

REVISITING EQUITY: COVID-19 AND THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the study

This research focuses on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the education of children with disabilities and to suggest possible strategies to sustain their participation in education. It specifically addresses the following sub-questions:

1. How have COVID-19 school closures impacted the education of children with disabilities who were enrolled in schools prior to the pandemic?
2. What have been the educational experiences of these children with disabilities during prolonged school closures?
3. What main concerns and opportunities have been identified in relation to the education of children with disabilities as a consequence of the pandemic?

The project started in October 2020 at a time when the pandemic was spreading rapidly across continents. Using remote methods, data were collected across three countries, namely Ethiopia, Nepal and Qatar, to capture the diversity of experiences in relation to learning for children with disabilities. Telephone surveys conducted with a total of 554 parents/caregivers and teachers who were teaching children with disabilities prior to school closures were the focus of these deliberations.

Country findings

Given the nature of the pandemic, each of these countries were at different points in terms of national lockdowns. While Ethiopian schools were opening up during data collection, the Nepalese government was putting in additional guidelines and tightening social distancing measures. We acknowledge that engaging with children with disabilities directly would have been most powerful, however given the remote nature of this survey and at a time of considerable upheaval in routine, we decided that direct engagement with children would not be practical or indeed, ethical. Nonetheless, the richness of our insights and the unique nature of this project, given it is one of the very few

cross-national surveys focusing specifically on children with disabilities during the pandemic, makes this a very significant study.

In Ethiopia, our findings indicate that teachers had very little contact with their students and their families during school closures. Rather, when teachers did connect with parents it was primarily driven by the fact that their school had received guidelines from their Woreda Education Office, to contact parents. Interestingly, mainstream schools with an Inclusive Education Resource Centre (a state implemented provision in Ethiopian schools to encourage inclusion) received more support from the Woreda Education Office and NGOs, suggesting that targeted attention to these schools might have been valued by the state. Mainstream teachers were in some contact with children with disabilities and their families, but special school teachers had not had any contact with parents of their learners. However, special school teachers expressed greatest concerns about their pupils' well-being during school closures, which could be a reflection of the higher needs of their students. However, the special school teachers were also more likely to highlight their own income status as being a barrier to connecting with the children and their families, such as the inability to pay for phone calls, etc. and the lack of support in this regard. Parents and teachers noted the lack of accessible learning materials and academic support, as well as financial barriers faced by parents were identified as key barriers to continued learning for children with disabilities during school closures. Findings indicate that while parents valued education for both girls and boys with disabilities and were confident that their child would return to school, children with disabilities spent very little time studying, with a greater number of boys studying than girls. Parents and teachers were highly concerned about loss of learning and the socio-emotional impact of closures on the child, a theme which was consistent across all three countries.

In Nepal, the level of contact between teachers and children with disabilities was higher, and teachers contacted parents on their own initiative, given that they had received no formal guidelines during school closures.

Special school teachers were more likely to have contacted parents of their children. Parents of children with disabilities ascribed significant importance to education for both boys and girls. While household chores were given more importance for girls, but girls were also described as studying and using the phone and internet for educational purposes more often than boys were. Parents with a daughter with disabilities also seemed more confident that they would return to school. However, loss of learning was a greater concern among parents with boys, and those from the higher age group. Across families, the lack of availability of additional academic support was identified as a significant barrier, particularly among parents of children who were deaf/hearing impaired and had a speech related disability. The overarching concern in the narratives was the significant negative impact of closures on children's socio-emotional well-being. In Nepal, our findings also highlight some interesting province level variations in relation to access to on-line classes and the involvement of NGOs during the time of crisis.

