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Editorial

A year of missed opportunity: Post-Covid learning loss – A renewed call to action



The world is on the verge of a new human crisis. Following the covid-19 shutdown of schooling systems across the globe, there are shared concerns over rising schooling inequality and learning poverty. Although many are worried about millions of children not returning to classrooms when schools reopen (UNESCO, 2021), an even more serious concern relates to the loss of learning among those who continue in education (Donnelly and Patrinos, 2021; World Bank Group, 2020). In the Global North, research has confirmed unequal family responses to cope with learning discontinuity (Grewenig et al., 2021; James, 2021). In the Global South, the learning challenges have proved multi-dimensional and much harder to tackle, given the triple burden of schooling deprivation, learning inequality and learning poverty.¹

Most education systems have responded by creating some institutional provisions to ensure learning continuity during the pandemic. There has been an explosion of distance learning and technology-based programs for crisis-time education service delivery. However, many of these efforts have been either too little or simply ineffective (Asadullah and Bhattacharjee, 2022; Reimers et al., 2022). The consensus view is that, despite many promising innovations, learning shortfalls have persisted or even increased, three years into the pandemic. Children from poorest families and countries have fallen furthest behind (Moscoviz and Evans, 2022; Betthäuser et al., 2023). According to one estimate, learning poverty has increased by a third in low- and middle-income countries (World Bank et al., 2022a).

The pandemic has increased expectations from education authorities and society, requiring teachers to act as “health promoters” and schools to do more for socio-emotional development of learners (Colao et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2022; Kratzer et al., 2022). A lively debate emerged on the relative risks and benefits of in-person schooling and whether the health concerns outweigh the educational loss (Gurdasani et al., 2021). Governments in high income countries in the Global North reopened schools much earlier than most nations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, which opted for prolonged closure (Buonsenso et al., 2021; Gómez and Andrés Uzín P., 2022).

World leaders including the UN Secretary-General have therefore rightly warned of an “education catastrophe”.² Acknowledging the seriousness of the crisis, there have been “calls for action” by a global coalition of international development agencies,³ as well as new ways of thinking about and addressing longstanding issues (Brehm et al., 2021). A variety of proposals have been put forward such as long-term

reorientation of school curriculum, extended learning hours, introduction of large-scale remedial programs and online supplementary tutoring (Kaffenberger, 2021; Park, Gayares, Thoma and Tulivuori, 2022; Patrinos, 2022). Consolidating these suggestions, the five-point RAPID framework of the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO (World Bank et al., 2022b) provides a comprehensive guideline highlighting education policy priorities to avoid short- and medium-term disruptions during the “home-to-school” transition and reverse pre-covid trends in learning poverty. Other specific suggestions include developing resilient education systems in terms of better budgetary planning and the use of data (Lennox et al., 2021).

But the policy response has been at best weak and at worst, ignored. While 97% of the high-income and 75% of the low-income countries claim to track student literacy and numeracy following the pandemic (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2020), we can find no record of a school system which has established criteria for students to master prior to re-entry into normal classes. This is partly because many education systems were unable to gauge students’ knowledge and skills after the pandemic led to cancellation or postponement of national assessments (The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021) that would have enabled design of remedial measures to compensate for the learning loss (Reimers, 2022, p. 31). Earlier calls for action have fallen on deaf ears – most national educational systems and leaders have often opened classrooms without significant changes. This statement by the editors of the IJED is our response to the 3rd anniversary of Covid-19 global school closures.

The pattern of non-response is evident in countries with a sizable school-age population such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Uganda as well as school systems in some OECD countries. In the Philippines, which had one of the highest levels of pre-pandemic learning poverty (90.9% children aged 10 not able to read), the government kept schools closed for the longest period of time (UNICEF, UNESCO and World Bank, 2022; World Bank et al., 2022a).

After opening up their schools to the normal diversity of education objectives, few school systems have an emergency strategy to prepare students for effective re-entry. They’ve returned to “business as usual” operations without acknowledging that children have essentially suffered major ‘cognitive trauma’.

