

# Descriptive Learning Trajectories and Policy Simulations Using MICS6 Data

# **Michelle Kaffenberger and Jason Silberstein**

# Abstract

In recent years, scholars associated with the RISE Programme have analysed learning trajectories using a variety of global datasets to shed light on the global learning crisis and diagnose what might help address it (Crouch, Kaffenberger, and Savage, 2021). For those who may want to build and analyse learning trajectories, this note acts as a methodological guide for doing so using an important new dataset on foundational learning, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys Round 6 (MICS6). We have applied the methods described in this note and, in partnership with the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR), developed a tool to showcase the results. The resulting "Learning Trajectories" webpage serves as an interactive introduction to learning trajectories and related policy simulations, and features a flexible data explorer for those who want to conveniently build, analyse, and apply learning trajectories and policy simulations to their own work and context.



#### **Descriptive Learning Trajectories and Policy Simulations Using MICS6 Data**

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# 1. Introduction

Learning trajectories show the dynamics of children's learning as they progress through school. They are typically visualized as line graphs which show the relationship between a measure of learning and grade attainment or age.

Representing and analyzing learning as a trajectory offers a few key advantages in comparison to the more familiar focus on learning as an outcome (Kaffenberger, 2019). First, since trajectories show how learning evolves across multiple grades or ages, they can shed light on the process of learning. This is in contrast to many national or international assessments which only measure learning for a single age or grade, and therefore can only offer at snapshot of the education system for a single point in time. Second, learning trajectories typically include early grades or ages, providing insight on the first years of schooling when many children begin to fall behind the assumed curricular pace (Belafi et al. 2020; Muralidharan and Singh 2021). Again, this contrasts with assessments of cumulative learning outcomes that occur relatively late in the schooling cycle, especially at the end of primary or secondary school. Finally, learning trajectories typically analyze the progress of the full cohort of in-school and out-of-school children, while other assessments administered during the school day may only be representative of the portion of the cohort that is currently attending school.

In recent years, scholars associated with the RISE Programme have analyzed learning trajectories using a variety of global datasets to shed light on the global learning crisis and diagnose what might help address it (Kaffenberger, Savage and Crouch, 2021).<sup>1</sup> For those who may want to build and analyze learning trajectories, this note acts as an methodological guide for doing so using an important new dataset on foundational learning, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys Round 6 (MICS6). We have applied the methods described in this note and, in partnership with the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR), developed a tool to showcase the results. The resulting <u>"Learning Trajectories</u>" webpage<sup>2</sup> serves as an interactive introduction to learning trajectories and related policy simulations, and features a flexible data explorer for those who want to conveniently build, analyze, and apply learning trajectories and policy simulations to their own work and context.

Section 2 below discusses the MICS6 data structure, and the way the dataset measures foundational reading and numeracy skills. Section 3 describes the methods used to construct the MICS6 learning trajectories and run a number of policy simulations built on learning trajectories. The methods described apply and adapt methods from Pritchett and Sandefur (2020), Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2020), and Akmal and Pritchett (2021) whom we acknowledge at the top rather than citing throughout. The Stata code to create the learning trajectories and policy simulations described below using the publicly available MICS6 data is available from the authors upon request.<sup>3</sup>

# 2. <u>Data</u>

# 2.a. Dataset

This methods note details the data and methods used to analyze learning trajectories and policy simulations based on MICS6 data. MICS are international household surveys that have been implemented by UNICEF in partnership with national governments since 1995. In the survey's 6<sup>th</sup> and most recent round, a module was added directly measuring children's foundational reading and numeracy skills, making MICS6 one of the largest internationally comparable sources of data on foundational learning. MICS sampling is nationally representative<sup>4</sup>, and the learning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The wider literature often refers to learning trajectories as learning profiles. The two terms are synonymous.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://www.education-progress.org/en/articles/learning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Write to jason.silberstein@bsg.ox.ac.uk

