

Managing the COVID 19 crisis in Education: A comparative study of a special needs school and a standardise school in Greece.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is an emergency of an unprecedented scale, bringing new challenges and severe changes in the schools in Greece. The Ministry of education had to guarantee that learning would be safeguarded as well as impose several measures to mitigate the effects this unfamiliar situation. Different strategies were followed regarding special needs schools and standard schools. The aim of this article is to investigate how satisfactory the measures were considered by parents and teachers of both schools. Moreover, we seek to explore if the trust of the stakeholders of education was increased or whether it was a lost opportunity to enhance trust among parents- teachers and the Ministry of education. For the purpose of our study we delivered questionnaires among the teachers and parents of both schools as well as conducted semi structured interviews with the headmasters of the school units. Also a rigorous and extensive study of the orders issued by the Ministry was done. Our article concludes with several points that need to be taken into consideration in moments of crisis and suggestions on what could be done to alleviate problems in similar times of crisis.

Keywords: special needs, COVID 19, crisis management, measures in emergencies.

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I. Introduction

In early March 2020, an extremely contagious novel coronavirus, first detected in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, had spread into a global pandemic. Although it is still unclear when COVID-19 began widespread community transmission in Greece, by March 10, 2020, the Greek Ministry of Education had mandated the closure of all schools all over Greece, first for 14 days and expanding that period for 2 months. An act supported by related literature. Children are found to be protected from severe or deadly critical infections, they can become the sources of spread, which was the main reason to close the schools worldwide. (Abdulmir A. S. et al., 2020). Moreover although it has also been arguments to the contrary (Uscher-Pines et al., 2018) claiming that promoting and applying social distancing policies in schools may not be effective in hindering the spread of the pandemic. School shutdowns and social isolation were considered obligatory by the Greek State for all schools. As a consequence, a variety of delivery modalities, teaching and learning continued via e-classes and distance learning strategies. Teachers had to design materials and upload them in the e-class so as to be accessed by students. This necessitated increasing access to technology and broadband internet services to ensure equity and included large-scale efforts to address urban and rural disparities that exist in Greece. Public schools teachers were faced with an additional challenge as, without federal guidance, it was still unclear what schools/ teachers were required to provide in relation to the federal special education requirements in the time of a pandemic. To provide this guidance, starting by March 12 the Ministry of education started issuing several official statements called “egkykliai” associated with remote learning and restating the importance of meeting the mandates of the goals of the National curriculum in this new remote learning context. However, the measures enforced by governments to restrain the highly contagious COVID19 laid bare the deep inequalities that beset education systems around Greece particular in relation to special needs education. The lockdowns and subsequent closures of educational institutions tended to amplified the gap between the rich and the poor, and particularly among special need students. Therefore, for these disadvantaged groups, teachers and schools alone had to find solutions to the problem of how to meet these basic problems and discrepancies that remote learning posed without jeopardising learning but rather ensuring that even with schools closed learning would not be hindered. This worry was and still is at the forefront of all educators in Greece. Added to this was the fact, that since the government officials responsible to handle the crisis played catch-up to the exponential spread of

COVID-19 teachers had no time to prepare for remote but also for real time on line teaching. As a result, in March 10 2020, as well as in November 16 2021 when the schools closed again, teachers were confronted with not only unfamiliar ground but also with several practical issues. Ensuring that students took home the books, etc., needed for study at home, Tying up loose ends; e.g., finalizing test results and reports, Staff preparation and training; arrangements for safeguarding; division of work between classes; mechanisms for teachers to remain in touch collectively for mutual support; and brief and simple updates on learning, unfamiliar technologies.

Having briefly mentioned all these problems, this paper wishes to focus on the second period of the closing of schools, which was also the longest one. The central objective of this article is to examine the State's response to the needs of Special schools and standard schools in Greece. This period was chosen since we believe that in this period the government officials had the opportunity, always of course baring in mind the flux of the situation, to be more carefully planned since the summer period could provide the State time to carefully plan the course of action in different foreseen scenarios. Also we selected the second closures of schools since at this period the Ministry decided to keep special schools open while closing all public and private standard schools. It is important to say that perspective presented in this article is based on a research conducted in only two schools in Greece that can be a rather restricting sample for many general conclusion to be drawn. Moreover, it is must be mentioned here, that in the second lockdown special education schools were not closed. Even though this time the special education teachers felt more prepared and had been acquainted with distance education practices they were faced with the decision to keep their school units operating and without the use of protection masks.

