

Editorial

COVID-19 pandemic and school education

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected school education worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools¹. Most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic¹. School closures impact not only students, teachers, and families², but carry high social and economic costs for people across communities³. They include:

- *Interrupted learning*: The disadvantages are disproportionate for under-privileged learners who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school.
- *Poor nutrition*: Many children rely on free or discounted meals provided at schools for food and healthy nutrition.
- *Confusion and stress for teachers*: When schools close unexpectedly and for unknown durations, teachers are often unsure of their obligations and how to maintain connections with students to support learning.
- *Parents being unprepared for distance and home schooling*: This is especially true for parents with limited education and resources.
- *Challenges in creating, maintaining, and improving distance learning*: Moving learning from classrooms to homes in a hurry presents enormous challenges, both human and technical.
- *Gaps in childcare*: In the absence of alternative options, working parents often leave children alone when schools close and this can lead to risky behaviours, including increased influence of peer pressure and substance abuse.
- *High economic costs*: Working parents are more likely to miss work when schools close in order to take care of their children. This results in wage loss and a tendency to negatively impact productivity.
- *Unintended strain on health-care systems*: Health-care workers with children cannot easily attend work because of childcare obligations resulting from school closures. Thus medical professionals are not at the facilities where they are most needed during a health crisis.
- *Increased pressure on schools and school systems that remain open*: Localized

school closures place burdens on schools as governments and parents alike redirect children to schools that remain open.

- *Rise in dropout rates*: It is a challenge to ensure children return and stay in school when schools reopen after closures. This is especially true of protracted closures and when economic shocks place pressure on children to work and generate income for financially distressed families.
- *Increased exposure to violence and exploitation*: When schools shut down, sexual exploitation of girls rises, teenage pregnancies become more common and child labour increases.
- *Social isolation*: Schools are hubs of social activity and human interaction. When schools close, many children miss out on social contact that is essential to learning and development.
- *Challenges in measuring and validating learning*: Examinations that determine admission or advancement to new educational levels and institutions are thrown into disarray when schools close. Strategies to postpone, skip or administer examinations at a distance raise serious concerns about fairness, especially when access to learning becomes variable. Disruptions to assessments results in stress for students and their families and can trigger disengagement.

In response to school closures, UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programmes that schools and teachers can use to reach learners remotely and limit the disruption of education⁴. UNESCO has made 10 recommendations to plan distant learning solutions⁵.

1. *Examine the readiness and choose the most relevant tools*: Decide on the use of high-technology and low-technology solutions based on the reliability of local power supplies, internet connectivity and digital skills of teachers and students.
2. *Ensure inclusion of the distance learning programmes*: Implement measures to ensure that students including those with disabilities or from low-income

- backgrounds have access to distance learning programmes.
3. *Protect data privacy and data security:* Assess data security when uploading data or educational resources to web spaces, as well as when sharing them with other organizations or individuals. Ensure that the use of applications and platforms does not violate students' data privacy.
 4. *Prioritize solutions to address psychosocial challenges before teaching:* Mobilize available tools to connect schools, parents, teachers and students with each other. Create communities to ensure regular human interactions, enable social caring measures, and address possible psychosocial challenges that students may face when they are isolated.
 5. *Plan the study schedule of the distance learning programmes:* Organize discussions with stakeholders to examine the possible duration of school closures and decide whether the distance learning programme should focus on teaching new knowledge or enhance students' knowledge of prior lessons. Plan the schedule depending on the situation of the affected zones, level of studies, needs of students, and availability of parents. Choose the most appropriate learning methodologies based on the status of school closures and home-based quarantines. Avoid learning methodologies that require face-to-face communication.
 6. *Provide support to teachers and parents on the use of digital tools:* Organize brief training or orientation sessions for teachers and parents as well, if monitoring and facilitation are needed. Help teachers to prepare the basic settings such as solutions to the use of internet data if they are required to provide live streaming of lessons.
 7. *Blend appropriate approaches and limit the number of applications and platforms:* Blend tools or media that are available to most students, both for synchronous communication and lessons, and for asynchronous learning. Avoid overloading students and parents by asking them to download and test too many applications or platforms.
 8. *Develop distance learning rules and monitor students' learning process:* Define the rules with parents and students on distance learning. Design formative questions, tests, or exercises to monitor closely students' learning process. Try to use tools to support submission of students' feedback and avoid overloading parents by requesting them to scan and send students' feedback.
 9. *Define the duration of distance learning units based on students' self-regulation skills:* Keep a coherent timing according to the level of the students' self-regulation and metacognitive abilities especially for livestreaming classes. Preferably, the unit for primary school students should not be more than 20 minutes, and no longer than 40 minutes for secondary school students.
 10. *Create communities and enhance connection:* Create communities of teachers, parents and school managers to address sense of loneliness or helplessness, facilitate sharing of experience and discussion on coping strategies when facing learning difficulties.

How well are students and schools prepared?⁶ As school after school shuts down in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, on-line learning opportunities have risen from a bonus extracurricular facility to a critical lifeline for education. The following data were collected as part of the global Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018, and are based on representative samples from 79 education systems involving over 600,000 15-year-olds across the 36 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries⁶.

- *Students' access to the digital world:* on average, across OECD countries, 9% of 15-year-old students do not even have a quiet place to study in their homes, and in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand it is over 30%.
- *Availability of technology:* on average across OECD countries, there is almost one computer for educational purposes available at school for every 15-year old student (the computer-student ratio is equal to 0.8). In most countries, the distribution of computers in schools tends to be more equitable than at home. Forty percent of all computers available to 15-year-olds in school are portable. Portable computers are more frequently available in socio-economically advantaged than in disadvantaged schools.
- *Use of technology and preparedness of teachers:* On average, across OECD countries, about 60% of 15-year-old students are enrolled in schools whose principals consider that teachers have sufficient time to prepare lessons integrating digital devices.
- *Access to effective online platforms:* On average, across OECD countries, almost

half of 15-year-olds are enrolled in schools whose principals reported that an effective online learning support platform is available.

- *School practices for using digital devices effectively*: On average, across OECD countries, the most common school practices intended to improve learning through the use of digital devices were having regular discussions between school principals and teachers about the use of digital devices for pedagogical purposes (63% of students attended schools that practice this), having written school statements about the use of digital devices (62% of students) and having a specific programme to prepare students for responsible Internet behaviour (60% of students). By contrast, on average, across OECD countries, the least common practices were having a specific programme to promote collaboration amongst teachers on the use of digital devices (36% of students attended schools that have such a programme), having a scheduled time for teachers to meet to share, evaluate or develop instructional materials and approaches that use digital devices (44% of students) and having a written statement specifically about the use of digital devices for pedagogical purposes at school (46% of students). School guidelines and practices to enhance teaching and learning using digital devices are more often observed in socio-economically advantaged schools than disadvantaged schools.

Whilst digital technology holds great promise in providing learners with access to high quality learning, education systems should ensure that technology does not further amplify existing inequalities in access and quality of learning. Not only should we provide access to technology and open learning resources, we should also maintain effective social relationships between families, teachers and students, particularly those students who lack the learning strategies to learn on their own. Technology, while amplifying the work of great teachers, will never replace them.

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