

## FOCUS

# Counting the high cost of school closures

**Pupils suffered setbacks in education and health during the pandemic, with those in kindergarten ending up ill-prepared for Primary One**

William Yiu and Zhao Ziwen

Hong Kong housewife Shirley Tsui is convinced the Covid-19 pandemic cost her six-year-old daughter dearly in terms of missing out on school and getting help early for her learning disabilities.

Prolonged bouts of school suspensions since 2020 meant the girl attended kindergarten in person for only half of the three years she should have been there.

The problems surfaced when she was in K2. "She had emotional problems and she once locked herself in the washroom and her teacher had to call me for help," recalled Tsui, who is in her 30s.

Her only child was diagnosed as having learning impairment, dyslexia, emotional problems and speech delays, and needed pre-school help to catch up with the appropriate development outcomes and various types of therapy.

But help was not available immediately, as many organisations had suspended their services for children aged up to six years because of the pandemic.

"My girl eventually got the government preschool service only when she started Primary One last year," she said.

There have been no more school closures, but starting primary school has not been easy for the girl, especially in Chinese language lessons.

She struggled with writing Chinese characters in sequence, something children usually mastered in kindergarten.

**Toddlers should have been taught some basic reading ability ... in kindergarten**

VIVIAN SIU, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

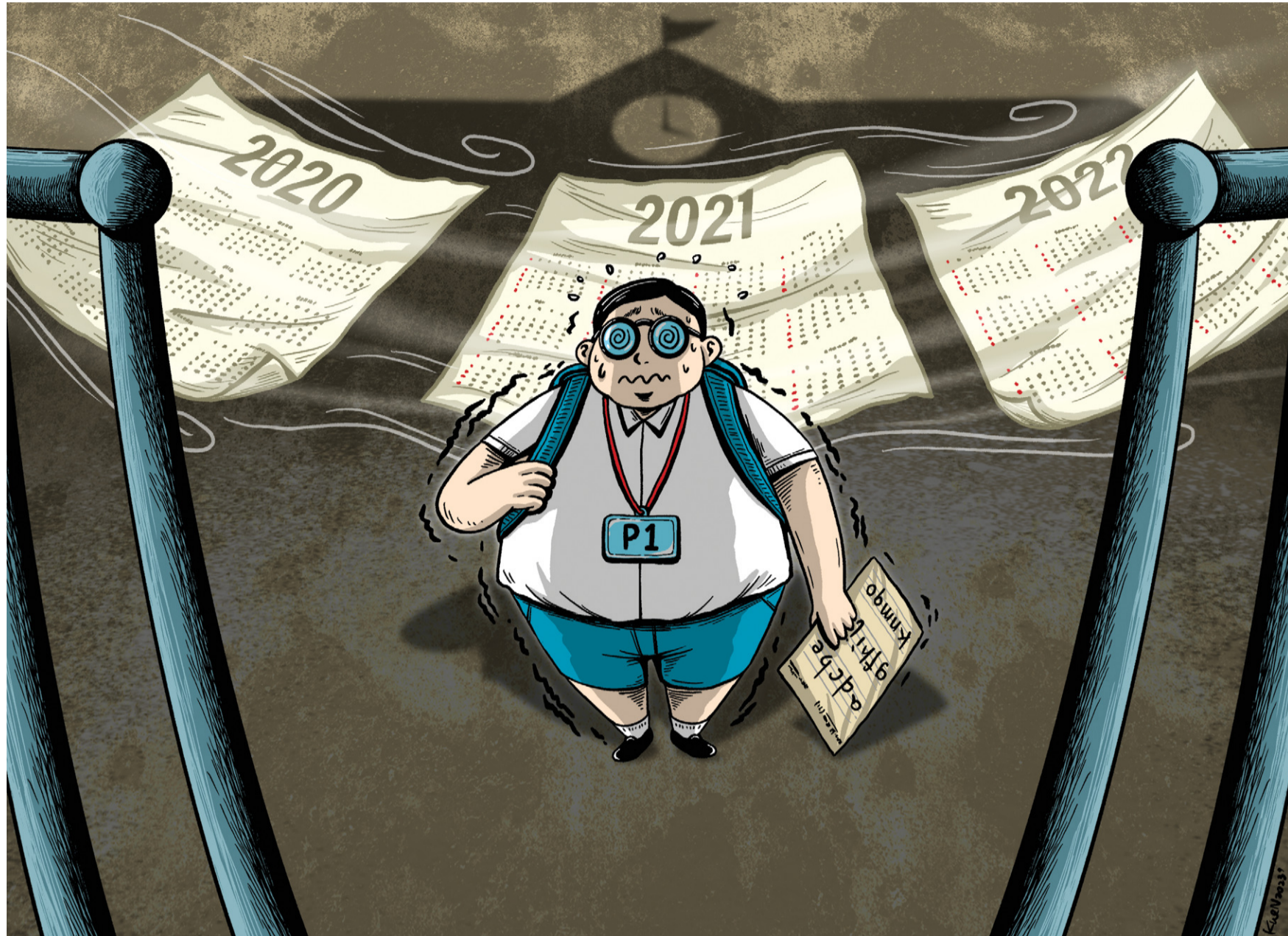
"My daughter's teacher told me my girl's handwriting was ugly and she could not follow the stroke order," Tsui said.

