



POLICY BRIEF

Learning Loss During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Poor Urban Neighborhoods

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Summary

Ten months after the nationwide school closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools in Ghana reopened in January 2021. A survey of poor urban neighborhoods in Accra shows that 94% of school-aged children are back in school. However, missing one academic year has limited learning for many young Ghanaians. Many students only spent an hour or less on learning during the lockdown, and one out of four did not have any contact with their teachers. Limited access to communication infrastructure and the inability of parents to assist children in their studies profoundly hindered learning at home. Missing school meals deprived children of a healthy diet crucial for further development and growth. Hence, despite most students being back in school in Ghana, the learning loss is huge.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 192 countries imposed lockdown measures affecting about 99% of the student population worldwide (UNESCO 2021). The government of Ghana closed all schools on March 15, 2020 to curb the spread of the virus, affecting 9.2 million learners in school. Some school closures were temporarily lifted during the lockdown, but most students could only access distance learning programs rolled out by the Ministry of Education. All children in Ghana returned to class in January 2021 (UNICEF 2021).

The prolonged school closure has sparked fear of rising dropout rates, especially for post-primary students and girls. According to UNESCO (2020), more than five million students in Africa are estimated to be at risk of dropping out.

To better understand how the school closures have affected Ghanaian students in poor urban neighborhoods, the Development Finance and Economics Group at University of Ghana Business School (UGBS) and the Development Economics Group

at ETH conducted a phone survey with over 800 citizens in 18 low-income areas in Accra in April 2020, August 2020, and March 2021.

Children returned to school ...

Despite concerns about dropout rates and growing absenteeism, 94% of parents reported that their children were back in school by March 2021, and 4% graduated in the meantime. This figure is higher than in some other African countries. In South Africa 85% of students were reported back in school and 80% in Kenya (Global Citizen 2021).

... but missed a year of learning

During the school closures, 63% of children studied less than an hour per day on the day before our interview in April 2020, compared to only 28% when schools had reopened. The number of children who studied at least four hours increased tenfold, from 6% during the lockdown to about 62% when schools reopened. Just over 60% of students had contact with a teacher on a regular weekly basis in January 2021, while a quarter of students weren't in touch with their teachers.

Technology Barriers

Although distance learning TV, radio and online programs have been implemented nationwide by the government of Ghana, access to these services was not equitable for all school-age children. Throughout the lockdown, 47% of children in our sample took advantage of educational TV programs such as Ghana Learning TV, an official program provided by the Ghana Education Service; 7% used computers and 16% smartphones for educational purposes. Yet, 42% of children relied solely on paper-based materials such as books. Thus, digital distance learning has likely worsened disparities in education. See also UNICEF (2021).

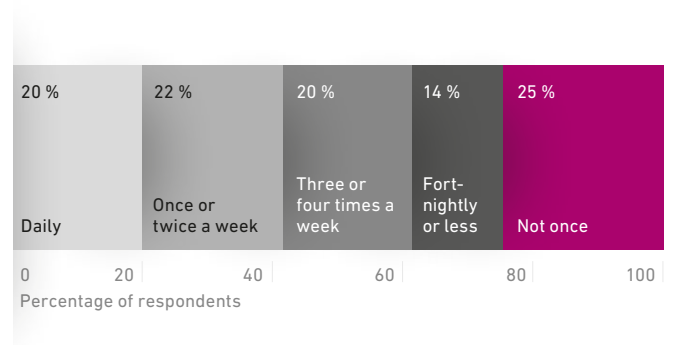


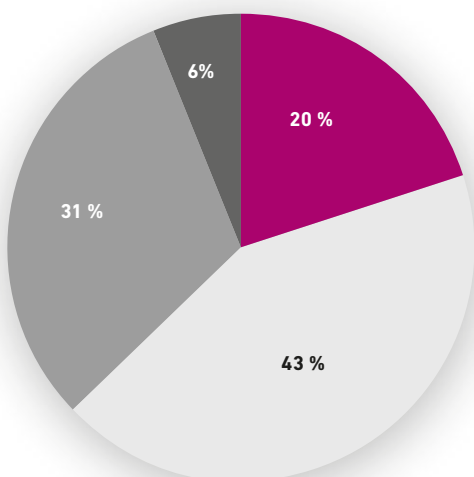
Figure 2: Contact with Teachers During the School Closure

Challenges to Distance Education

About 60% of households reported that limited infrastructure such as computers and internet remained one of the most serious obstacles for distance learning. Moreover, even if children are able to connect to remote learning programs, the learning is often still limited because of a lack of teaching support from both teachers and parents. During the lockdown, 74% of parents reported that they couldn't properly assist their children with studies and 46% of students struggled with limited teaching support from schools.