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The one exception to this is the MICS6 data from Pakistan, which have been released on a province-by-province basis. A national dataset was constructed for Pakistan by taking a weighted average of the 3 available provincial datasets (Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh) based on each province's share of the national population as reported in the <u>2017 census</u> (with FATA's population added to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since the MICS6 survey was administered in 2019 following the provinces' merger). When combined, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh account for over 93 percent of the national population in the census.

assessments are representative of children ages 7 to 14 in each country. Data for 31 countries, including 23 low or lower-middle income countries, are currently in the public domain (Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

Country	Income group	Years of survey	Children assessed (weighted total)	
Bangladesh	Lower-middle income	2019	38332	
Belarus	Upper-middle income	2019	2310	
CAR	Low income	2018-19	9437	
Chad	Low income	2019	28140	
DRC	Low income	2017-18	22169	
Ghana	Lower-middle income	2017-18	13741	
Guinea-Bissau	Low income	2018-19	10419	
Kiribati	Lower-middle income	2018-19	3268	
Kyrgyzstan	Lower-middle income	2018	4645	
Lesotho	Lower-middle income	2018	5416	
Madagascar	Low income	2018	15552	
Malawi	Low income	2019-20	24908	
Mongolia	Lower-middle income	2018	7582	
Nepal	Lower-middle income	2019	8862	
North Macedonia	Upper-middle income	2018-19	1275	
Pakistan	Lower-middle income	2017-19	108685	
Palestine	Lower-middle income	2019-20	8469	
Samoa	Lower-middle income	2019-20	3727	
Sao Tome & Principe	Lower-middle income	2019	2874	
Sierra Leone	Low income	2017	15227	
Suriname	Upper-middle income	2018	3891	
Thailand	Upper-middle income	2019	13109	
The Gambia	Low income	2018	12813	
Togo	Low income	2017	7451	
Tonga	Upper-middle income	2019	2462	
Tunisia	Lower-middle income	2018	5510	
Turkmenistan	Upper-middle income	2019	4856	
Turks and Caicos Islands	High income	2019-20	385	
Tuvalu	Upper-middle income	2019-20	550	
Vietnam	Lower-middle income	2020-21	5836	
Zimbabwe	Lower-middle income	2019	9288	
TOTAL			401189	

Table 1. Countries with available MICS6 data on foundational learning

The MICS6 surveys are well suited for analyzing learning trajectories. Because MICS6 assesses children, this data can be used to analyze contemporaneous cross section learning trajectories, or learning trajectories that reflect the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The MICS6 raw survey data and reports are available <u>here</u>. Country income classification follows the World Bank's 2023 FY lending groups accessed <u>here</u>.

current learning levels and progressions in the education systems (Kaffenberger, 2019).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, because the surveys assess children beginning at age seven, they provide data on learning in the early primary school grades, which are often not covered in more traditional sources of learning data.

Another advantage of MICS6 for analyzing learning trajectories is that, because they are household-based surveys, they sample the full cohort of in-school and out-of-school children. The data can therefore be used to construct both grade-based trajectories (which sort children by highest grade attended, whether the children are still in school or have dropped out) as well as age-based learning trajectories (which include all children whether they are in school, have dropped out, or never attended school).

# 2.b. Measure of learning

The MICS6 learning assessment is designed to measure foundational reading and numeracy skills, or skills generally expected to be achieved by grade 2 or 3. To pass the MICS6 reading assessment, a child had to correctly read aloud 90 percent of the words in an approximately 70-word story and correctly answer five simple questions about it. To pass the MICS6 numeracy assessment, a child had to correctly answer all 21 questions covering 4 domains: reading numbers aloud (1 to 3 digits); determining which of two numbers is larger (1 to 3 digits); simple addition (1 to 2 digits); and completing simple number sequences (i.e. 2, 4, 6, \_\_). All children aged 7 to 14 were given the same assessment. More detail on these standards and thresholds are available in UNICEF (2020), and example survey instruments for the reading and numeracy assessments used in Vietnam are available in Appendix 1 in English (General Statistics Office and UNICEF, 2021).

