

Exploring non-cognitive skills and inequality through the magnifying lens of a pandemic

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Impact

Successfully navigating the challenges of today's society requires a balance of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Non-cognitive skills – also frequently referred to, amongst other things, as socioemotional skills, soft skills, or even personality traits – play a crucial role in many aspects of life, impacting education as well as later-life outcomes such as success in employment, interpersonal relationships, and general well-being. They are broadly defined as the patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals that can be developed through formal and informal learning. Unlike cognitive skills that focus on intellectual abilities, non-cognitive skills encompass a diverse range of skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, social skills, perseverance, and creativity.

Given the importance of non-cognitive skills, this dissertation aimed to understand how these skills impact student learning outcomes and gaining further insights into differences among students. In this context, this dissertation explored the multifaceted impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on students, with a particular attention on non-cognitive skills, learning loss, and the effectiveness of summer school programmes. Furthermore, different educational levels, educational tracks, and socioeconomic backgrounds were considered. These insights can help educators and policymakers with strategies to address learning loss and enhance educational outcomes by including the role of non-cognitive skills and understanding their differential impacts across student populations.

Overall, this dissertation's findings demonstrate that non-cognitive skills mediate learning outcomes and differ across student populations during unexpected life-changing events. Furthermore, while there are no evident disparities in non-cognitive skills across various socioeconomic groups, the effectiveness of interventions aimed at enhancing student performance differs according to socioeconomic background.

As discussed in the Conclusion and discussion Chapter, the findings of this dissertation have important implications for educational practice and policy. They emphasise the need for tailored approaches to meet students' specific needs and contexts. This includes acknowledging variations in non-cognitive skills across various student populations, such as those based on educational tracks. Additionally, strategies aimed at mitigating learning setbacks should integrate a focus on non-cognitive skills, given their crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. This may involve integrating non-cognitive

skill development into the curriculum and offering targeted support to students with lower proficiency in these areas.

Acknowledging the important role of non-cognitive skills in learning outcomes also underscores the importance of prioritising students' overall development beyond achievement in terms of mere test scores. Implementing strategies to foster non-cognitive skills can therefore be seen as essential for educational and later life outcomes. These strategies have the potential to mitigate the adverse impact of unexpected life-changing events, such as a pandemic, on educational outcomes and optimising the effectiveness of interventions more broadly.

Another important implication for practice lies in supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Interventions, such as summer schools, can effectively improve student performance. However, it is essential to consider variations in their impact across socioeconomic groups. While this dissertation's findings suggest that there are no evident disparities in non-cognitive skills across socioeconomic groups, it remains possible that non-cognitive skills mitigate the effectiveness of interventions differently based on socioeconomic background. Insights in these differences are crucial for tailored approaches.

The findings and conclusions of this dissertation have been, and will continue to be, shared with educators, policymakers, and researchers. One chapter has been published in a special issue on the impact of Covid-19 in primary and secondary education in *Pedagogische Studiën*, a Dutch peer-reviewed journal accessible to educators, policymakers, and researchers. The study on summer schools has been published in an interdisciplinary international open-access journal. Additionally, all the studies in this dissertation have been presented at national and international conferences.

The findings have also been shared with a broader audience through presentations and discussions with educators and policymakers. For example, the research was presented at the education networking event celebrating the Lustrum of SOOOOLIO-14, an initiative focused on improving the transition from primary to secondary education, with a particular focus on non-cognitive skill development. Furthermore, the findings have been continuously shared within a learning community that was set up with educators and school boards to focus on non-cognitive skills and the transition from primary to secondary education.

In the near future, the other chapters of this dissertation will be submitted to high-ranking peer-reviewed journals. To reach a wider audience, the findings will also be shared at educational conferences and events within the field.