

Viewpoint

Impact of school closures due to COVID-19 on education in low- and middle-income countries

Farhana Sultana¹, Razmin Bari², Shaouki Munir^{3 a}

¹ North South University, ² University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, ³ University of New South Wales

Keywords: School closures, Education, Bangladesh, LMICs, COVID-19

<https://doi.org/10.29392/001c.36902>

Journal of Global Health Reports

Vol. 6, 2022

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has dismantled many long-established systems in society. Distance learning has rapidly replaced traditional classes at school. Keeping all other activities open, educational institutions were closed first to contain COVID-19 transmission when the number of cases started to rise, causing a massive adverse impact on education and students' well-being. Students of lower socio-economic classes are dealing with the worst consequences as they are not able to afford the means of online schooling, especially in low- and middle-income countries like Bangladesh.

School closure measures are taken despite evidence of minimal direct impacts of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on children's health.¹⁻⁷ Almost all educational institutions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have been physically closed for exceptionally long periods, ranging from several months to years.⁸ Such a long-term absence from schools and colleges has not only caused worse learning outcomes that are causing intergenerational inequalities, but also induced multiple physical and mental health issues and even crises among students at all levels.² Different countries launched online education through various media, including television or the internet. However, due to the lack of resources in many LMICs, this alternate education system could add minimal value to students' learning. Most importantly, it failed to capture the students' attention.¹ Consequently, students felt unmotivated and lost interest in learning, which resulted in an increased dropout rate and more frequent child marriages in these countries.⁹ At the same time, the extent of mental distress had increased, causing more burden and suicidal ideation among students.¹⁰

IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURE ON LEARNING

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus led to the closure of all schools and universities and affected 95% of the world's student population.¹¹ In Bangladesh, similar to many LMIC countries, all educational institutions were closed for more than a year.¹² Some schools, mostly English-medium schools whose student population come from a higher than average socio-economic background, were able to conduct classes via online means.¹³ However, due to the cancellation of the May/June 2020 and May/June

2021 sittings of the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Exam) and IAL (International Advanced Level) exams, students of the past two years have graduated through 'predicted grades'. These grades have been reported to be massively overinflated since the grading system was no longer held to the same standards by all institutions as each school became both the educational provider and the evaluator. The net result is the widening inequalities in terms of college admissions and even jobs.

Students themselves admit that they did not study as much for their finals as compared to years prior to the pandemic. Online classes through Zoom or similar applications allow direct student-teacher interaction, but in order to allow the teacher to be heard properly, all students remain muted for extended periods in class. Many students, much less enraptured by the online lectures as opposed to ones in real life, take advantage of common internet connection problems and rarely turn on their webcams. As a result, online classes are rarely interactive. Platforms such as Google Classroom allow homework to be assigned but these tasks only seem to stress out the students more than actually get them to study the class materials.¹⁴ Perhaps the primary school-kids are the most affected in the aspect that very few are properly acquiring basic knowledge and study methods that they will need for their later years of education.¹⁵

On top of this, many students under the national curriculum were at an additional disadvantage due to almost complete school lockdown for nearly 2 years. In Bangladesh, the national board exams of 2020 including HSC and SSC were pushed back for months until it was decided that students would graduate or get promoted to the next grade via auto-pass. In 2021, the board exams were

a Authors contributed equally.

postponed yet again and then held in a substandard manner with the syllabi of the subjects reduced to less than half the number of topics.¹⁶

Lacking any options for group study or for recreation besides their phones and television, children are mentally drained and demotivated while trying to keep up with studies they barely comprehend.¹⁷ Although a select few could make use of their time, most of these students will have a hard time coping with the pressure of their studies once schools physically open full-time and teachers stop being endlessly lenient. Moreover, this pressure will only worsen the longer the schools remain closed. In fact, many students have developed 'exam-phobia' due to insufficient learning via online classes.