The article is structured as follows : An outline of all formal directions, practices and courses of actions of the Greek State are briefly presented. Then we examine in detail the clarity and effect in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. In particular we highlight the fact special schools were not closed while standards schools, although with differences in the time order, were closed. We further discuss the effects of such policies and what were the responses of both parents of the students and teachers working in the same units. Students were excluded from the process due to the several hurdles we would have to overcome to ensure their participation. We conclude our article with practical suggestions made by the teachers and headmasters of the schools in the case that we feel could help alleviate problems in similar situations.

State legal action and practices for COVID19 in Primary Education

During the summer the Ministry of education focused its efforts in preparing for the second wave of the pandemic of COVID 19. They issued notes and state orders on how to deal with the forthcoming situation. However while studying the orders we came to the conclusion that , while should have aimed offering pragmatic guidance to teachers, institutional heads and state officials who were to manage the educational consequences of this crisis, they addressed general preparations that schools should make. Not clear measures and practices were given. Taking into consideration the great differences among school buildings, student numbers, different needs of schools around Greece the official orders were quite vague and allowed for different interpretation and course of action among schools. Several steps for online learning were done during the summer months. Online platforms were bought designed and ready to be used. Unfortunately though, teachers were not trained beforehand on how to use them or on how to design online lessons using online tools. Resulting to great frustration when they were asked almost overnight to respond to this teaching method ,adjusting their teaching material and designing new lessons in the course of the school year. The chance of assisting teachers being proactive in this period and to find possible solution to communicate and reach out students was subsequently lost.

Imposing the use of masks around school premises was a measure that although took time to carefully plan, since funds were given in order to provide all students with masks, still it required many more federal orders in as to be obligatory imposed and respected particularly by parents. It must be marked though, while studying the general guidelines that the Ministry issued that due to the different needs of students at different levels that the orders were vague decisions were weak thus requiring more than a few times to be clarified and more carefully worded. Scientific information or scientific consensus on COVID 19 potential as a threat in Education and to students was not clear. Thus, it seems that the federal as well as territory orders were following policy strategy of 'let science be the guide'. If one however, extrapolates from the way in which science has worked in similar crisis management situations such as the BSE case (Jacob 2000, Ratzan 1998) or similar ones, one would have to assume that policy decisions would have to be made in anticipation of scientific evidence rather than as a result of them. This is not an unusual situation for policymakers in the Ministry of Education. In fact evidence from other instances where scientific uncertainty was an issue policymaking show that there is one general view. This is: seek scientific advice, and do nothing until a reasonable degree of scientific consensus emerges. This directive is at first sight simple and unambiguous. When subjected to closer scrutiny, one begins to see that this simplicity vanishes the moment one has to translate the directives into practice. At this point, it becomes clear that for such principle to work, policymakers would need to have a kind of cognitive frame of reference as well as a set of institutional practices that would help them to

operationalisethese directives. Hence these weak policies and decisions created more anxiety to educators who demanded for more provisions and clearer order on the course of action. One particular order that called for the criticism among educators was the closing of classes if a student was sick with COVID 19 and not the whole school. The main challenge reported was that it would be difficult to reassure that the students that would be torn away from their social group and would be switched to synchronous learning through online platforms would be worried about suffering a disadvantage compared to their peers that would continue in school. Several more challenges regarding, distances in the school playground, siblings in other classes, the inequalities sharpening between students richer students equipped with technology to participate in synchronous learning, were difficult ambiguous and let on the schools to decide and to implement. This unclear situation had left thousands of teachers, feeling left in the lurch. While this was the case in normal school in Greece Special needs schools were even more challenging. According to Educational law concerning special education equal opportunities should be provided to the general student population as well as special needs students. This also must be applied during a school closure [i.e., by providing online learning], the school must ensure that students with disabilities also have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of free appropriate public education. Here lies a serious misunderstanding that circulated the within Ministry officials. Ministry officials interpreted this to mean that schools could not offer remote learning opportunities for any students due to their perceived inability to meet the requirement of it. Also that the special needs students should be excluded from the measure of wearing a mask, that increased special needs teachers fear and anxiety. As a result, fearing that if the school units closed numerous public school students with and without disabilities were not receiving any educational services the officials decided to let special needs schools open during the pandemic. This decision prompted a great discussion and dissatisfaction of special needs educators, who felt that the cornerstone of the national's special needs educational law, meaning asserting that lessons must be designed to meet the child's unique needs and that prepares the child for further education, employment, and independent living, could be met through the use of online material and platforms as was the case with non special needs students. A further issue that sparked more distrust and feeling of neglect lies in the fact that the federal decisions sent to schools in the form of *egykilioi* as mentioned above were not only ambiguous but also in many cases identical with the ones sent to standard schools with just a note for special education to adapt. As a result these decisions were usually referred among teachers as "oracles" showing their stress and marginalisation. The claim not to switch special schools to distance online learning adopted by the Ministry's officials though do not have solid grounds is academic literature and research. There are researches showing that synchronous and asynchronous learning can cater for the needs of students provided that it is carefully planned and given the required equipment and guidance (ADA 1990, Camera 2020)

