Interrupted Education in Ethiopia: Support for Students During the COVID-19 School Closures

This report presents findings from the Young Lives COVID-19 survey of head teachers in Ethiopia. It provides a snapshot of the support that upper primary schools in six regions and one city administration of Ethiopia were providing for students and their families during the COVID-19 related school closures between March and July 2020, and the challenges they faced in doing this. The survey investigated teaching and learning during school closures, with a focus on accessible and meaningful learning for all children.

Introduction

As of 1 September 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in Ethiopia had reached over 51,000, with 793 deaths recorded as a result of the disease (WHO 2020). Schools in Ethiopia closed on 16 March 2020 – just three days after the first case was reported in the country – and did not reopen before the end of the usual school term at the end of July. This resulted in nearly 25 million learners staying at home (Tiruneh 2020).

The Ministry of Education in Ethiopia has encouraged schools and parents to help all children to continue their learning from home during the closures, including advising them to watch or listen to lessons available on national radio and satellite television (Tiruneh 2020). There are also plans for intense catch-up support when schools reopen. Nevertheless, there is concern nationally and internationally regarding the extent to which school closures may increase inequality in Ethiopia. For instance, Tiruneh (2020) argues that a focus on radio or television-based lessons will exclude children living in rural households with limited or no access to electricity. Access to online learning is likely to be even more exclusive. Young Lives data show that in 2016, just a fraction of children living in the wealthiest households in Ethiopia had access to a computer, and four in five rural children had never used the internet (Marshall and Moore 2020). Recent data collected during the pandemic show that only a minority of the younger siblings of the Young Lives participants have been able to learn remotely while schools have been closed, and that this was particularly uncommon for rural children and for children whose parents had no formal education (Scott, Favara, and Porter 2020).

COVID-19 also brings an increased risk of hunger that is expected to affect Ethiopian children's ability to learn. Restrictions on movement are leading to lost household income, increasing food insecurity (Scott, Favara, and Porter 2020). At the same time, the school closures have ended many children's access to free or subsidised meals (Whittaker 2020).

Ethiopia is a country with both absolute low learning levels and large gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Pankhurst, et al., 2018). There is a risk that COVID-19 and the accompanying school closures will exacerbate both of these problems. Support for learners will be important in minimising learning loss during the pandemic, especially for the most marginalised.

KEY FINDINGS

1. While most (89 per cent) schools were providing support during the school closures, only a minority of head teachers were very confident in their school's ability to support students at this time.

2. All head teachers expected learning to be affected and the vast majority (77 per cent) expected some students to dropout as a result of the closures.

3. Girls and students from poorest households were expected to be particularly at risk of learning losses and dropping out, but this was not matched with targeted support.

4. This misalignment of learning support and need is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in Ethiopia.

5. Schools in Ethiopia faced multiple challenges related to technology, but many schools also faced difficulties in delivering physical resources.

6. Most schools were providing guidance and support for teachers, but many (41 per cent) head teachers had not received any guidance about how to support students during the closures.

Methods

The Young Lives COVID-19 survey of head teachers in Ethiopia was a telephone survey of the 64 schools that took part in the Young Lives upper primary school surveys in 2016/17 (2012 in the Ethiopian calendar) (Rossiter, Azubuike, and Rolleston 2017). Fieldwork took place between 17 July and 2 August 2020, while schools were closed, and head teachers from all 64 schools completed the Young Lives COVID-19 of head teachers. (a 100 percent response rate).

The sample includes schools from six regions and one city administration of Ethiopia: Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regions (SNNPR), Tigray, Somali, Afar, and Addis Ababa.[1]

The survey asked head teachers about the support offered to students and families during the school closures, the reach of this support and whether it was targeted at specific groups. It also asked about support for teachers and about the guidance that head teachers had received, the information they were reporting to the government, the challenges they faced in supporting learning at this time, and the impacts that they expected the closures would have on their students. Finally, it asked about plans for reopening.

