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## Deflecting the crisis of education: The COVID-19 pandemic as a missed moment of decisive intervention towards structural transformation

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### Abstract

Crises bring about a potential to refocus policy debates and to catalyse decisive interventions (Hay, 1999) towards structural reforms. Comparing the political debates related to education in the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary and Romania between March 2020 and July 2021, we explored the dynamics of the education policy discourse and how these political narratives approached educational and health-related inequalities brought forth by the crisis. By performing critical frame analysis (Dombos et al., 2012) on policy debates concerning crisis management in education, we show how the crisis first beheld the potential for decisive intervention and how this potential was deflected. The deflection of this potential reinforced the dominance of economic crisis framings that disregarded the educational and/or health needs of the most marginalised in both countries. Thus, the educational and health consequences of the pandemic for the most marginalised subjects in the educational systems were progressively rendered invisible in policy debates. The most marginalised subjects were socio-economically disadvantaged students with little or no access to digital learning infrastructures in Romania and teachers and educational workers with health risk conditions in Hungary. Deflection as a dual movement operated both as a social mechanism of inequitable burden redistribution of the consequences of the pandemic within education, and as a discursive mechanism reproducing the dominance of economic reasoning, limiting potential for transformative educational possibilities.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, crisis, crisis management, policy frames, Central and Eastern Europe, equity, education*

## 1 Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about drastic restrictions in face-to-face education across the globe. These measures catalysed broader policy debates between government and non-governmental actors about the responsibilities of ensuring the preservation of the health of citizens and workers in education and equal access to quality education for all. However, several years after the pandemic, these concerns no longer take centre stage in policy debates, despite the potentially ravaging consequences of both the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis management policies for marginalised populations in education. In this paper, we trace the shifts in the policy debates concerning education by looking at how a moment of

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decisive intervention (Hay, 1999) towards structural transformation emerged and was then deflected, reinforcing dominant economic understandings of crisis and crisis management. Thus, the objective of our enquiry is to contribute to the literature on the transformation of the state during crises as well as to studies on the importance of and policy responses to social inequalities in major crises (Béland and Ramesh, 2022; Capano et al., 2022; Segatto et al., 2022).

While education research typically restricts its focus to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic within the education sector, the novelty of this study is that we aim to highlight the interdependence of the education sector with other policy domains and situate it within broader processes of state formation and crisis management. We do this by looking at how policy debates between non-governmental and government actors evolved during the first three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in two Central and Eastern European countries, with a special focus on the normative justification of policy proposals and measures. We argue that akin to previous crises within capitalism (Hall et al., 2013, p. 310), the health and equity aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been initially timidly recognised publicly as a crisis affecting education, only for this potential to be deflected later on, causing the negative consequences of the pandemic in terms of educational equity and health to be displaced onto marginalised groups. In the two countries studied here, these were socio-economically disadvantaged students and teachers with health risk conditions. This deflection occurred through the circulation of crisis frames that have refocused the policy debate primarily around economic questions and diverted attention away from other crises affecting education.

## *2 Theoretical framework: Crises as opportunities for structural reform*

Pivotal classical theories of Marx (1981), Gramsci (1971) and Habermas (1975) posited crises as critical conjunctures undermining the authority of the state and opening up the opportunity for change. As such, crises are read as ‘moments of decisive intervention’ (Hay, 1999) that hold the potential for structural transformation and more recently as significant learning moments that shape future processes of government (Jessop, 2018). Reading the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis in education through the lens provided by this literature signals the possibility for structural transformation. However, recent empirical studies seem to disprove this argument. Discussing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education policy in Landri (2025) has shown that treating this crisis as a ‘tame’ and not a ‘wicked’ issue enabled the government to return to previous forms of ‘school normality’ once the emergency context could be declared to be over and alternative ways of thinking about schooling and expertise soon disappeared. In the same vein on a more general note, Hogan et al. (2022) find that, in most cases, crises tend to be followed by policy continuity and do not result in significant policy shifts. Specifically, when studying post-pandemic education policy and delivery in selected European countries, Zancajo et al. (2022) find that long-term responses in most countries led to partial reforms or new investments in already running programmes and have not constituted path-departing policy change. However, while some collective and collaborative initiatives reorganised day to day schooling and social relations (Safta-Zecheria et al., 2021), these initiatives were mostly short-lived and the acceleration of digitalisation of education (Landri, 2021) became the main way forward. Digitalisation of education systems was a rapidly strengthening policy area before the pandemic. The pandemic served as a catalyst that accelerated pre-existing trends and amplified voices calling for the digitalisation of teaching and learning and teachers’ digital training leading to problematic outcomes (West, 2025). These findings suggest that not all crises materialise into structural transformation and that questions of inequality are likely to be ignored in moving beyond initial crisis management

measures.