II. Methodology

Due to the imposed Covid-19 movement restrictions and subsequent survey constraints we decided to conduct a mixed mode methodology survey that included an email administered web survey through google forms and a telephone survey for specific parts of the targeted population, such parents with special needs or with lower education that were unable to respond by a different mode and would otherwise have been excluded from the sample population

Choosing this tailored to the particular pandemic situation, mixed mode survey design, allowed us not only to minimize coverage error but helped us improve timeliness and response rates.

Thus the goal of our study is not to generalize but rather to offer a contextualized understanding of some aspect of these particular cases. We feel that the present study can help decision makers have a practical perspective that might be applied to practice.

Having per vim (et virtute) excluded the face-to face interviews, also meant that we were able to minimize the extremeness of responses that has often been found in aural modes (Christian 2007) due to interviewer personal characteristics (sex, age, etc) or bias such as social desirability or acquiescence phenomena that consistently account for measurement errors. Opting for a mixed mode survey empowered us to take advantage of the strengths of a certain mode and overcome the weakness of another, in order to minimize total survey error as much as possible within resource and time constraints.

Setting up a web survey, allowed for more design flexibility, resulted in lower costs and mitigated the risk of social norms to be evoked in ways that would impact measurement in our survey. In particular it alleviated the *social desirability* bias, the tendency to give answers in a manner that will be viewed favorably by the person asking the questions and the deeply embedded, especially in the public sector, tendency² to agree with someone rather than disagree (*acquiescence*).

We also decided to structure questions similarly across both survey modes (telephone and google forms), aiming at improving data quality and overcoming differences in how people process visual and aural modes of communication.

According to the cognitive model of response order effects in survey measurement (Schwarz, Hippler, Noelle-Neumann 1992), in self-administered visual web surveys, respondents are more likely to be influenced by items appearing early in lists. Moving thorough more possible answers in the list, respondents' attention span is narrowing and they are less able to remember alternative answers. Thus, if early response options are logical and convincing, they are more likely to be endorsed, resulting in *primacy effects* (Ansari & Mela 2003, Dreze & Zufryden 2004, Hofacker & Murphy 2005). On the other hand, in interviewer-administered telephone surveys, there is typically not enough time for respondents to process all the responses as they are read by the interviewer. Consequently, the last answers are usually more likely to be remembered and chosen, resulting in *recency effects* (Krosnick & Alwin 1987, Moore 1997). Deciding to have certain respondents of the same target population choosing to give their answers either way, through the telephone with the presence of an interviewer or through self-administered online tools, allowed us to reduce measurement error, and resulted in more survey responses. Most importantly, it created the potential for synergy between contacts via different modes.

Sample

One of the first key decisions in sampling is determining the required sample size. What is an appropriate sample size is usually determined by i) the size of the sampling population and how much variation there is on its characteristics of interest ii) the desired level of confidence one wishes to have in the estimates and iii) the desired margin of sampling error.

In order to deduct our required size sample for our study we use the formula by Survey System, 2010:

$$ss = \frac{z^2 * p(1 - p)}{c^2}$$

where

ss= is the completed sample size needed for desired level of precision

z= the critical value for the desired level of confidence (1.96 for 95% level of confidence)

p = the proportion being tested

c= the desired margin of sampling error (0,07 = ±7)

Applying this formula, the completed sample size is 196.

