

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

*Barbara Gross, Peter Kelly and 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 measures, neoliberalism, disadvantaged students

## „Die verlorene Zeit aufholen“: Neoliberale Steuerung und Aufholmaßnahmen 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 Lernzeit an Schulen 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 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

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1 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.