

# COVID-19 Outbreak and School Dropout; A Worldwide Challenge for an Equitable Future

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COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most major global health crises around the world. This outbreak has impacted all socio-economic and cultural dimensions of life (1). One of the affected domains is education from preschool to university. By March, 49 countries, including China, France, Iran, and Japan closed their schools to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 (2). This phenomenon has raised major concerns due to its short-term and long-term negative outcomes. As far as short-term results are concerned, deprivation of many students from attending classes and, more importantly, inequality in access to virtual classes for low economic societies would be concerning. In the long run, reduced economic growth and social skills, inequity in the level of education, inequitable job opportunities, and many other negative socio-cultural outcomes would be of importance (3, 4).

School closure is a serious concern for policy makers as they are putting in all their efforts to reopen schools, otherwise they need to be justified for continuation of this policy (5). The effect of school closure on controlling the transmission of COVID-19 is debatable but its achievements, at a glance, is in support of this policy rather than against. Based on a survey in the United States, school closure was temporally associated with declined COVID-19 incidence and its related mortality (5). In France, the effectiveness of school closure remained unclear. Evidence shows that this strategy alone could postpone and slightly reduce the peak incidence; however, when combined with other strategies such as telework, the effectiveness of school closure can increase (2).

In response to this intricate situation, countries have implemented a variety of policies. In Denmark, for instance, younger children were allowed to return to school first because they were assumed to be at lower health risks, benefiting less from distance learning and requiring greater overseeing from

working parents (6). Reopening schools in China was based on two prerequisites: the ability of the school to implement standard safety precautions, and the official confirmation of the low risk of transmission (6). Policy makers in Singapore did not close the schools until April 8 when they applied country's partial shot down and then reopen it when they found zero school-originated transmission(6).

There is little evidence as to the effectiveness of school closure in developing countries; nonetheless, poverty, the destructive economic effects of COVID 19, lack of technological infrastructure, and cultural barriers are among the most important determinants of school dropout due to this policy (7). In these countries, several factors, such as the number of students, infrastructure for physical distancing, availability of personal protective equipment, facilities for the disinfection of the toilets, and general management of the epidemic at the community level could be taken into account to decide whether schools should remain closed.

Given the critical global predicament, taking a right decision seems to be very difficult and depends on the socio-economic context of each country. A tradeoff between community health on the one hand and inequality, poverty, and social retardation on the other hand have created a difficult condition for policy makers. This context becomes all the more convoluted in low resource countries.

Hence, to combat this crisis, developing countries' governments are at the frontline. They should be cognizant of the long-term outcome of this discrepancy and prioritize the low socio-economic or minority groups. Redistributive policies could be an alternative strategy for switching the resources and money from low priority programs to improve access to an equal education opportunity for the disadvantaged children. Furthermore, through a national guideline,

governments could align all stakeholders, such as families, volunteers, related organizations, charities, and non-governmental organization (NGOs) to conduct coordinated activities to reduce this inequity. Extended opening time, blended education, a mix of virtual and real class attendance by dividing students into two groups every day are also practical solutions in developing countries.

International agencies such as the World Bank and UNICEF, UNFPA, or UNDP are in the second line. They have the ability to encourage and help governments in developing countries to provide a comprehensive and equity-based education programs in the times of crisis. In this regards, translating and customizing the experiences of developed countries could be beneficial. They can also attract the support of developed countries to help low income families with school aged children and provide the necessary stationaries, personal protective equipment, and electronic devices for virtual education. The UN's offices are also able to encourage international NGOs and charities to accept this philanthropic responsibility and cooperate with developing countries to enhance the access of deprived children to equitable education.

In conclusion, COVID 19 has ensued severe educational inequalities worldwide. Millions of students are running the risk of becoming school dropouts. To combat this situation, a two-wing strategy would be the active policy of governments and international collaboration. Active policy by the governments seems to be necessary for gathering all stakeholders, attract community, NGOs, and charities' participation, and create a harmonized role for each. Along with national measures, worldwide collaboration is also required to mitigate the school dropouts resulting from COVID-19; this can be done by an advocacy plan for soliciting developed countries and international NGOs and charities' support in favor of disadvantaged children's education and preventing educational inequalities as

much as possible.

**Conflicts of interest:** None to declare.

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