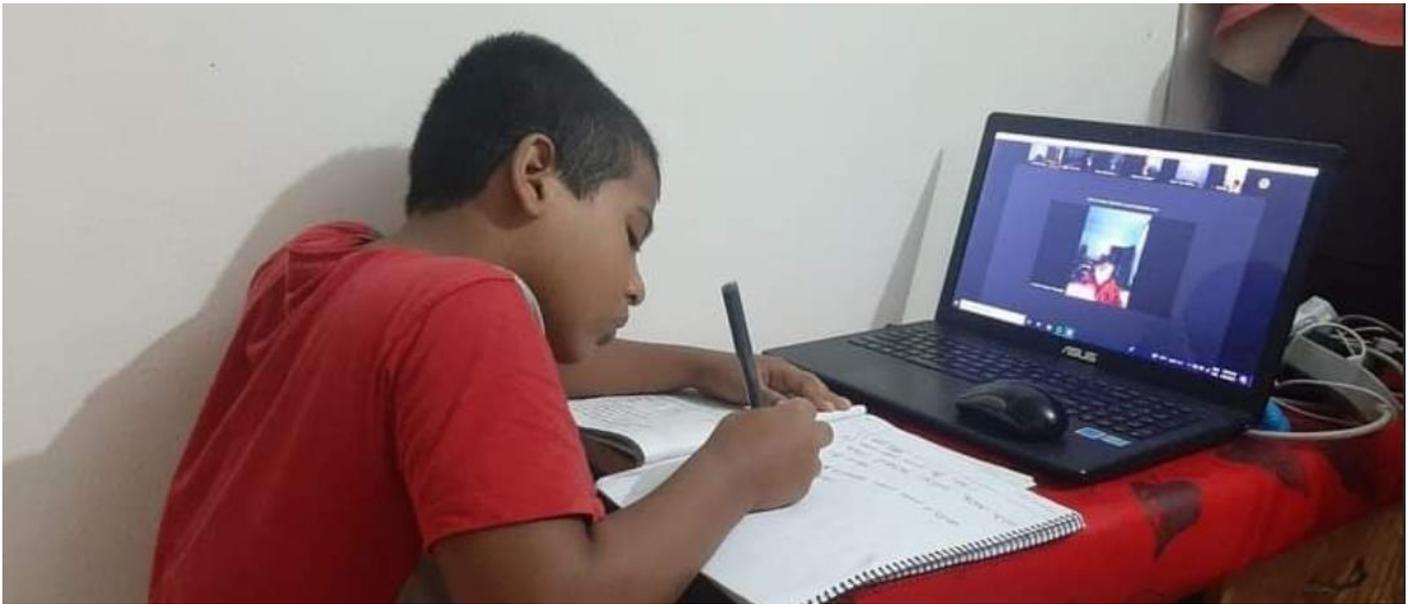


Education during COVID-19: Lessons from Bangladesh



In Brief:

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh has closed schools for over one year, affecting nearly 40 million students.
- In December 2020, researchers conducted a brief phone survey about educational activities and investments with 7,576 households with adolescents in grades 6-10 across Bangladesh. Researchers reinterviewed 5,015 households in March 2021.
- Among households that own a smartphone, approximately half have an active data package that could potentially be used for online learning.
- More than 60 percent of children received private tutoring in both December 2020 and March 2021, and parents reported spending more on boys than on girls.
- By March, despite widespread economic hardship and persistent closures, 89 percent of secondary students were still engaged in learning activities, primarily with the support of family members and private tutors. On average, students study 14 hours per week.
- The most common activities are reading schoolbooks (94 percent), meeting with teachers in person (62 percent), and working through exercise books (32 percent). Relatively few students watch government-provided educational TV lessons (20 percent).
- Relatively few students are working for pay (11 percent) one year after the school closures, and boys are about three times more likely than girls to be working. However, 88 percent of those working also did educational activities in the past week.
- As of March, nearly all parents (97 percent) expect that their children will return to schools once they are open for in-person learning.

