

BRIEFING NOTE N°12

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COVID-19: YOUTH AND EDUCATION: IMPACTS AND OPTIONS



PREAMBLE

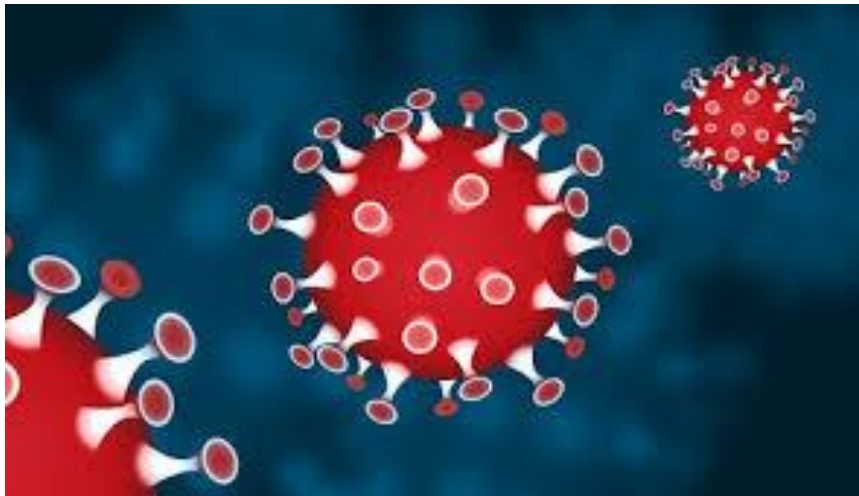
As it has done regularly in the past, in connection with complex, multi-factor and potentially long-lasting crises, the Groupe URD has begun to:

- Share lessons from previous major health crises (see: (https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200408_Crises-sanitaires_EN_FINAL.pdf))
- Establish a 'real-time evaluation observatory' in order to produce synthesis reports, analysis and recommendations about the crisis. (<https://www.urd.org/en/project/covid-19-observatory/>).

In this framework, the team of the COVID-19 Observatory has produced a series of briefing notes on specific subjects:

- Health;
- Food, agricultural and economic security;
- Social cohesion and social tensions;
- Migration and mobility;
- Education;
- Conflicts;
- The Emergency-Development Nexus.

This is the twelfth note produced by the COVID-19 Observatory. It presents our analysis on the impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector, and the challenges surrounding the support of this sector in "post-COVID" strategies.



The Groupe URD produces strategic documents in connection with a convention with the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (Crisis and Support Centre and the General Directorate for Globalisation) and the French Development Agency (AFD). These focus on topical issues in the aid sector, and help to improve the quality of operations before, during and after crises. The content of these documents is solely the responsibility of its authors.

SUMMARY

During the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the main objective of most governments has been to preserve as many lives as possible. In order to achieve this, entire countries have been put on 'pause', closing their borders and setting up confinements of variable enforcement, impacting not only economies but also education systems. These measures have been criticized by some, who claim that the 'cure', or the social measures imposed on populations, should not be worse than the health crisis itself. It was partly on the basis of this logic that Sweden decided to keep the bulk of their shops, schools and social activities open, and that the United States is still hoping to be able to reopen in time for the start of the school year. Nevertheless, the vast majority of countries around the world have preferred to temporarily halt the bulk of their economic and social activities, notably in the education and cultural sectors, so as not to overburden their health systems, giving priority to saving lives rather than maintaining a façade of normality.

It is important, however, apart from the debate that rages surrounding the priorities chosen by nations in the face of COVID-19, to identify the consequences that this period will have on the world's populations. This note presents some of the consequences that this crisis has had and will have, as well as a few of the challenges that it imposes on the education of young people around the world.

