

Ethiopian schools study suggests COVID has 'ruptured' social skills of the world's poorest children

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School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have "severely ruptured" the social and emotional development of some of the world's

poorest children, as well as their academic progress, new evidence shows.

In a study of over 2,000 primary school pupils in Ethiopia, researchers found that key aspects of [children's](#) social and [emotional development](#), such as their ability to make friends, not only stalled during the school closures, but probably deteriorated.

Children who, prior to the pandemic, felt confident talking to others or got on well with peers were less likely to do so by 2021. Those who were already disadvantaged educationally—girls, the very poorest, and those from rural areas—seem to have been particularly badly affected.

Both this research and a second, linked study of around 6,000 grade 1 and 4 [primary school children](#), also found evidence of slowed [academic progress](#). Children lost the equivalent of at least one third of an academic year in learning during lockdown—an estimate researchers describe as "conservative". This appears to have widened an already significant attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and the rest, and there is some evidence that this may be linked to the drop in [social skills](#).

Both studies were by academics from the University of Cambridge, UK and Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research in Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said, "COVID is having a long-term impact on children everywhere, but especially in lower-income countries. Education aid and government funding must focus on supporting both the academic and socio-emotional recovery of the most disadvantaged children first."

Professor Tassew Woldehanna, President of Addis Ababa University, said, "These severe ruptures to children's developmental and learning

trajectories underline how much we need to think about the impact on social, and not just [academic skills](#). Catch-up education must address the two together."

Both studies used data from the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) program in Ethiopia to compare [primary education](#) before the pandemic, in the academic year 2018/19, with the situation in 2020/21.

In the first study, researchers compared the numeracy test scores of 2,700 Grade 4 pupils in June 2019 with their scores shortly after they returned to school, in January 2021. They also measured dropout rates. In addition, pupils completed the Children's Self Report Social Skills scale, which asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "I feel confident talking to others", "I make friends easily", and "If I hurt someone, I say sorry".

The second study measured relative progress during the pandemic using the numeracy scores of two separate cohorts of Grade 1 and Grade 4 pupils. The first of these cohorts was from the pre-pandemic year; the other from 2020/21.

The results suggest pupils made some academic progress during the closures, but at a slower than expected rate. The average foundational numeracy score of Grade 1 pupils in 2020/21 was 15 points behind the 2018/19 cohort; by the end of the year that gap had widened to 19 points.

Similarly, Grade 4 students started 2020/21 10 points behind their predecessor cohort, and were 12 points adrift by the end. That difference amounted to roughly one third of a year's progress. Similar patterns emerged from the study of children's numeracy scores before and after the closures.

Poorer children, and those from rural backgrounds, consistently performed worse academically. Dropout rates revealed similar issues: of the 2,700 children assessed in 2019 and 2021, more than one in 10 (11.3%) dropped out of school during the closures. These were disproportionately girls, or lower-achieving pupils, who tended to be from less wealthy or rural families.

All pupils' social skills declined during the closure period, regardless of gender or location. Fewer children agreed in 2021 with statements such as "Other people like me" or "I make friends easily". The decline in positive responses differed by demographic, and was sharpest among those from rural settings. This may be because children from remote parts of the country experienced greater isolation during lockdown.

The most striking evidence of a rupture in socio-emotional development was the lack of a predictive association between the 2019 and 2021 results. Pupils who felt confident talking to others before the pandemic, for example, had often changed their minds two years later.

Researchers suggest that the negative impact on social and emotional development may be linked to the slowdown in academic attainment. Children who did better academically in 2021 tended to report stronger social skills. This association is not necessarily causal, but there is evidence that academic attainment improves children's self-confidence and esteem, and that prosocial behaviors positively influence academic outcomes. It is therefore possible that during the [school closures](#) this potential reinforcement was reversed.

Both reports echo previous research which suggests that lower-income countries such as Ethiopia need to invest in targeted programs for girls, those from rural backgrounds, and the very poorest, if they are to prevent these children from being left behind. Alongside in-school catch-up programs, action may be required to support those who are out of

school. Ghana's successful Complementary Basic Education initiative provides one model.

In addition, the researchers urge education policy actors to integrate support for social skills into both catch-up education and planning for future closures. "Social and emotional skills should be an explicit goal of the curriculum and other guidance," Rose said. "Schools may also want to think about after-[school](#) clubs, safe spaces for girls, and ensuring that primary-age children stay with the same group of friends during the day. Initiatives like these will go some way towards rebuilding the prosocial skills the pandemic has eroded."

"Ruptured School Trajectories" is published in the journal *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*. "Learning Losses during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ethiopia" is available on the REAL Centre website.

More information: Stephen Bayley et al, Ruptured School Trajectories: Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on School Dropout, Socio-Emotional and Academic Learning using a Longitudinal Design, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.17863/cam.88157](https://doi.org/10.17863/cam.88157)

Learning Losses during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ethiopia: Comparing Student Achievement in Early Primary Grades before School Closures, and after They Reopened, <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/learning-losses-during-covid-19-pandemic-ethiopia-comparing-student-achievement-early>

REAL Centre website: [www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/rea ... stems-ethiopia-rise/](http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/rea...stems-ethiopia-rise/)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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