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DONOR

The World Bank

COUNTRY

Bangladesh

TIMELINE

January–March 2021

STUDY SAMPLE

7,576 households

Background

Global school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted the education of roughly 1.6 billion students.¹ While most students returned to hybrid or in-person schooling during 2020 or early 2021, approximately 20 countries have kept schools closed entirely.² The impacts of these closures likely vary across and within countries, reflecting large differences in the resources for remote learning available at governmental, school, and household levels.

In Bangladesh, home to 40 million students,³ schools have remained fully closed since March 17, 2020. The government distributes daily television lessons through a government-run station (Sangsad TV), but these lessons are accessible only to those with satellite television or internet access. Plans to return to a hybrid schedule, at least for older students, have been continuously postponed. Students scheduled to sit cumulative exams were automatically promoted after those exams were cancelled. How students and their families have coped with the closures, and what they imply for an eventual return to in-person schooling, remain open questions.

Research

In December 2020, researchers recruited and surveyed (via phone) 7,576 households with children who were in grades six through ten at the time of the 2020 closures. Researchers then resurveyed 5,015 of these households (also via phone) in March 2021, one year after the closures, to measure to what extent children and their families have persisted in their education and what tools they used to do so. Due to the nature of the study, the sample includes only households that own a smartphone. It draws from three distinct sources: a representative sample of households subscribed to the largest telecommunications provider; a set of households in which children had enrolled in a government online learning resource prior to the closures; and a set of households that were participating in the Secondary School Stipend program, which targets lower-income families. Researchers conducted surveys with the parent or guardian of the secondary-school age child on educational investment, time use, and parental aspirations and expectations.

Findings

The short baseline survey conducted in December 2020 and January 2021—with a sample of 7,576 households—documented basic information about access to remote education resources and time spent on educational activities.

1. Among households that own a smartphone, **a little more than half have an active data pack and access to cable TV (53 percent and 65 percent, respectively)**, although households have an average of 2.6 phones and one other device.
2. **More than half of children (59 percent) received private tutoring** in the past month, and the rate is approximately the same between boys and girls. Parents on average tended to spend slightly more on boys' tutoring than on girls' (US\$26 vs. US\$24 per month).
3. **By January, very few children (3 percent) had worked for pay since the school closures**, and boys were more likely to have worked for pay than girls (4.8 percent vs 1.3 percent, respectively).
4. Caregivers were skeptical about their children's mastery over their current grade material, with **43 percent saying their children had "no" mastery and 51 percent saying they had "a little."** Anticipating that the schools will adapt to the challenges of the past year upon reopening, virtually all parents said that they expected their children would be "somewhat" or "very" likely to be ready for the next grade.

The midline survey results document in more detail the use of remote education resources, as well as time use and educational investments one year into the pandemic. As of March 2021:

5. One year after school closures began, **nearly all youth in secondary school (89 percent) are still completing educational activities regularly**, with the median student studying seven days a week for approximately 14 hours per week (see Figures 1 and 2 on the next page).

¹ UNICEF. 2020. "Losing livelihoods: The labor market impacts of COVID-19 in Bangladesh." <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34449>. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

² UNESCO. 2021. "Global Monitoring of School Closures caused by COVID-19." <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosures>. Last accessed 20 June 2021.

³ Ibid.

- 6. There is little evidence that girls are disadvantaged along these dimensions. **Girls are, in fact, more likely to be studying at all, and they report greater time spent studying.**
- 7. Families leveraged the resources at their disposal to support their children: **64 percent of children received private tutoring in March 2021** for an average of 11 hours per week among those receiving at least some tutoring. Conditional on paying for tutoring, expenditures are substantial, with a median of US\$12 per child per month.

