

To mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on education outcomes, systems should prioritise foundational skills and adapt instruction to children's learning levels

Overview¹


Education systems around the world were already facing a learning crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic. If nothing changes, school closures due to COVID-19 will exacerbate this learning crisis. But insights from recent research on education systems suggest that three steps can mitigate these losses and make systems better in the long run:




COVID-19 school closures will exacerbate the learning crisis, with potentially even worse long-run than short-run consequences

Learning levels in many developing countries were already low before the COVID-19 crisis: 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank). Over the last two decades, more children than ever have gained access to school, but overall learning levels among children in school have not kept pace and in many cases have fallen.

Several features of the learning crisis set the stage for COVID-19 school closures to severely impact long-term learning outcomes:

 **Learning profiles in developing countries are flat**, meaning that children acquire little new learning with each additional year in school. Many fail to master foundational skills early on and then struggle to keep up or catch up as the curriculum progresses (Belafi et al., 2020). Children who learn little during their usual schooling experience are unlikely to learn during school closures and, in fact, are likely to lose skills during the closure period. This will make catching up even more challenging.

 **Learning levels in developing country classrooms vary widely**. COVID-19 is likely to increase already wide heterogeneity within classrooms, as students experience varying degrees of progression and digression of their skills during their time out of school (Muralidharan, et al.; 2019; Andrabi et al., 2020).

 **The curriculum in many developing countries is overambitious**, setting out an agenda that teachers and students cannot effectively cover even in normal times (Beatty et al., 2012; Banerji, 2020b). This will make recovery more challenging as teachers must help students catch up to curricular expectations while also teaching a more diverse classroom (Cilliers, 2020).

Projections and empirical estimates of learning losses over summer holidays and due to natural disasters suggest that these factors will combine to produce COVID-19 learning loss in two ways:

- stagnation in learning while schools are closed
- children continuing to fall behind even after they return to school (Banerji, 2020b; Kaffenberger, 2020; Montoya, 2020)

Education systems must prioritise helping children catch up so that the learning losses experienced now during the COVID closures do not undermine learning for years to come, impacting later life outcomes including earnings, health, and empowerment (Kaffenberger et al., 2020; Andrabi et al., 2020; Vegas et al., 2020).

Make a system-wide commitment to prioritise foundational skills

Ensuring that children are safely able to return to school is vital (Carvalho et al., 2020). Once this is achieved, a system-wide commitment to prioritising foundational skills will be critical to ensuring that students get back on track after a long period away from school.

Foundational skills must be a priority. Even before COVID-19 school closures, the majority of children in developing countries did not master foundational literacy and numeracy (World Bank), which are critical to unlocking children's ability to access more complex content (Belafi et al., 2020). Children who fail to master foundational skills are the most vulnerable to long-term learning deficits. They are likely to fall farther and farther behind when schools reopen if the curriculum continues to progress at a pre-crisis level and pace.

Political and educational leaders should affirm that foundational skills are a priority, and articulate clear, achievable goals to reinforce this commitment. Education systems perform best when delegation is clear and consistent. When the priorities are made clear, education's various subsystems - curriculum, human resource, trainings, assessments and others - can more easily work together towards that goal, rather than advancing their own disparate approaches (Crouch, 2020). Similarly, clear delegation also allows frontline providers like school leaders and teachers to adapt to the challenges they face in ways that deliver on those priorities.

Assess children's learning levels when schools reopen

When children return to school, learning levels among children in the same class are likely to vary considerably and be lower than expected for their grade level. Students will have had differential levels of access to remote learning and parental support during time away from school (Andrabi et al., 2020; Crawford, 2020; Tiruneh, 2020). In order to get students back on track, teachers must know the learning levels of the students in their classrooms. Teachers will need resources to conduct diagnostic assessments and support, from within their school and from education authorities, to process this information and use it to adapt their classroom practice to children's learning levels.

Education systems and teachers should prioritise using assessments to understand where children stand in foundational literacy and numeracy. The approach should take advantage of high-quality assessments already in use. For example, instruments used by citizen-led assessment organisations can be adapted for use in the classroom (PAL, 2020; Banerji, 2020a; Beatty et al., 2020; Verma, 2020). In cases where diagnostic tools are not available, an abbreviated version of summative assessments from the previous year could be adapted for this purpose (Beatty et al., 2020). Once an initial assessment has been conducted, it can be repeated periodically to help children consolidate their learning and to enable teachers to monitor progress, tailor instruction, and offer further remediation when needed (Hwa et al., forthcoming).

Adapt instruction to meet children where they are

As schools reopen, teachers should focus on helping students progress in foundational literacy and numeracy rather than on moving through the standard curriculum, and progress should be measured in terms of student improvement from baseline rather than against a curriculum standard (Beatty et al., 2020).

To achieve this, teachers will need not only information on students' learning levels, but also the authorisation, resources, and capability to align teaching to be coherent with students' growth needs, and the support to put new practices into action. The approaches to adapting instruction can vary and should be aligned with the existing system. For example, school leaders could decide to devote an hour each day to review basic literacy and numeracy respectively (Banerji, 2020a), or existing toolkits and targeted instruction programmes can be adapted to be implemented in classroom settings (Beatty et al., 2020; Cilliers, 2020). Adequate resources, toolkits, and rapid training – some of which can be delivered remotely – should all be a part of the strategy. With clear goals and adequate support, teachers can be empowered to choose the practices that will work for their classroom.

To ensure children's future start planning today

Some of the COVID-19 pandemic's farthest-reaching effects are likely to be felt in the later-life outcomes of today's young children. Education systems have a critical role to play in mitigating these effects. By prioritising foundational skills, determining children's needs when schools reopen, and adapting to meet children where they are, we can both blunt the worst effects of this crisis on learning and strengthen systems for the future. Planning for this brighter future must start now.

Footnotes

¹ Decisions on when to reopen schools and what safety precautions to take when doing so are complex and should be made with the safety of all those involved in mind. This note describes teaching and learning considerations that education systems should plan for now and implement upon reopening, whenever it is safe to do so.

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