

Forum: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

Issue #12-01: Measures to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gap of children's education

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Introduction

COVID-19 has been a global pandemic that clearly impacted every country in the world to some extent. Therefore the closure of schools was a very common solution for many countries to prevent the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, emerging evidence shows the negative effects of the school closures. Over 185 million children have already lost the school year and fallen behind the minimum reading proficiency level needed. In addition, the unexpectedness and abruptness of this situation gave no time for teachers to prepare for the transition of online learning. Therefore, affecting the very small percentage of the privileged students who were able to receive remote education.

Education recovery for students is a prioritizing problem not only because of the lowered education statistics this year but also because of the future problems this will cause. The lack of social interaction of children has proven to increase the chance of mental illnesses such as depression and social anxiety. Furthermore, this issue will cause a higher unemployment rate and great economic impacts. Not even to mention the consequences of losing sex-ed and several more. The aim is to prevent children from losing any further school and try to re-obtain the lost year, consequently allowing the children to acquire their full potential and fulfill the school curriculum. Education is crucial for future

progression.

Definition of Key Terms

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

Recently discovered, COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus found in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Currently COVID-19 is a pandemic that affects most of the countries around the world.

Pandemic

An outbreak of a new disease worldwide consequently affecting a high proportion of the population.

Quarantine

The period and state of isolation set to prevent the spread of a contagious disease. These restrictions restrain regular activities and interactions between people.

Social distancing

To minimize the spread and exposure of a contagious disease during an outbreak, the practice of social distancing revolves around keeping a greater than regular physical distance from others. This way, avoiding proximity with people and objects in common areas.

Online learning

Also known as e-learning, online learning is education through the internet. This connects students and teachers via a global computer network which means no physical interaction.

Mental illness

Health conditions where emotions, behavior and thoughts are affected. The huge influence this has on people's daily life includes, but is not limited to, when doing productive activities, such as school and work, entering healthy relationships and having the capacity to adjust to change and adapt to difficulties.

Depression

Serious and common mental illness that affects a person's mood and to do things that were previously enjoyed. There are no specific causes of depression, however the various causes can regularly join. A few examples could be alcohol and drugs, loneliness, stressful events, personality, illness and even family history.

Social anxiety

Also called social phobia, social anxiety is a mental health condition. It consists of everyday interactions that result in the fear of being judged or rejected by others. The most common responses to these feelings are anxiety, embarrassment, panic and even rapid heart beat.

Learning gap

The contrast between where a student is expected to be learning at its age versus what they are actually learning throughout a specific timeframe. These tend to form when a student falls behind on a school segment and is not able to get back on track later on.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

A document signed in Paris on December 10th, 1948 by the United Nations. This universal organization counts 193 countries which are responsible for maintaining the peace and security in the world.

General Overview

COVID-19 outbreak

COVID-19 is an infectious disease recently discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the WHO Director-General on January 30, 2020. The virus is transmitted mainly by saliva droplets or nasal discharge when an infected person coughs or sneezes. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there have been more than 3,5 million deaths and over 166 million confirmed cases. Currently COVID-19 is a pandemic that affects most of the countries around the world.

Along with the health concerns created by the global spread of the virus, other social and economic matters have consequently increased. Due to pandemic regulations, kids were obligated to follow their education from home. However, the online technology required for these times is not available to the general public creating a gap in children's education.

Online education

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most young people would attend physical classrooms, meaning they would go to educational institutions. Meanwhile, with technology growing and becoming more influential in society, the usage of those became more common. Therefore, the closure of schools and the global interruption of learning for around 1.6 billion children guided the creation of temporary methods of teaching. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 90% of all students got kept out of school due to school's suspension, reversing years of educational growth.