Borrowing Gramsci's concept of catastrophic equilibria, Hay (1999) notes that in cases where there is no decisive intervention, even though crisis symptoms are apparent and widely recognised, crisis is not constructed in the political discourse and decisive interventions are not made. In this vein, Boin et al. (2020) suggest using the 'creeping crisis' concept. According to their definition, in contrast to 'fast-burning' crises, the threat of such slow-burning crises lurks in the background, may be recognised by certain experts or politicians, but for long fails to generate a sense of urgency among the wider public. It plays out in slow motion, its symptoms may be addressed, but its underlying causes escape treatment. Initial reviews point to the fact that learning losses due to school closures have disproportionately affected vulnerable students worldwide (Spiteri et al., 2022). (Cross) national data documenting the changes in educational outcomes have only started to appear recently (Di Pietro, 2023; Gajderowicz et al., 2025; Jakubowski et al., 2025), however, it will most likely take many years if not decades before the inequalities resulting (e.g. in wage-losses of the cohort affected) become truly visible in big data (Blaskó et al., 2022), which makes it easier for both governments and the wider public to ignore the problem of mounting structural inequities in education altogether. Moreover, although aggravating educational inequalities have received more attention and resources in some countries and contexts but in this area, novel policy approaches did not appear. Moreover, even though educational equity questions were addressed in several studies on the COVID-19 pandemic (Darmody et al., 2021; Hill and Reimer, 2023; Mitescu-Manea et al., 2021), bibliometric analysis of COVID-19 related research on education showed that social justice informed research was at best a marginal occurrence (Durrani and Ozawa, 2024). This points to the fact that academic debate has come to mirror, at least in part, the public invisibility of the crisis of equity in education enabled by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this paper, we want to explore how the potential for a moment of decisive intervention appeared to emerge in policy debates at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and how this momentum disappeared from policy debates. This is why, following Knio (2018, p. 12) we read crises as 'processes that unfold through the various attempts at managing them'. Furthermore, following Mellamphy et al. (2022, p. 1), we argue that the (initial) uniqueness of the situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic 'rendered traditional crisis narratives inappropriate and led to an ongoing process of narrative construction by a wide range of actors.' Nevertheless, to a significant extent, not all framings have been translated into policy responses. Our work shows how initial potentialities disappeared in attempts at managing the crisis in both countries, reinforcing economically dominated crisis framings.

This call to revisit the pandemic as a significant moment of possibility of structural and systematic change in education is not new, as children's rights scholars (Colucci-Gray, 2022), educational temporality scholars (Landri, 2025) as well as equity scholars more broadly (Cairney and Kippin, 2022) have already pointed to this (lost) potential. What our paper adds to this scholarship is the tracing of both the emergence and the disappearance of this potential in the concrete policy debates in education in two Central East European countries, as well as enabling thought of the movements of crisis recognition and deflection from within to the outside of the field of education.

## 2 Methodology

We draw on policy debates in Romania and Hungary throughout the first three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-March 2020 to July 2021). We have chosen these two countries because, despite a similar approach to governing education during the pandemic's first wave

(Mitescu-Manea et al., 2021), later policies strongly diverged, with Hungary choosing to keep schools open for the majority of time, while face-to-face school education remained largely suspended in Romania. In comparing two markedly different contexts of crisis governance, we show how similar dynamics of deflecting the crisis are at work in both contexts. The assumption underlying our enquiry is that an analysis comprehensively addressing these two diverging contexts is likely to offer insight into present discursive transformations in education policy in other countries too.

The research question that informs our enquiry is: *how have crises in education been discursively framed by governments and non-government actors during the COVID-19 pandemic?* To answer this, we analysed policy documents and policy-related statements issued by government and opposition actors, relevant local authorities and school administrators, as well as non-state actors: NGOs, trade unions, parent and student associations, experts and market actors. Our database was compiled manually by searching relevant outlets in the two countries and putting together the information into common hyperlinked excel sheets. By specifically focusing on comparing governmental and non-governmental policy framings of the crisis, the study aims to shed light on how the crisis was being managed, and how non-governmental actors offered a counterpoint to the limitations of policy frames used by national governments, showing how specific issues were raised publicly but never came to be translated into government policies. This allowed us to explore how a crisis of education was both partly and feebly recognised and how it progressively stopped being recognised thus pointing to how and by which means the moments of ‘decisive intervention’ were missed.