Ignoring calls for diagnosis has resulted in a missed opportunity to regain the lost momentum towards achieving global goals, including

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty>

² <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/un-secretary-general-warns-education-catastrophe-pointing-unesco-estimate-24-million-learners-risk-0>

³ For instance, see the statement by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE): https://docs.campaignforeducation.org/GCE_Call_to_action_long_PROTECT_EDUCATION_IN_EMERGENCIES_NOW_FINAL.pdf

SDG 4 of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. A candid admission is needed by educational authorities to recalibrate and make up for the learning losses before school reopening. Recognizing the failure to produce a coordinated global response for learning recovery is the necessary first step. Hence this renewed call to action.

The less-than-satisfactory and uncoordinated response could also be explained by weak state capacity and low levels of political responsibility. During the MDGs campaign, bureaucratic capacity to raise revenue and administer social programs proved critical for rapid progress in poverty reductions (Asadullah and Savoia, 2018).

A divide between rich and poor nations in the capacity of state authorities to prepare schools and children for a safe return to classrooms with necessary health provisions in place may have caused global disparities in delayed reopening. Demands for new infrastructure owing to the expanded role of schools may have created new challenges to fight “learning poverty”, a disease affecting schools systems at many levels of economic development. Given the “state capacity deficit”, many school systems struggled with low learning levels even before the pandemic.

On the other hand, in East Asian countries with strong state capacity such as Malaysia, high allocations to education in pandemic-time national budgets have not been enough to ensure learning continuity (Asadullah, 2023). Schools have reopened without learning diagnosis or an official assessment of learning loss. Equally, despite being the richest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa was unable to restore the education system to the pre-Covid setting, let alone address the post Covid challenges. This further worsened learning inequalities (Soudien et al., 2022).

Covid-19 has been rightly described as the worst education crisis in a century. Yet it is also a window of opportunity to rebuild and transform national education systems (World Bank Group, 2020). A necessary condition for achieving a global education reset is for national governments to break away from the past traditions and put in place the long-overlooked political and financial commitment needed to fight learning poverty. This is particularly germane for countries that have just launched or considering a new education policy (e.g. India and Bangladesh).

Beyond necessary budgetary allocations, there is an urgent need for a universal and coordinated policy response at the national level – even if late, governments should reprioritize system-wide short-term acceleration programs, prior to beginning the next academic calendar year. Such ‘catch up’ initiatives should be universal. Students would be focused on the main literacy and numeracy skills so that the gap is ‘reasonable’, defined locally, or perhaps within a standard deviation from the pre-Covid norm. Once the gap is brought into a reasonable realm, regular classes should commence. This could be relevant as a strategy at all student/age levels.

To tackle the concern over state capacity deficit, one strategy is to seek greater state-NGO partnership. For instance, Pratham’s ASER initiative has been critical for early diagnosis of learning gaps in India (Banerji, 2022), as have the reports of PREAL in Latin America and OECD for its member states.

We acknowledge that the renewed call for accelerating post-pandemic rebuilding efforts of education systems around the world comes during a paradigm shift in global development when many are also emphasizing multi-directional global learning (Oldekop et al., 2020). The innovation of “teaching-at-the-right-level” (TaRL) by Pratham India is a prominent Southern model. Therefore, another strategy is to intensify North-South institutional partnerships and seek greater leadership in knowledge sharing and partnerships for strategies and solutions to make up for learning losses. After all, this is also an opportunity to reevaluate and integrate other forms of learning - indigenous knowledge, outdoor education, place based education (Yeminiet al., 2023).

In sum, of the many needs in education, we editors of the International Journal of Educational Development believe that addressing this issue is the highest priority. The Covid learning loss is felt globally, in

school systems across the spectrum of economic development. There will be no return to the norm unless the cognitive damage from Covid isolation is rectified.

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