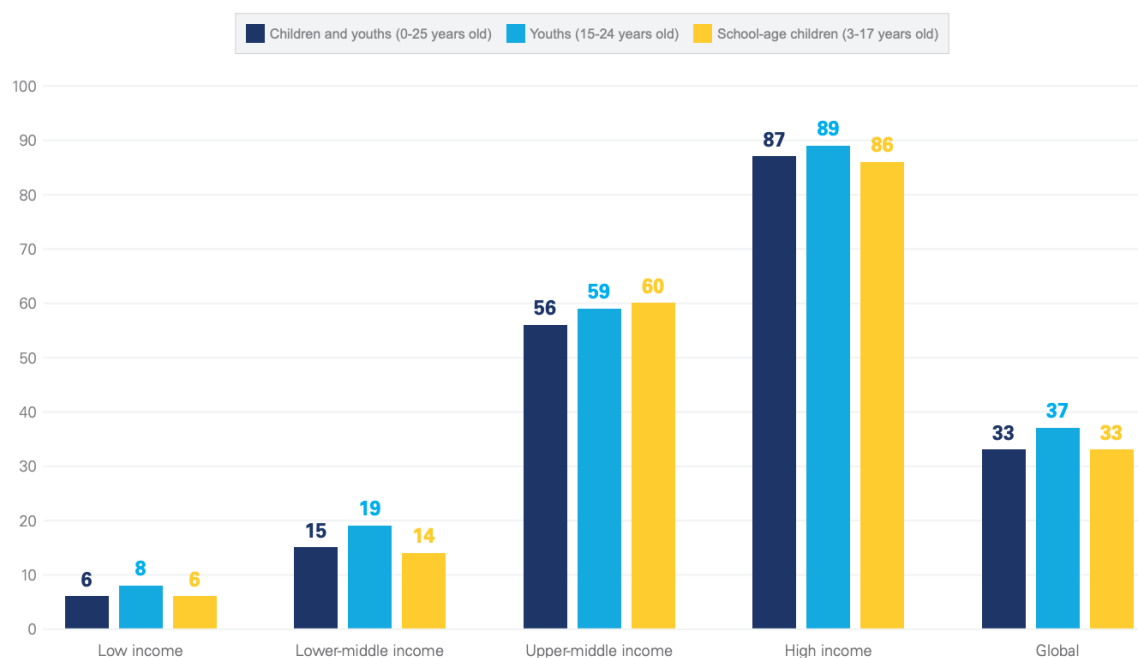
It has also been noted the mental health and comprehension struggles caused by these distance learning methods. With all the uncertainty of future events

and isolation, strong emotions such as stress and loneliness became more common between teens. These feelings also involve the lack of motivation online school has caused in young people. "We can't simply transfer what was done in the classroom to the online setting," says University of Oklahoma associate professor Benjamin Heddy, PhD. Therefore, students can't be checked upon in the same way a physical school would.

Vulnerable groups

Modifications in the education system, as well as what used to be the traditional form of learning, have had the greatest impact on vulnerable groups. School and other learning facilities closures have influenced 94 percent of the world's student population, with up to 99 percent in low and lower-middle income nations (United Nations). It highlights systemic flaws and lower rates of digitalization and literacy in less developed countries. Following the *How Many Children and Youth Have Internet Access at Home* report, created by UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2.2 billion people, which corresponds to two-thirds of children and young people aged 25 or less, are not able to access the internet from home. Therefore, these groups are not able to progress with their education, creating a gap between where they are expected to be at their age versus what they are actually learning throughout a specific timeframe. A survey taken by the UN in 2020 shows the substantial effect that internet access has had on the number of children in primary school who have been taken out of school. Countries that lack understanding and access to digitization depended on physical school settings. As a result, institutions living in these conditions were unable to maintain their educational levels.

Percentage of children and young people with internet access at home, by country income group



Source: Authors' calculations based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other national household surveys (2010-2020).

It is also important to consider situations presented in educational systems that already took place previous to the pandemic. These include issues such as mental health conditions, gender exclusion, rejection of children with disabilities, refugees, and people forced to displace. The attempt to discover ways to deliver education to refugees has also been deemed critical. This is due to the fact that displaced people have also been deprived of access to services provided by schools such as meals and psychosocial guidance.