As we chose to focus on publicly visible NGOs, trade unions and other social movement and economic actors, we have likely included in our analysis positions stemming from the direct experience of these organisations with their users and members. Consequently, a notable limitation of the study is that the positions of school-aged children in socio-economically marginalised remote rural communities with no access to NGO services are likely to be absent from our approach but truly significant. However, due to the digital poverty of such communities (that underpins their very educational marginalisation), these accounts would have only been accessible through face-to-face ethnographic or interview research that was largely suspended for much of the timeframe under analysis here. We hope that our argument helps to open a discussion on these topics and situations, despite not claiming to offer a comprehensive account of positions that have been rendered invisible in policy debates.

Following Bacchi (2000)’s understanding of policy-as-discourse, the study aims to problematise the categories and frames that guided education policy debates during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conceptualise individual policies in a similar manner to Ball ([1993] 2006, p.12), seeing them as ‘textual interventions into practice’ that give rise to reactions and interpretations from sets of actors affected by these policies. We aim to go beyond ‘mere’ textual analysis into a discursive analysis of policy as ‘how [policy] statements are formed and made possible’ (Ball, 2015, p. 311). Being primarily concerned with the discursive dimension of policies, we explored how ‘policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of “truth and knowledge”, as discourses’ (Ball, 1993, p. 14). We have complemented the critical readings of policies with the analysis of framings employed by non-governmental actors, akin to Benford and Snow (2000), we looked at how policy framing is carried out outside of government institutions by NGOs, trade unions and other stakeholders seeking to produce a change in education during this time.

In order to combine these approaches and render a comparative analysis of two national contexts workable, we employed Critical Frame Analysis (Dombos et al., 2012). CFA has its origins in both social-movement framing (Benford and Snow, 2000), and policy-as-discourse

approaches (Bacchi, 2000), and was specifically designed with the analysis of gender equality policies in mind. However, recently it has been used to understand the framing of teacher education (Fernández, 2018) and educational (Mitescu-Manea et al., 2021) and health related inequities in education (Safta-Zecheria et al., 2022).

Following the CFA method, we sampled all legislative and policy documents related to compulsory education (laws, decrees), as well as general legislative and policy documents that indirectly impacted education (e.g. declaring a state of emergency) issued in the period between mid-March 2020 to July 2021. Furthermore, extending the method, we included public statements delivered by the government's executive bodies with direct reference to education. Moreover, by conducting a media analysis and analysing the websites and social media communications of non-state actors occurring in the media, open-letters, open access reports containing policy recommendations, press releases, petitions and other policy-related statements by non-state actors and opposition party representatives were also included. The final sample consists of 277 documents in the Hungarian case and 148 documents in the Romanian case. The material was then coded manually. As in CFA, recurrent cycles of inductive coding were carried out to identify common meta-frames related to the construction of crises in the two national contexts. The analysis of meta-frames focuses on 'overarching frames of a higher-level of generality that stretch over different policy issues and can be operationalised as the normative aspects of issue frames', thus enabling us to identify common normative claims across policy issues (Dombos et al., 2012, p. 6). CFA is a particularly astute methodology in bringing out specific relevant aspects of policies, rather than describing these exhaustively, a point also stressed by some of its proponents (van der Haar & Verloo, 2016). In this vein, we looked at how the language of crisis warranted the recognition of certain calls for action while rendering others invisible. The language of meta-frames allows us to see how different calls for action were prioritised over others within policy frames, enabling us to connect different loosely connected policy documents. In this respect, meta-frames allow us to engage with discourses that assemble policies and make them possible, bringing us closer to Ball (2015)'s understanding of policy as discourse.

In our analysis, we identified three main meta-frames that drove the normative underpinning of education policies in the two countries by constructing the COVID-19 pandemic in education crisis as: (a) a *health crisis in education*, (b) a *crisis of education*, and (c) *an economic crisis connected to education*.

