RISE
RESEARCH ON IMPROVING SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

INSIGHTS

Learning Environments under COVID-Induced School Closures: Evidence from Vietnam

by Kenn Chua and Paul Glewwe
RISE Vietnam

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education of over 1.5 billion students globally. A majority of students live in countries where schools were either fully closed or were operational only through remote access. As school disruptions are likely to have lasting impacts on children's human capital accumulation, data documenting how schools and households have adapted to this new learning environment have the potential to provide information on how to curb the adverse effects of school closures on children's educational progress.

Using a telephone survey, the RISE Vietnam country research team (CRT) collected data from 134 school principals from a nationally representative sample of 140 primary schools (a response rate of 95.7 percent). A telephone survey was also conducted of 2,389 parents of Grade 3 and 4 students enrolled in these 140 primary schools; this survey covers all 140 schools, with an average of 17 parents per school. Principals were asked what schools did to provide instruction while schools were closed in early 2020, while parents were interviewed regarding children's weekday activities as well as the types of instruction the children received during this period. The telephone interviews with school principals and parents were conducted between July and September of 2020.

Key Points

- Data collected from Vietnam in the second half of 2020 show how households and educational institutions responded to school closures between February and April of 2020.
- About 95 percent of principals from a representative sample of 134 primary schools indicate that they made arrangements for students to learn while schools were closed. Nearly 75 percent of schools report sending and collecting materials online, and 52 percent recorded or livestreamed lessons via apps such as Zoom or Google Meet.
- A majority of schools report that educational services were provided either daily (32.1 percent) or more than once a week (36.6 percent).
- However, in contrast to interviews with school principals, only 69 percent of parents report that their child's school provided any learning arrangements during the closure.
- School disruptions were felt differently across the household wealth distribution: 80 percent of parents in the top quartile report that their child's school made arrangements while only 57 percent of parents at the bottom quartile do so.
- Differential access to information technology as well as children's time use are potential determinants of learning disparities that may emerge as result of the school closures that occurred in 2020.

In 2020, Vietnam was in many ways an outlier in that it flattened its epidemic curve early in that year, thereby allowing schools to reopen as early as May 4, 2020—roughly three months after schools were first directed to shut down. Vietnam's schools continued to stay open and ended its 2019-2020 school year towards the end of June. While the period of school closure in Vietnam was brief, the country's example may provide lessons for other nations that faced, and are still facing, the educational consequences of the pandemic.

Interviews with Principals

According to the principal survey, 94.8 percent of schools made arrangements to provide instruction during the closure between the months of February and early May of 2020. The most common methods reported were the sending and collecting of learning materials online (75.4 percent) and/or in-person (73.9 percent). In addition, over half of schools provided live teaching content using video-conferencing and streaming software (See Table 1).

Table 1: Principal's report of learning arrangements provided by school during the closure from February to early May, 2020

Learning Arrangements	Percent %
School made no arrangements	**5.2**
School made arrangements of which:	**94.8**
Sent and collected materials via email/Zalo/Facebook	75.4
Learn new materials on Zoom, Google Meet or similar video "live" lessons	52.2
Sent and collected materials in-person	73.9
Set up educational website or app	28.4
Text messages	6.7
Educational television	14.2
Other	10.4

Source: Specific actions add up to > 94.8% since schools can report more than one action.

In terms of the frequency of provision, the majority of principals reported that learning arrangements were provided at least once a week, with at least two-thirds reporting that these were performed either daily (32.1 percent), or more than once a week (36.6 percent).

Moreover, to address the challenges of providing instruction brought about by unequal access to information technology, principals reported encouraging teachers to print out online materials either to be collected from the school by the parent (51.5 percent) or to be delivered in-person to the student (46.3 percent). Table 2 presents the breakdown of the strategies that Vietnamese schools used in 2020 to assist students with little to no information technology at home.

Table 2: Principal's report of what the school did to help students with little or no information technology at home

Learning Strategies	Percent %
Encourage teachers to print out online materials to be posted at or collected from school	51.5
Encourage teachers to print out online materials and deliver it in person	46.3
Encourage teachers to prioritise using their time to assist these students and their parents	23.1
Other methods	21.6
Did not have any strategies for helping such students	3.0
School does not have such students	1.5
School made no arrangements of any kind for learning when the school was closed	5.2

Source: Methods used sum to more than 94.8% since principals could report multiple methods.