However, when populations, like the one in our study are small, researchers usually adjust this formula by including the finite population correction (fpc), which accounts for the size of the target population in the calculation. The fpc adjusts for the fact that in smaller populations, a given sample provides proportionately more information than a sample of the same size in larger populations.

Following the finite population correction formula, we calculated the new ss:

$$new\ ss = ss / (1 + (ss - 1) / pop)$$

where pop=200

and the estimated new sample size needed for our study is 49.

Target population

Our target population was the parents and educators of two schools. A normal school in the suburbs of Athens the capital of Greece and a special school of Athens.

The standard school chosen due to its common and defining characteristics of most schools in the North and South suburbs of Greece that adhere to the high and medium economic zone. We selected this population since we believe it to be representative of the population. As result our study meets the requirements of Statistical Generalization theory (Lincoln and Cuba 1985). We also tried to ensure transferability of our findings drawing from the research of the methodologist Donald Cambell 1986, who proved that transferability can be achieved if the contexts that the research will be applied are more or less like the one used in the study. The special school chosen also has student population and parents population of almost the same economic and educational background since both schools are in the high economic area zone of Athens. Finally a semi formal interview with the headmasters of the school was also conducted in order to clarify points and enter in a deep discussion of issues that themselves wanted to initiate.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires used Linkert scales rated from 1 to 7. With one being the lowest mark and 7 the highest in the questions of satisfaction and trust. The 2 questionnaires administered to parents and educators included 10 questions aiming to unravel the degree of satisfaction and trust participants had to the Ministry's response to COVID 19 pandemic in Education. The questions aimed at whether participants were reassured and on whether the Ministry meet through its actions meet its legal obligations and maintain the rights of students and families during a time of significant change.

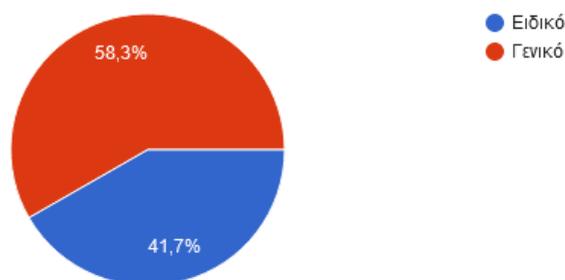
Pretesting, feedback from respondents, outlier detection and questionnaire validation.

The goal of the pretesting was to determine whether the proposed questionnaire and procedures to be adopted would be adequate for the larger study. The questionnaire was tested in both modes that respondents would use in order to complete it so that we could see how respondents would be able to navigate the questionnaire without assistance in the case of the online tool but also to understand if certain items were particularly problematic to administer over the phone and needed further explanation. The pilot testing gave us a sense of how sample members will react to the contacts and material provided and was particularly useful for making estimates of the response rates and seeing if only certain types of people are responding, leading to increased potential for nonresponse error. In addition, it confirmed the need i) to have telephone interviews for a part of the sample population and ii) to administer the web survey through google forms and not via emails in order to address respondents' data privacy and time concerns.

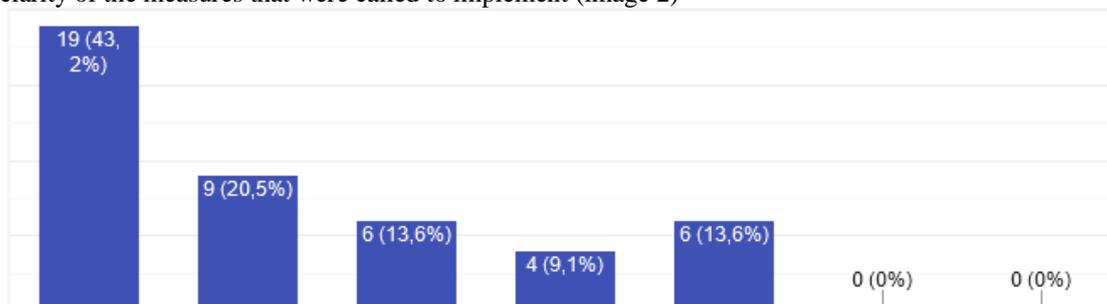
After all respondents recruited in the pilot testing provided their answers and most importantly their comments on the questions included in the draft questionnaire and the data collection method used, we rephrased some questions in order to be more comprehensible. We also dropped an item from the citizens questionnaire that didn't fit the circumstances of respondents. Next, we looked for atypical patterns of responses (*outlier detection*) but no out-of-range values, or items with little variance were found. At this stage the final version of the questionnaire was confirmed.

