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COVID-19 School Closures, A Learning and Health Crisis

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines social determinants of health as non-medical factors that define health outcomes which includes income, social protection, education, food insecurity, and structural conflict among others [1]. Education and health are bi-directionality linked as good quality education is an investment for health and health is a necessity for effective education [2]. Education is a right for all children as defined in Article 28 of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child [3]. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 which aims to "[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" [4].

In all countries, irrespective of their income level, schools provide more than a space for learning to children. Educational facilities also promote SDG 3 which aims to "[e]nsure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" [4]. School health and nutrition programs provide significant improvements to health and learning outcomes and they also provide developmental gains [5].They promote children's wellbeing, by providing a safe space, access to immunizations, and providing nutritious meals [2,6]. In particular, feeding programs are associated with improvements in children's academic performance, physical health and the mental well-being of children [7].

COVID-19 Pandemic and School Closures

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 [8]. One approach to minimizing COVID-19 transmission, involved school closures, impacting 80% of children worldwide [9]. Figure 1 below highlights school closures in various parts of the world. The three regions with some of the longest school closures are North America, South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean [10]. An Interactive Mapping tool by UNESCO indicates that 1,291,004,434 learners were affected by the pandemic at its peak on April 20, 2020 and there were 151 country-wide closures [11]. It is estimated that this generation of students' risk losing $17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value due to school closures and economic shocks [12].

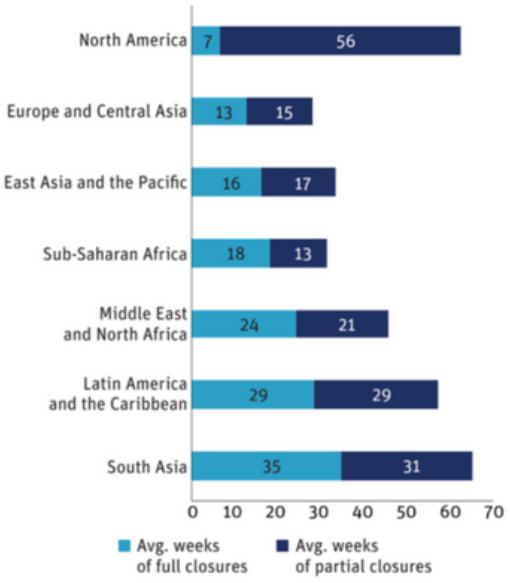

Figure 1. School Closures in Various Parts of the World [10].

School disruptions during public health emergencies exacerbate pre-existing educational inequalities due to uneven access to educational materials [9,13,14]. There were challenges for those in remote areas, those of ethnic minority backgrounds, and those in high poverty schools [14]. For low-income families, some of the challenges were inadequate, unstable, unaffordable access to internet, and lots of instability especially if both siblings were schooling online [14]. The closures have also been very harmful for children already facing discrimination and exclusion such as children with disabilities, girls in countries with gender inequalities, gay, bisexual, and transgender children, children in rural areas, and children already impacted by conflict, amongst others [13].

In many high-income countries, there were widening gaps of existing inequalities. In the United States (US), the pandemic has widened gaps between majority Black and majority White schools [15]. While in Japan, disadvantaged children and younger children suffered the most from school closures [16]. In Sweden, the pandemic had limited impacts on those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in primary schooling, indicating the varied impacts the pandemic had in countries [17]. In, India, a lower middle income country, there was a cumulative loss for children in their ability to speak languages and their mathematical abilities [18].

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean had some of the longest school closures. In this region, approximately 170 million children were deprived of in-person education [10, 16]. While in Ethiopia a low-income country, there were concerns for children in rural areas who had limited access to technology as the pandemic widened existing educational inequalities between rural and urban areas in pre-primary and primary education [19]. The impacts of COVID-19 school closures varied by different parts of the world and the impacts were also very different depending on the communities that the closures impacted.

Impact on Health

School closures had many impacts on the wellbeing of children. It is documented that school closures limited physically safe spaces contributing to increased cases of child abuse [2]. The pandemic also led to the deprivation of social and emotional experiences needed for development and wellbeing of children [2]. The loss of a space for learning also impacted access to food, protection, water and sanitation, and mental health and psychosocial support as these are provided through schools [20]. In many lower income countries, the economic crisis caused by COVID-19, has put poor households into greater poverty and some families turn to early marriage as an alternate source of income [2]. Early marriage is known to have determinantal impacts to young girls as they have children at an early age, putting them at a higher risk of pregnancy related complications and death [21].

The pandemic has had negative impacts on children's physical and mental health. A report by Save the Children states that 83% of children globally indicated increased negative feelings since the beginning of the pandemic [22]. In the US, parents reported concerns of their children's mental health due to unfinished learning, with these reports being higher in parents of Black and Hispanic children [23]. The pandemic also impacted physical health as schools are a place for children to exercise and receive a nutritious meal. In the US and the United Kingdom, the-

re have been rising rates of childhood obesity during the pandemic [24, 25]. In the US, the highest increases were seen in younger children with disrupted routines and increased stress contributing to this [24].

Additionally, many children have lost the only nutritious meal they receive during the day losing their vital vitamins and micronutrients which impacts their development and growth. The Word Food Programme (WFP) estimates that over 320 million children have missed out on school meals due to school closures [26]. The pandemic school closures have led to many negative health outcomes for children, and these will need to be targeted as COVID-19 recovery has commenced.

Conclusion

COVID-19 school closures have led to a learning and health crisis in countries around the world. COVID-19 recovery should focus on providing children with safe educational spaces. As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes less of an imminent threat, it is important to work towards reversing the damages to education and health. UNICEF's Learning Passport is one initiative working to minimize educational gaps. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this program underwent a rapid transformation to expand its reach. Currently the Learning Passport operates in 28 countries worldwide and is being deployed in 25 more [27].

To minimize the health impacts of school closures, UNICEF and WFP launched a take-home rations, vouchers, and cash transfers in 68 countries to ensure children's access to nutritious meals [28]. As schools have re-opened, it is essential ensure children are able to catch-up on learning missed during school closures and ensure they have the needed psychosocial support and access to nutritious meals to improve their health.

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