### 3 Analysis

#### 3.1 *The three meta-frames, their relationship and representation in policy documents and policy debates in Hungary and Romania*

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early spring 2020 saw the suspension of face-to-face activities in schools as preventive health measure in both countries. As such, the initial policy measures were explicitly directed towards securing the right to health through proclaiming a state of emergency brought about crisis management policies. As shown in Table 1, securing the right to health meta-frame was clearly present throughout the first three waves of the pandemic in both countries. Nevertheless, it came to be articulated differently in concrete policy measures and progressively lost its importance. By the second pandemic wave in both countries, the framing of the context as an economic crisis became prevalent in crisis management and gradually replaced the initial health framing. While first health and then economic concerns dominated the governments' approaches to crisis management, non-governmental actors signalled that a very different crisis was being produced by the pandemic crisis man-

agement policies, namely a crisis of education. This crisis never took the central stage in government policy frames, attesting to how the crisis of education came to be regarded as collateral damage in the process of pandemic crisis management (Saito, 2021). However, to a greater extent in Romania, this framing was dominant in non-governmental actors' framing of the crisis in policy terms – pointing to the opportunity of taking the present moment as one of raising awareness about aggravating structural educational and health risk inequities in education. Thus, although crisis management policies in both countries centred first on health and then on economic matters, the policy debate brought the crisis of education in both countries into a new light. In the following, we will engage with each of the identified meta-frames and show how they played out in the policy debates in both countries.

**Table 1** Percentage of documents addressing each of the three meta-frames. The percentage is given in relation to the type of document (government / non-government) and the country (Hungary/ Romania)

|                                        | government documents |         | non-government documents |         |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|
|                                        | Hungary              | Romania | Hungary                  | Romania |
| Health crisis in education             | 79%                  | 49%     | 63%                      | 30%     |
| Crisis of education                    | 6%                   | 22%     | 34%                      | 90%     |
| Economic crisis connected to education | 16%                  | 15%     | 17%                      | 7%      |

Source. : Author's compilation.

### 3.2 *Health crisis in education meta-frame*

During the initial wave, administrations in both countries stated that strict lockdown measures including school closures were the only measure that could secure the health of citizens. At the time of the following two pandemic waves, both governments promoted a more nuanced approach to opening schools, declaring that they intended to keep them open for face-to-face education as much as possible. However, in Romania, this was barely realised since schools remained closed for long periods, most notably from November 2020 to February 2021, and in April 2021. When schools were reopened it was promoted by the government as an equity measure aimed at ensuring the right to education, until the end of the second pandemic wave when the opening of schools became linked to the reopening of the economy. This was also connected to different measures of economic support for parents that were more readily available during the first two waves of the pandemic.

By contrast, in Hungary primary schools and kindergartens remained open throughout most of the school year (with the exception of April-May 2021), whereas face-to-face secondary education was suspended for several months (mid-November 2020 to early May 2021). Keeping schools open was justified by the government not as an equity- but as an economic measure that enabled 'the economy' to function by ensuring that parents could return to work as soon as possible and avoiding crises at home, where women could feel overburdened by working while caring for children.

Throughout the three pandemic waves, government actors in Romania repeatedly justified keeping schools closed as a health measure. However, by the second pandemic wave, Romania's policy started favouring a relaxation of health-related restrictions for commercial agents, allowing shopping malls to reopen before schools opened for face-to-face education. This marked a turning point, as health measures applied predominantly to restrictions within education (e.g. restricting the reopening of schools for face-to-face education) but not to

commercial agents. This pointed to the fact that quality face to face education was readily sacrificed to protect the health of citizens without putting strain on a consumption driven economy.

Governmental actors in both countries downplayed the extent of the public health crisis when permitting schools to open by presenting schools as 'safe' places and urging parents to send their children to school. This often went hand in hand with performative practices aiming at demonstrating schools' safety from a public health perspective. Most notably in Hungary, starting with the second wave and sharply contrasting to the first wave, government communication systematically downplayed health risks. The government was firmly committed to keeping schools open through the 2020/2021 school year as long as possible. Expanding the 'war against the virus' metaphor (Wodak, 2021) to education, the government portrayed schools as the first line of defence (the warranties for the continuity of life and economic production in the hinterland), and schools were expected to implement 'defence operations', sanitary and social distancing measures. This approach to keeping schools open underscores ways in which from the onset of the second wave the economic crisis framing started to predominate in the Hungarian case.

In this context, non-state actors (most importantly trade unions) and oppositional parties also constructively engaged with the health crisis meta-frame. However, these utterances predominantly focused on stressing the health risks of continuing face-to-face education. In this framing, the government, failing to act in time and protect teachers and students with effective measures, was presented as the main threat to teachers' and students' health and safety that should be held responsible for risking human lives. In response, the government applied a 'reversed form of politicisation', any criticism of the government's measures coming from the opposition, experts or non-governmental actors were labelled as 'political' attacks (Bene and Boda, 2021). The Democratic Union of Teachers (PDSZ) in particular, was frequently accused of making false claims to gain political benefits.

