

# The Impact of Covid-19 on Schools: A Critical Analysis

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Received March 10, 2022; Revised April 12, 2022; Accepted April 22, 2022

**Abstract** The two-year lockdown of education institutions inevitably impacted on society invariably. In order for education institutions to be more productive, there is a need to take into account the most significant impact so that the identified gaps can be addressed as well as incorporating the lessons learnt into the school system. This article gives a snap shot on the government intervention to ensure learning as well as documenting the heavy toll Covid-19 had on the children, teachers and parents as well as the infrastructure.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, impact, disparity, preparedness; Uganda

**Cite This Article:** Peter Mpisso Ssenkusu, Cornelius Ssempala, and John Mary Vianney Mitana, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Schools: A Critical Analysis." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2022): 253-256. doi: 10.12691/education-10-4-14.

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries/economies were locked out of their schools. Students everywhere have been faced with schools that are open one day and closed the next, causing massive disruption to their learning. With the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic still raging, the disruption to education has extended into 2021 and many education systems are still struggling to ensure learning continuity. In Uganda, the closure affected an estimated 73,200 schools, more than 15 million students and 548,000 teachers [1].

## 2. Home Learning

Using the Preparedness and Response Plan for Covid-19, the government of Uganda designed a framework to ensure continued learning. This plan had three options. The first option consisted of the preparation, printing and distribution of self-study home packages for learners in primary and secondary schools. The second option involved uploading the self-study packages on National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) websites to be downloaded by parents. The last option was learning via radio, television and newspaper lessons. However, this arrangement benefited a limited portion of the school-going population. [2] estimated only up to 10 per cent of primary and secondary school children accessed some form of alternative school. Unfortunately, due to drops in household income, some families made their children become domestic workers which left them no time to participate in the alternative forms of learning [3].

The pandemic aggravated the inequality between the rural and urban children. Learners in high-end traditional and private schools accessed some form of learning via internet-enabled platforms and lessons via radio, television and printed self-study materials [3]. However, their counterparts such as children in low-fee private schools as well as others in government-aided primary and secondary schools had very limited access to these same resources. It is notable that the self-study materials were not very beneficial in cases where parents failed to support the learning due to tight work schedules or due to their illiteracy.

Another limitation to the success of alternative learning was the digital divide as a portion of the population had no access to the required technologies. The data from National IT established the following status of households: Television set – 21.8 per cent, Telephone – 10.8 per cent, Internet access – 10.8 per cent, and computer 5.9 per cent. In addition, constraints of rural electrification and power stability limited media access. Thus, while electricity is critical to power the technologies used in remote learning, only 71.2 per cent households have access to the national electricity grid in urban areas as compared to 8 per cent in rural areas [4]. It is evident that Covid-19 exacerbated the rift between rural and urban families, and between learning institutions. For many, staying at home meant staying in academic black out. This discrepancy is further enforced by evidence that suggests that children's numeracy and literacy levels have fallen and many face the risk of never attending school again [5].

[4] observed that, while using different media can create opportunities for learning, Ugandan children face many barriers to continued learning including inadequate infrastructure, high cost of access, unreliable and poor quality internet connections and power services, weak

policy regimes, inaccessibility course delivery platforms, shortage of skilled personnel to manage delivery modes, a technology illiterate user group, limited bandwidth.

### 3. Violence and Sexual Harassment

Prior to Covid-19, the school was considered a safe haven particularly for girls. In some cases, it was the buffer against early marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual violence [3]. However, the long school closure had a negative impact on several fronts as it exacerbated the challenges that many girls faced in accessing education. For example, police estimated 3,280 cases of gender-based violence in the first month of lockdown alone [6]. Additionally, there were an estimated 4,062 instances of teenage pregnancy in Acholi region (covering six districts) within a span of six months alone [4]. The UNICEF-supported child tollfree line, Sauti 116, reported over 600 cases in the month of June 2020 alone, with cases ranging from sexual abuse to physical abuse and even one instance of murder [5]. Additionally, The Monitor Newspaper (June 23, 2021) reported that police reported 271 cases of defilement, 255 cases of child neglect and six cases of disappearance in Lango region.

According to [7], between March and September 2020 there was a 366.5 per cent increase in pregnancies among girls aged 10 -14 years, translating to a rise from 290 to 1,353 cases. Since then, The Situation of, and Impact of COVID 19 on School going Girls and Young Women in Uganda reported that between March 2020 and June 2021, there was a 22.5 per cent increase in pregnancy among girls aged 10-24 seeking first antenatal care from 80,653 to 98,810. These statistics reveal the rapid rise in pregnancy amongst girls.

