



PIDE

COVID-19 BLOG

No. 32

JULY 10TH MARKS 119TH DAY SINCE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN SHUTDOWN IN PAKISTAN!

Over the 7 months since COVID-19 was discovered and has spread across the world, a large amount of data has been collected on the morbidity, mortality and infection profile of the virus. As countries around the world reopen schools, it is instructive to examine the health implications of doing so together with best practices being adopted to ensure the safe unlocking of education.

1. The evidence is clear: the mortality rate in young people, especially those under the age of 23, is statistically insignificant. A new study by Cambridge University statisticians shows that the chance of anyone under the age of 15 dying from COVID-19 is 1 in 3.5 million. To put this number in perspective, the probability of being struck by lightning is 1 in 700,000! Children also tend to get less sick from the virus than adults¹.

A recent Health Advisory by UNICEF makes clear that children who do get infected generally show mild symptoms and recover well. In addition to low mortality and morbidity, children are also weak vectors i.e. their capability of passing on the disease to others is much lower than adults².

One reason for the absence of infections could be that children have fewer of the receptors the virus uses to enter the body, according to Prof. Herman Goosens, the Coordinator of a EU Task Force on COVID-19. According to Goosens, children account for less than 1 percent of infections. Recent evidence from Germany, Denmark, Finland and France, where schools have reopened, is instructive. No statistical correlation has been found between the reopening of schools and the RO or infection rate in these countries. Nor did significant infection clusters emerge where schools have reopened or in schools themselves³.

2. Parents and students here are also listening and watching. A recent Gallup Poll in Pakistan shows 74 percent of responding parents are in favour of reopening of schools. We also have examples of student protests as they see their educational prospects suffer and their chances of upward mobility shrink.

3. The medium-term implications of a continued closure of educational institutions in particular the schools are dire:

3.1 Of the almost 50 million children enrolled, 2 out of every 5 go to private schools. This makes Pakistan one of the few countries in the world where the private sector accounts for such a large proportion of the education system. Therein lies the rub: prolonged closures such as the one we are experiencing mean fee incomes for most low cost schools dry-up, while recurring costs such as teacher salaries and rent continue to pile up. While a sliver (less than 5 per percent) of elite private schools will likely weather the COVID-19 pandemic, the end outcome for sector is foretold: permanent closure in the long run as the schools go bankrupt. Recent evidence suggests that the process is underway. The All Pakistan Private Schools Federation estimates that almost 10 percent of the schools have already gone under, with more in the pipeline. We then face the prospect of children not having schools to go to when the government eventually decides to reopen education.

3.2 A multitude of evidence, including a recent study by UNESCO, suggests that even a few weeks out of the classroom have a severely regressive impact on learning outcomes. The impact is magnified for younger children for whom a few weeks of lost lessons can mean a setback of a full

term with resulting loss of cognitive behavior and motor skill, numeracy, literacy and reasoning skills. The World Bank has documented learning losses after the three months closure following the 2005 earthquake to be between 1.5-2 years. We are already in the fifth month of closure. Age 5-6 pupils have already forgotten how to write alphabets and grade-5 pupils are now at grade-2 learning retention levels. In a situation where academies and coaching centers also face an existential crisis in the face of prolonged closures, we are confronted with a double whammy: a worsening of the crisis of learning and a deepening of the crisis of education.

3.3 Online education has been an extremely poor substitute for the actual classroom, particularly for school children. This is so even in countries with advanced digital infrastructure and wide access to the internet. In Pakistan with per capita income of \$1271, an average of 3-4 children per household, and high-speed internet penetration of less than 20 percent, online schooling remains a pipe dream. The online schooling provided by a small cohort of elite schools while ineffective only serves to widen the educational apartheid between the privileged few and the teeming multitudes. While the government has launched a laudable initiative of teleschooling it remains limited in outreach and effectiveness, particularly given the fact that many students do not have home environments where parents have the educational skills to supplement the learning of students at home.

4. Prof. Goosens' advice is to bring children back to school. This is echoed by the Executive Director of UNICEF, Henrietta Fore, who wrote, "the risks of keeping schools closed outweigh the health risks caused by the pandemic." A recent NYT poll of the world's leading epidemiologists had over 70 percent advocating the reopening of schools⁴.