Children faced inadequate conditions for effective learning, such as overcrowded households. In our sample, 95% of households have less than one room per household member. The data suggest that one in five children didn't have sufficient space for learning.

During School Closure



When Schools Reopened

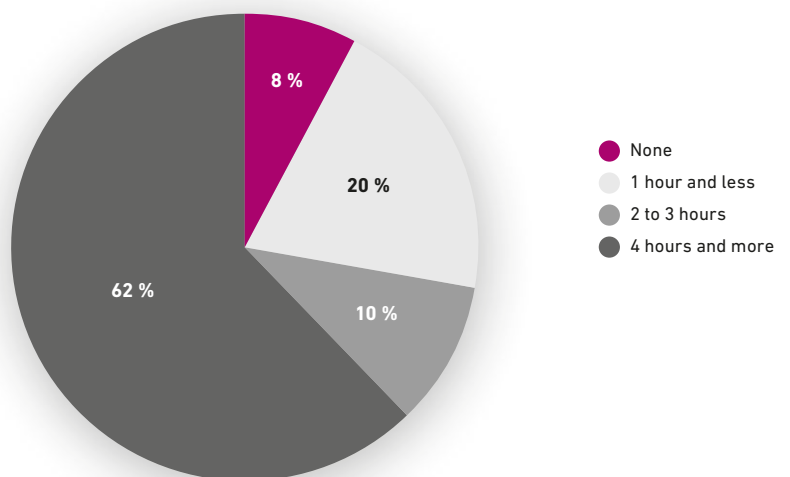


Figure 1: Number of Hours Spent on Education

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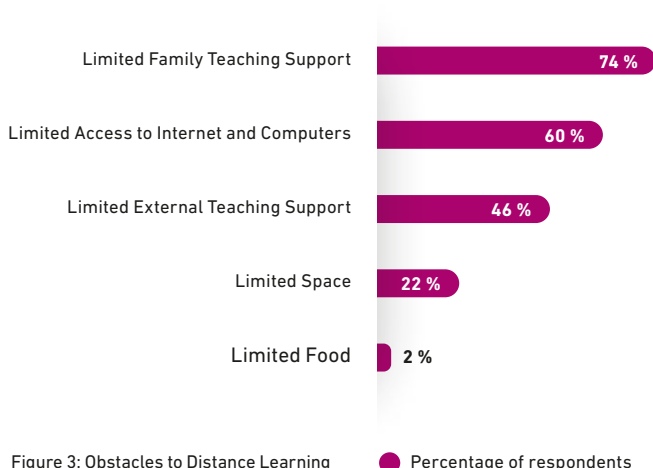


Figure 3: Obstacles to Distance Learning
Note: Respondents could choose more than one option.

Apart from learning, school closures disrupted the distribution of school feeding programs, a crucial source of nutrition for low-income children in Accra. In our sample, 43% of children usually receive school meals.

During the school closure, 84% of households where children usually receive food at school expressed concerns over family food security. With schools reopening, the share of concerned households dropped to 63%.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the results of this panel survey, an immediate recovery response is needed to protect student progress, as well as a program to strengthening readiness for future emergencies that necessitate school closures.

Implement learning recovery programs to catch up on the hours of learning lost. Schools should carry out knowledge assessments to target students currently falling behind. The government should provide financial support to cover tutoring and catch-up classes.

Develop solutions for remote instruction based on the reliability of power supply, internet connectivity, technology availability and digital competencies of students and teachers, with the goal to preserve equitable access to education.

Oblige teachers to maintain regular contact with each student and monitor their progress at least once a week.

Sources

Global Citizen (2021). Thousands of Children in Kenya Failed to Return to School This Week. January 8, 2021.

UNESCO (2020). How many students are at risk of not returning to school? Advocacy paper 30 July 2020.

UNESCO (2021). Global Monitoring of School Closures.

UNICEF (2021). Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Pandemic on Children in Ghana.

Photos

p.1.: Basic two students at Sakumono Complex School in Accra attend again classes on January 18, 2021. Photo: Misper Apawu



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