III. Results

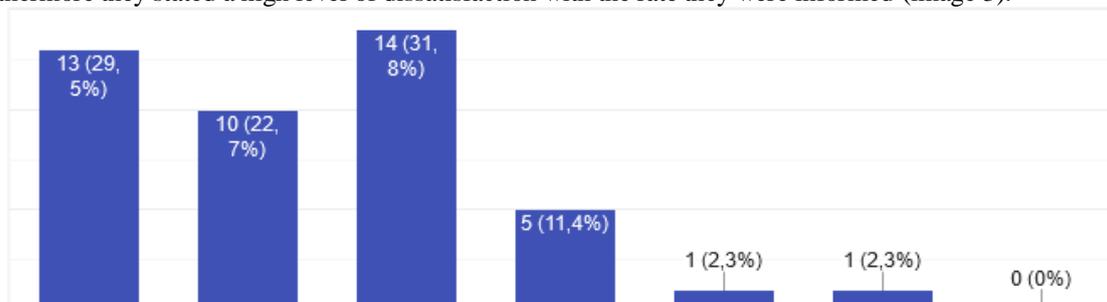
Concerning the educators of both schools it is clear from the questionnaires that the level of satisfaction and trust in decisions officials took to safeguard the students and their own safety is indicatively low (Image 1.)



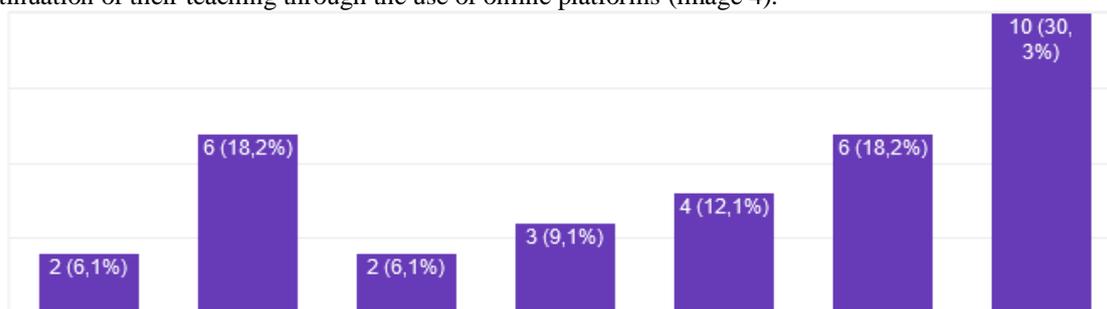
Out of the 60 educators in total that participated in the survey the vast majority maintain their contempt with the clarity of the measures that were called to implement (image 2)



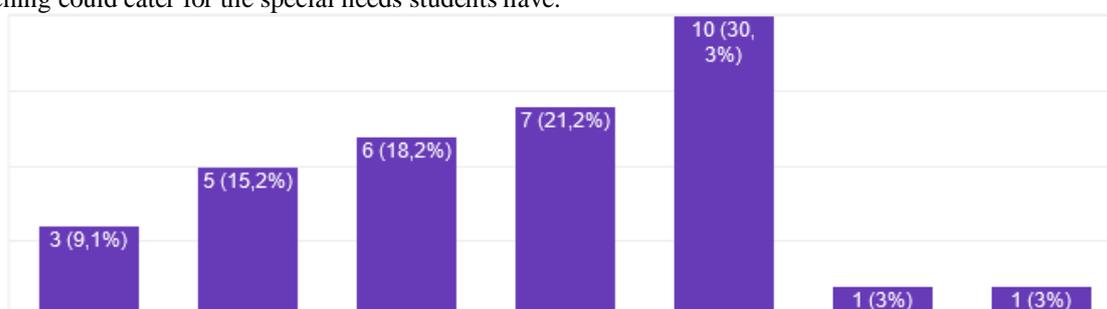
Furthermore they stated a high level of dissatisfaction with the rate they were informed (image 3).