Whether the MICS6 foundational skills assessment represents a low or high bar is an important question for interpreting resulting learning trajectories. The assessment is relatively stringent in that it requires children to get all questions on the assessment correct in order to pass. However, the skills tested are foundational skills that are typically at the Grade 2-3 level, and children of all ages and grades took the same assessment. Passing the assessment therefore does not reflect mastery of grade-level-appropriate material. Rather, it reflects mastery of foundational skills that are considered prerequisite for learning in later grades.

# 3. <u>Methods</u>

# 3.a. Descriptive learning trajectories

Learning trajectories are descriptive statistics that can be calculated by grade and by age. With MICS6 data, learning trajectories by grade show the share of children with a particular grade attainment who have passed the MICS6 reading or numeracy assessment. Children are grouped by their highest grade attained, regardless of whether they were still in school at the time of the survey or had previously dropped-out (and attended that grade in the past).

Learning trajectories by age show the share of children of a particular age or group of ages who have passed the reading or numeracy assessment. Each age or group of ages includes all children, whether they were in-school at the time of the survey, had dropped out, or had never attended school. Since out-of-school children tend to have lower learning achievement than their in-school peers of the same age, trajectories by age are almost always lower than those by grade.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> This is in contrast to household surveys which assess foundational skills among adults, providing a retrospective understanding of education quality.

#### 3.b. Simulations

Multiple policy simulations can be analyzed based on learning trajectories. The simulations all derive from a simple identity which shows that learning depends on grade attainment and learning per grade. This is represented mathematically:

% with Foundational Skills<sub>A</sub> = 
$$\sum_{g=0}^{g} (\alpha_{A,g}) * (s_{A,g})$$
 (1)

where A is an age cohort;  $\alpha_{A,g}$  is the share of the age cohort with highest grade attained g; and  $s_{A,g}$  is the share of the age cohort with highest grade attained g that passed the foundational skills test (in reading or numeracy).

This leads to two intuitive conclusions. First, the impact on learning of increasing children's grade attainment will depend on the rate of learning per grade. Many children currently complete many grades of school but learn little in each grade, and leave school having learned little overall. Second, the impact on learning of increasing children's rate of learning per grade will depend on how many grades children complete. Learning is a process that happens over time, and needs to accumulate over multiple grades to lead to high overall learning outcomes.

The simulations are run by substituting the grade attainment parameter, learning per grade parameter, or both parameters at once for a counterfactual population of interest. Because the simulations depend on descriptive data, they are best thought of as reasonable, empirically-informed simulations of what could happen, not as causal estimates of what would happen.

# 3.b.i. Access simulation

The first simulation estimates what might happen if all children who never went to school or dropped out had instead attained the same grade and associated learning level as the average child their age who is in school. This simulates the potential learning gains from a policy focused on increasing school access and grade attainment. The simulation is described by Equation 2:

Simulated % with Foundational Skills<sub>A</sub> = 
$$\sum_{g=0}^{g} (\alpha_{In-school,A,g}) * (s_{In-school,A,g})$$
 (2)

where A is an age cohort;  $\alpha_{In-school,A,g}$  is the share of in-school children of age A with highest grade attained g; and  $s_{In-school,A,g}$  is the share of in-school children of age A with highest grade attained g that passed the foundational skills test (in reading or numeracy).

These simulations of increased schooling access will tend to overestimate the actual likely learning gains from such a policy, for two primary reasons. The first is that they assume children who have dropped out or never attended school would, if in school, achieve the same learning as children who stayed in school. Because lower performers are more likely to drop out, it is likely the children who enter school under such a policy would be on a shallower learning trajectory (if there are not accompanying improvements to the instructional process). Second, the simulation assumes that education systems would be able to expand while maintaining constant quality, which may not be feasible.