The current health crisis, and above all the social measures used to respond to it, are likely to aggravate existing inequalities in access to quality education around the world. While the richest countries and the more privileged families will have access to alternative sources of education during confinement and will have time to dedicate to this educational continuity, many others, particularly in countries of the global South, have not had the necessary support to continue their education during the confinement period. The establishment of remote-learning systems of educational continuity indeed requires a certain level of electricity and telecommunication infrastructure, which are in many cases rarely accessible to the majority of populations in poor or even middle-income countries where the crisis has led to rapid impoverishment. The reopening of schools, which seemed promising as the world seemed to overcome the "first wave" of COVID-19, was once again put in question with the resurgence of the virus' circulation. It is evident that the current situation poses major challenges for all countries, which obviously those with more resources will be better able to overcome. The adaptation of classroom infrastructure to comply to sanitary norms, the establishment of remote education systems available to all, and the expansion of medical capacity represent significant additional resource-needs that few countries have.

Even before COVID-19, the world was facing an educational crisis highlighted by the difficulties in achieving SDG 4. According to the World Bank, around 53% of young people in low- and middle-income countries live in "learning poverty". The closure of schools, a measure taken everywhere in many countries to facilitate 'physical distancing' and reduce the risk of contamination, is likely to worsen this crisis in the coming times and make it impossible to reach the goal of halving this learning poverty by 2030. Of the 1.6 billion children and young people who have been confined to their homes, many are likely to be unable to catch up, or worse, won't return to school at all. The world's governments must therefore continue to put in place systems to ensure educational continuity and ways to get back to school as soon as possible, and international cooperation, including through multilateral institutions such as UNESCO and UNICEF, must support these countries and their young people.

1. INTRODUCTION

In rich and poor countries alike, measures restricting movement, or even outright confinement, have had significant impacts on education systems. Within days, schools and universities closed in many countries around the world, leaving pupils and students, but also parents and teachers, facing major challenges. Differences in the economic levels of countries, the energy and telecommunication capacities, the skills of teachers and the dynamism of educational teams have led to the emergence of a highly heterogeneous map of how this educational crisis has been handled, with a deepening of divides between countries and an increase in the social inequalities surrounding education. Often, in the aftermath of a conflict, we often referred to a "lost generation", referring to the youth deprived of education by war in the countries concerned. This time, the problem is not militaristic but biological, and is indeed global in scope.

This 12th note from the COVID-19 Observatory highlights our analysis of the situation, and proposes actions to be taken in the face of this rather demoralizing diagnosis.

2. THE IMPACTS OF UNPLANNED SCHOOL CLOSURES

2.1. MULTIPLE IMPACTS, CHALLENGES IN THE SHORT AND MEDIUM TERM

Over the course of this health crisis, one of the issues that has not been sufficiently addressed has been the impact of confinement on the education sector. While most countries in the world have sought to maintain educational continuity, the transition to remote learning has been made more or less quickly, and it seems that in many cases it has not been truly effective. For many regions, the closure of schools has simply meant that parents have been told to keep their children at home, with no alternatives.

Statistics give us an idea of the magnitude of the number of people affected by school closures. According to UNESCO, nearly 1.6 billion students have been impacted at the maximum point of school closures, or 91% of the total student population.¹ This number, often mentioned in official discourse surrounding the impact of the health crisis on the education sector, is only part of the equation. The true impact on students will only be known in the coming months and years. However, it is already clear that this crisis has had a significant impact on students in terms of knowledge acquisition, social and psychological development, and even in terms of economic and food security. We identify these consequences in more detail below.

Firstly, the issue of the loss of knowledge acquisition. Forced out of school, many students have seen their learning lose quality, or even disappear completely during the period of confinement, a break in learning that continues for more than 60% of learners (according to UNESCO estimates of 5 July 2020). This break will already have had a huge impact on young people, in terms of potential loss of knowledge education.

¹ <https://fr.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

Some sources have already tried to quantify this impact:

Researchers at the Brookings Institute² have made some projections, basing their estimations on past school closures related to weather-related hazards (Hurricane Katrina, among others), the usual summer holidays, and the MAP Growth tests normally administered throughout the year. Their models identify some worrying points:

- Most students are likely to be well behind in their learning, especially in mathematics and science, but also in literary subjects.
- At the beginning of the school year, there will be much more variability in students' skills, and students who are already getting low grades will be particularly impacted.
- Usually, those who lose the most knowledge during the summer holidays are the ones who recover it most quickly when they return to school. This will not necessarily be true in a post-health crisis context, where loss of acquired knowledge will not necessarily be addressed in the same way.

