

# Students with disabilities hardest hit by school closures

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In several countries, students with disabilities were severely affected by school closures. An international study shows how students in Malawi, Ethiopia, Nepal and Qatar were left without education and had increased mental health concerns.

Shruti Taneja Johansson, a senior lecturer at the University of Gothenburg, has been working with an international research team to study how students with disabilities in Malawi, Qatar, Nepal and Ethiopia were affected by [school closures](#) during the pandemic. Shruti Taneja Johansson headed the research together with Nidhi Singal, a professor at the University of Cambridge, while researchers in Malawi, Qatar, Nepal and Ethiopia conducted interviews with [parents](#), carers and teachers in the respective countries.

The circumstances of students with disabilities differ considerably across the four countries and this was reflected in how they were impacted by school closures:

- Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. When schools for students with disabilities closed, the majority of students lost contact with their schools and spent little or no time at all studying.
- In Ethiopia too, there was very little contact between teachers and homes while the schools were closed. A lack of materials and resources to pay for phone calls were described as obstacles to continuing teaching. Schools with inclusive [education](#) resource centers had slightly more contact with students and their homes.
- In Nepal, interviews were conducted with parents and teachers of students attending special schools for the deaf and blind. Here some teachers took the initiative to contact parents so that they could give the children instructions. But although the students spent some time studying, there was great concern that the children were falling behind and also concern that they would not

return to school after the pandemic.

- In richer Qatar, students were able to access computers and online learning was provided. By and large, students were in daily contact with their teachers, but parents were concerned about the quality of education and teachers felt unprepared and stressed.

## **Parents placed a high value on education**

However, all four countries had some things in common.

"There was widespread concern that the students were not receiving adequate education. Parents in all of the countries emphasized the lack of teaching materials and support from the schools as the greatest obstacle to their child's education. In Malawi, Nepal and Ethiopia, for example, distance learning was mainly provided via national TV and radio broadcasts that were not designed for students with disabilities. There were concerns both that the children were missing out on education in the here and now, and that their future prospects would be impaired in the long term," says Shruti Taneja Johansson.

"The fact that the parents were engaged is positive," she adds.

"This shows that education is highly valued. In several low-income countries there are many students with disabilities who do not attend school at all and previous research had shown that many parents saw no reason for disabled children to attend school."

## **In-service training for teachers is important**

In all four countries, it emerged that the children's socio-emotional situation deteriorated with the loss of their daily routines and social contact with friends. The children in all the countries also lost out on

support and treatment.

"The parents said that the children were lonelier and more anxious. The pandemic has shown that schools are not just places for education. Schools are also important for nurturing socio-emotional well-being," says Shruti.

One key lesson learnt is the importance of providing teachers with in-service training on adapting teaching to [children](#) with disabilities. Many of the teachers interviewed stated that they felt alone and helpless.

"The teachers said they lacked tools, that they didn't know how to support students with disabilities. There is evidently a great need for in-service training," says Shruti.

"Students all around the world have been affected by school closures during the coronavirus pandemic. But students with [disabilities](#) have been hit harder than others. They are a forgotten group of students that are often last on the agenda."

**More information:** Nidhi Singal et al, Impact of COVID-19 on the education of children with disabilities in Malawi: reshaping parental engagement for the future, *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2021.1965804](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1965804)

Revisiting Equity: COVID-19 and Education of Children with Disabilities. [www.wise-qatar.org/revisiting- ... n-with-disabilities/](http://www.wise-qatar.org/revisiting-...n-with-disabilities/)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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