In Qatar, both the parental income of the sample and the state of the wider education system in terms of access to resources shaped the experiences of children with disabilities. Findings clearly indicate high level of contact between school staff and children with disabilities and their parents, with over three quarters of staff being in contact either daily or more than one a week during closures. Like education for rest of the student population, technology played a central role in maintaining contact between teachers and learners, and in assisting learners with lessons. Both parents and teachers noted the greater availability of technology, which assisted in accessing lessons, however, they did question the quality of teaching. These concerns resonated in teacher responses, as many noted that they felt unprepared, and stressed the need for more appropriate teaching and learning materials and effective training. Parents played a key role in assisting their children with their learning during school closures, however all of them lamented about the negative impact on children's socio-emotional well-being with many reporting their child as having increased feelings of depression and decreased motivation.

Overarching reflections

The aim of this study was not to undertake a comparison across the three countries, nonetheless some overarching commonalities emerged when reflecting on the findings. Central among these is an acknowledgement that not only are changes needed in the wider education system to promote effective education of children with disabilities, rather that this change is urgent and possible. The pandemic and resulting impact on schools has reaffirmed the importance of education for children with disabilities. This was most profoundly expressed in the voices of parents, across income groups. Parents recognized the significance of academic learning during school closures and were aware of the immediate impact in terms of loss of learning, and were also very mindful of the loss of future opportunities.

Research studies have documented the multi-fold negative impact on persons with disabilities during the pandemic across countries, irrespective of their national wealth and/or commitment to disability rights and perceived progress on inclusive education. A key issue that has emerged from our research is the centrality of schools as being significant to the wider socio-emotional well-being of all children and even more so for children with disabilities. Being alone at home reminded parents of the loss of structure for their child's day, the loneliness arising from lack of contact with their friends, and the lack of opportunities, due to closures. There was also the inability in case of deaf children who were using sign language to socialize with others in their own communities.

Unexpected and prolonged school closures have also provided evidence that education cannot happen just within the four walls of the school. It needs to be connected with real life and also with families. This was most profoundly articulated by parents of deaf children, who talked about their total sense of resignation when attempting to support their child. They did not understand sign language, and hence found it challenging to support their child. The fluidity of school boundaries emerged as parents now found themselves in a more central

position in relation to their child's schooling. Consequentially, parents reflected on how they need to be more involved in their child's schooling and strongly expressed the desire for training to support their child when at home.

More crucially, the pandemic has reiterated the crucial importance of teacher professional development and support for teachers. Many teachers were left on their own with little guidance or support. Continuous professional development opportunities need to be made available to teachers to help them undertake pedagogical adaptations. It is critical to empower teachers to work independently and to invest in training them to exploit the full potential of remote and blended learning. The notion of teachers as facilitators, which is often used as a cliché, needs to be explored more carefully, especially in terms of supporting parents and other community members in providing education for children with disabilities. As schools reopen, teachers will be required to readjust curriculum and learning objectives to meet the additional needs of all learners, particularly those with disabilities. Among other things, for some learners this might include remedial courses, 'catch-up' classes and/or accelerated curriculum delivery. As we move forward, there needs to be a greater acknowledgment of the fundamental right of children with disabilities to quality education, and the pivotal role that teachers play in making this happen. Finally, while a lot has been said about the changed role of schools, it must be acknowledged that the pandemic has also changed the role of teachers. The abrupt closure of schools has raised significant challenges in relation to teacher identity as well as changes in their roles and responsibilities. Teachers, like others, are also likely to be dealing with personal losses and hence, need support.

Recommendations for policy level stakeholders

- Children with disabilities need to be an integral part of the educational reform agenda
- Recognize schools as important spaces for nurturing cognitive development and fostering socio-emotional well-being
- Teachers need to be trained and supported to address the diversity of learner needs
- Harnessing the potential of technology: low and high tech
- Building stronger partnerships between home and school

Recommendations for researchers

- Prioritize disaggregation of data for learners with disabilities
- Access and quality are both centrally important for accountability
- Understand not just existing gaps but what can be done to mitigate current losses
- Capture the lived experiences of children with disabilities and their families

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