Economists at the University of Bristol have tried to quantify the potential cognitive impact that stopping school due to COVID-19 will have. By extrapolating from the studies by Carlsson et al (2015) and Lavy (2015), published well before the start of the COVID-19 crisis, they nevertheless estimate the order of magnitude of the impact that this disruption will have on student learning. Using the two different methods mentioned in the studies above, the economists estimate a drop in test results of about 6% of the standard deviation after 12 weeks of confinement without schooling. This is not negligible: indeed, lower scores on standardized tests are correlated with greater difficulty in finding a job, and lower pay, especially true for tests near the end of a teenager's schooling³.

The World Bank has begun to quantify the potential economic impact of lost school time⁴. It has created different models depending on the mitigation measures put in place to address loss of learning (a loss reduced in particular by using implementing educational continuity, e.g. through remote education). Some economic estimates indicate an alarming loss resulting from this period:

- A loss of 0.6 years of learning (their 'intermediate' outcome, between their optimistic and pessimistic projections), adjusted for variations in learning quality, could cause an average wage reduction of USD 872 in annual wages over the lives of current primary and secondary school students (in other terms more than USD 16,000 over the course of their working lives).
- Using this number, the World Bank extrapolated that without an effective response to school closures, the world could stand to lose up to US\$10 trillion over the lives of these people – a daunting number which calls for investments to ensure that this loss of learning is minimized.

Finally, another important aspect of school is the social learning it generates. Beyond cognitive learning, school is vital as a setting for social learning: the links between students and with teachers are vital for the personal development of each child⁵. Knowing how to express oneself, how to listen to others, how to respect diversity, and more abstractly how to respect the 'social contract' is difficultly learned from books. Confined to their homes, children suddenly find themselves unable to see their friends, teachers and other members of their classes, an isolation that could have a strong impact, especially if it lasts too long⁶. Too long a closure could perhaps lead to delays in social learning, although there remains little evidence of this. Online platforms, from games to social networks, will likely reduce this impact, at least in part. Similarly, the transition to remote learning tools hopes to provide educational continuity. It remains to be seen whether they will be enough.

²<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/05/27/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-achievement-and-what-it-may-mean-for-educators/>

³ <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.202.4055&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁴<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/simulating-potential-impacts-of-covid-19-school-closures-learning-outcomes-a-set-of-global-estimates>

⁵ <https://www.nap.edu/read/5286/chapter/6>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0890856720303373>

2.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES: POTENTIALLY GREATER THAN THE LOSS OF LEARNING?

Notwithstanding the fact that school closures will result in significant loss of learning for children, educators and psychologists alike point out that this will not be the only impact felt by students. In the context of school closures, and with the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis more generally, it is unfortunately quite likely that many students will experience significant trauma, additional stress and anxiety. Many children and adolescents will potentially find themselves confined in unsuitable and/or unsafe housing, especially if parents are also confined and still have to work. Family ties have been placed under greater strain, with mandatory confinement and the need to live together with few alternatives. The economic impact of the crisis has greatly aggravated the stress felt by many, posing psychological difficulties for parents and, indirectly through them, children. Finally, with the number of deaths from SARS-CoV-2, close to 700,000 at the time of writing, families around the world will find themselves in mourning. All of this will add to the emotional and psychological consequences of the current crisis in general, in which students around the world are temporarily losing, unexpectedly, a comforting routine. While the WHO indicates that in order to combat these psychological consequences, parents should devote time to help and support their children, this is not necessarily possible in all cases. Such support is particularly difficult, if not impossible, for families where parents have significant employment problems, or where they have even been affected by the disease itself.