# 3.b.ii. Learning simulation

The second simulation estimates what might happen if all children from country X maintained their current grade attainment, but had the rate of learning per grade of a higher-performing country Y. To simulate this, the grade attainment parameter is the same as in Equation 1, but the learning per grade parameter is adjusted, as in Equation 3:

Simulated % with Foundational Skills<sub>X,A</sub> = 
$$\sum_{g=0}^{g} (\alpha_{X,A,g} * s_{Y,g})$$
 (3)

where X,A is an age cohort from country X;  $\alpha_{X,A,g}$  is the share of the age cohort in country X with highest grade attained g; and  $s_{Y,g}$  is the share of children in country Y with highest grade attained g that passed the foundational skills test.

Note that parameter s no longer varies with the age cohort. Instead, the learning per grade parameter depends on the share of children with each grade attainment in the higher-performing country that passed the reading or numeracy test, regardless of their age.<sup>7</sup>

# 3.b.iii. Equality simulations

A third scenario, simulating policies that prioritized "equal access", considers how learning levels would change for the poor in a particular country if they had the grade attainment of the rich in that country but maintained their current rate of learning per grade. This is simulating a policy scenario prioritizing expanding schooling attainment for the poor without regard for the learning achieved per grade. The poor are defined as children from families in the lowest wealth quintile, while the rich are defined as children from families in the highest wealth quintile (here and throughout). To simulate this, we multiply the grade attainment parameter of the rich with the learning per grade parameter of poor:

Simulated % with Foundational Skills<sub>Poor,A</sub> = 
$$\sum_{g=0}^{g} (\alpha_{Rich,A,g} * s_{Poor,g})$$
 (4)

where Poor, A is an age cohort of children from poor families;  $\alpha_{Rich,A,g}$  is the share of the same age cohort of children from rich families with highest grade attained g; and  $s_{Poor,g}$  is the share of children from poor families with highest grade attained g that passed the foundational skills test. As in Section 3.b.ii., the learning per grade parameter does not vary with the age cohort.

A fourth scenario, simulating policies that prioritized "equal learning", asks the inverse question: how would learning levels change for the poor in a particular country if they maintained their current grade attainment but had the rate of learning per grade of the rich in the same country? To simulate this, we multiply the grade attainment parameter of the poor with the learning per grade parameter of rich:

Simulated % with Foundational Skills<sub>Poor,A</sub> = 
$$\sum_{g=0}^{g} (\alpha_{Poor,A,g} * s_{Rich,g})$$
 (5)

where Poor, A is an age cohort of children from poor families;  $\alpha_{Poor,A,g}$  is the share of the age cohort of children from poor families with highest grade attained g; and  $s_{Rich,g}$  is the share of children from rich families with highest grade attained g that passed the foundational skills test. Again, as in Section 3.b.ii., the learning per grade parameter does not vary with the age cohort.

Variations of the equal access and equal learning simulations are also run for other dimensions of inequality, including gender and geography. The gender equality simulations follow the same formulas as equations (4) and (5), but substitute "girls" for "poor", and "boys" for "rich". The geographic equality simulations also follow equations (4) and (5), but substitute "rural" for "poor", and "urban" for "rich".

# 3.c. Sample considerations

Two data cleaning protocols were implemented to address groupings that resulted in small sample sizes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> This is to accommodate a particular feature of the data, which is that in higher-performing countries children are mostly in the appropriate grade-for-age, whereas this is not true in lower-performing countries. At the extremes: there are no 14-year-olds in Grade 1 in high-performing countries, so there is no counterfactual learning-per-grade parameter available in the data to assign to the many 14-year-olds in Grade 1 in lower-performing countries.

