

ARE CHILDREN REALLY LEARNING?

Exploring foundational skills
in the midst of a learning crisis



Acknowledgements

Overall direction was provided by Vidhya Ganesh, Director, Division of Analytics, Planning and Monitoring; Robert Jenkins, Director of Education and Adolescent Development, Programme Group; Mark Hereward, Chief Data Officer, Division of Analytics, Planning and Monitoring; and Yanhong Zhang, Chief, Data Analysis and Innovation Unit, Division of Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, all of UNICEF.

Suguru Mizunoya and Peggy Kelly of the Data and Analytics Section of UNICEF led the preparation of the report, supported by Diogo Amaro, Sakshi Mishra, Garen Avanesian, and Yixin Wang. Notable contributions were also provided by Michelle Kaffenberger and Jason Silberstein of the RISE Programme. Significant comments were also received from Silvia Montoya, Director, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

Valuable comments and inputs were received from UNICEF colleagues including (in alphabetical order):

Kokou Sefako Amelewonou, Matt Brossard, Manuel Cardoso, Shiraz Chakera, Kurtis Albert Cooper, Ivan Coursac, Akihiro Fushimi, Elsebeth Qvortrup Iverson, Takudzwa Kanyangarara, Divya Leta, Hsiao Chen Lin, Haritz Goya Lujambio, Asma Maladwala, Bassem Nasir, Alassane Ouedraogo, Nicolas Reuge, Kenneth Russell, Jutaro Sakamoto, Georgina Thompson, Beifith Kouak Tiyaab, Frank Van Cappelle, Ann Marie Wilcock, Euphrates Efosi Wose, Jean Luc Yameogo, and Haogen Yao.

The team would also like to thank Syaeful Bahri for designing the report.

This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre, Canada.

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March 2022



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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when the world was already grappling with a serious learning crisis in which many children were not mastering the fundamentals of reading and numeracy even if attending school. With widespread school closures and other disruptions to the education system brought about by the pandemic, the learning crisis has escalated to new heights. While the number of out-of-school children had already started to climb for the first time in 20 years in 2020, by all accounts the increase has begun accelerating. Children have to get back to the classroom, but changes are needed to ensure that they really learn, starting with the foundational basics of reading and numeracy. Improvements in teacher training, greater investment in teaching resources, and a focus on foundational skills will help turn the tide and set children on a path to educational growth and discovery.

This report offers unique insight into the extent of the learning crisis by providing an in-depth picture of which

children are most at risk of not acquiring foundational learning skills. The analysis of 32 low- and middle-income countries and territories uses newly released data from surveys undertaken in 2017-2021 as part of Round 6 of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS6) to examine the equity perspectives of the crisis, exploring learning outcomes among different subgroups of children, with a focus on the most vulnerable. Simulations are also carried out to preview the extent to which learning loss has occurred as a result of the pandemic, as well as determine the impact of different strategies to overcome these losses. Finally, the report examines timely concerns of remote learning readiness in the event of school closures and draws links between this pressing matter and learning outcomes.

The MICS6 data confirm that the learning crisis is real for most children. While the most vulnerable, including

children from poor households, children with a less supportive home environment, children with functional difficulties, and children involved in child labour have the lowest level of foundational learning skills, in most countries it is the majority of children who are far from achieving foundational learning goals.

Children are expected to have acquired foundational reading and numeracy skills at the end of Grade 2. This includes being able to read and interpret a simple passage and identify and distinguish between different numbers. But in most countries analyzed, the majority of children have not mastered foundational skills in either reading or numeracy by the time they reach Grade 3. In more than half the countries, only 30 per cent of children have foundational reading

skills and a mere 18 per cent have foundational numeracy skills. Among many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than one in 10 children have foundational learning skills on time.

Learning outcomes can vary based on factors such as sex, urban-rural location, household wealth, disability (functional difficulty status), child labour status, language of instruction, parental involvement in their children's education, and the home environment. The findings indicate that **wealth** is the strongest predictor, as children in the poorest quintile have 16 percentage point lower likelihood of having foundational reading skills than children from the wealthiest quintile. Moreover, analysis of differences by parental involvement show that children whose parents do not attend meetings at the school or help them with their homework have a lower probability of having foundational learning skills, as do children who have no child-oriented books at home, or their mothers have less than a primary education.

Children with **functional difficulties (disabilities)**, whether they be of a physical, behavioural, or emotional nature, can be at further disadvantage when it comes to learning. The good news is that children with functional difficulties have similar primary school attendance rates as those without those difficulties. The less encouraging news is that they may not be learning as much as their peers. Students with a functional difficulty in the domains of communicating, learning, remembering, hearing, concentrating, walking, controlling behaviour, making friends, and anxiety are less likely to have foundational reading skills than students without those difficulties. Among these domains, the difference is largest for children with communication difficulty, at 23 percentage points.