In the Romanian case, the national trade union federation in education (FSLI) repeatedly raised the issue of teachers' right to health. Especially during the short periods when schools reopened, they publicly raised the question of how teachers with underlying health conditions were required to teach, requesting special regulations that would allow them to keep working from home. Moreover, before the COVID-19 vaccines became available requested priority for teacher to get flu jabs that were considered to offer some protection. Later, trade unions together with UNICEF requested teachers become a priority group in vaccination, a point that was also translated into policy.

In short, stakeholders in both countries, especially teacher unions, responded with an argument emphasising the health risks of face-to-face education, with the aim of putting the issue of teachers' right to health and safe working conditions on the political agenda. They also raised concerns about the insufficiency of preventive health measures, the lack of human and material resources for effective sanitary measures, and the spatial and physical constraints of social distancing in schools. Most prominently in Romania, this went hand in hand with experts bringing data showing differences in overcrowding and lack of sanitation in schools into the public debate – pointing to decades of growing inequity in sanitary school infrastructures between rural and urban schools. They called for the schools to be opened and for a governmental plan to address educational inequities by investments in sanitary infrastructures and in reducing overcrowding in schools. Hence, while in Hungary, the argument emphasising health risks was used to advocate for closing schools down, in Romania, stakeholders demanded investment in reducing the health risks and open the schools kept closed by the government.

The debate about vaccination priorities starting in early 2021 marked another important moment in the development of the health crisis meta-frame. In the Romanian case, the government presented vaccinations for teachers, educational staff and later school-aged teenagers as essential pathways to returning to face-to-face education and associated economic activity. Nevertheless, these measures were not prioritised either early on or thoroughly enough. Teachers and other workers in education were given second-degree priority in vaccination early on. Yet, the challenge was, as non-governmental actors highlighted, the low vaccination participation that was attributed to the lack of media and science literacy among teachers and school workers. NGOs, in partnership with public institutions, started vaccination information campaigns and media literacy campaigns to debunk COVID-19 -related conspiracy theories. In turn, the government publicly blamed teachers for the difficulties in ensuring a return to face-to-face education. In Hungary, the government refused to prioritise the vaccination of people working in education, not considering them as priority groups until the end of March 2021, and only when vaccinations became widely available did it frame the acceleration of vaccination as the only way to release restrictions arguing that sole lockdown measures were not effective. This was done despite the fact that non-governmental actors argued for the prioritisation of workers in education.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments appeared willing to prioritise health concerns over economic and educational priorities. This willingness faded progressively and was replaced by economic concerns in both contexts. As such, the most obvious consequence was putting at risk the lives of teachers and other educational workers with health conditions, as well as those of students and their families. Mitigation measures such as quick and effective quarantining, regular testing and priority vaccination could have helped to ease the health burden on educational actors. However, these were either put in place in a delayed way or overly focused on individual cases (in Hungary) or proved to be unsuccessful (in Romania). Finally, non-governmental actors that signalled concerns for infringements on teachers' right to health were discursively marginalised by governments through public discrediting, most notably in Hungary.

### *3.3 The crisis of education meta-frame: a missed moment of decisive intervention?*

Non-government actors were the leading proponents of addressing the pandemic as a 'moment of decisive intervention' in education through policies that would start with but also go beyond crisis management. The main concern of such proposals was ensuring educational equity during remote education but also pointing to the structural inequalities in education that would need to be addressed in order to move towards quality digitised education that could also secure basic health rights. Most non-governmental organisations when signalling this crisis pointed out the immediate need to act, while a minority pointed to the potential for structural transformations in the mid- and long term. We distinguish between two aspects of this meta-frame: the ***crisis in education*** (as an ongoing urgent short-term call for action) and the ***crisis of education*** (as a crisis made visible and exacerbated by the pandemic, but by no means reducible to the pandemic context).

In terms of government positions, the meta-frame was underrepresented (see table 1). The Hungarian government entirely denied and neglected the crisis of education. In contrast, in Romania, it only partially or inconsequentially recognised it.

