Back to Commentary and Analysis

Equity-Focused Approaches to Learning Loss during COVID-19

APRIL 16, 2020

Karen Mundy and **Susannah Hares**

Follow   f   🐦   in   ✉

With an estimated 91.3 percent or 1.57 billion students out of school worldwide, ministers of education executing their plans for school during disruptions related to COVID-19. Under the banner of learning continuity, many countries have slowly begun to use existing platforms, tools, and technologies for so form of interim learning by distance.

RELATED CONTENT

Managing Education Systems During COVID-19: An Open Letter to A Minister of Education

----

School's Out: Now What?

But even in the best-resourced and highest-performing education systems, most COVID responses in education will end up by privile better-off children. Students from households with greater levels connectivity, higher levels of parental education, greater availabili parental time for engagement, and in-home availability of books a materials have much better ability to access and benefit from dist learning. These advantages are further reinforced by the fact that learning platforms are typically more developed for secondary an higher education than at the primary level. International organiza have also emphasized COVID education responses that rely on technology. In developing countries, where far fewer children have access to secondary education, and where learning opportunities are heavily defined by quality educa the early years, COVID presents an especially stark equity challenge.

In this blog, we draw from a wide range of evidence about interventions that hold promise as equity-focused approaches to learning continuity. Our main message is that emergency measures which rely on technology are unlikely to offer an adequate response for learning continuity for children who sit a what Wagner describes as "the bottom of the learning pyramid." And no country can improve overall learning outcomes without tackling the "tail" of its learning distribution—the children who are most l behind by current policies.

Thus, while we discuss how ministries can "layer" an effective set of enabling responses for learning continuity during COVID school closures, emergency interventions are likely to make modest contribu to learning continuity—their primary role may be to keep children engaged in their education. We the

urge ministries of education to start planning now to implement targeted measures to ensure childre the poorest households can catch up when schools reopen, using the mounting evidence on accelerat learning.

1. What do we know about equity challenges in learning continuity?

Evidence in recent years has highlighted how gaps in schooling lead to loss of learning, providing an important caution for educators. Estimates vary by context, but the impact of school closure is stark. F example, in the United States, where children enjoy summer breaks of 8-10 weeks, summer learning l has been estimated at between 10-25 percent of yearly learning, with children from poorer househol disproportionately affected. Studies in low-income settings show that gaps in schooling lead to drop critical transitions between educational levels, and can lower the progression of the most disadvant children through the school system. Further, as research from Argentina and Rwanda has shown, scho closures at primary level can have harsh cumulative effects, lowering chances of secondary completio reducing labor market earnings of affected children many years later. A new analysis by the World Bar offers starkly different scenario for learning loss during COVID.

Connectivity cannot be counted on to solve learning loss for children at the bottom of the pyramid. M governments have turned to online learning as a handy and effective way to staunch learning loss. Ho several sobering reviews show just how limited connectivity for students is around the world. For exa in their excellent planning resource on COVID-19, Harvard and the Organisation for Economic Co-ope and Development (OECD) show that while in many OECD countries children from advantaged schools access to computers, in many other countries, including Turkey, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, Peru Indonesia, 50 percent or fewer children from disadvantaged schools have a computer at home. Access internet is even more severely limited in many developing countries—for example, Young Lives data s that in Ethiopia four of five rural children have never used the internet. Access to other forms of connectivity are also profoundly unequal, especially in South Asia and Africa. For example, in sub-Sah Africa, while three quarters of the population have a cell phone, most use pay as you go SIM cards an change service providers and numbers. In some states in India, only half of all schools have working electricity, and there are stark differences in access to cell phones and the internet between girls and Fewer than 40 percent of all households in low- and lower-middle-income countries own radios or televisions.

