



Letter to the Editor

The paradox of re-opening schools in Zimbabwe in the COVID-19 era



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords
 COVID-19
 Pandemic
 School
 Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

The easing of COVID-19 restrictions in southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, has seen most countries reopening schools for face-to-face learning. In this letter we discuss the paradox of reopening schools in the COVID-19 era and proffer recommendations for safe learning environments.

Dear Editor

Globally, countries have started to emerge from lockdown restrictions previously imposed to control the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The COVID-19 pandemic has spread throughout the globe with nearly 70 million confirmed cases and over 1,43 million deaths as of November 26, 2020 [1]. So far, available COVID-19 data suggests that children under the age of 18 years represent less than 10% of reported cases globally, with relatively few deaths compared to other age groups and usually mild disease [1]. However, cases of critical illness have been reported. As with adults, pre-existing medical conditions have been suggested as a risk factor for severe disease and intensive care admission in children [2]. At present there is limited data on the risk of infection in children and transmission in this age group. The easing of COVID-19 restrictions has seen most countries globally reopening schools for face-to-face learning.

The competing demands of safety from infection, general wellbeing and education must be thoroughly considered and balanced in a pandemic school environment [3]. Most countries have had to make reopening decisions based on whether the risks of infection to children, staff and families outweigh the harms of closure to children's education and social development. In Zimbabwe, schools reduce early sexual activity, drugs and alcohol abuse and other behavior issues [4]. For instance, reports showed that at least 415 school going girls dropped out of exam classes in Manicaland Province during the March to October 2020 COVID-19 lockdown period mainly due to marriage and pregnancy [5]. Additionally, very few students had access to online learning resulting in very little learning in the 2020 school calendar [6,7] These factors clearly supported the decision to open schools as the weekly number of COVID-19 confirmed cases dropped.

As with other countries in southern Africa, Zimbabwe implemented a phased schools reopening approach [8]. As more learners returned, there have been reports, from different parts of the country, of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools [9]. A recent outbreak in the Matebeleland North Province had nearly a quarter of the students enrolled at one school testing positive for COVID-19 [10]. Other schools have also reported outbreaks of varying impacts [11,12]. The COVID-19 outbreaks in schools have been linked to community transmission with most communities reported to be no longer adhering to standard COVID-19

preventative guidelines due to fatigue [13]. These recent COVID-19 outbreaks in schools are an important public health problem given children can be asymptomatic carriers [14] with the capacity to infect their older family members resulting in severe disease and possibly death.

The government of Zimbabwe has made important strides in ensuring schools are safe for learners and teachers, however, these efforts have largely been limited in coverage and underfunded. Many schools in rural areas where the bulk of the population resides do not even have access to running water. The poor infrastructure has in some cases seen very large classrooms of up to 70 learners where it is impossible to social distance. The need for investment in schools to protect learners, teachers and their families cannot be over emphasized.

Firstly, we recommend increasing resources available to schools to strengthen symptom screening and reporting, monitoring, rapid testing and tracing of suspected cases [14]. Students from poor families have little or no resources to afford essential infection prevention and control (IPC) materials such as face masks and hand sanitizers. In Uganda, for example, the government has committed to providing free masks to all citizens six years and older [15]. Secondly, there is need to protect older teachers and those with comorbidities [16] where possible through reassignment to tasks that do not involve interaction with fellow teachers and/or students. Thirdly, the government should consider ramping up COVID-19 health education efforts for staff and children, so that those living in a household where others have symptoms of COVID-19 infection understand the need to self-isolate. Fourthly, where applicable, schools must be encouraged to support sustainable remote learning platforms for delivery of lessons. Recently, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization launched a WhatsApp platform for remote teaching [17]. This application has the potential to reach the 5.2 million people who use WhatsApp in Zimbabwe. Such digital platforms have the capacity of ensuring continued learning for children in home isolation. Fifthly, long-term investment in schools' infrastructure to permit implementation of social distancing and IPC measures also needs to be considered.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100070>

Received 27 November 2020; Accepted 6 December 2020

Available online 24 December 2020

2666-5352/© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Royal Society for Public Health. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND

license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Declaration of competing interest

None to declare.

References

- [1] WHO, Novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Available from, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>, 2020.
- [2] CDC, Coronavirus (COVID-19) 2020 [29 September, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>], 2020. Available from.
- [3] N. Ziauddeen, K. Woods-Townsend, S. Saxena, R. Gilbert, N.A. Alwan, Schools and COVID-19: reopening Pandora's box? *Public Health in Practice* 1 (2020) 100039.
- [4] R. Eghtessadi, Z. Mukandavire, F. Mutenherwa, D. Cuadros, G. Musuka, Safe-guarding gains in the sexual and reproductive health and AIDS response amidst COVID-19: the role of African civil society, *Int. J. Infect. Dis.* 100 (2020) 286–291.
- [5] R. Tapfumaneyi, Zimbabwe: over 400 girls drop out of Manicaland schools due to lockdown Pregnancies, 27 November, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202010100113.html>, 2020. Available from.
- [6] D. Matabvu, E-learning exposes education gap 2020, 27 November, <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/e-learning-exposes-education-gap>, 2020. Available from.
- [7] C. Gomba, Student perceptions of distance learning at advanced level in Zimbabwe, *International Journal of Research* 5 (2) (2016) 25–33.
- [8] F. Mutsaka, Zimbabwe begins gradual reopening of schools amid virus, 26 November, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-harare-archive-zimbabwe-8ced2d2ab18cf52bd8ff430ba0b5b524>, 2020. Available from.
- [9] M. Ncube, Mixed feelings over schools' shutdown after Covid-19 outbreak 2020, 26 November, <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mixed-feelings-over-schools-shut-down-after-covid-19-outbreak/>, 2020. Available from.
- [10] Ndlovu TM-NaB, 184 covid-19 infections at John Tallach 2020, 26 November, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/184-covid-19-infections-at-john-tallach/>, 2020. Available from.
- [11] R. Muchetu, More schools, colleges hit by Covid-19 2020, 26 November, <https://www.sundaynews.co.zw/more-schools-colleges-hit-by-covid-19/>, 2020. Available from.
- [12] New Zimbabwe Press, Chinhoyi High closed after 57 students test positive for Covid-19 2020, 26 November, <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/chinhoyi-high-closed-after-57-students-test-positive-for-covid-19/>, 2020. Available from.
- [13] Xinhua Govt, Launches home-based covid-19 testing study to identify hotspots 2020, 27 November, <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/govt-launches-home-based-covid-19-testing-study-to-identify-hotspots/>, 2020. Available from.
- [14] WHO, Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools, Available from: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4, 2020. (Accessed 26 November 2020) https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4.
- [15] PM News Tuesday, Uganda set to provide free face masks to citizens, Available from, <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2020/05/19/uganda-set-to-provide-free-face-masks-to-citizens/>, May 19, 2020.
- [16] WHO, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): schools, Available from, <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-schools>, 2020. (Accessed 26 November 2020), <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-schools>.
- [17] UNESCO, UNESCO to launch Dzidzo Paden|Imfundwe'ndlini App to support remote learning and access to academic resources 2020, 26 November, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-launch-dzidzo-padenimfundwendlini-app-support-remote-learning-and-access-academic>, 2020. Available from.

Tafadzwa Dzinamarira^{a,*}, Godfrey Musuka^b
^a University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, South Africa
^b ICAP at Columbia University, Harare, Zimbabwe

* Corresponding author. Department of Public Health Medicine, School of Nursing and Public Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 4001, South Africa.
 E-mail address: anthonydzina@gmail.com (T. Dzinamarira).