In his letter entitled 'Consider reopening schools' in Daily Monitor (Monday, August 30, 2021), [8] was struck by the rate at which early marriages were taking place in his home (rural) area. 'Three daughters of a neighbour had all been married off. The eldest was in Senior Three, the second was in Senior One and the youngest in primary Seven and all three will soon be mothers. This marks the end of their education pursuit'. He continued to note, In comparison, my landlady's children have been attending online lessons on the zoom platform. And yes they have all been earmarked for promotion to the next classes'. This is just one of the many homes in rural communities in Uganda that have lost their children with bright futures to early marriage at tender ages. This will further entrench the disparity between the rich and the poor.

One might describe the long stay at home as more dangerous than Covid-19 itself. It has resulted in teenage pregnancies, physical and psychological abuse and child marriages. The girl child, even if sent home to 'stay safe', is not safe from her father, stepfather, bodaboda men and boys at home and in the neighbourhood. With the increased rate of sexual harassment, the problems ahead are by far difficult compared to what we are trying to avoid. On May 14, 2021, [9], revealed that her office recorded 1,867 cases of girls aged under 18 who were defiled and made pregnant between March 2020-March 2021, noting however that much she has not finalized compiling data from April to date, her office has

registered 600 cases of teenage pregnancies in the last two months. This makes the total number of cases at least 2,467."

### 4 Children with Disabilities

In Uganda, approximately 16 per cent of children have disabilities, and 5 per cent of those have access to education through inclusive learning and 10 per cent through special schools [10] (World Bank, 2020). According to [10], the statistics for children with disabilities indicated that 28 per cent have mental impairment, 25 per cent have hearing impairment, 22 per cent have visual impairment, 16 per cent have physical impairment, 5 per cent have autism and 4 per cent have multiple impairments.

One of the shocks caused by Covid-19 is the lack of socialisation. Children with disabilities face stigma, stereotypes and discrimination, which often keeps them at home and hidden even when times are good. The pandemic has further alienated children with disabilities from children without disabilities since many of the needs of children with disabilities are not integrated into society [11].

[12] conducted a study in 2020 to assess the impact of the pandemic for children with disabilities and their families. The findings revealed that most of these families failed to meet the basic needs as they had no stable incomes. This state of affairs had a significant impact on their ability to access health and rehabilitation services, home education and learning, as well as having peer support networks and social support [12]. Such families also faced a challenge of accessing Covid-19 related information, as well as the support the children needed for their home schooling. The study further noted that families suffered from food insecurity and increased anxiety about their lives and the fact that the home schooling was not inclusive enough to cater for children with disabilities. Notable is the fact that children with disabilities have been further disadvantaged during the school closure as there was no special program designed to address their needs.

### 5. Poverty

The review highlights that because of the pandemic, many families lost income. Consequently, a number of children were unable to take part in the alternative learning. While poverty was reported to have decreased from 56 per cent in 1993 to 21.4 per cent in 2016, an estimated 23 per cent people living in urban areas lost their income during the pandemic [13]. The data from [13] also indicates that Covid-19 drove an additional two million Ugandans into poverty and shrank employment by 10 per cent from 57 per cent before Covid-19 to 47 per cent during Covid-19. This increased the proportion of the population engaged in subsistence agriculture from 41 per cent to 52 per cent.

According to [2], the plight of the working poor had deepened with a disproportionate impact on the children. [2] estimated 35 per cent of the employed Ugandans as extremely working poor, 30 per cent as moderately poor and 20 per cent as nearly working poor. Similarly, the [13]

estimated the natural poverty line to have increased from 18.7 per cent to 21.9 per cent during Covid-19. These estimates are in agreement with the [2] projections of 1.7 million becoming poor due to the pandemic and the [10] predictions of three million people pushed to poverty due to the economic downturn in 2021. [2] further indicated how the economic hardships have forced some parents and guardians into engaging in criminal activities such as selling their children, forcing them into early marriages, abducting children for ransom and child trafficking.

## 6. School Infrastructure in Dire Conditions

Our field observation to assess the state of education institutions across the country reveal that most of the rural schools have dilapidated structures and unkempt compounds while others lacked pit latrines and had been vandalized. For example, one primary school in Nakaseke district animals have taken over the premises. The school was completely closed and the teaching staff had been transferred to different schools within the district. In February 2020, the school had reopened with only six pupils which led to its de-registration by the District Education Officer (DEO). In Mityana district, another school was converted into a hotel. Before the second lockdown in June 2021, the school had over 1,000 pupils.

The field visits further revealed that many school properties such as furniture have been destroyed by termites and needed urgent repair. Some administrators in Buikwe district expressed some uncertainty about the current state of schools. Firstly, some of the teachers, especially those in the primary section, have promised to come back and teach yet they are currently running businesses for supplemental income. Secondly, there are significant challenges regarding the rampant collapse of pit latrines across several districts. For example, in Tororo one school which had an enrolment of 1,200 pupils was not sure of opening due to lack of toilet facilities. In the same district, the education officer reported that most of the 163 government-aided schools in the district had been vandalized – most of the schools have had windows and doors taken away by community members and many had pit-latrines collapse due to heavy rains.