Findings

1. Provision of support

Eighty-nine per cent of head teachers reported that their school was offering some kind of provision during the COVID-19 school closures. Eighty-eight per cent said that their school was providing support for student learning, and the same proportion were offering support for parents and other adults with responsibility for their students. A lower proportion, though still the majority (72 per cent), were providing support for student well-being. While a quarter of the schools in the sample usually provide school meals, the vast majority of these schools were not providing food during the closures.

Support for student learning was most commonly provided offline – with 81 per cent of head teachers reporting that their school had provided students with physical learning resources (Figure 1). Nevertheless, over three-quarters (81 per cent) said that they were encouraging students to watch lessons online, over two-thirds (69 per cent) were encouraging students to listen to lessons on the radio, half (51 per cent) were signposting to lessons on TV, and almost half (forty-seven per cent) were offering online teaching. Fewer schools were offering recorded lessons themselves or supporting learners through messaging or phone or video calls.

Figure 1: *Provision for student learning*
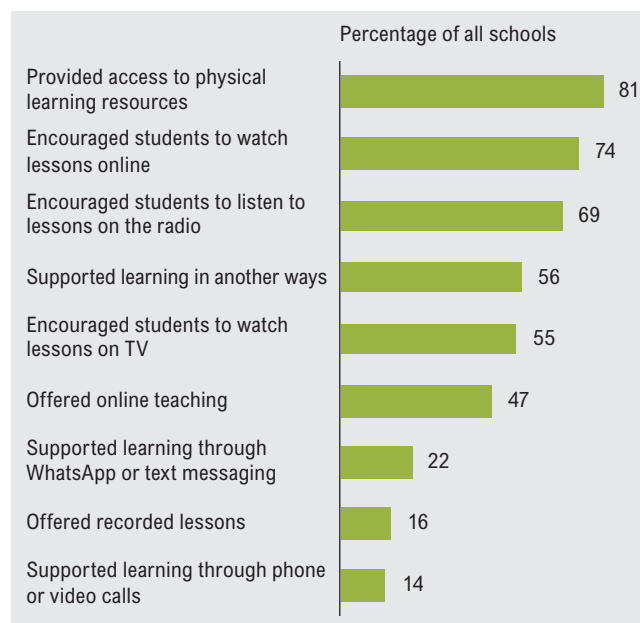
2. Targeting and reach of support

Around three in five (61 per cent) head teachers who reported that their school had been offering any support during the school closures said that they were targeting this support at particular groups of learners. Almost all of these (58 per cent of schools offering any support) reported targeting support at students who would be sitting national exams next year. Fewer reported targeting support at weaker learners, students from the poorest households, students with disabilities (14 per cent for each group), the highest attaining learners (11 per cent) or those most at risk of dropping out (9 per cent) (Figure 2).
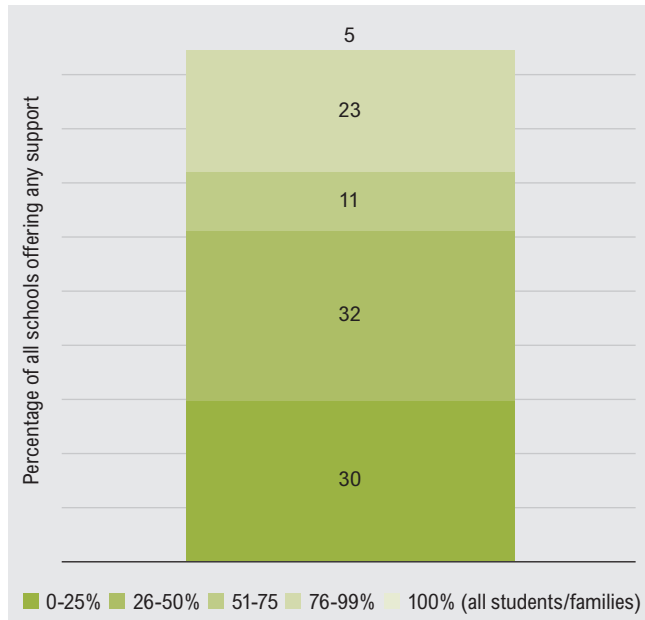
Figure 2: *Targeting of support at particular groups*