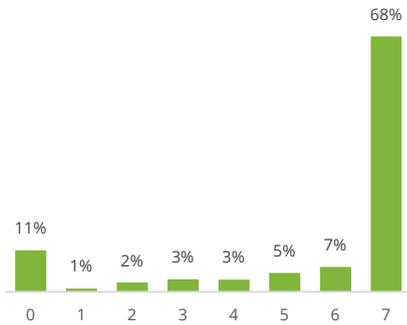


Figure 1. Days did any schoolwork, past week

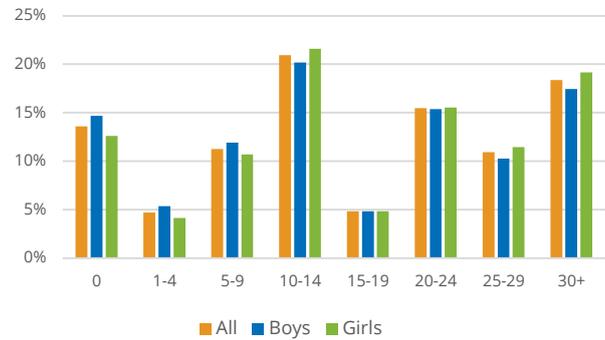


Figure 2. Number of hours spent on schoolwork, past week

- 8. **Nearly all secondary school youth read the assigned schoolbooks or textbooks (94 percent) in the past month, and more than half (62 percent) met with a teacher in person.**

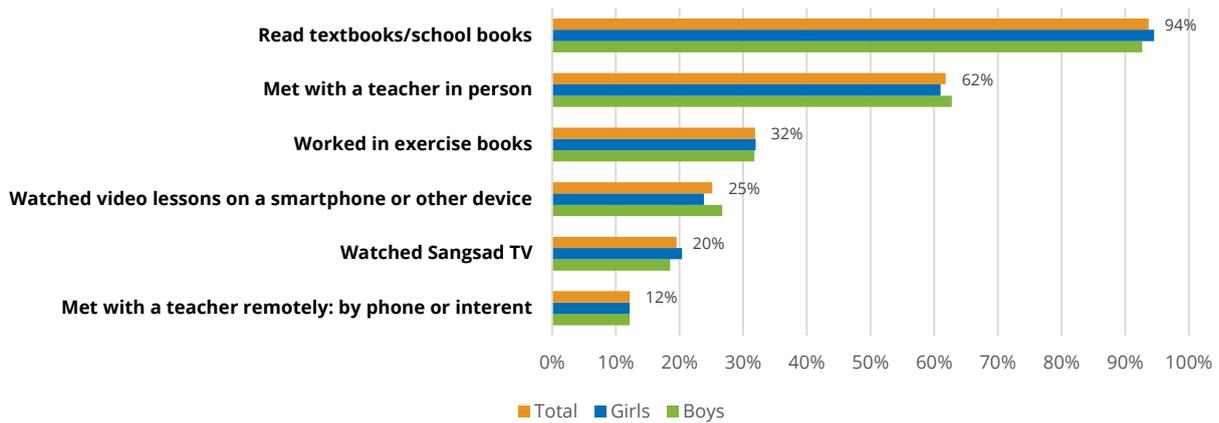


Figure 3. Learning resources child used in past month

- 9. The **remote educational tools provided by the government, however, are used by few students and their parents.** This in part reflects that owning a smartphone does not necessarily imply that households can use the internet to access remote activities for education. Only **33 percent of those who reported owning a smartphone in December 2020 used it for educational activities** (Figure 4), with most relying on pre-paid data packages (Figure 5).