These impacts will potentially have significant consequences during the back-to-school period, and even beyond. Based on past studies conducted in post-disaster contexts, it would seem that the psychological impact of the disruption of routine due to disasters, as observed in Australia⁷ in Ethiopia, in India and in Vietnam⁸, have a severe impact on educational outcomes. It has been proven that stress can have a strong negative impact on mental ability and memory⁹. The impacts of school closures due to COVID-19 are not likely to be any different.

It should also be noted that these psychosocial impacts will not be the same depending on the age of the students, or for those with pre-existing mental problems or special learning-assistance needs¹⁰. Any plan put in place to continue education during COVID-19 must take these particularities into account, including an assessment of the additional stresses faced by students, and putting in place programs to deal with them.

Teachers, too, may suffer some psychological consequences during this crisis. The impact of crises (epidemiological, natural/technological disasters, generalized violence, and others) on teachers has been only partly studied¹¹. However, as many children's first point of contact outside the home, they are often very important for the emotional and psychological support of students. It is therefore important that school officials, as well as governments more generally, find ways to assist them in managing this socio-emotional burden, which is added to the new workload of managing remote teaching systems in which the most rewarding part of teaching, the direct contact with pupils, is replaced by a virtual setting.

⁷ <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.13200>

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/rode.12406>

⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/npjscilearn201611>

¹⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7156240/>

¹¹ https://my.chartered.college/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CCTReport070520_FINAL.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0t62tROapzSQv28ofnlVc3AhE44UuFTP19dg6_V0-o7y8NqAFkEawAWZ8 (pages 26-30)

2.3 IMPACTS ON GENDER ISSUES

Closing schools will obviously not impact all students equally. This is evident in the disproportionate impact it will have on girls¹². School, beyond simply being a place of learning, also represents a safe haven for many children who live in difficult situations at home. Girls are particularly at risk of sexual violence and problems surrounding reproductive health during school closures: when schools were closed due to Ebola, there was a sharp increase in teenage pregnancy and many pregnant girls were refused entry to school at the start of the school year¹³; unfortunately, the same thing is likely to happen again in the current crisis.

In addition, throughout the world, women provide the vast majority of unpaid household labour (cleaning, cooking, childcare, etc.). This is equally true for young girls: even before confinement, girls aged 5 to 14 years already spent 40% more time than boys on household chores at home¹⁴. Forced to stay at home, girls are likely to see a disproportionate increase in the amount of work they have to do, leaving them less time than boys to devote to academic homework. This increase in work may encourage parents to push their daughters to drop out of school altogether.

Finally, like many other NGOs, organizations working to advance the situation of girls and in the education sector in general face a lack of funding. In May, nearly half of the educational organizations contacted by CGDev reported that their budgets had already been reduced, largely as a result of a drop in private and philanthropic donations¹⁵. This decrease in budget may come at the most inopportune time: more than ever, children and especially girls will need additional support in order to achieve MDGs 4 (quality education) and 5 (gender equality).

2.3 NUTRITIONAL IMPACT

It also seems highly likely that school closures will worsen widespread malnutrition among children living in poverty for whom school canteens have become essential. For at least 320 million children around the world, meals provided through schools are an important source of food on which they depend, provided by governments, NGOs and intergovernmental agencies such as the WFP. For many of these children, these meals can be the main source of nutrients crucial to their growth.

This is particularly prevalent in countries with high rates of poverty and extreme poverty. In these countries, a meal equivalent in nutrients to the 9 million meals given daily by the WFP can be worth up to more than 10% of the monthly income of the poorest families¹⁶. These meals therefore represent a significant source of savings for these families, especially when these families have multiple children to feed. Thus, the interruption of the canteen can and will jeopardize financial security in addition to food security.