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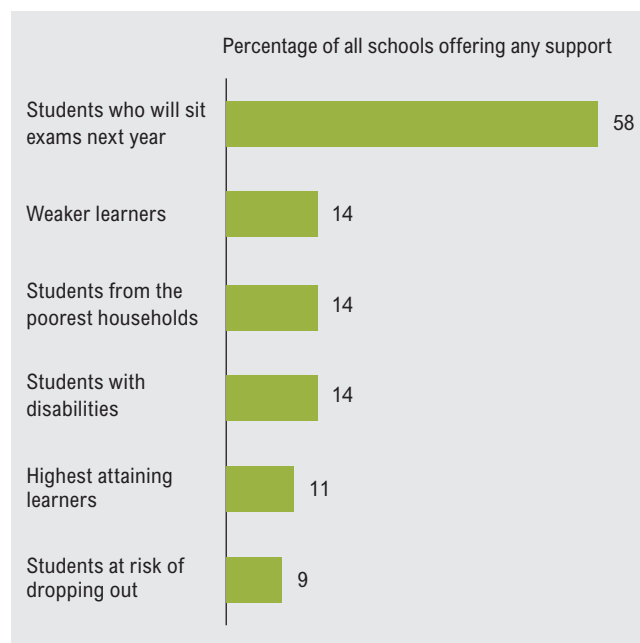
1   See Rossiter (2016) for more information on the sampling strategy used in the Ethiopia upper primary school survey.

Just five per cent of head teachers in schools offering support during the closures reported that their school had been able to be in contact with all students and/or their families (Figure 3). Most reported having contact with less than half of students/families during the closures, and this included a notable minority (30 per cent) who were only in contact with a quarter of students/families or less.
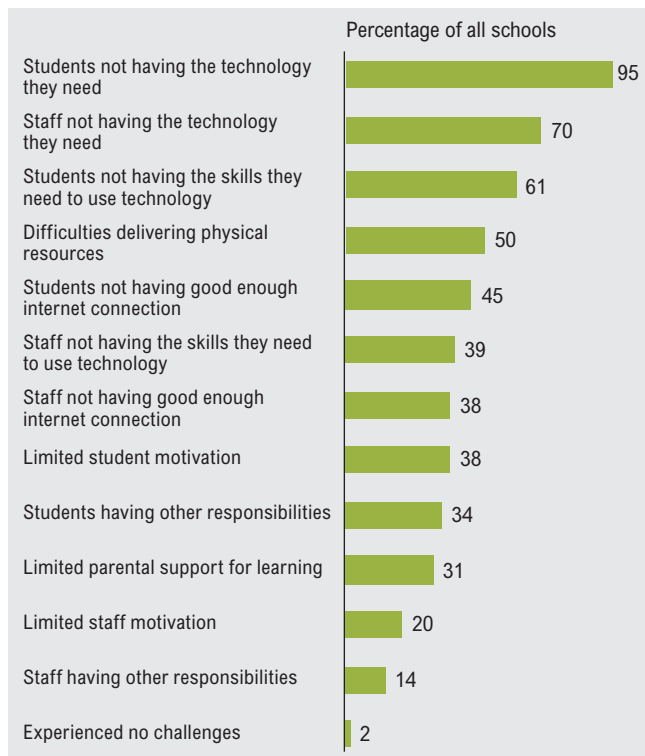
Figure 3: *Proportion of students/families reached*

Percentage of all schools offering any support

- 0-25%: 30
- 26-50%: 32
- 51-75: 11
- 76-99%: 23
- 100% (all students/families): 5

3. Challenges

Schools in Ethiopia faced multiple challenges related to technology, but many schools also faced difficulties in delivering physical resources (Figure 4).

Figure 4: *Challenges faced*

Percentage of all schools

Students not having the technology they need	95
Staff not having the technology they need	70
Students not having the skills they need to use technology	61
Difficulties delivering physical resources	50
Students not having good enough internet connection	45
Staff not having the skills they need to use technology	39
Staff not having good enough internet connection	38
Limited student motivation	38
Students having other responsibilities	34
Limited parental support for learning	31
Limited staff motivation	20
Staff having other responsibilities	14
Experienced no challenges	2

Almost all (95 per cent) head teachers reported that students in their school did not have the technology that they needed to learn during the school closures. Staff not having access to technology was also a prevalent barrier – making it difficult for 70 per cent of schools to support students learning while schools were closed. In addition, most (61 per cent) head teachers reported that students lacked the skills they needed to use technology, and a sizeable minority (39 per cent) reported that staff lacked these skills.

