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# SPOTLIGHT

## PREVENTIVE MEASURES AGAINST THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA SCHOOLS: IS IT TIME TO REOPEN SCHOOLS?

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### Key Points

- The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has changed how millions of students around the globe are educated.
- E-learning or online education is now the global new normal.
- Given the digital divide, new shifts in education approaches could widen equality gaps.
- School closures have impacted negatively on both primary and secondary school students.
- Schools should be reopened only when facilities for promoting social distancing and hygiene are put in place to avoid the spread of COVID-19 among students.

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## PREVENTIVE MEASURES AGAINST THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA SCHOOLS: IS IT TIME TO REOPEN SCHOOLS?

By **Kilala Devette-Chee**

Papua New Guinea (PNG), like most countries in the world, was caught by surprise with the global novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) outbreak in early January 2020. While there are now almost 1.5 billion children or 87 percent of the global children population affected by school closures in nearly 165 countries around the world, 60 million teachers are also at home (Strauss, 2020). The bulk of these children are enrolled in primary and secondary schools, but there are also millions of students affected at the pre-primary and tertiary education levels (Winthrop, 2020), and the statistics are likely to escalate exponentially by the day (UNESCO, 2020).

According to UNESCO (2020), the rationale for closing schools was to prevent the spread of the virus as, during pandemics, children are seen to be excellent vectors for viral transmissions. Given their close contact with one another throughout the day, they are easily infected and often pass the virus onto their families who then in turn pass it on to their co-workers. CNN on the other hand reports that a new study by researchers at University College in London reveals that recent modelling studies of COVID-19 suggest that school closures alone would prevent only two to four percent of deaths which is far fewer than social distancing (CNN, 2020). Data also suggest that while children can be infected with COVID-19, they are likely to experience only mild symptoms (CNN, 2020). However, while the symptoms may be mild compared to those experienced by adults with the virus, children can still spread COVID-19 to more vulnerable people which is why many governments took the decision to close schools (CNN, 2020).

This spotlight highlights what the global community is doing to maintain continuity in children's learning and how to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. It then

focuses on the nation-wide school closures in PNG and the impact it has on the livelihood of children/students. Recommendations are then provided as a way forward to mitigate the impact in the country.

### Measures countries are taking to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic in schools

In a matter of weeks COVID-19 has changed how students are educated around the globe. Many governments have had to make difficult choices about their investments in education. As seen in all media outlets globally, COVID-19 is amplifying the struggles that children are already facing in order to receive quality education. While developed nations have been one step ahead with an immediate immeasurable switch to online learning, developing nations are lagging behind due to shortfalls in funding and other related matters.

Developed countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere turned to online teaching and learning (e-education) within weeks of the pandemic due to their fluid economies (Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister and Crosier, 2020). As such, key interventions have been put in place to support the continuity of their children's learning during COVID-19 pandemic in their countries.

Similarly, according to Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister and Crosier (2020), most European countries have closed schools as part of their measure to limit contact between people and slow down the spread of the virus. Italy, the first European country to be hit by the pandemic, closed its schools on 5 March 2020. While this decision was followed immediately by Albania, Greece, Czechia and Romania, most European education systems closed their schools by 16 March 2020. United Kingdom was the last country to announce such matters and closed its schools by 20–23 March 2020. In these countries, learning support is being provided in different ways: via books and materials taken from school; through various e-learning platforms enabling teachers and pupils to work and interact together, and with the help of quickly developed national television programs or lessons on social media platforms (Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister and Crosier, 2020). A similar trend is seen in other parts of the world but

with minimal distance learning platforms in certain countries. According to a report by Vegas (2020), countries in East Asia, and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean are providing remote learning via online education exclusively with a sizeable number of countries using TV and radio to reach rural areas and those without internet access. In the Middle East and North Africa, 28 percent rely on TV and radio only, slightly under 40 percent offer online education, while 22 percent are using a combination of online and broadcast options (only radio, or TV and radio).

On the contrary, across the rest of Asia, many schools are empty due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic thus resulting in millions of children falling behind due to unequal access to the internet thus hurting poorer and disadvantaged children as classes go online, according to technology and human rights experts (The Conversation, 2020). While universities are resorting to online courses, most schools in primary and secondary levels do not have the resources to go online. In Malaysia, the government has instructed the closures of schools, universities and colleges from 31 March 2020 as an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the country (The Conversation, 2020). Schools and universities in other Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines are adopting and considering the same approach even though online access entails many challenges. As a developing region, many Southeast Asian students are from economically vulnerable families. Their access to computers are limited to school-provided computer labs, and many do not have access to unlimited internet on their mobile devices (The Conversation, 2020).