¹² <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest>

¹³ [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31377-5.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)31377-5.pdf)

¹⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/girls-spend-160-million-more-hours-boys-doing-household-chores-everyday>

¹⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gendered-impacts-covid-19-school-closures-insights-frontline-organizations.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://fr.wfp.org/communiqués-de-presse/covid-19-face-la-fermeture-des-écoles-le-pam-se-prepare-aider-les-enfants>

3. SOLUTIONS IN A RESTRICTED ENVIRONMENT

3.1. REMOTE LEARNING

To combat the unprecedented loss of learning by more than a billion students, school leaders, organizations (regional, national, international) and governments, as well as teachers themselves, have had to be agile and adaptable to deal with this new crisis. In the vast majority of countries, the closure of schools has been accompanied by a transition to remote teaching. In many cases, this has taken the form of the implementation of educational technologies (known as "edtech"), which have taken many forms, as synthesized by the World Bank¹⁷. In all contexts, the transition to remote learning has required experimentation, a strong reliance on pre-existing networks in communities, and a strong adaptation to the specific contexts of individual communities and students.

This transition has not been easy. The vast majority of countries in the world did not have a plan in place to ensure educational continuity in the event of systematic school closures, so the response to this crisis was *ad hoc* in nature, and shrouded in uncertainty. In recent months, new forms of learning, as well as new actors, have emerged. From teachers who volunteered to do emotional and educational 'check-ins' with their students (while respecting public health measures), to communal child daycare arrangements between families, new forms of solidarity have emerged. Knowing how to analyze the transition that has been made is therefore vital, in order to better understand how to better guide the education sector during the current crisis, and to respond to the educational shocks of the future (including if SARS-CoV-2 becomes endemic).

5.1. TECHNOLOGY AND EQUITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

When schools closed due to COVID-19, in order to ensure educational continuity, many governments turned to online platforms to allow teachers to continue to reach their students. Around the world and even prior to the current crisis, governments had already begun to invest in the implementation of new technologies and platforms in the education sector, a rapidly growing industry that was already worth \$18.66 billion in 2019¹⁸, and which is expected to grow to \$350 billion before 2025¹⁹. China and the United States have been the two biggest investors in this domain, in part due to their large populations and the increasingly widespread Internet access within their territories. This has enabled them, as in the majority of Western countries, to transition from in-person courses to remote teaching relatively smoothly, using online sites and applications to connect their students to their teachers.

However, in order to adhere to its goal of halving learning poverty by 2030, it is necessary for the international community to recognize that the consequences of school closures tend to have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized students, especially in countries with significant pre-existing gaps in their education systems. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly at risk: more than 20% of 6-11 year olds, more than 33% of 12-14 year olds, and more than 60% of 15-17 year old adolescents were already out of school before the arrival of COVID-19²⁰: numbers which are likely to increase as a result of the health crisis and its economic and social consequences.

¹⁷<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

¹⁸<https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/2019-global-edtech-investments-reach-a-staggering-18-66-billion-1028800669#>

¹⁹https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/4876815/online-education-market-and-global-forecast-by?utm_source=dynamic&utm_medium=GNOM&utm_code=lww8wt&utm_campaign=1334315+-+Online+Education+Market+Study+2019+%7c+World+Market+Projected+to+Reach+%24350+Billion+by+2025%2c+Dominated+by+the+United+States+and+China&utm_exec=joca220gnomd

²⁰ <http://uis.unesco.org/fr/topic/education-en-afrique>

Students in these contexts have fewer options for education at home, with only a certain few of them having access to computers, a stable connection, the means to pay for educational tools, and other resources available to those living in developed countries. With school closures and the additional financial stresses caused by the economic downturn associated with COVID-19, the risk of dropping out of school is likely to be especially high in sub-Saharan Africa and other impoverished regions.