It is not questionable based on these facts that educators of the general school were satisfied and relived when a general school shutdown was announced, in terms of their safety while really worried for the continuation of their teaching through the use of online platforms (image 4).

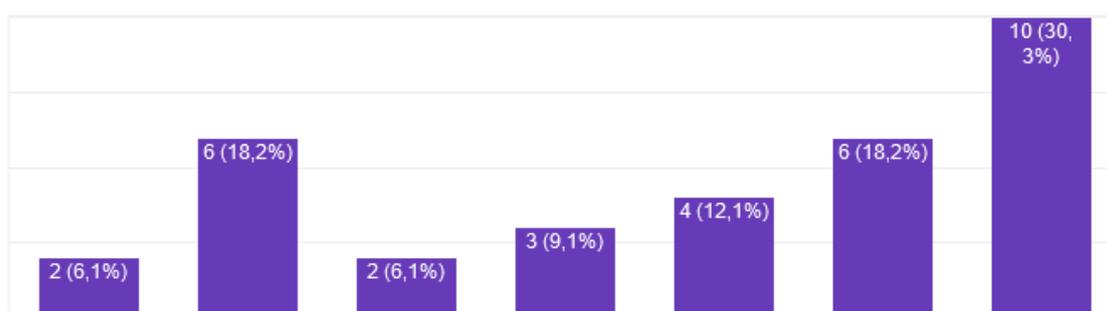


Also, it becomes evident that simultaneously the educators of the special need school felt even more dissatisfied with the decision not to closed special needs schools on the grounds that neither synchronous nor asynchronous teaching could cater for the special needs students have.



An interesting finding of our research is the discrepancy between the opinions of parents.

Although educators are highly unsatisfied and their trust level in the decisions and the measures of the government significantly low. This is not the case of the parents of both groups. The parents appear satisfied (image 5) with the decisions of the Ministry of Education and their trust (image 6) in the services and course of action the Ministry followed is increased.



IV. Conclusion

In these circumstances, education was affected greatly as one main daily activity of millions of students, teachers and parents around of the world (Hopegood 2020,UNESCO 2020,). In most countries, schools areclosed and education is provided through distance education platforms (Reimers, 2020). It is a challenging situation for both teachers, students and parents around the wold with the most vulnerable groups faced with even more obstacles than ever. However we feel that there are multiple strategies that may help to ensure that students' legal rights are met. Giving careful attention to the special needs of each school unit so as to address its needs and allow for feasible solutions. For example giving more school classes in public building around the school areas so as to ensure social distancing particularly in highly populated school units.

Planning and arranging free internet access to students as well as providing laptops of tablets so to ensure that students can participate to the online courses. This could have help avoid issues of affordability, especially in unprivileged areas whereinternet access remains a luxury. Parallel to this, institutions and educators had to equip themselves with the necessary tools and skills at a staggering speed to shift to remote learning. But, a large number of educators and special needs teachers in Greece lack sophisticated technology

and experience in designing online learning environments. Moreover, we believe that supporting the Professional Development of Teachers via Distance Education before schools opened so as to have educators prepared, trained and assured that they can cope with the needs of online teaching. Finally, help in establishing authentic partnerships with families extended beyond sending home materials or messaging to families. These partnerships could promote parents, caregivers, and community members as equal participants in the educational process, with shared and meaningful responsibilities. As result, reassurance of the parents and teachers could be achieved. Many teachers and counsellors could provide this reassurance but not without clear information from examining bodies and institutions about the arrangements with frequent communication on educational and administrative matters. Hence, parents and students in deprived situations anxieties could be assured.

Primarily a point that headmaster pointed as provoking further anxiety and distrust is the lack of practical measures when the schools opened. They maintained that in other European countries measures were more targeted and carefully planned and administered that cause a feeling of neglect and inferiority to educators who were informed for this discrepancy. Also, changes to educational supports and services must ensure that vulnerable populations and communities are not put at even more of an increased risk for the community transmission of COVID-19. Educators asked for strong precaution when the scientific evidence is too weak. The policy of policy 'wait and see' attitude based on halting further intervention until more evidence is available was considered as too risky and potentially costly to the general public since it halts immediate intervention. This paper concludes with the case of COVID 19 crisis management as a good example of how even good policy principles may be thwarted by bad policy design and implementation.

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