DIRE SITUATION IN RURAL AREAS

Child marriage has always been prevalent in this part of the world; the lack of education has made the poor rural girls unequipped for jobs and even more of a 'burden' to their families. Since the start of the pandemic, child marriage has increased by at least 13%.¹⁸ Boys of these families have also had to enter the workforce prematurely.⁹ In current circumstances, the best-case scenario would be this: students still pursuing higher education will struggle to be on top of their courses at university; they may have a chance to turn things around if universities are kept open and can aid such students. Worst case scenario: underprivileged students whose schools closed down permanently will be unable to complete their education.

Many rural residents cannot afford to get smartphones or laptops, which are integral to online classes, and even if they do, the internet bandwidth available in those areas is very low. On top of this, many families have to deal with power outages. Quite inevitably, education has been put on the back burner for nearly two years, and therefore, online education in LMICs has had minimal effect.¹⁹

Additionally, people from rural areas in LMICs have often considered completing their education a lower priority. The government has always had to take initiatives to bring girls and boys from distant villages to school. While remote learning is increasing the estimated achievement gap between affluent and underprivileged students in richer countries, the lack of any form of education for the lower classes in LMICs is permanently fixing the status quo for generations to come if the government does not double down on their efforts to educate its young citizens. Growing evidence indicates that existing disparities in educational and developmental outcomes are broadening due to the disproportionate impact of the current pandemic.⁴ Half of the global illiterate population lives in South Asia, and the current situation seems to be working directly against UN's Sustainable Development Goal #4 which strives to ensure equitable and quality education for all.²⁰

RESISTANCE FROM STUDENTS AGAINST SCHOOL REOPENING

Having had no proper schooling for nearly two years, as observed, some primary and university students expressed incredible unwillingness to sit and give exams at school. The reason for this is obvious: cheating is exponentially more difficult when invigilators look down students' shoulders instead of simply telling them to turn their cameras on (through which only their faces can be seen and nothing else). Too many students have spent the past two years simply learning where in the book the answers are, not necessarily *what* the answers are. As a result, these kids have a hard time catching up with two years of study to give exams properly. These students will most likely oppose open schools, especially during exam season. This fear is justified by the amount of emphasis the Bangladeshi society puts on grades and marks. But to allow students to overcome everything, it is mandatory for schools to reopen as soon as possible and remain so unless and until other health protocols such as lockdowns are announced. The longer students go without learning their syllabi material properly, the more they will struggle at later points in their lives due to the long gap in learning.

MEASURES TO BE TAKEN TO COMPENSATE LOSS OF LEARNING

The pandemic and subsequent school closures have set whole nations back in their journey towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals; hence, extra initiatives must be taken to overcome the losses. Those who can afford it can send their children to coaching centres or hire private tutors to compensate for the lack of studying since the pandemic started. Considering the socio-economic conditions of the lower classes, only government-funded programs or NGOs can expand their network to help underprivileged students in rural areas cope with the setbacks in education during out-of-school hours. Teachers and community leaders must join forces to motivate students and parents in rural areas to resume schooling. Governments can also sanction special incentives such as free meals for poor students especially.

CONCLUSIONS

The indirect impacts of COVID-19 and related policy responses may have broad, long-lasting severe negative impacts on students. Students experiencing adversity lose out on their potential the most. If this situation continues, the future generation will endure more severe consequences. Therefore, to avoid irremediable loss, it will be pragmatic to keep all educational institutions open and allow in-person activities with proper masking and physical distancing in LMICs for a more equitable world. While divided opinions from parents, students and teachers cannot be ignored, governments should revisit their decisions based on scien-

tific evidence to help children excel in education for a better future.

.....

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge Rahmin Bari for English editing.