In order to combat this loss of learning, states must continue to adapt to the particular contexts of each region, and schools must take into account the situation of each student. Put in place programmes to ensure educational continuity, complemented by food and even financial assistance to temporarily replace the canteen (as WFP has started to undertake²¹), will be vital to ensure that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on families is limited. The adaptation of distance education to particular contexts, in order to ensure widespread educational continuity, has already begun in some countries. Some examples are listed here:

- The Rwandan School Board (REB) implemented remote learning by adapting to the context of its citizens: radio being the main medium used by Rwandans, it was used to ensure that children would always have access to their learning. In addition, the Rwandan government has established a partnership with telecommunication companies so that the learning sites can be accessed free of charge on mobile platforms²².
- Similarly, Peru has made their courses available online and on dedicated radio stations, first using these platforms to educate families about COVID-19, and then transitioning to focusing on educational continuity for young people. In addition, the state has announced the distribution of nearly one million tablets (with solar chargers where necessary) to the most disadvantaged children, so that they can continue their education at a distance²³.
- Other countries have signed agreements with private companies to handle distance education. This has been the case in Paraguay and Georgia, countries in which Microsoft is responsible for ensuring the educational continuity of millions of students in the current context²⁴.

Nevertheless, the quality of these remote education services has not yet been fully proven. It seems very likely that it is of lower quality than face-to-face instruction, and that it further widens the gap between those who have time and resources to devote to distance education and those who do not.

3.2. THE ‘MERCHANTS OF EDUCATION’ AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION: A DEVELOPMENT TO BE MONITORED

The transition to remote learning around the world has brought about a major upheaval in the education sector. States have had to rely on virtual platform providers (Zoom, Microsoft, Google, etc.) as well as on telecommunications companies to facilitate the connection between students and teachers. All over the world, "edtech" is currently in very high demand, and it is the private players who have succeeded in providing the technologies needed during this pandemic. Will these changes be temporary and once the crisis is over, will there be a return to face-to-face classes? Or, will the fear of new ‘waves’ of contamination and future diseases lead to an a permanent transition towards incorporating distance learning in the educational sector?

²¹<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals>

²² <https://twitter.com/airtelrw/status/1243514937907056640?s=20>

²³<https://www.gob.pe/institucion/minedu/noticias/126152-minedu-comprara-mas-de-840-mil-tablets-con-internet-movil-para-escolares-de-zonas-alejadas>

²⁴<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

Within a few months the ongoing situation led to major changes and the realization that distance education had many advantages. The fact that the content retained by students seems higher with e-learning²⁵, especially for young adults and adolescents, may lead many schools and universities to integrate a greater amount of e-learning into their curricula, even after the end of the pandemic. In addition, this novel experience has in many cases allowed for more direct individual help for each student, who by using messaging applications (such as WhatsApp, Discord, etc.), in addition to the 'traditional' e-mail, can easily get in touch with their teachers at any time.

These advantages could encourage a transition to distance learning and a reliance on private operators in the future. Despite the advantages of distance education that have been highlighted in many articles²⁶, it is important to keep in mind that these companies work primarily to maximize their revenues, which more often than not is not equal to maximizing the societal public good. The current transition to e-learning, with its strong emphasis on partnerships with private companies, therefore risks overlooking the barriers encountered by the most disadvantaged students, especially in poor countries. This will require a heightened sense of vigilance and supervision on the part of education ministries, complemented by oversight provided by the international community. This oversight will be all the more important in the times to come, as the looming economic crisis will surely push many nations to reduce their deficits by privatizing education, as the United States had already begun to do since their last recession²⁷. The privatization of education, if it continues beyond the current crisis, can potentially lead to a decline in the quality and accessibility of education, jeopardizing the accomplishing of SDG 4 (access to quality education for all). In the months and years to come, it is therefore imperative that public actors in the education sector ensure that all students, especially the most disadvantaged, have access to affordable, quality education, no matter what channels that education is delivered through.

4. POST-COVID: A CAREFUL RETURN TO SCHOOL

As their first wave of COVID has come and gone, many countries have begun to debate the reopening of educational facilities. While it appears that young people are much less likely to suffer from the medical consequences of COVID-19²⁸, they continue to be affected by the psychosocial and nutritional consequences that will be all the more severe if school closures continue. By April, this concern had already prompted a few of the world's countries to plan for a possible return to school²⁹. As more and more media, scientists and educators describe the significant impact of lost learning during confinement³⁰, the majority of countries in the world have begun to plan for an at least partial re-opening of educational institutions, with in-person classes to be scheduled as soon as possible.