Her daughter is among tens of thousands of Hong Kong students affected in various ways by the multiple rounds of school suspensions from 2020 to early last year.

A calculation by the Post found children in K1 to K3 attended school for only 30 to 50 days in 2020, instead of around 190 days before the pandemic. Primary school pupils had only 70 to 80 school days that year, and secondary students, 80 to 90 days.

In 2021, schools generally stayed closed for the first two months before students at different grades took turns to return. Half-day classes only resumed fully in late May.

But Hong Kong's deadly fifth wave of Covid-19 infections early last year saw in-person classes suspended in January and the summer holiday was brought



forward, too. Pupils only returned to school in batches in April and May, and there have been no further closures since then.

With the last batch of cross-border primary and kindergarten students resuming face-to-face lessons on February 22, the city's schools are back to normal at last, except for everyone having to wear masks and the need for primary and preschool pupils to do daily rapid antigen tests.

But Hong Kong is still coming to terms with the lingering impact of the school closures, which forced children to spend months at home attending classes online, isolated from their teachers and friends.

Parents, teachers and experts have pointed to a significant increase in everything from learning disabilities to obesity as they tallied the cost on children.

In this, the city is not alone. Other Asian societies, including South Korea, Japan and Singapore, have also begun to grasp the negative effects of the pandemic on young people, including on their mental health.

In Hong Kong, the youngest children who missed out on a proper kindergarten education over the past three years were among the hardest hit.

They entered primary school without adequate preparation, and some were struggling.

Clinical psychologist Vivian Siu Ho-ye said some primary pupils in the lower grades could not write their names or the numerals one to 10 in sequence.

"Toddlers should have been taught some basic reading ability and classroom skills in kindergarten," she said.

"There is a girl in Primary Two who found it difficult to clean herself and tidy up after using the toilet. She was in preschool when schools were suspended."

Siu, who is with the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society and has more than 15 years' experience, said preschool teachers could usually identify children's speech, behavioural and autistic issues early and refer them for help as soon as possible.

The pandemic disrupted that process when the children had to stay home. "Many toddlers with developmental barriers could not be identified and receive appropriate training," she said.

Siu said children who did not pick up various motor skills sufficiently at preschool, including how to hold a pen, would find it hard to learn and adjust to primary school life.

According to Department of Health data, the number of children under 12 who were newly diagnosed with speech and language development disorders rose in 2020 and 2021, coinciding with the school closures. The number with speech problems rose from 4,300 in 2019, before the pandemic, to 4,570 in 2020.

Speech problems were the only condition among all developmental disorders that registered an increase in 2020. The number rose to 5,401 in 2021.

The number fell by nearly a quarter last year, with nearly all students returning to school from last April and no more citywide suspensions since.

Experts told the Post some children had difficulty because they could not observe their teachers' mouth movements to

imitate, and could not hear them clearly either, as the teachers were masked.

Carmela Wan Ka-ye, a primary school social worker with the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, also said many children had put on weight during the three years of staying home for extended periods. More students had trouble with their eyesight too, probably the result of prolonged use of electronic devices while attending online lessons.

Wan said: "A mother told me her kid gained 20kg over the three years, likely due to the lack of exercise and long time attending online classes."

The proportion of overweight or obese children aged between nine and 13 rose from 7 per cent to 24 per cent during the pandemic, according to a study last June by the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation and Chinese University.

The researchers said the considerable periods spent at home had disrupted children's daily routines, and they had snacked more and exercised less.

Cross-border student Tian Xingyu, 12, returned to school in Hong Kong heavier than before, although that was not the only change he was dealing with.

His father, who only wanted to be identified as Cheung, said after attending online classes for so long, the boy had become afraid of mixing with others. "He did not have a chance to contact other kids the same age and no longer plays sports like before," he said.

"He used to be a bag of bones, but his weight jumped from 40kg to 60kg. I hope he can burn his fat by travelling to Hong Kong."