Figure 1. Empirical evidence suggests the Countries that have reopened schools show no spike in new cases according to The Centre for Global Development⁵

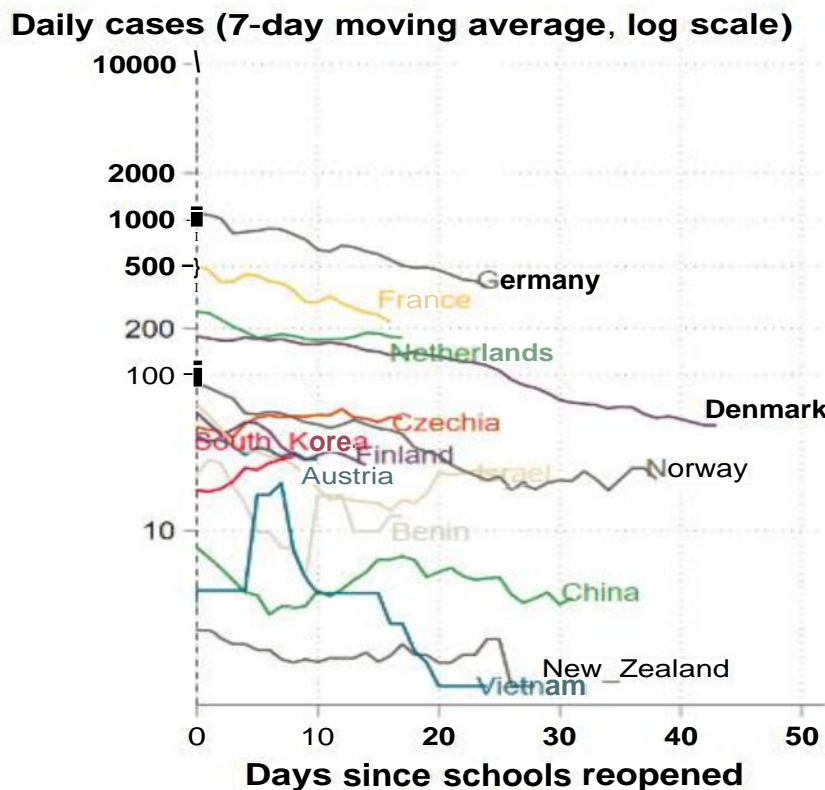
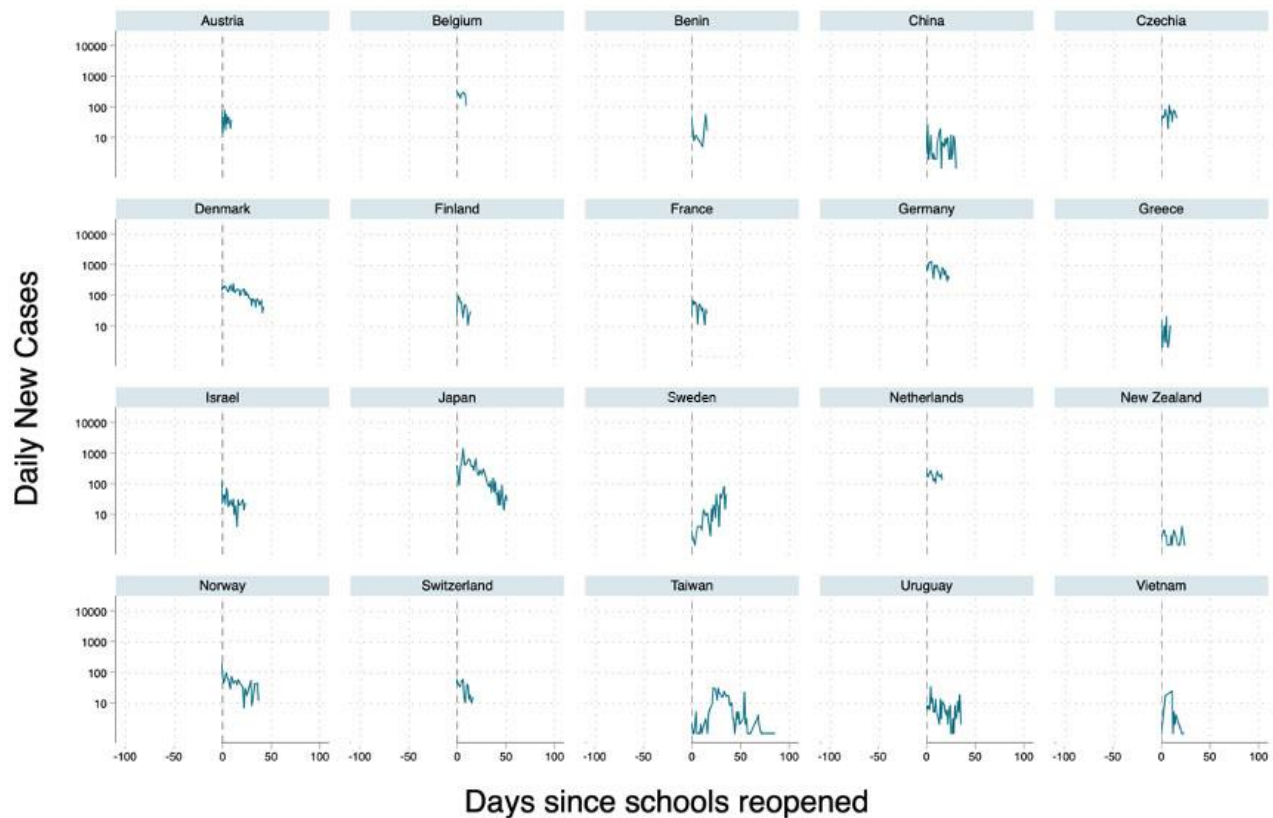