Half (50 per cent) of head teachers reported experiencing difficulties delivering physical learning resources. While less prevalent than issues related to online learning, this is an important barrier given that providing physical resources was the most common strategy for supporting learning (Figure 1).

More than a third (38 per cent) of head teachers said that limited student motivation had made it difficult to support children's learning during the school closures. Almost as many pointed to students having other responsibilities (34 per cent) and to a lack of parental support (31 per cent). Fewer identified limited staff motivation as a challenge (20 per cent) and fewer still (14 per cent) felt that teachers' other responsibilities made it difficult to support learning.

4. Support for teachers and guidance for schools

Most (80 per cent) head teachers reported providing support for teachers during the school closures. As well as general guidance and counselling, many were offering teachers guidance on assessing students' progress remotely (67 per cent), using radio to support learning (63 per cent), and supporting students with no access to technology (63 per cent) (Figure 5). In line with the types of support that schools were offering students, fewer head teachers reported providing guidance on how to use television to support learning (48 per cent) or how to use platforms to share information (33 per cent). All head teachers reported that teachers were continuing to receive their full salaries during school closures – including in schools offering no provision for students or families.

Figure 5: *Support for teachers during school closures*

Percentage of all schools

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Any support for teachers	80
Guidance and counselling	80
Guidance on assessing students' progress remotely	67
Guidance on using radio to support learning	63
Guidance on supporting students with no access to technology	63
Guidance on using TV to support learning	48
Guidance on how to use platforms to share information	33
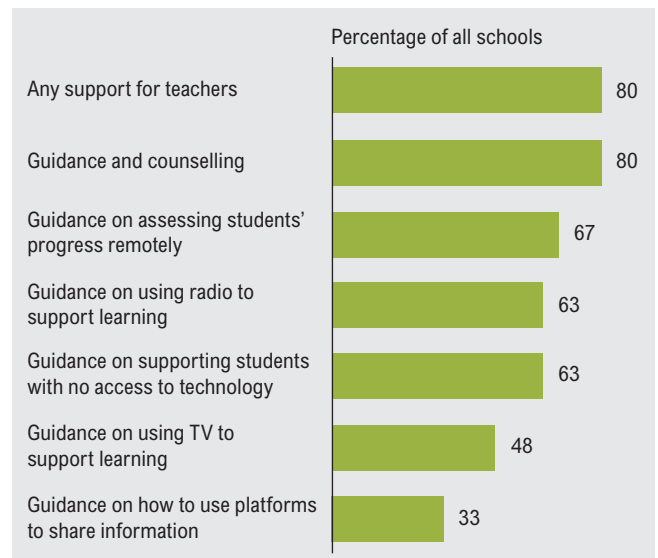
Just less than half (47 per cent) of head teachers had received guidance from their *Woreda* Education Office on how to support student learning during the school closures. Guidance from regional education bureaus, parent-teacher committees and other sources was less common, and 41 per cent of head teachers reported that they had not received any guidance at all on how to support student learning during the closures.

While 63 per cent of head teachers indicated that they were required to report activities to the government during closures, not all of these were reporting any information, and some head teachers who did not feel mandated to report information were nevertheless doing so. Overall, half (50 per cent) of schools were reporting the number of students who had received learning materials and similar proportions were reporting on teacher engagement (48 per cent) and contact with parents (47 per cent). A smaller number (30 per cent) were reporting the number of students who submitted assignments during the closures.

5. Anticipated impacts

All head teachers expected students' learning to be affected by the school closures and most had some concerns about their school's ability to support learning while schools were closed. Just one-fifth (20 per cent) of head teachers were 'very confident' that their school was able to support students' learning during closures, and the same proportion were not confident at all. That said, a higher proportion (47 per cent) of head teachers were very confident that students will be able to catch up on any learning lost during the school closures.