The boy said his grades had suffered, too. "I could score over 80 in English in the past but now score only around 60. I used to score over 90 in Chinese, but now I get only 70," he said.

Elsewhere in Asia, parents and experts have also begun discussing the impact of extended school closures on young people.

South Korean schools were closed for 68 weeks from 2020 to 2021, according to Statistics Korea, a state-run agency.

Kindergartens were closed for longer periods over the past three years.

In Seoul, university researcher Ryu Ha-na, 37, kept her son at home when kindergartens were shut, but now she is worried that the six-year-old is ill-prepared for primary school.

"My son can't read the Korean alphabet," she said. "Some kids can read it at four to five years old. He will enter junior school next month, but he is not ready at all."

Illustration: Lau Ka-kuen

She has sent her son to seven "cram schools" to help him improve in English, Korean, piano, soccer and more. "If the kindergartens worked properly, I wouldn't do this," she said.

A survey by South Korea's Ministry of Education in late 2020 showed during nearly a year-long school closure, an estimated 3.3 per cent more students failed exams in their middle school, compared with 2019.

Students already trailing in their schoolwork saw their grades drop further.

In Japan, individual prefectures shut down schools constantly over the past three years.

**He did not have a chance to contact other kids the same age and no longer plays sports**

CHEUNG, FATHER TO CROSS-BORDER STUDENT TIAN XINGYU

Hatanaka Norika, a 15-year-old middle school student in Nagoya, said: "I hate school closures, when there was no class for me. I suffered a great drop in my grades."

Her school was suspended for half of a year in 2020.

"I prefer to study in school. If there is anything I don't understand, I can directly go to my teacher," Norika said.

Research by the University of Tokyo last year found more than half of students surveyed had lost their motivation to study.

Japan also saw its suicide rate rise in 2020, after a decade of

decline. Both adults and teenagers were among the statistics.

In Singapore, another Asian society which places a high value on education, mental health has emerged as an issue among young people. The city state imposed closures three times from 2020 to 2021 – twice for all levels from primary to high school and once for primary only.

Universities had even longer periods of online courses.

**A girl said she felt prettier with a mask, which also covers pimples**

JOYCE YIP OF THE HONG KONG FAMILY WELFARE SOCIETY

More than half of Singaporean students suffered negative feelings during home-based learning in 2020, while some spent significantly more time on digital devices, according to an article in the *Journal of Emerging Investigators* in August 2021.

The same conclusion was reported in a Japanese research paper in *Nature*, indicating restricted social activities caused a negative impact on students' mental health.

Jason Tan Eng Thye, an associate professor at the National Institute of Education in Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, said: "Staying at home caused massive social activity reduction."

"The importance of school life is that it not only provides curricular courses but also extracurricular activities for students to socialise and enhance their psychological and physical strengths."

Research showed a higher risk of child abuse and domestic violence during the period of home-based learning in Singapore.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development saw a 14 per cent increase in inquiries related to domestic conflict and violence during the first two weeks of the country's school and workplace lockdown in 2020.

"Even the government understood the negative effects of home-based learning," Tan said.

In a statement in late 2021, Singapore's Ministry of Education said: "We recognise that home-based learning cannot be a full substitute for the school-based learning experience. On a prolonged basis, it comes at a cost not just to students' learning but also their socio-emotional development and mental well-being. It also imposes a burden to families and society."

With concern over the disease receding across the world as fewer cases are recorded, experts say the time has come to focus harder on children and young people who continue to suffer the effects of the health crisis.

While Hongkongers expect the mask mandate to be lifted soon, not everyone is keen to stop covering up.

Joyce Yip Chui-ye, a manager at the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society who supervises a team of about 10 social workers sent to schools, said there were teenage students who were worrying about showing their faces to their classmates after all this time.

"I have some students saying that they will not take off their masks. A girl said she felt prettier with a mask, which also covers pimples," she said. "It is an issue of self-esteem."

Asked if the pandemic hit Hong Kong's children and young people harder than others, psychologist Siu said people of all ages were affected, perhaps in different ways.

Children who showed signs of struggling or lagging behind, she said, ought to receive help to catch up as schools returned to normality. "But I am sure kids are more flexible than previous generations," Siu said. "They could adapt swiftly to changing lesson modes, in-person or online."

"Two years ago, there were lots of uncertainties and students could not plan anything. But with no more school closures, we can now reassure them that they can meet their teachers and classmates and expect something regular in school."



Children who missed out on a proper kindergarten education have been hit hard. Photo: Nora Tam

24%

The proportion of overweight or obese children aged between nine and 13 rose to this level amid the pandemic, according to a 2022 study