At the onset of pandemic crisis management policies, the lack of governmental recognition of the existence of a *crisis in education* was visible in the reluctance to address the new remote teaching and learning contexts. Neither resources nor guidelines were available for teachers working under special conditions in Hungary. In Romania, the government, at

first, misrepresented the existence of a crisis in education by focusing on the extraordinary features of the health crisis – the right to education was suspended and remote education recommended but not set out in terms of concrete practice recommendations. Several weeks into the pandemic, the shift to online education was declared mandatory by the Ministry of Education, despite numerous calls from NGOs, teacher unions, student councils and parents' associations to address the various educational inequities this entailed. The government only recognised and addressed specific adverse unequal effects the shift to online education would generate (such as recognising that students in low-income households would lag behind for lack of access to educational activities) but withheld from addressing structural inequities resurfacing in the context of the pandemic which had the potential to elicit deeper discussions about curricular and educational reforms. For example, in the Romanian case national examinations (such as the National Assessment at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade) have been proven to underscore the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities (especially between urban and rural, as well as between poor and wealthy students) through de facto enabling performance-based segregation (Țoc, 2018). Inequalities were expected to be strongly exacerbated by school closures that would widen the achievement gap and its individual consequences in terms of high school placement and possibility of passing the Baccalaureate at the onset of the pandemic (Florian and Țoc, 2020). This prompted experts to advocate an annulment of these measures for the 2019/2020 school year and a fundamental replacement of these examinations with formative assessments (Florian and Țoc, 2020). Such proposals recognised that the pandemic did not hit education in a vacuum but only underlined already operating trends of educational inequity and used the context to propose more socially just alternatives. However, even though in Romania these proposals were an integral part of the policy debate they never materialised into policies taken up by the government.

Romanian and Hungarian NGOs working with vulnerable groups and marginalised communities, experts and oppositional parties raised concerns about the right and access to education of disadvantaged and Roma communities, and of students with special education needs during remote education. They repeatedly underlined the aggravating equity crisis in education that surfaced as an outcome of the inequitable impact of public health measures on the access to quality education for vulnerable and marginalised groups. During the second wave in Romania, these NGOs continued to problematise the lack of access to online education for the most vulnerable and the problems involved in effectively ensuring physical distancing in the present infrastructure during face-to-face activities, thus pointing to the relationship between a hard to manage health crisis and a de facto equity crisis in education aggravated by the suspension of face-to-face activities in schools.

As suspending face-to-face education was one of the key strategies for managing the health crisis in Romania, the unequal consequences for educational actors remained largely unaddressed and unrecognised by government actors. Exceptionally, access to education was discussed as a critical priority by government actors during the periods in which the decentralised system allowed certain schools to be open. However, once schools were closed, the issue of access to education became secondary to managing health concerns again. Nevertheless, mainly during the third wave, the government took limited, targeted measures to reduce learning gaps. For example, it introduced remedial classes during the summer, a measure that remained largely underfunded.

In Hungary, the government had never planned significant interventions to tackle equity issues or unequal access to education and to support those missing out from education because of 'pandemic education'. While equity concerns were at the centre of the criticism of the government's crisis management during the school closures in the first wave, such con-

cerns were much less emphasised during the 2020/2021 school year when schools partially remained open.

The pandemic opened an opportunity to reveal underlying systemic contradictions in the education sector. In both countries, at the onset of pandemic management policies, experts and NGOs discussed the resurfacing structural inequalities in the educational system, pointing to the possibility of introducing short-term, pandemic-related changes with a long-term beneficial impact on education through systemic transformations. This frame was underrepresented in the overall sample. However, it is of critical importance for understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic could have offered a moment of decisive intervention.

In Hungary, experts and NGOs working in marginalised communities were actively shaping the public debate during the first wave highlighting that remote education will increase the learning gap of disadvantaged and at-risk students and urging the government to plan for long-term action to address these issues. However, after reopening schools in September 2020, such calls for systemic policy interventions faded away.

In Romania, these proposed measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus in educational settings, alongside achieving different long-term goals, among which increasing equity (e.g. by redesigning national evaluation procedures), access and quality in education (e.g. by decreasing class sizes) beyond the pandemic, implementing blended education on a mass scale, including in marginalised communities, allowing for open sharing of resources between educators using digital platforms. During the second and third waves, alarm signals regarding the growing learning gap continued to appear in policy debates promoted mostly by NGOs working with marginalised students. These calls lost the comprehensive and systemic edge they had during the first wave.

### *3.4 Economic crisis connected to education meta-frame*

Initially, the two governments addressed the relationship between the economy and schooling very differently, yet their framings converged briefly before the third wave. In the Hungarian government's communication, the goal of saving workplaces and mitigating the economic crisis was a paramount concern in relation to education all along. In the first wave, the government communication primarily featured the locus of crisis in family homes. The Prime Minister repeatedly urged parents to use free childcare services offered at educational institutions and posited the lockdown as a source of crisis *in* the family. From August 2020 onwards, the government explicitly proclaimed that its foremost goal was to mitigate the economic consequences of the pandemic. Within this meta-frame, the education system was viewed as an auxiliary to keeping the country's workforce, parents with young children in particular, at work. This was of such paramount importance that even during the total school closure in April-May 2021, daycare was provided in schools in justified cases. Non-governmental actors and oppositional parties advocated for welfare measures, such as paid care and sick leave for parents.