FUNDING

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed significantly to the conceptualization and drafting of this manuscript and have agreed on the final version.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests (includes financial and non-financial). The authors completed the Unified Competing Interest form at <http://www.icmje.org/disclosure-of-interest/> (available upon request from the corresponding author) and declare no conflicts of interest.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Farhana Sultana
Lecturer
Department of Political Science and Sociology
North South University, Bashundhara R/A,
Dhaka 1229, Bangladesh
Email: farhana.sultana@northsouth.edu

Submitted: April 01, 2022 GMT, Accepted: May 15, 2022 GMT



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

1. Aslan SA, Turgut YE, Aslan A. Teachers' views related the middle school curriculum for distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educ Inf Technol*. 2021;26(6):7381-7405. doi:10.1007/s10639-021-10587-z
2. Meyerowitz-Katz G, Bhatt S, Ratmann O, et al. Is the cure really worse than the disease? The health impacts of lockdowns during COVID-19. *BMJ Glob Health*. 2021;6(8):e006653. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006653
3. Rajmil L, Hjern A, Boran P, Gunnlaugsson G, de Camargo OK, Raman S. Impact of lockdown and school closure on children's health and well-being during the first wave of COVID-19: a narrative review. *BMJ paediatrics open*. 2021;5(1):e001043. doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2021-001043
4. Goldfeld S, O'Connor E, Sung V, et al. Potential indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children: a narrative review using a community child health lens. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 2022;216(7):364-372. doi:10.5694/mja2.51368
5. Lee B, Raszka WV Jr. COVID-19 transmission and children: the child is not to blame. *Pediatrics*. 2020;146(2). doi:10.1542/peds.2020-004879
6. Walsh S, Chowdhury A, Braithwaite V, et al. Do school closures and school reopenings affect community transmission of COVID-19? A systematic review of observational studies. *MedRxiv*. Published online January 4, 2021. doi:10.1101/2021.01.02.21249146
7. Wu JT, Mei S, Luo S, et al. A global assessment of the impact of school closure in reducing COVID-19 spread. *Phil Trans R Soc A*. 2022;380(2214). doi:10.1098/rsta.2021.0124
8. Schools still closed for nearly 77 million students 18 months into pandemic. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/gha/press-releases/schools-still-closed-nearly-77-million-students-18-months-pandemic-unicef>
9. Situation Analysis - COVID-19 and Education. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/situation-analysis-covid-19-and-education>
10. Rahman ME, Al Zubayer A, Bhuiyan MRAM, Jobe MC, Khan MKA. Suicidal behaviors and suicide risk among Bangladeshi people during the COVID-19 pandemic: an online cross-sectional survey. *Helvion*. 2021;7(2):e05937. doi:10.1016/j.helivon.2021.e05937
11. Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. Accessed January 30, 2022. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf
12. COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF. Accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed>
13. COVID-19 deepens divide between Bangladesh's rural and urban students. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/education-bangladesh/a-55358552>
14. Kids Under Pressure. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://challengesuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CS-NBC-Study-Kids-Under-Pressure-PUBLISHED.pdf>
15. Piya FL, Amin S, Das A, Kabir MA. Impacts of COVID-19 on the Education, Life and Mental Health of Students in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2022;19(2):785. doi:10.3390/ijerph19020785
16. SSC exams begins across country. Accessed November 14, 2022. <https://www.bssnews.net/news/28066>
17. Shaw SM, Caldwell LL, Kleiber DA. Boredom, stress and social control in the daily activities of adolescents. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 1996;28(4):274-292. doi:10.1080/00222216.1996.11949776
18. Hossain MJ, Soma MA, Bari MS, Emran TB, Islam MR. COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: emergency call to action. *BMJ paediatrics open*. 2021;5(1):e001328. doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2021-001328
19. How Technology is Exacerbating the Class Divide during the Pandemic: The Case of Children's Education in Bangladesh - BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (bracu.ac.bd). Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/how-technology-is-exacerbating-the-class-divide-during-the-pandemic-the-case-of-childrens-education-in-bangladesh/>
20. Education - United Nations Sustainable Development. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>