Figure 6: *Head teacher confidence*
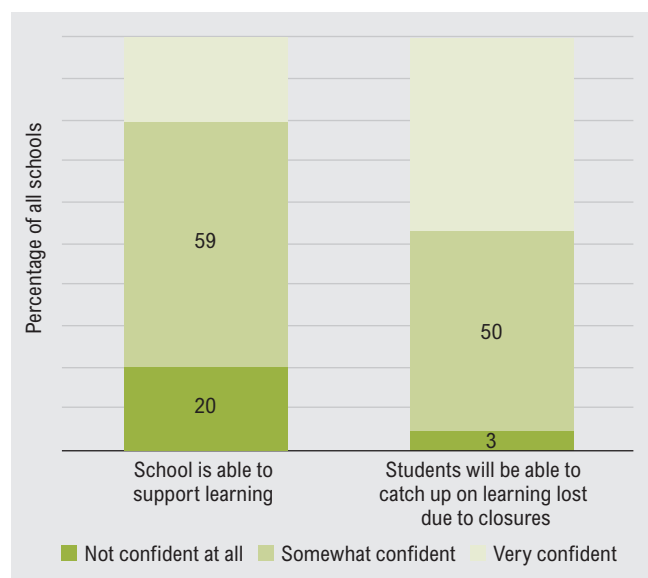
When asked about the area of learning that they expected to be most affected by the school closures, more than half of head teachers focused on mathematics (Figure 7). Motivation and English were the next most common areas of concern (highlighted by 19 and 13 per cent of head teachers, respectively).

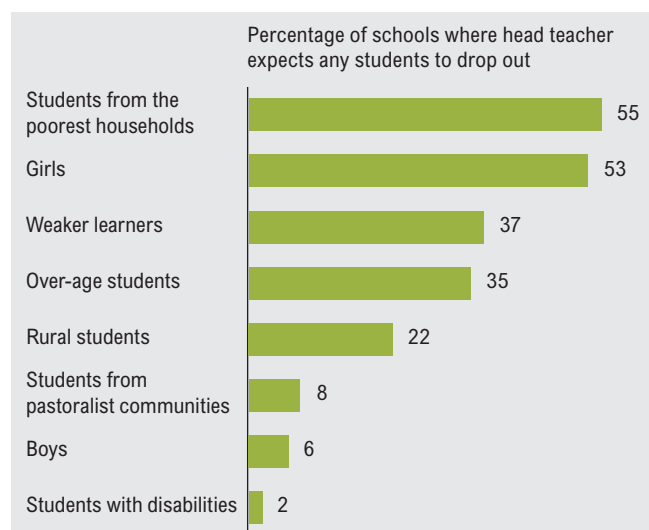**Figure 7:** *Areas of learning expected to be most affected*
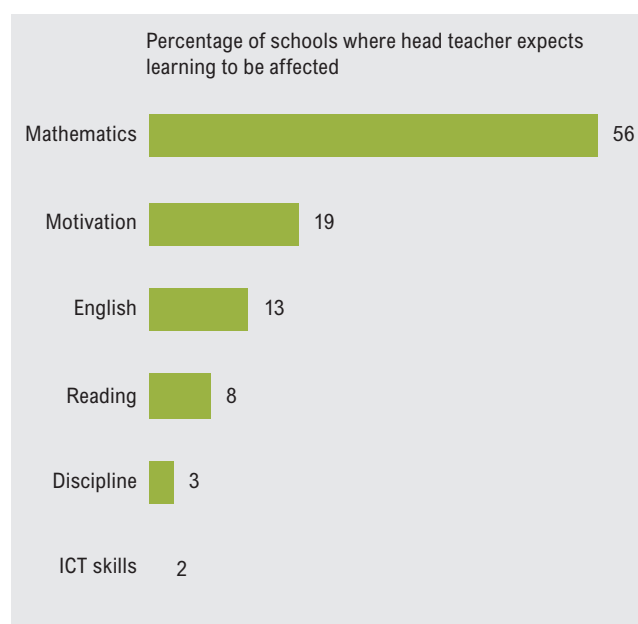
Head teachers were particularly concerned about lost learning for girls, weaker learners and students from the poorest households (Figure 7). More than two-thirds (70 per cent) expected girls' learning to be particularly affected, a similar proportion (69 per cent) expected weaker learners to be particularly at risk, and 63 per cent anticipated that students from the poorest households would be particularly affected.