In Romania, during the first two waves of the pandemic, the macro-economic impact of pandemic mitigation measures was not presented as a primary concern neither by the government nor by non-state actors. The government introduced paid care leave for parents staying at home with their children, a policy marred with uncertainties and that focused on tax-paying individuals only. NGOs drew attention to the difficulties experienced by families in securing basic food and hygiene needs and to the growing costs of education for families (that of technological devices, internet connectivity, and, in some cases, the fees of afterschool activities). At the very end of the second wave and during the third wave, the reopening of schools was presented as a vital part of the full re-launch of the economy. Schools were thus,

for the first time, related to economic operational capacities rather than access to education and health issues. This continued implicitly during the third wave, when care leave was no longer provided to parents and measures directed at closing schools were organised as exceptions to the rule (e.g. extending the Easter holiday).

In summary, while the economic crisis meta-frame became the main driver and dominant narrative of the Hungarian government's interventions regarding schooling from the second wave onwards, in Romania, the macro-economic impacts of the pandemic only became a core issue by the third wave. While in Hungary, the meta-frame of an economic crisis connected to education was used to justify the continuity of face-to-face education, in Romania, where face-to-face education was suspended for the most time, the government gave exemptions to private providers and thus favoured access to non-compulsory education for children from high-earning households that could afford private afterschool education. Nevertheless, both governments paid special attention to the effects of school closures on the availability of workforce and therefore prioritised opening care services for younger children. While the Hungarian government was concentrating on workfare measures and provided little social protection in a regional comparison (Aidukaite et al., 2021), the Romanian government provided economic support for parents who could not go to work due to childcare responsibilities in the periods when face-to-face education was suspended and increasingly capped this form of protection as the crisis progressed. What is common, however, is that the rationale of these government actions targeted households with tax-paying, working parents, whereas precarious households were much less or not at all supported.

Finally, mitigating the effects of the economic crisis became the main concern of governments in both countries by the third wave. This served to deflect both the focus on securing citizens' health and that of structurally transforming education.

## 4 Discussion

In this paper, we analysed how the COVID-19 pandemic could be read as a 'moment of decisive intervention' in education policy debates in Romania and Hungary and have shown how the emancipatory potential of the crisis (Jessop, 2018) has been missed.

We found that non-government actors in Hungary and Romania recognised structural health and equity crises in education related to the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic was managed by the governments. These crises have not been fully acknowledged publicly by either of the two national governments during the first 15 months of the pandemic. Thus, the crisis context failed to materialise as a 'moment of decisive intervention' towards health and educational reforms. Instead, by addressing the pandemic as an economic crisis, the government contributed to the consolidation of the structural health and educational inequality in the educational systems. In Romania, the use of the economic meta-frame involved closing schools as one of the main instruments to controlling the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, in sharp contrast to a more flexible and relaxed restriction policy on economic activity. In Hungary, the government's insistence to keep primary schools and kindergartens open was justified by the need to ensure that parents could continue working and need not remain at home to care for their children. In both countries, the 'economy' was prioritised over education or health concerns, even when this approach endangered fundamental rights or even lives.

In a nutshell our research shows how social justice policy issues, such as educational and health equity in schools, can point to larger structural inequalities that briefly become visible and appear addressable in policy making during the peak of a crisis only to vanish before

they become translated into transformative practices. Akin to what Paolo Landri (2025) has described as ‘tame problems’ educational policies in Italy during the pandemic as problems inscribed with a ready-made solution without transformative potential, in Hungary and Romania health and educational equity in schools were also ‘tamed’ into a neoliberal outlook on education that emphasizes strictly maintaining as much economic activity as possible as the dominant *raison d’être* for the state. This overpowering of ‘the economy’ as an undisputable and unchallengeable priority in dealing with the crises is reminiscent of Massey (2013)’s earlier warning that the ways in which the economy is politically constructed as the creation of wealth through growth have erased imaginaries for calling into question the constitution of social relations. In this case, the reading of crisis as foremost an economic crisis signals the closing of the window for decisive intervention that would allow for a policy otherwise (Clarke et al., 2015); one that would address both educational and health inequities in education and that had, if only briefly, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, opened the space for contesting structural inequities. This opening of policy debates on issues of structural inequities was a crucial moment in creating a space where a new consensus around democratic values and against dominant framings of economic priority could begin to be built. While the moment of decisive intervention for governments may have passed, the creeping crisis may still hold the potential for the emergence of a new consensus if we work to acknowledge the momentary emergence of alternative framings of potentialities for recognising the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis of education. In this regard, while the present crisis has yet again been ventriloquised (see Clarke, 2023, Chapter 6) by governments to support the political primacy of growth-oriented economic goals, there is still a space open to make the crisis speak on behalf of the needs and interests of marginalised populations.

