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Covid-19 and closing the gap: webinar report



Covid-19 and closing the gap

On 30 July 2020, Cambridge University Press presented a webinar to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education systems around the world. Hosted by Ben Knight, the panel comprised five global thought leaders in education. Together, they discussed the impact on disadvantaged communities, responses to school closures in different educational contexts, and how education policy and practice might need to adapt in the long term.

This report brings together the insights and guidance from those panellists.

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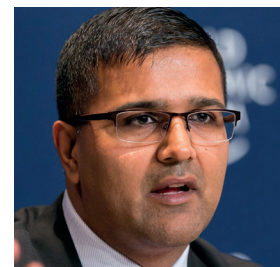
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Introduction

Ben Knight

One-and-a-half billion children – that is, 75% of enrolled students in 140 countries around the globe – have been out of school during lockdown. But is Covid-19 increasing social inequality through its impact on education?

Here, global educational thought leaders seek to tackle these questions as we look at the impact of Covid-19 on education, particularly on disadvantaged students; what can be done to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on education equity; and what it means for the future of education.



1. What is the impact of lockdown on education in disadvantaged communities?

- There was already a large learning gap in many places before the pandemic, so systems have to deal with an exacerbated issue, rather than a new one.
- We have to consider different cohorts of children and their individual challenges.
- Levels of continued access to quality education during lockdown differ widely for individuals, even within the same household.

Learning loss and the learning gap

While it is likely to be too early to understand the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, it is important to note that there was already a learning crisis in schools, with many children spending years in education and not learning. There is a distinction between *learning loss*, which is the loss or reduction of knowledge and skills resulting from a disruption to education such as school closures, and the *learning gap*, which is the difference in learning between different groups of individuals, such as those who have continued access to education and support and those who do not.

Dr Rukmini Banerji states that even before the pandemic, in India and many other parts of the world, enrolment levels were very high while basic learning levels – reading, arithmetic – were extremely low. 'In every grade you see a wide distribution of levels that children are at.' According to Dr Banerji, the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\)](#) has consistently shown over the last decade that at least half of primary school leaving-age children are not yet at a Year 3 [2nd Grade] level of learning.

A recent study carried out by researchers in Pakistan about the long-term implications of the October 2015 Afghanistan/Pakistan earthquake found that while the economic levels of the families affected by the earthquake largely returned to where they were in 2015, the learning levels of the children in the affected areas took four years longer to recover. For Dr Banerji, these findings highlight that 'only a small part of [learning loss] can be attributed to the closure of schools, and the rest is what happened when pupils returned to school and there was a rush to get back to the curriculum'.

Considerations for different cohorts of children

Dr Rabea Malik suggested that those who are soon to start school will be entering at a lower level than previously expected: 'Quite a lot of progress that had been made in the early development of children so that they became prepared learners when they did enter schools in a couple of years, has been disrupted.'

Dr Malik also discussed how some girls are at a higher risk of dropping out of school because of the pandemic. 'The burden of care for them at home has gone up, so the risk is that it may take them longer [to return] or they may not be able to return to schools at all.' There are different challenges for these different cohorts of learners, and that needs to be considered in plans to get learners back into schools.

Another sometimes-forgotten factor is the socio-emotional wellbeing of children during a crisis. For Dr Ricardo Sabates, schools are about education and social protection, with both aspects being disrupted during the outbreak. While working in northern Ghana for the REAL Centre, which provided a complementary basic education programme and accelerated learning to children who have not been to school, Dr Sabates studied the loss in children's progress between finishing their complementary education and transitioning to government school, known as 'summer loss':

'We found that about 60% of what these children learn on average is lost during these three months, and the EEF [Education Endowment Foundation] found in their latest systematic review that it could be somewhere between a third to a half of learning loss experienced during summer – the pandemic has magnified the situation in terms of inequalities.'

These findings also suggested that the children who reported that they can get support at home have a much lower learning loss than children who cannot, as do children who have materials for reading, writing, and working with numbers at home. In addition, and further complicating matters, access to help and electronics at home is inevitably disrupted in this cohort once lockdown restrictions are eased and family members are spending more time outside of the home environment.

Access to education and support

Access to education is crucial in reducing learning loss, and Charles Clarke emphasised that 'there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution to getting this right in the future'. He highlights three factors that need to be accounted for when looking for solutions to the educational disadvantage exacerbated by the pandemic:

'First, the involvement, commitment, and ability of parents in helping their child during lockdown. Second, is the fact that schools have each behaved very differently, with some working hard to ensure that their pupils are engaged with the curriculum, while others have taken a more formalistic approach and not followed through on pupil engagement; then there is the attitude of the children themselves.'

Mr Clarke cites the findings of a very [recent survey](#) from the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) which indicated that families with one child under five found it 'far, far more difficult' to help the older children to learn in that situation, because the parents' focus is on the needs of the younger child. The challenges of accessing quality learning vary considerably for individual learners, even within households.

