

## Short summary of the impact of COVID-19 on schools in Malta

Data from a sample of teachers, parents and pupils in Malta about their experiences of blended and online learning during the pandemic has thrown light on effective practice and some of the reasons for this.

On 28th March, 2020, government had announced decisions related to education institutions which included the closure of schools and educational institutions till the end of the scholastic year. A largely reflexive response between March-June 2020 was adopted and measures related to online teaching were used to ensure some continuity of the scholastic year. During the lockdown, there were no specific directives given by MEDE and schools provided some form of online learning depending largely on their own initiative and resources.

With the start of the scholastic year 2020-2021, physical distancing had become a key component in determining a safe reopening of schools with details of the guidelines issued by the Department of Health and Education Ministry. The document enlisted three possible scenarios under consideration for the re-opening of schools for the 2020/2021 scholastic year namely traditional classroom-based education, the hybrid/blended model where a mix of face-to-face learning and virtual lessons takes place or 100 % virtual learning with no face-to-face teaching. The on-line or hybrid option was considered to be a standard default or fall back for all schools and years. Furthermore, the document stressed that an element of, at least a partial virtual learning component, was necessary since the school still needed to provide learning to those who could not attend school.

In 2020-2021, there was no second lockdown in Malta but many schools adopted different measures to ensure social distancing. Some schools had classrooms big enough to cater for each class population while safeguarding social distancing protocols. Others did not have the physical space for this so not all students were accommodated physically. Some schools used synchronous teaching whereby some students were present at school while some others followed the lessons online. Other schools split each class into two classrooms, with the class teacher being in one class while transmitting to the other class, managed by a class assistant. Whatever the case was, most schools used online platforms as a new pedagogical tool.

The factors which enabled the emergence of good practice were the immediacy of school responses to the situation with investment from an infrastructural point of view. Schools offered digital support mechanisms whereby every teacher and child had a core provision of hardware, software and access to a platform as a normal part of educational support. Teachers were encouraged to take the TEAMS online training course. Furthermore, teachers supported each other, and a cultivated collegial atmosphere was reported. The SMT of the schools interviewed offered constant support and presence to staff, parents and students. All parents and many students in fact, reported that they felt supported by teachers and SMT. Students felt that they had access to their learning and more so to teachers themselves. It was also reported by both staff and students that a benefit of online teaching and learning was an increase in creativity and innovation in pedagogical practices.

Concerns were also expressed about the lack of personal and social interactions in the online classroom. Furthermore, the school staff interviewed felt that they were not offered guidelines and directives by the Ministry and their response to the pandemic resulted largely from internal support mechanisms, such as drawing on internal expertise, improvement of infrastructure and comradery.

The practice of Blended Learning was appreciated as it gave access to learning to all students and furthermore students felt they had control and access to their own learning. Interviewees are in favour of blending some practices and see the validity of Blended Learning with respect to pedagogy and communication with parents and students. However, all stakeholders strongly prefer face-to-face teaching.