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POLICY BRIEF

Learning Recovery and addressing the learning crisis in the Asia Pacific

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education for approximately 1.2 billion students across the Asia-Pacific, and forced the closure of many schools, precipitating a transition towards remote learning, albeit with uneven access and quality (UNESCO, 2021; Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2022), and threatening to deepen the 'learning crisis' that already existed, particularly for the most vulnerable learners.

As education systems in the Asia-Pacific seek to recover the learning loss due to the pandemic and address the broader learning crisis, it is incumbent on governments to identify appropriate recovery strategies in the short term. Also, governments need to support education system transformation so that all learners reach minimum proficiency in numeracy and literacy and acquire competencies needed to fulfil their potential – personal, social and economic. Learning recovery strategies will differ across the region, not the least because schools were fully or partially closed[1] for different lengths of time - for example, India (82 weeks), Indonesia (77 weeks), and Bangladesh (73 weeks). Other countries saw shorter closures, such as: Vanuatu (4 weeks), Papua New Guinea (6 weeks), and the Solomon Islands (7

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[1] Full school closures refer to situations where all schools were closed at the nation-wide level due to COVID-19, while partial school closures refer to school closures in some regions or for some grades, or with reduced in-person instruction.

weeks)[2] (UNESCO, 2021). The examples provided in this brief draw from a range of countries that were fully or partially closed for different durations during the response and recovery phases of the pandemic.

Key issues and challenges in Asia-Pacific

The pre-existing learning crisis in Asia-Pacific before Covid-19

The 5-Year Progress Review of SDG 4 – Education 2030 in Asia-Pacific indicated that despite overall improvement, most countries were unlikely to achieve the SDG 4 targets in literacy and numeracy and that a learning crisis existed before the pandemic. This crisis has been evidenced by millions of children remaining illiterate, out of school, or failing to master basic literacy and numeracy foundation skills at the completion of their primary education (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Before the pandemic, 53% of children in low-and middle-income countries were unable to read a simple text by age 10, and the rates of improvement in learning were already very slow (World Bank, Learning Poverty Index).

The 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) study found that only two of six Southeast Asian nations had more than half of children at the end of primary school meeting the minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2019). Similarly, the 2018 Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) found that across the 15 participating countries, on average less than 14 percent of children met minimum proficiency levels for mathematics and less than 17 percent for reading by the end of primary school (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2019).

The impact of COVID-19 on learning

The pandemic has further compounded the learning crisis. In attempts to manage the spread of the virus, governments in the Asia-Pacific closed schools and implemented a range of education policies and practices to maintain access to education, including remote and blended learning. However, schools, school leaders and teachers were generally unprepared for using these learning pedagogies and technologies.

As a result of school closures, students in developing Asia may have lost almost 30% of learning-adjusted years of schooling according to early estimates from the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2021). The list of referenced examples below from the South Asia and South East Asia sub-regions provide an estimate of the magnitude of learning loss, as well as its inequitable distribution with poorest students being far more severely affected: the sub-regions that had the longest school closures such as South Asia are estimated to have suffered the greatest learning losses:

- **Rural Karnataka, India**: the share of Grade 3 students in government schools able to perform simple subtraction fell from 24% in 2018 to 16% in 2020 (ASER, 2021)
- **Rural Pakistan:** declines in shares of Grades 1-5 students able to read in Urdu (from 24% in 2019 to 22% in 2021) and solve 2-digit sums (from 20% in 2019 to 16% in 2021) (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agashi, 2021)

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2 These school closure durations relate to the period of time up to 30 November 2021

- **Bangladesh:** adolescent girls' literacy and numeracy scores dropped by 6%; learning losses among the poorest 40% was 3 times that of the richest (Amin, Hossain and Ainul, 2021)
- **Cambodia:** the share of Grade 6 students who failed to meet the basic proficiency level increased from 34% to 45% in Khmer language and from 49% to 74% in math between 2016 and 2021 (Yarrow, Masood and Afkar, 2020)

Without mitigation measures of learning losses, the World Bank estimates that students could lose 1 trillions dollars in South Asia and 4 trillions in South East Asia respectively (Azevedo et al., 2020).