Perhaps for these reasons, education leaders surveyed in 75 countries report that availability of technological infrastructure is the most challenging issue in the implementation of their COVID respo Even among rich countries—like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom—the absence of connectivity has slowed down the shift to distance learning during COVID-19 and continues to be a m challenge. In short: relying on connectivity for distance learning is not a panacea during school closu indeed technologically mediated distance learning is likely to increase inequality in learning continui

2. Remote learning opportunities for children without connectivity

Given that inequality in connectivity is only going to heighten the gaps between rich and poor as we distance learning, what can governments do? A wide range of options exist. Almost all require govern take a pro-poor approach that layers five reinforcing opportunities for learning:

I. Simplify curricula and modify learning goals

To reach children at the bottom of the pyramid, governments could start with simplified curricula targ areas where learning loss will be most consequential for learning progression in the coming school y Focused strategies that ensure continuity in early grade literacy and numeracy during the COVID crisi

urgently needed. For higher grades, governments could prioritize learning continuity for children mos
risk of dropping out, such as cohorts transitioning from primary to lower secondary school, by includir
strategies to keep vulnerable populations engaged and excited about learning.

II. Make learning materials available

Even during a pandemic, school systems should be able to work with partners to safely deliver or allo
families to pick up a basic package of learning materials, including books and writing materials (for
example, from food distribution locations). The impact that learning materials can have on learning
continuity during periods of school closure are well researched. For example, a US-based intervention
mailed 10 books to students over the summer matched to students reading interests, accompanied by
or text messages to parents, promoted more than one month of gains in reading skills.

Governments may be able to fund these materials using supplemental grants to schools and by drawi
resources and support from development partners to purchase materials for the poorest households.
Governments could leverage other COVID-related social services—for example, emergency food distril
channels or health service programs—by using volunteers (with social distancing), or other means.
Education can learn much from foodbanks and other health emergency distribution chains about how
safely ensure such deliveries.

III. Use radio, television, and SMS to amplify learning

There is evidence to suggest that across the learning continuum from kindergarten to secondary scho
radio provides a low-tech and effective intervention that can mitigate learning loss when it is combin
with outreach from teachers, provision of learning materials, and interactive content—including in
emergency settings, such as Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis. Many countries already have radio-b
programs upon which to build. Where individual households lack radios, it may be possible to provide
cost devices or to use speakers to broadcast short lessons in communities. A number of experimental
programs suggest that SMS messaging or simple phone calls may also be used to provide simple lear
activities and nudges to students to help maintain engagement in learning, though they can in no wa
replace a formal curricula.

Such low-tech solutions are likely to be most effectives when they are combined with the other
interventions described in this blog: opportunities for interactive engagement (including with family
members), outreach from teachers, and access to learning materials.

IV. Make use of family engagement, an under-utilized resource

Parental and sibling support during COVID-19 are an especially important layer in efforts to bridge g:
learning continuity within poor households during emergencies. Yet the importance of family engager
in enhancing learning is an area often overlooked in mainstream planning of education systems—whe
role for parents and communities is also limited to raising resources or participating in governance ai
accountability.

A growing body of research shows significant effects of parents and siblings on childhood learning, by
supplementing and reinforcing the traditional 2–4 hours of focused learning within schools. Furtherr
evidence from recently evaluated programs, such as Save the Children's Literacy Boost and other fami
based literacy interventions, show that even in the poorest households and households with limited l
parental and sibling engagement and support can add significantly to learning outcomes using very s
methods. Those methods can take the form of creating dedicated time for children to learn, teaching
parents to engage children in talk and answering questions, or creating simple counting and languag
activities as part of daily household routines. "Child-to-child" approaches, and peer and collaborative

learning—where older siblings or cousins support learning for younger students—can be safe and eff
reinforcing skills. While a lack of parental education may further disadvantage poorer children, parent
engagement programs in developing countries have shown that even parents with limited literacy ca
much to enhance learning. COVID responses should build on these existing programs.

V. Encourage outreach and support from teachers, school leaders, and districts

The final layer in an integrated strategy for bridging learning loss for students from poorer househol
during COVID-19 involves structured support from teachers, school leaders, community leaders, and se
districts. As we learned in the health sector during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, enabling local prob
solving and supporting context-specific solutions is especially important during health emergencies.

These actors know much about the individualized needs of children in their care. They can do much to
ensure that families and students understand available learning opportunities and maintain motivati
engagement in learning. While many countries are already using social and other media as platforms
communicate their broad plans for learning under COVID, disadvantaged children will benefit
disproportionately from more personalized outreach from teachers and school leaders.

Leaders at the district level should have a fair understanding of the disadvantages and barriers to
participation for children within their catchments, including from tools developed through the UIS/UI
Out of School Children initiative. During COVID closures, they have an important role to play in suppo
teachers and leaders to find context-specific solutions, which may range from "drive-by loudspeaker
announcements" to SMS messages, phone calls, or even household visits (respecting social distance).

