

# Daily Monitor

## The Impact of COVID Lockdown on Learners

By Joan Salmon

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*A Primary Six pupil in Namayingo cleaning Gold ore at Bukana Island last year. Children have watched a year go by without studies after COVID 19 outbreak. PHOTO/GABRIEL BUULE.*

Benson Lubwama, a Primary Two pupil should be going to Primary Three but plays without a care, oblivious of what tomorrow holds. However, Tahir Andrabi, an author shares that the hidden paradox of disasters is that even if those who suffer today are the elderly, those who will pay throughout their lives will be the youngest.

With the Covid19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns that rippled through the world, 90 per cent of children had their education interrupted, according to a white paper, averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children.

In Uganda, Dr Gorreti Nakabugo, the executive director of Uwezo, an initiative to improve literacy in East Africa, says 15 million children were disrupted due to school closure in March of this year. "However, school is more than a physical space because for some children, it is a safe place from violence. For others, it is a source of regular nourishment."

### Learning Loss

Globally, according to the white paper, the pandemic hit an education system that was already struggling. "With more than 175 million children not enrolled in school, yet even those in school not learning, in low income countries, more than 90 per cent of the children are experiencing learning poverty- not learning the basics by the time they are 10 years old." The paper highlights that with the pandemic, the numbers will surely increase.

In Uganda's case, Nakabugo says learning outcomes were low even before the school closure. "One would expect the situation to worsen unless something is done."

Josephine Tumwesige, in her research, Covid19 educational disruption and response: Rethinking E-learning in Uganda, says just like it was with Ebola in the West African states, education has been one of the worst hit sectors. "Without a vaccine, the end of social distancing measure is uncertain hence affecting reopening of schools and could lead to a very disruptive stop-go period during recovery with schools reopening and then closing."

Nakabugo says that while children who were progressing normally will catch up easily, those who were already struggling will struggle the more or fall off completely. "We can appreciate that no country had experienced such a crisis in recent years. While such research is scanty but we can draw on pandemics that existed before COVID19 and anticipate the impact."

Agnes Achiro of Seeta Junior School, Mukono, agrees with that saying they are giving these children some exams to help them get back into the school mood. "Many have retarded and have lost morale. With exams around the corner, we are doing our best to get them on levelled ground," says Achiro.

### **Domestic violence**

Violence between parents has also affected children. "Children had never been at home for that long hence some feuds were unknown to them.

However, during lockdown, they saw their parents quarrel intensely to the point of separation," says Achiro. She says they have embarked on counselling them as many are even distracted in class, worried about the situation back home. "We have a culture of school putting them in families where the teachers act as the parents. In these groupings, we are able to talk to them and address several of their issues. How I pray every school would do the same to get these children's minds back in line," says Achiro.

### **Sexual violence**

Violence against children has also increased greatly during the lockdown, with most of it happening at home. Ms. Judith Nabakooba, minister of ICT, during a press conference in August 2020, shared that cases of child abuse were at 21,260. "There are a number of reports showing an increase in child marriage, defilement and rape. More than half of these happening at home.

The closure of schools should never be an excuse to violate the rights of children and expose them to any form of sexual abuse," she said in part. Ruth Gambu, a home care manager at Wakisa Ministries, shares that while they have received pregnant teenage girls, of the five received in August last year, three were incest related, besides 10 that were received between March and July.

Annabelle Nakabiri Ssebakiye, the executive director of The Remnant Generation, says in Lyantonde, Lyakajura sub-county, 60 per cent of the girls were pregnant. She adds that forced marriages are rampant in rural areas as parents are using them to settle debts as well as reduce the number of mouths to feed.

### **Increased sexual activity**

Some children have been exposed to pornography. "In some families, there are older siblings, and maids who in the absence of parents, do what parents would never approve and the younger children automatically join in.

With access to phones and other devices, thanks to online learning, many got to watch nude videos and we are counselling some," says Achiro.

Diana Serukenya Luboyera, an administrator of MotherCare Schools, adds that sex information liberalisation aggravates matters as children believe that they can engage in sexual activities as long as they have what is needed, say condoms.

"While we are preparing them for their final exams, we are also tasked with counselling them to become aware of the dangers in society and how to avoid them," she says.

### **Extension of programmes**

Unlike the past when final exams were done in November, they have been pushed to March and April. This, Richard Mugejjera, the headmaster of MST Junior School, says has affected many. "Children have had to struggle with the pain of watching a year go by and their hopes dashed as they awaited to sit for their final exams," he notes.

More to that, UNEB Executive Secretary Dan Odong, noted a 3.8 per cent rise in registered candidates. "Already grappling with high cost of managing children at home, this increment could indicate that some children were pushed to candidate classes because parents have not been working hence need to skip some fees.

### **Redundancy**

In the urban setting, there is limited land for play and most families are in gated homes. "Schools offered a new environment that allowed them to play and interact with others. Today, they are stuck home with limited interactions seeing that parents are also conscious of allowing their children to play out of home," headteacher Mugejjera shares.

He says parents are calling wondering when school will reopen because the children are getting increasingly restless. "While the children are safe from Covid19, many are bound to succumb to depression and anxiety," he reveals.

On the other hand, he says the period has served to help parents appreciate the value of teachers because many are finding it hard to contain just five persons yet a teacher manages 10 times more than that.