Reports from Parents

Nevertheless, despite concerted efforts by schools and education authorities, parents' and students' experience of the pandemic has been unequal. For instance, in contrast to interviews with school principals, only 69 percent of parents reported that their child's school made arrangements to provide instruction. Potential reasons for this include parents' lack of awareness about school programs as well as disparities in access to information technology, with at least 22 percent of households having no access to the internet at home. It is also possible that school principals' reports of actions taken by schools overestimate the extent to which those actions in fact occurred. Overall, it is not possible to know which reports are closest to what actually happened.

Table 3: Parents' Report of Learning Arrangements Provided by School (by household wealth)

Learning Arrangements	Wealth Quartile (1 = poorest, 4 = wealthiest)			
	1	2	3	4
Parents report school made no arrangements	**42.7%**	**35.8%**	**24.6%**	**19.8%**
Parents report school made arrangements, of which:	**57.3%**	**64.2%**	**75.4%**	**80.2%**
Sent and collected materials via email/Zalo	25.5%	32.4%	43.0%	48.6%
Learn new materials on Zoom, Google Meet or similar video-con	18.1%	19.3%	28.1%	28.4%
Sent and collected homework in-person	34.4%	24.3%	18.4%	15.7%
Sent and collected homework via school's e-learning platform	7.7%	8.7%	14.2%	15.9%
Learning new materials through telephone	1.7%	0.4%	1.4%	1.2%

Source: Specific actions sum to more than the figure in row 2 since parents can report more than one action.

As shown in Table 3, parents from the highest wealth quartile were most likely (80.2%) to report their child's school making learning arrangements. For those in the top three quartiles of the wealth distribution, the main method of providing instruction was through the sending and collecting materials via e-mail and Zalo. In contrast, for those at the bottom of the wealth distribution, majority relied on sending and collecting homework in-person. In addition to this, the rate of access to learning via video conferencing and streaming software was disproportionately higher among wealthier households.

To provide a snapshot of how access to online school resources varied across the wealth distribution, Table 4 presents information about internet access and devices used for studying. Unsurprisingly, majority of the wealthiest households reported having access to the internet at home and having utilised either mobile phones or computers and laptops to facilitate remote schooling for their children. Meanwhile, about 30 percent of those at the bottom half of the wealth distribution reported not having access to the internet, and those that did primarily relied on mobile phones rather than other types of technology such as computers, laptops, and tablets.

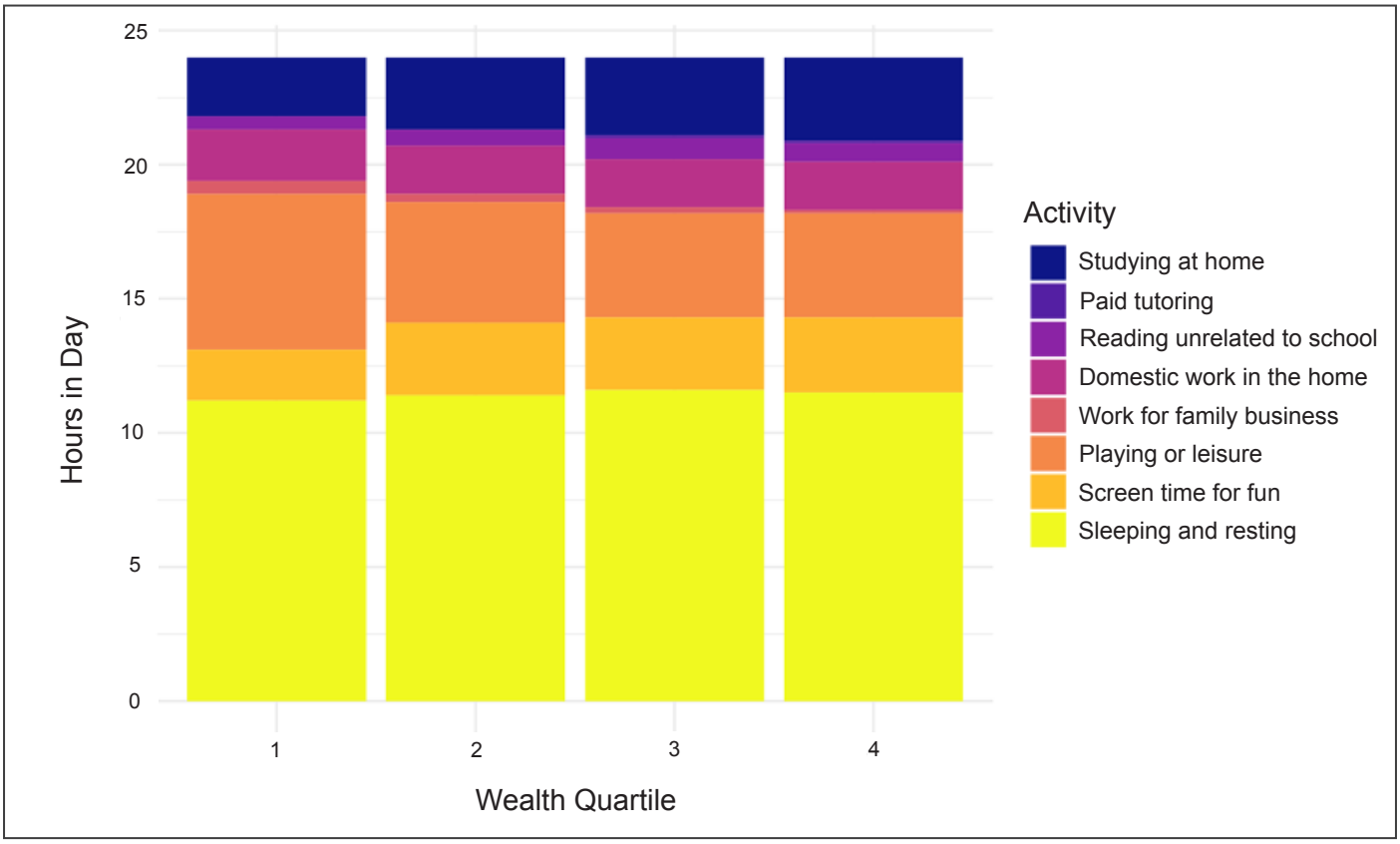
Table 4: Parents' Report: Devices Used to Access School Online Resources (by household wealth)