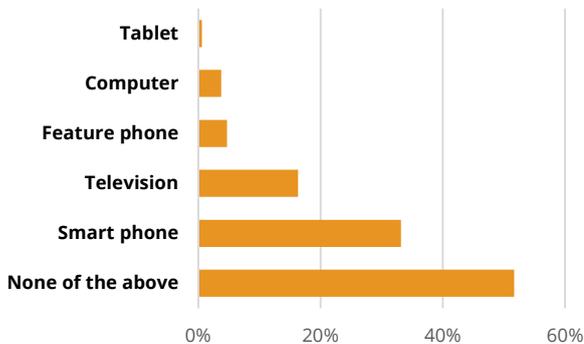


Figure 4. Devices used by children to access remote learning resources

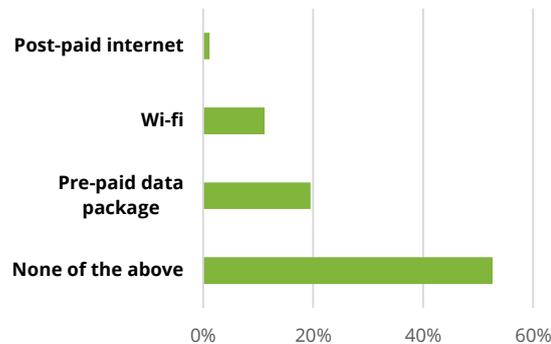


Figure 5. Plans used to access remote learning activities in March

10. In addition to tutoring, parents and other household members support their children’s education directly by supervising, providing encouragement and support, helping children find resources, and explaining or clarifying materials. **Sixty-eight percent of children received help from parents with their schooling in the past week. Conditional on helping, parents spend an average of ten hours per week helping their children with educational activities.**

11. Local schools often required students to submit regular assignments, and the government instructed schools to collect end-of-year assignments in lieu of final exams.⁴ Among a randomly selected 10 percent subsample, **two thirds (66 percent) of parents said their children were asked to continuously submit assignments through the year, and 80 percent said they were asked to submit end-of-year assignments.** Virtually all students in the subsample submitted at least some assignments, and 92 percent submitted “most” or “all” regular assignments. There were no differences by child gender.

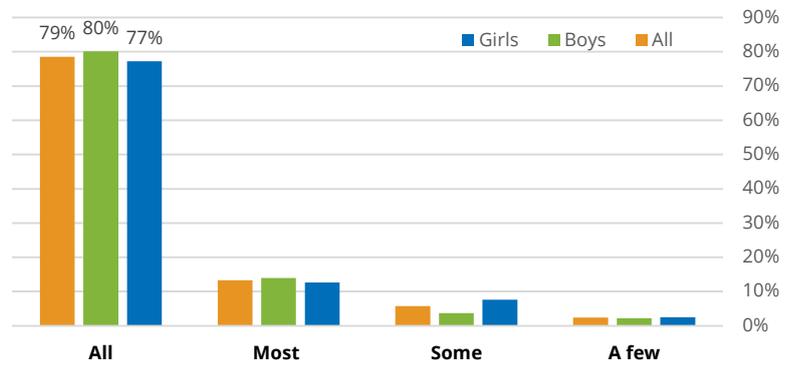


Figure 6. Share of regular assignments students submitted during 2020

12. **Nearly all parents (97 percent) were confident that their children would attend school once it opens for in-person attendance** with no significant difference between boys and girls.
13. **Only one-in-ten children (11 percent) worked for pay in the month of March 2021.** Those who worked spent an average of 21 days of the month working and an average of four hours per day. A higher share of boys than girls worked for pay in the previous month, and conditional on working, boys worked for fewer days but more hours in a day compared to girls. However, 88 percent of those working are still completing educational activities.
14. **Girls were more likely to perform care work** (74 percent for girls vs. 54 percent for boys), averaging 12 hours per week conditional on doing any care work, and 10 hours per week for boys doing any care work.

Table 1. Time children spent working and helping the household

| | Boys | Girls | Total | Difference |
|---|------|-------|-------|------------|
| Share worked in the past month (%) | 16% | 7% | 11% | 9.0%* |
| Average days worked, conditional on work | 18.5 | 24.2 | 20.5 | -5.6* |
| Average hours worked, conditional on work | 4.8 | 2.5 | 4.0 | 2.4* |
| Share did any care work in the past month | 54.3 | 73.9 | 64.9 | 19.7%* |
| Average hours, conditional on care work | 10.3 | 11.6 | 11.1 | -1.3* |
| Total children | 2580 | 3046 | 5626 | |

Asterisks indicate that differences are statistically significant at the 1-percent level, based on t-tests by child gender.

Takeaways

This study highlights two major patterns: despite widespread economic hardship and closed schools over the past year, parents and students remain focused on schooling and have continued to invest in education. With investment decisions more fully in the hands of parents, however, this has created greater inequality in educational experiences. Some students work with hired private tutors regularly in lieu of classes, while others study primarily alone while assuming substantial caregiving or paid work.

⁴ Alamgir, Mohiuddin. “Assignments for class 6-9 students to start on Nov 1.” *The Daily Star*. 24 October 2020.