3. Recovery: planning for learning recovery when schools reopen

The options suggested above focus primarily on actions governments can take during periods of scho
closures. However, even in well-resourced education systems, it is unlikely that this combination of
interventions will be able to fully mitigate against learning loss, especially for the most disadvantage
households. For this reason, governments should be planning interventions now that ensure that
disadvantaged children can return to school *and* catch up with their peers when schools reopen.

Strong evidence from around the world suggests that summer and afterschool learning programs, inc
those that utilize trained teachers or volunteers, structured pedagogy, enrichment experiences, ability
grouping. and high levels of teacher-student engagement, can generate significant learning gains for
disadvantaged populations. Accelerated learning programs and other kinds of intensive "learning cam
targeted to the most disadvantaged children have been shown to be effective in many developing cou
contexts, both for bridging periods of learning loss and pathways for successful re-entry of out of sch
children. Other interventions, such as afterschool tutoring and peer-to-peer coaching, also hold promi

Now is the time to plan for these programs, so that teachers, school leaders and volunteers can be pre
and outreach to parents can be launched before schools are abruptly reopened. Teachers and commu
volunteers, who are more likely to have online access, can be trained and coached virtually on acceler
learning. Relevant curricula and materials for accelerated learning can be designed. District and scho
leaders can identify disadvantaged groups and tailor approaches to specific contexts; and parents car
informed and engaged. Priority should be given to the most vulnerable in two age groups: children at
primary level, where learning loss can most limit educational progress; and adolescents transitioning
primary to secondary education, where the poorest are most at risk of dropping out.

*Karen Mundy was the primary author of this post. This blog has benefited from inputs from Kerrie Proulx, A
Dowd, Ben Piper, Scott Davies, Janice Aurini, Sheena Bell, Laura Moscoviz, Minahil Asim, and staff at Room
Read.*

RELATED TOPICS:

Equality of Opportunity and SDG4, Coronavirus Preparedness & Response, School Closures and Education Systems

DISCLAIMER

CGD blog posts reflect the views of the authors, drawing on prior research and experience in their area of expertise. CGD is a nonpartisan, independent organization and does not take institutional positions.

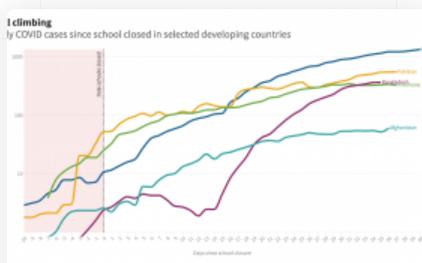*Photo credit for social media:* *Photo by Dominic Chavez / World Bank*

Related Posts
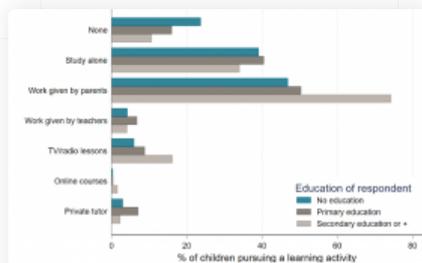
APRIL 24, 2020

BLOG POST

Five Findings from a New Phone Survey in Senegal

Alexis Le Nestour and Laura Moscoviz

APRIL 23, 2020

BLOG POST

When Should Schools Reopen?

Lee Crawford et al.

APRIL 21, 2020

BLOG POST

How Are International Donors Responding to Education…

Shelby Carvalho, Susannah Hares and Karen Mundy

APRIL 8, 2020

BLOG POST

**A New Surv
School Clos**

Megan O'Donn
Susannah Hare

Comments

1 Comment   **Center For Global Development**   🔒 **Disqus' Privacy Policy**

♡ **Recommend**   🐦 **Tweet**   f **Share**

| Join the discussion… |

LOG IN WITH   **OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS** ?

| Name |

Stefan Nippes • 6 days ago

Dear Authors, you were intending to link this statement to a source: "disadvantaged children will benefit disproportionately from more perso teachers and school leaders" - but the link is not there. What study are you referring to?

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

✉ Subscribe   Ⓓ Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd   ⚠ Do Not Sell My Data