Researchers and educators have realised that access is a top priority for reducing learning loss, and Vikas Pota highlighted six new randomised control trials that are being held around the world to look at the impact of the use of radio, television, and other technological inventions, to improve children's access to learning in varying contexts. Mr Pota predicts these will produce fascinating insights and sees reasons to be optimistic about the dynamic initiatives that have been borne out of this crisis.

It is clear that governments, policymakers, and educators need to know how much can be achieved, in what period of time, and at what cost. The panel agreed that a clear strategy could dictate the best way forward and this would, in turn, help to minimise some of the learning losses. There may be a range of factors of which we are not yet aware – that is, we must expect, but cannot factor in, the unknown.



2. Responses to the Covid-19 education gap

- Getting children back to school safely on a regular basis, whether physically or digitally, is critical.
- More investment is needed in responses to learning loss, remedial support packages and in teacher training to adapt to the new learning landscape.
- Resilience and sustainability will be key elements in the strategic planning of every education system going forward.

Global education is in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, and governments, ministries, and policymakers need to be clear and united in what the response to this challenge should be. What is currently working, how much catch-up is possible, and for how long will exceptional measures be needed?

School attendance is key: 'Children being able to attend school on a regular basis', says Mr Clarke, 'is a critical element in being able to move forward'. Also of new and great interest is the question of online provision in the future of education. The panel agreed that the provision of online education will be crucial for recovering the losses made during this pandemic, and that any remedial support packages must have sound strategic and financial backing.

Financing

The financing of education will always be a hot topic, but in this extraordinary time, there is a move away from the plea for general investment towards more specific criteria. Vikas Pota cites the example of Turkey, where three key areas have been targeted for investment: emergency connectivity and IT infrastructure; the production of digital content; and investment to build institutional capacity. Mr Pota suggests six measures that would help address the shortcomings we have witnessed:

1. Protect education spending;
2. provide a one-off increase in spending to the schools that have been hardest hit by learning loss;
3. invest in summer learning programmes and tutoring to help those students falling furthest behind;
4. implement just-in-time learning assessments so teachers can plan their lessons to accelerate learning recovery once schools reopen;
5. provide scholarships to keep children enrolled;
6. develop various types of employment programmes and lifelong learning opportunities for at-risk youths.

Dr Malik agrees that 'it becomes very important to link social protection now with questions around how you get some conditional cash fronts [programmes where recipients of support meet certain criteria] for this, and other mechanisms that can provide a safety net for a lot of the households. A recent survey in Punjab revealed that close to 40% of households are reporting a loss in income and financial distress. So the scale and shock of this is going to be big, and going to be multifaceted.'

Teacher training and capacity-building

The pandemic and lockdown has shown that educational capacity needs to be expanded and strengthened. Mr Pota sees a space being created for the teacher workforce to have an influence and an impact based upon what they are seeing on the frontline. 'An interesting facet to the pandemic', he says, '[has been] where the trust between policymakers, bureaucrats, and the teacher workforce has improved because there was a feeling that we are "in this together".'

'We have seen that teachers can innovate and respond, and I would want to see that continue in any kind of dialogue that takes place about the future of education. [...] We need to make sure that we increase investment in making sure that teachers are better versed, equipped, and prepared in the incorporation of these digital technologies through their pedagogy and the way that they manage their classrooms and the learning process, and to achieve this, there is a greater investment required.'

Dr Malik agrees with this in principle, but is sympathetic to the scale of this task. She noted that countries such as Pakistan are 'traditionally structured to follow top-down instructions, which has resulted, over the decades, in "frontline responders" – the teacher workforce, in this case – waiting for instructions. So a shift in mindset is required, along with, crucially, a building of trust in the teachers, their knowledge about the communities, their knowledge about the children themselves, and of their own classrooms.'

There is also the need for flexibility, which large education systems in developing countries often are not structured to accommodate. 'In Pakistan', Dr Malik continues, 'we're seeing that for the past ten to fifteen years if there's been investment in [...] decentralising and providing more autonomy to the schools and to the teachers, now is the time that you're going to be able to reap those benefits very quickly'.

At-risk groups

It is already accepted that at-risk children are the most vulnerable to learning gaps, and with the added learning loss brought about by the pandemic, these children will require further protection from falling out of the education system altogether. When children return to school, they must feel that they are welcomed back to resume their education. At the same time, there may be a need for targeted strategies for identifying the varying risks to different groups of children. Vikas Pota recalls a recent conference in which teachers from around the world discussed the key things that they would most like to learn about. Predictably, technology was of great interest, as was collaboration and leadership, but also the wellbeing of the teacher workforce. Mr Pota is of the firm belief that building resilient education systems generates incredible returns. This is one area that is largely ignored in both developed and developing countries and, in Mr Pota's opinion, is the area that most needs significant investment.