Nevertheless, governments’ denial of a health and equity crisis of education turns the present conjuncture into a creeping crisis on a path towards more structural contradictions and less equity – stabilising what Hay (1999) has termed catastrophic equilibria. This development is visible in the fact that during the winter of 2021/2022, schools in Romania started using remote education as an alternative to heating the schools for face-to-face education because of the rising costs, further aggravating educational inequities associated with digital poverty. In a next step, the austerity measures proposed by the Bolojan government in 2025 were directed at reducing the education budget especially downsizing programmes geared towards marginalised students, restricting access to scholarships and warm meals in school as well as increasing the teaching load of all teachers. These measures can be read as a continuation of the economic crisis framing materialised during the pandemic.

## 5 Conclusion

Through the over-emphasis of an economic framing of the crisis by governments, corresponding measures were aimed at resolving these crises through interventions. Consequently, the locus of the crisis moved from education to maintaining the capitalist economic structures. Through this, what Saito (2021) has termed COVID-19 related collateral damage in education was perpetuated and solidified in the studied countries. This displacement unequally affects participants in the educational process: teachers with health conditions in Hungary who needed to continue working throughout several waves of the pandemic without receiving priority in the vaccination campaign for months in order to ensure that parents with care responsibilities can continue working through the pandemic, or economically and digitally marginalised rural students in Romania who may not have had *de facto* access to school for more than a year during the period studied here, who could not return to school in order to

prevent health risks despite commercial activities resuming as a priority activity despite the health risks. This discursive shift addresses the crisis symptoms recognised by governments by moving the consequences of the crisis onto marginalised groups that are also discredited in the policy debates (e.g. the teacher union in Hungary that was accused of making false claims for political benefits) – thus the crisis as a moment for decisive intervention is deflected and the most marginalised members of society are left to deal with the unequally distributed consequences of the pandemic on their own while remaining increasingly invisible in the policy debates. Through this deflection, the present contradictions in the education system are rendered invisible and irrelevant, and the transformative momentum of the crisis is lost.

The loss of momentum is connected to the question of how structural transformation towards (health and educational) equity in education is seen by governments and how much of this recognition is translated into interventions directed to practice. In education, as opposed to public health, equity still appears as a contested term by scholars and international actors alike (Cairney and Kippin, 2022, p. 4), the pandemic seemed to bring this debate to the centre stage of educational policy making worldwide, if only for a relatively brief moment. Marking this moment is of political significance for how future crises and their impact on education should be managed. Nevertheless, at present the pandemic seems to have catalysed neoliberal oriented proposals for education (Fleming, 2023), rather than equity-oriented ones. At the same time, in the wake of the pandemic, technology rather than democracy has come to dominate the public education related policy imaginary (Norris, 2023). In view of these points refocusing the potential for structural transformation in education as a reparative modality of post-pandemic future making is of paramount importance.

Whereas Romania and Hungary had a similar starting point at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, their crisis management trajectories diverged. This led in turn to different ways in which the unfolding crisis affected different marginalised subjects. Yet, what the two trajectories shared was a reproduction of neoliberal capitalist economy through educational policies to the detriment of educationally or health-wise vulnerable subjects. In future studies, the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic related crisis management policies worked to reproduce neoliberal economic policies through education and what the local and national particularities of these policies were and how these came about and which actors had to shoulder the unequal consequences of the pandemic, and its management should be investigated. Investigating these questions more broadly could help overcome the limitations of the present study that is focused on a relatively brief period at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in two Central and Eastern European countries and offer a more comprehensive overview of how crisis narratives unfolded during the pandemic and which groups are potentially exposed to the unequally distributed consequences of the pandemic. Practically, this approach could help inform transformative interventions in future educational policies, as well as direct reparative efforts.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective in a time of rapidly unfolding crises narratives that have become an instrument of global governance (Aul, 2024) that seeks to govern through anticipation (Elfert and Ydesen, 2024), pointing out how social justice informed transformative policy imaginaries vanish by being deflected to make room for government supported economic measures is of paramount importance.

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