Figure 2. Daily new cases in countries that have reopened schools (by country)



5. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) have published guidelines for the safe reopening of schools and universities. Pakistan must draw on these and begin to reopen by adopting what the “tried and tested Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)”:

Pre-opening SOPs

- Campuses to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.
- Ensure ventilation systems are functional in classrooms.
- Staff and teachers-training on SOPs to be followed on campuses.
- PR campaign weeks prior to schools opening to educate students and parents on the SOPs for safety to be followed on campuses.
- Masks, sanitizers etc. for staff and students.
- Coordination with local authorities for effective monitoring and oversight.

Post opening SOPs

- Ensure proper ventilation in classrooms.
- Physical distance-markings of premises with tapes, paint or chalk powder.
- Screening for body temperature, for anyone entering (also exiting) premises.
- Hand washing with soap to be mandatory upon arrival —for students and all other entrants — a good habit already promoted heavily in the environment.
- Movement from the gate directly to classrooms —in a queue with distance.
- No morning assemblies, no mid breaks, no extracurricular activities.
- Wearing of masks to be mandatory at all times.
- Larger classrooms may have seating at a distance.
- Schools with smaller classrooms to work in shifts or by staggering classes on alternate days with $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of the strength rotated to ensure distancing.
- In case of staggering schedules, school/university timings may be altered:
07:00 – 10:00 First Shift
10:30 – 13:00 Second Shift
14:00 - 17:00 Third Shift (only for high school and University students)
- Pick and drop transport to rotate / shuffle outback.
- Avail Saturdays and Sundays especially for higher school classes and universities to make up for any lost time or work.

The above measures will compliment staggered classes/days, social distancing measures on premises and in transportation to and from premises/home.

In a country where even in the best of times almost 22 million children remain out of school, continued school closure will result in an educational and social disaster that will take generations to repair. Governments are risk averse and rightly so. The risk of a rise in disease spread from opening schools is not zero especially since children can serve as disease vectors. However, they must not ignore the evidence that education is amongst the lower-risk sectors.

Now that the government has decided to re-open educational institutions on September 15, it is imperative that the pre- and post-opening SoPs given in the above two boxes are strictly looked into. Educating our future generations and protecting lives should not be a trade-off. Acting prudently, we can save both.

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