The Digital Divide in Online Education. Inequality in Digital Preparedness of Students and Schools before the Start of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disordered the educational process across the globe, as schools suddenly had to provide their teaching in an online environment. One question that raised immediate concern is the potential effects of this forced and rapid digitalization on inequalities in the learning process by social class, migration background and sex. Elaborating on the literature on the digital divide, we study inequalities in digital preparedness of students and schools, before the pandemic took place. Using data from the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) on seven countries, and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) on 45 countries, both from 2018, we demonstrate that schools and students vary in their preparedness for digital education, but that school variation is not systematically related to the student composition by socioeconomic and migration background. More important drivers for a digital divide in corona-times are the ICT skills students have, which are strongly related to socioeconomic background (known as the second level of the digital divide). We found little evidence for a hypothesized ‘fourth level’ of the digital divide, which would result from social gradients in the preparedness of school environments for digital education.