First, all learning averages based on 25 unweighted observations or fewer were dropped to ameliorate potential noise due to sampling. Where learning averages were dropped following this rule for the group of children who had never attended any primary school (their highest grade attained was less than Grade 1), then average learning levels of zero were imputed for this group.<sup>8</sup>

Second, simulation results were dropped for specific groups when there were inadequate samples to meaningfully run them. Consider, for example, the equal access simulations, which involve multiplying the grade attainment profiles of the rich for each age cohort with the average learning per grade of the poor (equation 4 above). For higher age cohorts, substantial shares of rich children have progressed to the later grades of secondary school. However, in many countries, there were only small samples of poor children (less than 25 unweighted observations) in these later grades, making it difficult to confidently calculate the counterfactual parameter of average learning per grade of the poor. Analogous problems were present for the learning simulations (equation 3) and equal learning simulations (equation 5). When a counterfactual learning per grade value could not be calculated due to small sample sizes for more than 5 percent of an age cohort in a given country, the simulation results for that age cohort were dropped. This is why some of the simulation results are not reported for particular ages, but available for others, and why there are more unreported values for simulations which require relatively greater subdivision of the data (i.e. into wealth quintiles).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This follows the logic of other international efforts to measure learning such as the World Bank's metric of learning poverty, which assumes that all out-of-school children are experiencing learning poverty.

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#### Appendix 1 – Example MICS6 Foundational Skills Survey Instrument

# Reading

The MICS6 reading assessment tests the three skills in Figure A.1. (UNICEF, 2020).

Figure A.1. Reading assessment skills



Figures A.2. and A.3. show the questions from the survey instrument used in Vietnam that correspond with each of the three assessed reading skills (presented here in English but administered in Vietnamese). While survey instruments were extremely similar across countries, they were also lightly customized at the national level (i.e. the number of words in the story was approximately 70 words, but varied in length across languages). These excerpts from the Vietnamese MICS6 survey instrument are from the appendices of General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2021) pages 690-693.

Figure A.2. Read 90% of words accurately

FL19. Turn the page to reveal the reading	Manh	is	in	class	two.	One	day,
passage.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Thank you. Now I want you to try this.	Manh	was	going	home	from	school.	He
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Here is a story. I want you to read it aloud as carefully as you can.	saw	some	red	flowers	on	the	way.
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
You will start here (point to the first word on the	The	flowers	were	near	а	tomato	farm.
<i>first line)</i> and you will read line by line ( <i>point</i> to the direction for reading each line).	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	Manh	wanted	to	get	some	flowers	for
When you finish I will ask you some questions about what you have read.	29	30	31	32	33	34	35
	his	mother.	Manh	ran	fast	across	the
If you come to a word you do not know, go onto the next word.	36	37	38	39	40	41	42
	farm	to	get	the	flowers.	He	fell
Put your finger on the first word. Ready? Begin.	43	44	45	46	47	48	49
	down	near	а	banana	tree.	Manh	started
	50	51	52	53	54	55	56
	crying.	The	farmer	saw	him	and	came.
	57	58	59	60	61	62	63
	He	gave	Manh	many	flowers.	Moses	was
	64	65	66	67	68	69	70
	very	happy.					
	71	72					

FL22.	Now I am going to ask you a few questions about you have read.	
If the secon to pro 'No r move	child does not provide a response after a few ads, repeat the question. If the child seems unable povide an answer after repeating the question, mark response' and say: Thank you. That is ok. We will e on.	
Make	e sure the child can still see the passage and ask:	
[A]	What class is Manh in?	CORRECT ((MANH IS) IN CLASS TWO)1 INCORRECT
[B]	What did Mạnh see on the way home?	CORRECT (HE SAW SOME FLOWERS)1 INCORRECT
[C]	Why did Mạnh start crying?	CORRECT (BECAUSE HE FELL)
[D]	Where did Mạnh fall (down)?	CORRECT ((MANH FELL DOWN) NEAR A BANANA TREE)
[E]	Why was Mạnh happy?	CORRECT (BECAUSE THE FARMER GAVE HIM MANY FLOWERS / BECAUSE HE HAD FLOWERS TO GIVE TO HIS MOTHER)1 INCORRECT

# Numeracy

The MICS6 numeracy assessment tests the four skills in Figure A.4. (UNICEF, 2020).





Figures A.5. – A.8. show the questions from the survey instrument used in Vietnam (presented here in English but administered in Vietnamese). These are also from General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2021) pages 690-693.

