that shape their habitus. This is why we draw on him here. Amongst his insights are (a) that people deploy economic, cultural and social capitals, whose currency varies from field to field, as they struggle to forward their own interests and the interests of those they care for, and (b) that these capitals are unequally distributed (Bourdieu 1971; 1986). Linguistically, ethnically and socioeconomically disadvantaged students have a varied mix of such resources.

In this article we analysed the influence of neoliberal governance, which focusses schooling on outputs in all of the countries examined whilst linking this to high-stake accountabilities, fragmenting state provision and introducing market logics most strongly in England. We identified how debates about catch-up and the policies that resulted followed neoliberal logics, and found that, although evident in all three countries, there is a greater focus on universal provision for catch-up based on simple knowledge acquisition in the more intrusive and high-stake English policy context. But, as our Bourdieusian analysis shows, simple knowledge acquisition ignores the social and participatory nature of complex learning, whilst universal provision, sometimes provided through digital technologies or market processes, ignores differences in student resources and out of school support. These allow already advantaged students to maintain and increase their privilege, and thereby (re)produce the inequalities of the disadvantaged. Our analysis indicates that immediate initiatives aiming to compensate students for schooling time lost during lockdowns in all three countries are only marginally helpful for those who are socioeconomically, ethnically or linguistically disadvantaged.



During the pandemic, a number of educationalists and researchers highlighted the limited involvement of educationalists in policy development (summarised in Kelly et al. 2021). Securing adequate resource is clearly an important starting point, but this needs coupling to a policy vision, strategy and commitment to improving children's wellbeing more holistically if it is to deal with such a complex and serious situation. One implication of the foregoing Bourdieusian analysis for all three countries is that, instead of focusing on time lost and catch-up alone, resources should also be targeted on reducing or compensating for home inequalities that hamper engagement and progress. This could include a stronger collaboration between schools and families, support to improve the home environment and social and health interventions to tackle wider constraints that may impede educational progress. Indeed, school choice in Italy provides an example of what can happen if already disadvantaged students do not receive this kind of additional support. Those students who were aiming for a secondary school diploma, opted instead for vocational training paths because of economic difficulties in their family homes, with long-term consequences for their life chances, career opportunities and future earnings. Despite substantial investment supporting learners and their families in all three countries, less was said about how these financial resources could be used to benefit those with often multiple disadvantages without adding to the fragmentation of services and policies. Here, whilst recognising the importance of wider, bespoke support and intervention, services for families and children also need rethinking, with structural and long-term plans to build networks between educational, social and health services and integrate some areas of provision, especially as the complex problems faced are strongly interrelated.

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