According to UNESCO, out of the 1.54 billion children in education programs, 743 million are girls. Inside that number, 111 million girls live in less developed countries (LDCs). This actively reassures that even before the pandemic, education was already a struggle. In the top three nations with the lowest school enrollment for girls, including Mali, Niger, and South Sudan, four million girls were forced to drop out of school due to the pandemic. A report created

by the International Labour Organization presents reasons that keep girls out of school in less developed nations. Poverty and economic instability seem to be a very common cause including the lack of hygiene resources and infrastructure. Safety and transportation are also a concern for many parents considering there is no transport for kids who live far from their institution of learning. Especially for girls, rape and sexual harassment rates keep increasing on a daily basis, creating more reason for concern. As a matter of fact, the UNDP and IrishAid claimed that due to the shutdown of schools, girls have been more exposed to physical and sexual assault by their peers and older men.

As for children with disabilities, these students have had to overcome numerous obstacles in order to adjust to distant learning. Now, disabled children are having difficulty locating resources that have been tailored to their specific circumstances, such as unique technological equipment and additional support (all of which would enable them to participate in online programs). As previously mentioned, If the disabled kid comes from a low-income family with no access to the internet, the situation becomes even worse. Also, according to UNICEF, due to isolation, families have ended up living in a confining, claustrophobic environment, which is particularly difficult for children with special needs and their parents. Remote learning has been implemented, but this does not compensate for the loss of a variety of real-world learning activities that were formerly available to students with special needs.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

Considered one of the countries with the best higher education systems before the pandemic. Even with their efficient vaccination process, students had already lost an entire education year because of the inability to carry out

in-person school. Several public schools were not even able to provide online learning because they lacked internet connection. This made their high education system decrease and the standards were lowered, causing the efficiency of education to decrease.

India

Being a country who closed its schools for over 51,9 weeks, over 260 million students lost almost the entire school year. India is the home country to the largest number of children in the world. Many studies have shown the difficulty and inefficiency of online education in countries with large poverty levels such as India. Not only that, but the lost school year and financial loss because of the virus has caused an increase in child force labor. A total of 591 children were rescued of child labor only at the beginning of quarantine.

Russian Federation

Taking effect quickly to close all the schools, Russia has taken several measures to prevent any further loss of children's education. They have prioritized teacher vaccination in "group 1", making education be among their main goals for improvement. The minister of education has also launched several technologies for education and socialization to achieve this. Lastly, recommendations were sent to parents to prevent sexual abuse, pressure and bullying on the web for children.

Brazil

Unequal access to computers and digital tools has made it impossible for the Brazilian population to receive online education. Statistics have demonstrated that 38 out of the 69 state universities have completely suspended all activity without offering an online education, causing thousands of students to lose access to their education. The minister estimated that over 1.1 million students who attended federal institutions lost their scholar year. Furthermore, Jair Bolsonaro's inefficient approach of handling COVID-19 caused for several lives

to be put at risk and create a calamity.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
December 31, 2019	First case of Covid-19 detected in Wuhan, China
January 30, 2020	The Covid-19 outbreak was declared Public health emergency of International Concern
Mid February 2020	Schools around the world were temporarily closed
March 6-20, 2020	Most schools around the world announced their full closure
March 11, 2020	Covid-19 was declared a Pandemic
Late March- Beginning of April 2020	Shift to online classes
March 2021	Schools reopened in the United States of America
April 2021	Schools reopened in Europe and part of America