Additionally, teachers' quarters and classrooms badly needed renovations yet there are no resources allocated to address these concerns. Some schools are in a dire situation as the compounds were already turned into maize gardens to prevent locals from encroaching on the school land, and produce food for their teachers. Many schools are not up to standard to comply with the Standard Operating Procedures for Reopening Learning Institutions set forth by the MoES. The Director of Basic and Secondary Education stated that *"the effects of the pandemic have not been felt only in relation to interrupted teaching and learning, but also lost infrastructure and human resources"* on July 29 to the New Vision. He continued to note, *"we have lost teachers who have opted to do other things such as driving bodaboda. We have also lost infrastructure such as classrooms and desks which have been destroyed by termites.* Also, there is a need to invest heavily in ICT-customised learning through

establishment of infrastructure such as computers, internet and phones, more especially in remote areas. The future of education will be determined by how Covid-19 continues to evolve.

## 7. Refugees

While school closures have affected the whole country, approximately 600,000 children attend schools in refugee settlements. Many of these settlements are in areas of high-risk, exacerbating the risks and challenges caused by Covid-19. In camp settings, [14] estimated that 3,028 refugees have tested positive for Covid-19 and approximately 6,291 refugees have been vaccinated. Urban refugees, however, face challenges in nutrition and household food consumption, with only 8 per cent of households with three daily meals in 2021 as compared to 42 per cent in 2020 [14].

## 8. Remaining Uncertainties

Is there a program to support learners' entry into schools and bridging courses for female learners who may drop out due to getting pregnant during the lockdown? This crisis should serve as an impetus to deliver accelerated learning programs through national education systems to allow students whose learning was disrupted during Covid-19 to make up for lost time, as well as offer alternative approaches for vulnerable students who are not able to move through education systems in a linear manner.

Education actors should consider the following questions in anticipating the reopening of schools: How will the teacher's role be reinforced so that they provide individualized feedback, maintain connection with students and provide ongoing psycho-social support? How will low-fee private schools and preschools survive? How will they be supported? If they completely close, can the public school system cope with the numbers?

Temporary school closures have left families without schools, schools without incomes, and teachers without salaries. Significant financial commitments need to be made to the education sector to address such uncertainties. Unfortunately, the Global Education Cluster and the Republic of Uganda MoES GPE Labour Management Plan determined that Covid-19 has elucidated shortfalls in public funding to the sector. There is concern that disparities in wealth, gender, and other vulnerabilities will be exacerbated without such financial commitments. Even if schools can overcome their debt and convince their teachers to return, it is unclear whether they will be able to remain solvent when they reopen. Social distancing measures will mean fewer children in each classroom, and enrolments are likely to fall as families struggle to afford fees during the recession.

The uncertainty is reported in the media. For example, according to the Daily Monitor, September 2021: Owners put 600 schools up for sale over Covid-19. The inability to pay loans amounting to 5 trillion Ugandan shillings has led to banks threatening the auctioning of schools.

The private sector plays a significant role in complementing government in the provision of education

as approximately 9 million learners are enrolled in private institutions from pre-primary to tertiary and university levels. In addition, the sector employs over 350,000 teachers and 241,526 non-teaching staff. The proprietors of private schools appealed to the government in order to address issues of accumulated interest on unpaid bank loans, renovation of dilapidated structures, lack of capital standard operating procedures, debts, and other costs such as salaries and wages. The logistical support was also meant to help schools secure sanitises, face masks, hand washing equipment in preparation for reopening. However, this appeal that was presented on the floor of parliament was rejected. Some private (non-licensed) school teachers in Soroti City were denied registration for the Covid-19 relief cash, they resorted to work as porters at construction sites because the lockdown hit them hard. As one expressed, “*We know the money is little, but it can help us buy some beans and maize flour*”. Another teacher only identified as Gloria said her living condition has been worsening during this lockdown and this has forced her to sell charcoal for survival. The chairperson of the Soroti City Private Schools Association said about 1,200 private school teachers and non-teaching staff were registered for the relief cash but more than 150 in 15 schools were not captured for various reasons. Relatedly, the president promised to follow up on the issue of putting money in the teachers’ Sacco to help them in the recovery process as this promise was initially made in 2020.

## 9. Conclusion

Data indicates lack of preparedness and readiness for schools to take on learners. The problems experienced are multidimensional. For example, both teachers, learners and other school stakeholders have gone through diverse yet challenging experiences. Many problems will be solved by the stakeholders as teaching and learning goes on. This is why a different pedagogy will be needed to restore academic, emotional and social equilibrium within the school. Play, music and drama has the magic to integrate the intellectual (academic), psychological (emotional), sociological (culture), and bodily (physical) into one. Comprehensive approaches will require involving all stakeholders namely, learners, teachers, parents and community members. Learning through Play will enhance connections among the stakeholders as well as help to solve the emerging problems. Capacity building for teachers, parents and community members will be very vital.

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