Table A.5. Read numbers aloud

FL23. Turn the page in the READING & NUMBERS	9
BOOK so the child is looking at the list of numbers.	CORRECT1
Make sure the child is looking at this page.	INCORRECT
Now here are some numbers. I want you to point to	NO ATTEMPT
each number and tell me what the number is.	12
	CORRECT1
Point to the first number and say:	INCORRECT2
Start here.	NO ATTEMPT
	30
If the child stops on a number for a while, tell the child	CORRECT1
what the number is, mark the number as 'No Attempt',	INCORRECT2
point to the next number and say:	NO ATTEMPT
What is this number?	48
	CORRECT1
If the child does not attempt to read 2 consecutive	INCORRECT2
numbers, say:	NO ATTEMPT
Thank you. That is ok.	74
	CORRECT1
	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT
	731
	CORRECT1
	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT

FL24. Turn the page so the child is looking at the first	7&5
pair of numbers. Make sure the child is looking at this	CORRECT (7)1
page. Say:	INCORRECT
Look at these numbers. Tell me which one is bigger.	NO ATTEMPT3
	11 & 24
Record the child's answer before turning the page in	CORRECT (24)1
the book and repeating the question for the next pair of	INCORRECT
numbers.	NO ATTEMPT
	58 & 49
If the child does not provide a response after a few	CORRECT (58)1
seconds, repeat the question. If the child seems unable	INCORRECT
to provide an answer after repeating the question,	NO ATTEMPT3
record '3', no attempt, for the appropriate pair of	65 & 67
numbers, turn the booklet page and show the child the	CORRECT (67)1
next pair of numbers.	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT
If the child does not attempt 2 consecutive pairs, record	146 & 154
'3', no attempt, for remaining pairs and say:	CORRECT (154)1
Thank you. That is ok. We will go to the next activity.	INCORRECT
	NO ATTEMPT3

Table A.7. Calculate simple addition questions

FL25. Give the child a pencil and paper. Turn the page	3 + 2
so the child is looking at the first addition. Make sure	CORRECT (5)1
the child is looking at this page. Say:	INCORRECT2
Look at this sum. How much is (number plus	NO ATTEMPT3
number)? Tell me the answer. You can use the pencil	8+6
and paper if it helps you.	CORRECT (14)1
	INCORRECT
Record the child's answer before turning the page in	NO ATTEMPT
the book and repeating the question for the next sum.	7 + 3
	CORRECT (10)1
If the child does not provide a response after a few	INCORRECT
seconds, repeat the question. If the child seems unable	NO ATTEMPT
to provide an answer after repeating the question,	13 + 6
record '3', no attempt, for the appropriate sum, turn	CORRECT (19)1
the booklet page and show the child the next addition.	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT
If the child does not attempt 2 consecutive sums, record	12 + 24
'3', no attempt, for remaining sums and say:	CORRECT (36)1
Thank you. That is ok. We will go to the next activity.	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT

Table A.8. Recognize patterns in a sequence

FL27. Now I want you to try this on your own.	5, 6, 7,
	CORRECT (8)1
Here are some more numbers. Tell me what number	INCORRECT2
goes here (pointing to the missing number).	NO ATTEMPT
	14, 15,, 17
Record the child's answer before turning the page in	CORRECT (16)1
the book and repeating the question.	INCORRECT2
	NO ATTEMPT
If the child does not provide a response after a few	20,, 40, 50
seconds, repeat the question. If the child seems unable	CORRECT (30)1
to provide an answer after repeating the question,	INCORRECT2
record '3', no attempt, for the appropriate question,	NO ATTEMPT
turn the page and show the child the next question.	2, 4, 6,
	CORRECT (8)1
If the child does not attempt 2 consecutive patterns,	INCORRECT2
record '3', no attempt, for remaining patterns and say:	NO ATTEMPT
Thank you. That is ok.	5, 8, 11,
	CORRECT (14)1
	INCORRECT
	NO ATTEMPT