Learning Arrangements	Wealth Quartile (1 = poorest, 4 = wealthiest)			
	1	2	3	4
Parents report school made no arrangements	**42.7%**	**35.8%**	**24.6%**	**19.8%**
Parents report school made arrangements, of which:	**57.3%**	**64.2%**	**75.4%**	**80.2%**
Parents do not have access to the internet	33.7%	28.7%	20.1%	17.2%
Parents have access to the internet, of which:	23.6%	35.5%	55.3%	63.0%
Used mobile phone	21.4%	30.6%	43.2%	45.0%
Used computer/laptop	4.2%	6.5%	16.4%	29.3%
Used "SmartTV"	1.5%	2.3%	6.0%	9.2%
Used a tablet/iPad	1.5%	1.3%	3.5%	8.7%

Source: Specific devices sum to > figure in row 4 since parents can report more than one.

Finally, interviews with parents also demonstrated stark differences in the children's time use while schools were closed. On average, parents reported that their children only studied 2.7 hours on a typical weekday, or about 20 percent lower than the number of schooling hours in a regular half-day school. As Figure 1 shows, students in the poorest wealth quartile of households studied the least (2.2 hours) while those in the top quartile studied the most (3.1 hours), on average.

Figure 1: Parents' report of child's time use on a typical weekday by wealth quartile



Re-opening and Catch-up

The next step in this research is to understand the impacts that school closures have had on student learning. Fortunately, the reopening of schools in 2020 allowed the RISE Vietnam CRT to collect data on test scores before the 2019-2020 school year ended. Preliminary results from the analysis of these data show little effect of the pandemic on student learning in Vietnamese primary schools.

Indeed, as countries grapple with the potential for learning losses brought about by protracted periods of COVID induced school closures, it is vital that policymakers monitor how children are coping with the complications of learning in this difficult environment. As the Vietnam example shows, these challenges are likely to be experienced differently by various groups, and the success of efforts to assist students in catching up will benefit greatly from evidence on what happened in Vietnam and other countries when schools were closed due to the pandemic, and what they do after their schools reopen.

Kenn Chua is a PhD candidate in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota. He holds a Master's degree in Economics from CEMFI and a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of the Philippines. His current research focuses on the economics of development and education. Kenn's previous research can be found in the Journal of the European Economic Association and Food Policy.

Paul Glewwe is a Principal Investigator for the RISE Vietnam team and Distinguished McKnight Professor in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on household and individual behaviour and welfare in developing countries, and in particular, the factors that determine how long (if it all) children go to school and, more importantly, how much children learn in school. He has also conducted research on inequality, income mobility, poverty, and child nutrition in developing countries, and on education in the U.S. He has conducted research on the following developing countries: Brazil, China, Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Ghana, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Peru, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

Citation:

Chua, K. and Glewwe, P. 2023. Learning Environments Under COVID-induced School Closures: Evidence from Vietnam. 2023/056. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2023/056

RISE is funded by: UKaid from the British people; Australian Aid; Bill & Melinda Gates foundation