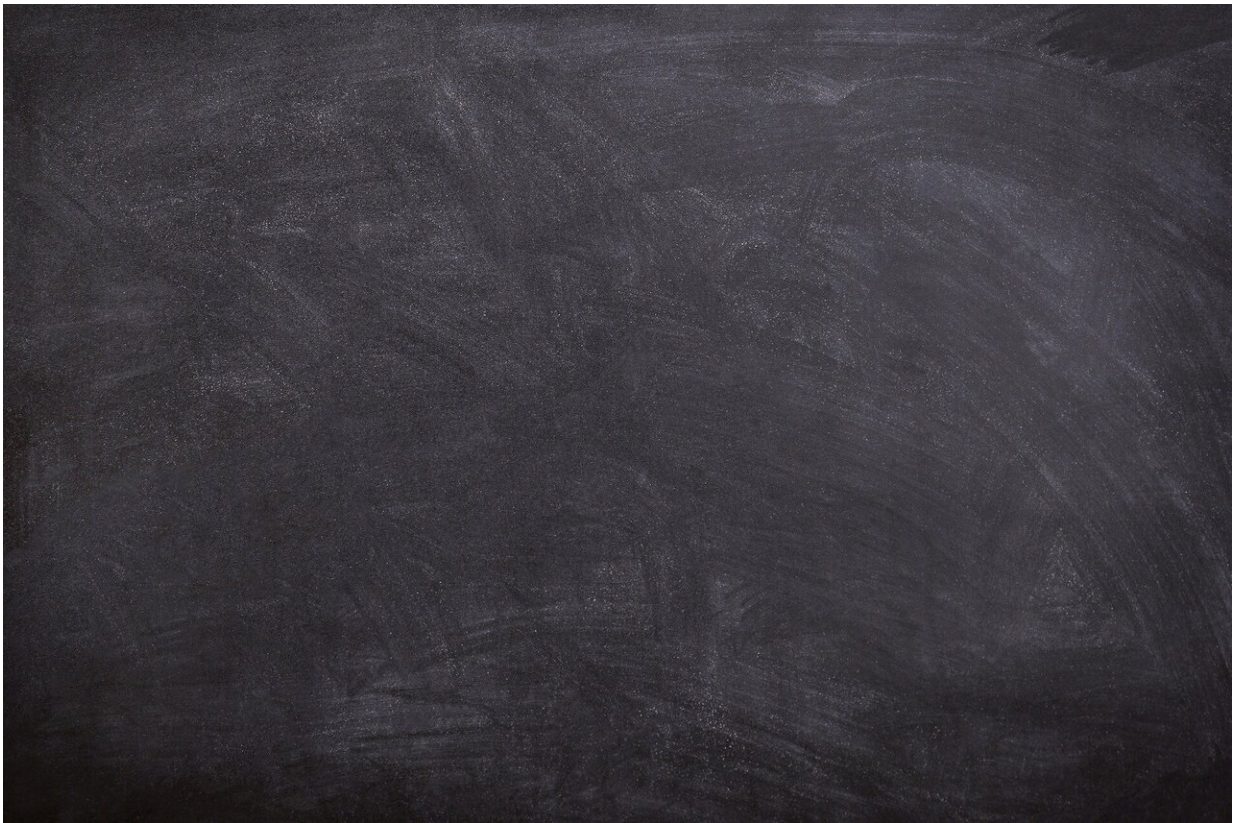


Pre-primary education played 'protective' role against COVID learning losses in sub-Saharan Africa

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Researchers have urged aid organisations and governments in sub-Saharan Africa to strengthen their plans for emergency pre-primary

education, which evidence suggests prevented 'alarming' learning losses in the region during COVID school closures.

In a study of more than 2,600 children in Ethiopia, researchers found that among pupils who entered primary education immediately after schools reopened, learning losses were far less severe if they had been in pre-primary education prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. The learning deficit among children without this pre-primary experience was four times greater.