African countries on the other hand, face even more challenging scenarios. According to Save The Children as reported by the African Press Office (CNBC Africa, 2020), more than 120,000,000 children and students are currently out of school in West and Central Africa. Almost all countries have introduced nationwide school and university closures so far to contain the Covid-19 pandemic and the number is expected to rise as the virus looks to spread further (CNBC Africa, 2020). As such, Save the Children points out that at least there are limited mechanisms in place to ensure children can follow an education from their homes. However, as their education is interrupted and they are not being in a safe place such as a school, children are at a higher risk of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation, and girls especially, are more likely to drop out of school completely (CNBC Africa, 2020).

### Measures taken by PNG to prevent spread of COVID-19 in schools

***PNG also followed suit. The first confirmed COVID-19 case in the country was on 20th March 2020. Government of PNG (GoPNG) suspended all schools nationwide***

***on 23rd March 2020.*** The country went on immediate lockdown with a State of Emergency (SOE) put in place to minimise the movement of people from catching or spreading the virus. Schools were to remain closed until the 8 April 2020 and public servants were told to work from home. No public transport was to operate and the movement of people was restricted. While social distancing became a norm, the washing of hands and other important health and sanitation measures went viral on social media and other public media platforms around the country. By then, children in the city were already well versed with the health measures from the awareness they received in school prior to the lockdown, and they quickly adapted to the change.

***Upon a review of the SOE directives, and an Education Ministerial statement, schools were to remain closed until Monday 1 June 2020. However, a press statement on Sunday 19 April 2020 from the SOE controller confirmed that schools were reopening on Monday 27 April 2020 instead.*** At the time this article was being written, a further announcement was made for primary and secondary schools to remain closed and reopen on 4 May 2020 while tertiary institutions including universities were to resume classes on 27 April 2020.

***Like many developing countries around the world, PNG is still lagging behind in terms of e-learning or e-education both in general education and likewise, tertiary education.*** Although privately run institutions such as International Education Agency (IEA) schools, Kopkop College, and Divine Word University, to name a few, are already on par with global technology and online/digital education, GoPNG-run schools are miles behind.

***Prior to the announcement on reopening schools, the Department of Education (DoE) had organised a home school platform for students in order to maintain continuity in learning during the SOE period.*** A press release from the Secretary of Education was circulated to all parents, students and stakeholders on 8 April 2020 announcing a schedule which highlighted lessons for students during the extended suspension of classes using three modes of lesson delivery: radio, television and online learning via the internet.

A mixed bag of reactions from parents and students was received during this announcement. While some applauded the initiative of DoE, others highlighted a variety of concerns.

Although it cannot be denied that the DoE has provided a positive strategy to mitigate the loss of programmed lessons for children/students nationwide, it is apparent that the so called 'digital divide', which refers to the gap between those who have radios, TV, computers and the internet and those with limited and no access – is a real challenge in PNG. The

increasing high cost of internet access exacerbates learning inequalities even more for low-income families, and the infrastructure and services necessary for everyone to be able to use the internet at home is unevenly distributed across urban, rural and remote areas. The biggest challenge for PNG when it comes to automating systems or implementing IT solutions in the public service (including the school system) is, we are at the crossroads. According to Simon (2020), “we have one foot in the IT world and one foot still in the bush”, so it is both the infrastructure and financial position which is a dilemma for the majority of PNG’s population.

### The reopening of schools in PNG

As reported on NBC TV News on 21 April 2020, primary and secondary schools will reopen on Monday 4 May 2020. This announcement has brought about mixed reactions from parents and the general population. While some people welcome the resumption of classes this soon, the majority as seen on all social media platforms, are in opposition to this government decision given that COVID-19 is now present in the country.