Nonetheless, it is important that with the potentiality of new waves of contamination, the return to a certain normality is gradual, and remains based on the dynamics of the pandemic in each country to ensure the safety of populations. Naturally, it is important to ensure that the risk of transmission is minimized in schools, as they have been in communities. While children of primary school age do not appear to be significant vectors for SARS-CoV-2³¹, adolescents seem to spread the virus at a similar rate to adults³².

²⁵<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paycom/2017/02/14/learning-management-systems-101-rethinking-your-approach-to-employee-training/>

²⁶<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/>

²⁷<https://www.insider.com/public-education-divestment-has-occurred-since-the-recession-2018-11>

²⁸<https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/doi/10.1093/cid/ciaa450/5821281>

²⁹<https://en.unesco.org/news/education-ministers-share-plans-reopening-schools-after-covid-19-closures>

³⁰<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/07/18/the-risks-of-keeping-schools-closed-far-outweigh-the-benefits>

³¹<https://www.pasteur.fr/fr/espace-presse/documents-presse/covid-19-ecoles-primaires-pas-transmission-importante-du-virus-entre-enfants-ou-enseignants>

³²https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315_article

While the conclusions of studies on these topics seem promising, they aren't yet definitively proven in all contexts, and the reopening of schools shouldn't depend solely on these findings; instead, a strong vigilance must be maintained. It will therefore be important to continue to monitor the dynamics of transmission within schools so that they can be better understood and the most appropriate measures can then be taken.

In any case, it is obvious that the reopening of schools will require precautions and adaptations on the part of students and teachers. To reopen schools safely, it is best to be cautious and follow all health guidelines that slow the spread of the virus, even for young children. Some publications have already stressed the importance of barrier measures (wearing masks, setting up hand washing stations in schools, etc.), even if transmission seems unlikely³³; it will also be important to be able to carry out widespread virological testing within educational structures in order to quarantine potentially infected individuals and to better identify transmission behaviours in schools. Sweden's decision to keep their schools open (except for children over 15 years of age) could have made it possible to conduct such monitoring and to better model these transmission dynamics within schools: a missed opportunity that countries currently planning to reopen schools should not emulate.

Also vital is the importance of the timing of the reopening of the schools. Re-introducing face-to-face classes when infection rates are much higher than when confinement began, as is currently proposed in the United States, is more likely to spread the virus and cost many lives. In such contexts, where they can afford it, educational institutions should do their utmost to provide quality remote education accessible to all, especially to older children who are more comfortable using computer software. In regions where an online educational platform is not accessible to all, it will be important to work with funding sources such as the World Bank to set up appropriate systems (radio, textbook distribution, etc), as previously pointed out. Nonetheless, if political influence or public pressure forces a return to face-to-face schooling, countries should consider only reopening schools for younger children³⁴, so as to limit the propagation of the virus.

Another important point to address is that it will surely be necessary everywhere in the world to go beyond a return to normal. As indicated, this crisis will have many different impacts, which we have only begun to address here. There will be a need for appropriate programs to address the psychosocial needs of students, as well as additional academic support targeted particularly at students and regions with low learning outcomes, high drop-out rates and low resilience to external shocks. A special focus on girls and adolescent girls to ensure that they remain included in education systems, conducted both in schools and universities and at home, will be essential.

The current crisis related to COVID-19 has already had a strong impact on students, teachers and instructional modalities around the world. It will be important to put in place systems that are better able to provide emotional and psychological support for children, including alternative methods of providing quality education for all. The implementation of transmission mitigation measures at the start to the school year must not fall solely on teachers. Addressing the negative impacts of this crisis in the education sector will require multi-sectoral contributions from governments, donors, organizations and even families.

³³ <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1279750/retrieve>

³⁴ <https://theconversation.com/reouverture-des-ecoles-primaires-mode-demploi-137477>



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