Despite this, the study also shows that pre-primary education was the most neglected part of the Ethiopian government's COVID education response. One aid donor characterised its remote learning plan for this age group as: "a vacuum, with no-one accountable".

The research was undertaken by a team from the University of Cambridge, Addis Ababa University and the Ethiopian Policy Studies Institute. The report is part of a five-year study, commissioned through the World Bank's [Early Learning Partnership](#).

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said: "Our findings from Ethiopia are almost certainly symptomatic of a wider pattern. Across sub-Saharan Africa, pre-primary education does not seem to have figured significantly in how education Ministries responded to the pandemic."

"It clearly plays a vital, protective role in limiting learning losses. With new variants of the virus emerging, school disruption could easily happen again. Plans should be put in place now to ensure that pre-primary [age groups](#) are not neglected."

Ethiopia's schools closed for about eight months from March 2020,

affecting more than 26 million pupils, including 3.2 million of pre-primary age. The study examined both the impact on children's primary school readiness, and the value of pre-primary education in this context.

First, the researchers tracked the progress of 2,600 children who were of pre-primary school age in the academic year 2019/20 and became eligible to start primary school in 2020/21. The intervening period coincided with when school-based learning was interrupted.

The pupils took early numeracy tests at the start of each academic year. Researchers then compared the test scores of children who had attended "O-Class" (a pre-primary programme run by the Ethiopian government) and those who did not attend pre-primary school at all.

Even though COVID-19 meant that the O-Class group spent far less time in the classroom than expected, they still performed much better in both numeracy tests. Their average scores rose from 46%, at the start of O-Class, to 64% as they entered primary school in 2020/21. The scores of those who had not attended pre-primary school rose from 26% to 46%.

While this shows that all children made some progress, it also suggests that those without formal pre-primary education were a full year behind their peers by the time they started primary school. Even when the researchers controlled for potentially confounding factors, such as prior attainment, parental literacy, household wealth and where they live; the O-Class children were still eight percentage points ahead.

The headline results mask deeper inequalities. Within O-Class, learning gains were significantly greater among boys, those from wealthier families, and those with literate caregivers.

To establish how much learning was lost during the pandemic, the study then compared the group's test scores at the point when they started

primary school, in 2020, with those of a cohort of 2,700 children who started primary school in 2018.

The average score in the 2020 cohort was 7.4 percentage points lower than the pre-pandemic group after accounting for other factors, suggesting that all children experienced some sort of learning loss due to COVID-19. Importantly, however, children's participation in O-Class played an important role in mitigating learning loss. Compared to the pre-pandemic group, the 2020 cohort who attended pre-primary school scored nine percentage points higher than those who did not attend any preschool, after accounting for other factors.

Children without a pre-primary education were also far less likely to enter primary [school](#) at all after the pandemic. About 92% of the O-class children enrolled in primary classes after schools reopened, compared with just 50% of those who had not been in pre-primary.

"The differences are alarming," Rose said. "Participation in O-Class clearly played a role in preventing losses, but so did household wealth. We should be particularly concerned about girls, and those in less-wealthy and rural areas, who missed out then, and potentially still are now."

The researchers also interviewed staff from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, the national examinations agency and aid organisations—along with 480 parents—to assess how pre-primary education was handled during the closures.

Government and aid officials raised concerns about the lack of a clear strategy for pre-primary education. The report finds that a lack of policy prioritisation for pre-primary and limited coordination between services meant that local resources, which might have otherwise kept young children learning, were not used effectively. Only half of parents and

caregivers reported engaging in learning with their children during the closures, and just 10% had contact with a teacher.

The report urges governments to widen access to quality pre-primary education, and to make it central to [education](#) recovery planning. It adds that less-advantaged children, who have clearly missed out most, should be prioritised.

"Pre-[primary education](#) raises particular challenges about how to support young [children](#) and families when schools close, but that shouldn't stop us from finding solutions," Rose said. "These issues need to be addressed now and not in the middle of the next emergency."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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