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations (UN) recognizes the impacts children have been suffering all over the world due to the education gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last few years, the United Nations has been seeking to avoid education attacks induced by political, military, and gender-based beliefs seen across the

world, which have impacted nearly 22,000 children and educators in 93 countries. In July 2020, the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group: Global Campaign for Education, International Council for Adult Education, Education International, and the European Students Union created an event where the consequences of crises in education were discussed. Their experts would give special attention to less privileged groups of children and educators in order to understand the context they live in. Gatherings like these are great opportunities for the creation of new resolutions and strategies to react to crises and raise human and civil rights consciousness.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has released more than 20 report updates consisting of the organization's response to the COVID-19 situation regarding kids education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most recently, on April 5, 2021, the 23rd update on the status of school's reopening has been published. It gives a clear description of the latest information and events occurring to help each of these nations. Also, one of the most active programs is known as "Save our future" which is supported by UNICEF, UNESCO, WORLD BANK, The Education Commission, The Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, The African Development Bank Group, UNHCR, and the World Food Programme. The organization states that about 90% of the world's students have had their schooling interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has exacerbated disparities already present and exacerbated the global learning crisis. Therefore, an entire generation's future is in danger. Overall, the campaign focuses on a four-point strategy for overcoming the major barriers that exist in countries where online classes are not a possibility for continuing education.

Past action

UNICEF, WHO, and governments sponsored a series of protocols that schools should follow for a successful reopening. These were things like wearing masks, practicing social distance, handwashing and respiratory hygiene/etiquette, and isolating if any of the COVID-19 symptoms are present. Nevertheless several other countries implemented more requirements, to fit correspondingly with the amount of coronavirus cases present.

Denmark: Denmark was a country who handled the school opening in a very safe and organized way. They separated children into “micro-groups” of 12 which they called “protective bubbles”. This bubble and setting the desks two meters apart worked very well for the large population.

Russia: Russia has not only implemented the requirements needed to reopen schools, but they also helped when schools were still online. For starters, they implemented the expansion of online education legislation. They have also prioritized the school openings for high school students to prevent the spread in younger kids.

UNICEF continues to support the safe school reopening. They have already reached over 28,000 schools and provided them with cleaning supplies and hygiene. Furthermore, they have supplied children with digital devices to increase their online education possibility in regions where it was not achievable. Lastly, UNICEF has also developed a Teachers Preparedness Package which is a kit that provides practical and concise information about the impact of Covid-19 on education and gives guidance and advice on how to teach through this time. This package spoke specifically to the teachers and encouraged them to keep on teaching, so children could keep on learning.

Possible Solutions

This issue is of extreme importance, especially considering COVID-19 continues to be spread all over the world. The last thing needed is to continue to have an even bigger long term impact on the future lives through the gaps and lack of education. Establishing ways in which all kids can have access to classes virtually and/or physically is crucial for guaranteeing their right to education, yet making sure to follow the pandemic safety regulations.

Financial support is required for the reopening of schools and effectively carry out proper wellbeing and hygiene materials. Also, as mentioned by the World Health Organization, there must be at least a 1-2 meter social distance between people. Measures to provide these aspects are of extreme value since it is what can assure educational institutions ready to receive students in person while following COVID-19 guidelines. Still, it is imperative to address underprivileged communities in which the complete absence of education is present to understand what type of implementations could be possible and invested in.

Finding solutions for these issues is key to making sure every single person is receiving equal access to education independently of socioeconomic class or location. As a society, it is indispensable that we gain knowledge and create strategies from this occasion to set ourselves up for the future to potentially reduce the consequences it may have on us.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

The sustainable development goal that supports this issue is "quality education". This SDG ensures inclusive and equitable quality education, and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. This is something that clearly has been prevented and impacted by the global pandemic and will continue to affect the world in future years. The closure of schools and lack of internet devices

caused the lost year of school to over 185 million children, and nations must work towards the improvement of education once again.

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Appendix

- I. Detailed reports from UNICEF and country governments containing updates of the COVID-19 Education Response in Latin America and the Caribbean.
<https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/update-reports-covid-19-education-response>
- II. UNICEF program article on education during emergencies such as in epidemics, wars and natural disasters.
<https://www.unicef.org/education/emergencies>
- III. UN’s chief vision on steps for education face to face with COVID-19 disruptions.
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- IV. UNESCO’s analysis and implementation plan on education in a post-COVID world.

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IX. OHCHR on the convention on the Rights of the Child

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X. *Save our future* program official website

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