Mr Clarke agrees and returns to his point about strategy, which is essential if the teacher workforce is going to be strengthened from within. Any strategy – at government and even individual school level – will have to include short- and long-term planning to carry it forward.

‘I think the two key words to the new world are going to be resilience and sustainability. And those are going to be things that every part of every education system is going to need to be able to achieve.’

Rt Hon Charles Clarke

3. The impact of Covid-19 on the future of education

- Blended learning is likely to play a key part in remedying the learning loss caused by the global coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic and in forming the future educational landscape.
- Parents and local communities will play a key role in mitigating learning loss and supporting children to get back to school in local contexts.

The challenges and uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic also bring opportunities. We have seen how dynamic the teaching workforce is, and teachers find themselves in a position of trust, both with the government and with parents. This raises the question of what their future might look like – instead of waiting for instructions of how to act, perhaps it is time for teachers to become part of the strategic approach.

The Covid-19 pandemic has perhaps accelerated the inevitable – a fundamental shift in how our children learn in today's digital age where families still rely on their children attending a physical classroom.

Blended learning?

Blended learning – a vision of teaching both in the classroom and online – is likely to play a key part in remedying the learning loss caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the learning gaps that already existed, and in forming the future educational landscape. According to Dr Ricardo Sabates, accelerated learning and alternative education provisions have shown that they can improve foundational and life skills. Programmes that were developed taking into account local knowledge of what works were the programmes that best enabled learning.

Former UK Education Secretary Charles Clarke says there needs to be far more work done on delivering high-quality online education, explaining that any future provision must collaborate with the teacher workforce. He says that there has traditionally been a top-down approach, with technology firms and marketing efforts informing the teaching, rather than the other way round. The focus must be on the pedagogy itself – how it is used, and how it informs the technology. Accelerated learning is needed, but it is important not to focus on the over-demanding curriculum. As Dr Sabates puts it, a catch-up scheme that results in no learning taking place, 'is a provision within a system that was already not functioning'.

A wholly strategic approach is needed, and real efforts must be made towards establishing a cross-sector collaboration between teachers, technology companies, departments of education, parents, and the community.

Supporting teachers through trust and wellbeing

One clear aspect of the global pandemic has been that far more can be done to support the teaching workforce. In terms of getting back to regular classes, teachers need to know which level their students are at, so that teaching can be targeted and relevant. Dr Sabates highlights the importance of clarity for teachers and learners around why they are using assessments: 'We think that teachers assess the children in order to be able to teach them at the right level, but the truth is that the children are assessed because those results will inform their sector education officers.'

Mr Clarke sees huge potential in online technologies supporting teachers: 'If you only focus on initial teacher training, by definition it takes 30 or 40 years to change the teaching force – you've got to move much more quickly than that by having much more high-quality, online teacher training.'

Parents as educational partners

Mr Clarke believes that parents are partners in educating their children and that children will do better if parents and teachers are working together to understand their child's education. As he puts it, 'there are many parents who feel completely locked out of the secret garden that is their children's education with teachers'.

There is insufficient work done on this dimension, but Mr Clarke hopes that the Covid-19 pandemic will be a catalyst to more thinking around how to build cooperation between teachers, parents, and their children to help those children learn better.

The role of the local community

The local community also has a key role to play in the reopening of schools and in school retention going forward. Dr Sabates praises 'local innovations by young innovators' in Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and Pakistan, because 'they have tailored these programmes taking into account the local knowledge of what works'.

Dr Malik suggests that there needs to be a 'sense of celebration' when schools reopen, 'to let parents know that children are welcome again, that teachers and ministries and departments of education have prepared to welcome them back [...]. But also at the same time there may be a need for very targeted strategies for, for example, girls who may be at risk of dropping out'.

The question of leadership

According to Mr Pota, it is imperative that we make sure that political leadership and its central function in education is also addressed:

'What we need is political leadership that enables high-quality school leadership. High-quality school leadership is the single most important factor that transforms the educational experience for children'.



Concluding remarks

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this webinar was its consensus. The panel agreed that children need to be back in school and kept enrolled; that a cross-sector, unified, collaborative approach is needed, in which meaningful dialogue can take place and a clear strategy is agreed upon. Also uncontroversial is the guarding of spending, consideration of one-off cash injections, and longer term investment.

The dynamic, innovative, and responsive teaching workforce is garnering more appreciation than perhaps has been seen before, and they, at the frontline of education, are part of the solution and therefore must be consulted at every stage.

Online provision must move from being supplementary to being integral in the future of education, and informed by pedagogy rather than profiteering businesses. A proactive strategy is necessary to avoid a reactive 'new normal'. The highly variable cohorts of children cannot be exaggerated. But when five thought leaders from different corners of the world can gain such consensus on what is needed to move forward – a wholly strategic, cross-sector, multiplicitous approach – then perhaps there is hope.

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