Figure 8: *Groups whose learning head teacher expects to be particularly affected*
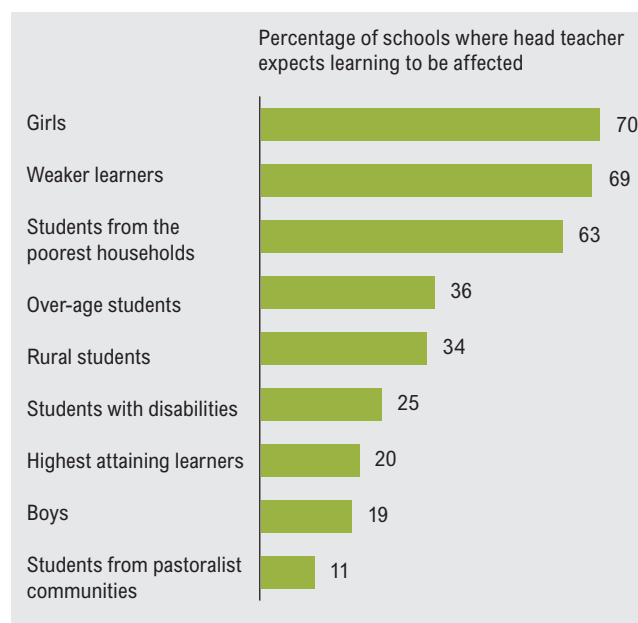
Girls and poor students were also expected to be most likely to drop out of school altogether (Figure 9). Among head teachers who expected any learners to drop out as a direct result of the school closures, over half (55 per cent) said that students from the poorest households were particularly at risk and a similar proportion (53 per cent) expected girls to be particularly affected. Overall, a striking majority (77 per cent) of head teachers expected some students to drop out of school as a direct result of the closures.

Figure 9: *Groups who head teacher expects to be particularly at risk of dropping out*

Percentage of schools where head teacher expects any students to drop out

Group	Percentage
Students from the poorest households	55
Girls	53
Weaker learners	37
Over-age students	35
Rural students	22
Students from pastoralist communities	8
Boys	6
Students with disabilities	2

Concluding remarks

Widespread concerns regarding the risk of the COVID-19 related school closures exacerbating existing inequalities in education in Ethiopia are well founded.

The majority of schools in our sample were doing a lot to support the learning and well-being of students and/or their families. However, 95 per cent of head teachers reported that students' lack of access to technology made it difficult to support their learning while schools were closed. Despite the vast majority of schools providing students with physical learning resources, half also reported difficulties in delivering these resources during the lockdown.

All head teachers expected students' learning to be affected by the school closures. While half expressed confidence that students would be able to catch up on lost learning, over three-quarters expected some of their students to drop out as a direct result of the school closures. **Girls, weaker learners, and students from the poorest households were expected to be most at risk.**

An awareness of the risks for disadvantaged learners was not matched with targeted support while students were at home. Though most head teachers identified girls, weaker learners and students from the poorest households as being particularly likely to be negatively affected by the school closures, few reported that their school was targeting support in this direction. Instead, the most common strategy was to target support at students who will sit exams next year. Supporting students who will sit their Primary School Certificate (PSC) exam is an important task for schools and teachers because attaining the PSC increases students' life chances. However, the perverse set of incentives introduced by high stakes examinations systems can further drive inequalities between different groups (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992). **This strong focus on students who will sit the examination next year, combined with an absence of targeting of support towards those who are already disadvantaged, risks increasing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Ethiopia.**

Collectively, these findings paint a picture of both supply and demand side factors intensifying the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in Ethiopia and suggest that those missing out are not a small number of outliers. The majority of schools had been in touch with less than half of their students while schools were closed, and the vast majority of head teachers expected girls, weaker learners and poorer learners to be particularly affected.

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Acknowledgements

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Young Lives