As stated earlier, countries that have strong economies have switched to online or e-learning while some low-middle income countries have closed the academic year due to the absence or lack of proper e-education facilities and/or other matters related to COVID-19. Since PNG’s situation is similar to the latter but chooses to reopen schools otherwise, due to the limited number of positive COVID-19 cases with no deaths so far, four important points need to be considered:

- **Classrooms in PNG are overcrowded** – According to the forthcoming publication by Devette-Chee et al. (forthcoming), teacher-pupil ratio is alarming as a result of the impact of the Tuition Fee Free (TFF) Policy. What used to be a ratio of 1:35 or 1:40 in the past, we now see a ratio of 1:50 or 1:60 students to one teacher. Urban centres have a high risk of spreading COVID-19 if there is an outbreak as there is now up to 80–100 students to one teacher in a class.
- **Social distancing will be problematic** – As the capacity of classrooms are being filled to the brim with students, there is very little space to manoeuvre given that in some overcrowded classrooms the sitting space arrangement from one student to another is approximately 20–30 centimetres.
- **Shared teaching and learning resources poses threat** – What is worth noting too, is that most schools have very limited teaching and learning resources. As a result, text books, reading books, worksheets etc. are shared between one to two, or three students which further exacerbates

the situation thus violating the SOE directives of 1.5 metres of social distancing.

- **Toilets and sanitation remains an issue** — According to forthcoming publication by Devette-Chee et al. (forthcoming), toilets in schools are a concern. Most schools that were surveyed had issues with toilets. One school at the time of our study, was closed due to unhygienic and unhealthy practices. As such, schools need to revisit the status of their toilets and carry out immediate upgrades to meet the SOE directives upon resumption of classes.

### Recommendations on how to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learning during closure and reopening of schools

1. For the first time in history, the world has a tool that may serve as a large-scale remedy for the loss of classroom-based education and enable the continuity of learning programs through distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order for PNG to be on par with the rest of the world, it is highly recommended that the government embark on a nationwide digital connectivity in all schools having in mind the following:
  - Aside from internet connectivity, PNG needs to embark on online education nationwide. Online education requires commitment and discipline from both students and teachers. If this can be achieved, academic performance could be at least as good as traditional formats.
  - At lower education levels (elementary and primary) families are responsible for enabling teaching, motivating their children (and themselves) and promoting learning. Parents must ensure that their children (students) remain in touch with their teachers and carry out recommended lessons and activities provided.
  - The effectiveness of distance education depends on the involvement of the teacher and his/her training in the use of distance learning methodologies. Therefore it is imperative that teachers undergo immediate training on how to use online learning tools and platforms.
  - A fundamental matter that cannot be resolved in weeks or months is access to and quality of the digital platforms and should be addressed immediately by the Marape-Steven government.

2. Maintaining school safe operations when reopening schools after closure due to a pandemic requires many considerations according to WHO (April, 2020). Since PNG is one of the first countries to reopen its schools, it is recommended that the following are adhered to in terms of protecting the students and their families:

- In order to mitigate overcrowding in the classroom and social distancing to be captured in schools, introduce shift teaching where a teacher splits his/her class into two and teaches the first half in the morning and the second half in the afternoon.
- Teachers need to prepare students' learning materials in bulk for students to work on during their half-a-day non-contact period at home.
- Provide children with information on how to protect themselves.
- Provide testing kits or at least thermometers for monitoring and identifying potential COVID-19 patients in schools.
- Promote best handwashing and hygiene practices and provide hygiene supplies for the students.
- Clean and disinfect school buildings, especially water and sanitation facilities.
- Increase airflow ventilation.  
(WHO, April, 2020).

3. As the schools have just reopened, it is imperative that students are provided with holistic support. It is therefore recommended that schools should provide children with vital information on handwashing and other measures to protect themselves and their families, facilitate mental health support, and help to prevent stigma and discrimination by encouraging students to be kind to each other and avoid stereotypes when talking about COVID-19. According to UNICEF (2020) parents and caregivers are required to:

- Monitor children's health and keep them at home from school if they are ill;
- encourage children to ask questions and express their concerns, and
- remind children to cough or sneeze into a tissue or their elbow and avoid touching their face, eyes, mouth and nose.  
(UNICEF, 2020)

## Conclusion

COVID-19 is now beginning to take its toll in most countries around the world. While the number of deaths continue to escalate globally, some countries are now planning to reopen schools depending on the flattening of the curve, which provide a positive outlook towards recovery. Although life will not return to normalcy soon, the decision by the Marape-Steven Government to reopen primary and secondary schools in PNG on this week needs to be taken with a caution. As long as schools are prepared well in terms of re-organising students' sitting arrangements in the classroom, one text book or one learning resource per child, health and hygiene measures prepared and most importantly, toilets are upgraded to the standard approved by the National Department of Health, parents will be at ease and will willingly let their children attend school.

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