When children are forced to work, they can be denied the opportunity to learn. In comparing the educational outcomes of children from the poorest 40 per cent of households who are

engaged in **child labour** and are not attending school, with children from similar households who do attend school and are not involved in child labour, the differences are clear-cut. When children go to school rather than work, their chances of having foundational reading skills are at least double in most countries. Keeping children in school is so important, as the learning gap between children in and out of child labour tends to widen as children get older.

While school is the best place for children, it is also essential to have high quality instruction, otherwise the **pace of learning** can be too slow. Children do learn more the longer they stay in school. By Grade 8, in all but three countries, at least half (and in many cases three-fourths or more) of children have acquired foundational reading skills. But many children still don't have foundational numeracy skills even by Grade 8. This speaks to the slow pace of learning in many countries, which can be tied

to the low quality of education. In the average country analyzed, it would take 7 years of primary schooling for 70 per cent of children to acquire foundational reading skills. To reach this benchmark for numeracy it would take 11 years of primary school. Concerted efforts are therefore needed to address the learning crisis, which include systemic approaches to improve learning for all children.

The massive disruptions to the education system brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the recent increase in out-of-school children, mean that children are sure to suffer substantial learning loss, but with the right strategies, these losses can be recouped over time.

While the world awaits the real-time data recounting the impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes, simulations and other analyses can offer an illuminating preview. We examine differences in foundational reading skills between children **in school and those who dropped out** in the previous year. This offers a proxy of the impact of a year of school closures on learning outcomes.

Data for 12 countries show that on average (and holding everything else constant), the share of children who have foundational reading skills would drop by 68 per cent after missing out on school for a year. Given that only 30 per cent of children had foundational reading skills before the pandemic, this fall for children who drop out of school (which represents children who had their schools closed for a year) could mean that only about 10 per cent would have foundational reading skills a year later.

Further analysis of the situation for out-of-school children is especially pertinent

considering that the number of out-of-school children is on the rise for the first time in 20 years, spurred by the pandemic. Although the rate of learning among children attending school may be low, it is far lower for children who are out of school. For children aged 8 to 14, the difference in foundational learning skills by school attendance is stark. For reading, 46 per cent of children who are in school have these skills, compared to just 12 per cent among children who are out-of-school. For numeracy, the difference is 27 per cent for in school compared to 12 per cent for out-of-school. The underlying message is clear: children need to be in school to learn. Schools that are closed need to reopen, and stay open, so that children can continue their learning journeys.

Although all children suffer the consequences of school closures, it is the **younger children** who stand to lose the most, with losses accumulating over time. Simulations reveal that a year's worth of learning loss during school closures could amass to a 27

percentage point reduction in the share of today's Grade 1 children demonstrating foundational reading skills by Grade 9, dropping from 78 per cent to 51 per cent. By contrast, the potential long-term losses for today's Grade 6 cohort are much smaller: 7 percentage points from a year's learning loss. With effective mitigation strategies, including teaching at the right level, supported by long-term system reorientation, there could be large potential gains in recouped learning loss. Following these strategies, eventual Grade 9 foundational reading skills could rise to 75 per cent for today's Grade 1 children, nearly to where it would be had there been no school closures. The key, however, is ensuring that the system reorientation continues over the long term. There is no quick fix.

Beyond the pandemic, the world is confronting other challenges, such as the rapid pace of

technological change which is bringing a move towards more digitized forms of learning, which holds consequences for children's learning.

The **digital divide** can be seen across education, with the evidence becoming more visible during the pandemic as school closures forced a shift to distance learning. Having access to the internet at home has become even more important so that children can continue learning when they are unable to go to school. But it is primarily children aged 7-14 from the lowest income countries, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa, who have the lowest rate of internet access at home. Correspondingly, these are also the children with the lowest rates of foundational reading skills. To help bring about greater equity in learning, as well as aid in learning recovery, the internet needs to be accessible to everyone.

In conclusion, the threats to children's education are manifold and require a concerted and coordinated effort on the part of governments and other key stakeholders. For its part, UNICEF, in conjunction with its partners across the globe, is doing its utmost to improve learning outcomes for children, both throughout the pandemic and beyond. With the help of three key initiatives: **Mission Recovery**, which prioritizes bringing children back to school, implementing catch-up learning, and preparing and supporting teachers, along with **Reimagine Education**, which promotes digital learning as part of essential services for every child, and **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**, which produced the FLN Hub, a repository of practical resources to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy interventions, children may have the opportunity to learn, thrive, and reach their potential.