The pandemic also exacerbated educational inequity, with marginalised students most affected, such as through the lack of resources and technologies to access quality education (Tarricone et al., 2021). In some countries, the pandemic had notable gendered impacts. Data from Bangladesh shows that boys were more likely to receive family help with schoolwork, while girls spent more time on household chores than boys, detracting from the time spent on their education (Jones et al., 2021). The pandemic puts girls at an increased risk of dropping out of school, child marriage, early pregnancy, being vulnerable to domestic violence and gender-based violence and being exploited as child labor (World Bank, 2021). While the gendered impacts on learning were mixed, in Pakistan, learning losses were found to be larger among girls than boys. In Pakistan, girls were outperforming boys in Urdu language levels in 2019; but in 2021, the opposite was true (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Urdu reading performance levels by gender in ASER assessment in Pakistan
Percentage of children at grades 1 and 3 that can at least read words or can at least read a story
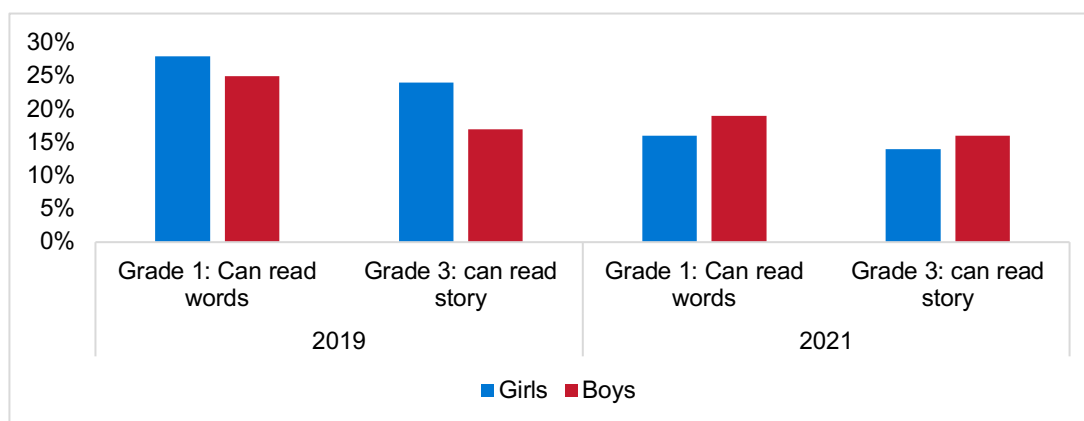
Source: Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (2021)

In response, countries need to implement contextually appropriate and evidence-based learning recovery approaches that, for example, enable students to continue and complete their schooling, measure learning, prioritise essential curriculum components, and enhance pedagogy that targets the broader student wellbeing, safety and protection (UNESCO et al, 2022). Governments in the region must put the 'right to learn' for all at the centre of education recovery and system transformation strategies, to mitigate the risk of losing in human potential.

Key priority areas in Asia-Pacific

Initial actions for learning recovery: curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy

The learning recovery phase emphasises the safe reopening of schools and managing remote and blended learning modalities to support a return to onsite learning. As many students, in particular the most vulnerable have not been learning or not meeting grade-appropriate minimum learning levels, it is important to implement measures to mitigate learning loss and catch up to expected age-appropriate learning outcomes.

A contextually adapted learning recovery program, consisting of a mix of evidence-based strategies to recover learning, can help get students back on their pre-pandemic learning trajectories. This program may take multiple years to implement, as this generation needs to both recover their learning losses and needs to improve on its pre-pandemic trajectory, which in most cases was quite unsatisfactory. While learning recovery programs should be prioritized urgently and there is an extraordinary need to expand resources to this challenge, each country will need to assess which policy options are most suited to their context, considering budgetary and capacity constraints. Systems must have a high tolerance for failure and adjustment, given the unprecedented nature of this task. Monitoring, assessing progress, and adapting iteratively will all be critical. A learning recovery program must go beyond academic learning, to also support social and emotional learning and overall wellbeing, which are also essential elements to aim for when building back better.

The RAPID (Reach, Assess, Prioritize, Increase, Develop) Learning Recovery Framework developed by UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank is an adaptable framework aimed at helping countries plan for the learning recovery (UNICEF, UNESCO, & The World Bank, 2022). Its components are:

REACH every child and retain them in school:

Education systems and schools need to prioritise the return and re-engagement of all students, particularly young children, girls, and the most vulnerable through the following priority actions:

- Reopen schools safely, with adequate measures to minimize transmission in place, and keep them open
- Launch re-enrolment campaigns to bring students back, using channels like radio, TV, SMS, calls and community events
- Strengthen early warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out and implement strategies to prevent drop-out
- Consider introducing cash transfers to increase attendance of children from families that are struggling financially

ASSESS learning levels regularly

Education systems should assess students' learning levels and identify gaps to set-up adapted recovery strategies and meet students where they are in their learning. This will require:

- Establish pre-pandemic learning goals and levels, what was typically achieved in a normal school year
- Assess learning losses and the national and sub-national level and what content schools have yet to master
- Provide teachers with tools for classroom level measurement of students' learning levels
- Identify learning equity impacts, including any change in the spread of learning outcomes around the mean

PRIORITIZE teaching the fundamentals

As part of the learning recovery strategy, systems and schools should consider how the curriculum may need to be adapted to prioritise foundational content to support individual student learning needs, especially for the early years and the vulnerable. Curriculum adaptation might involve consolidating curriculum to target learning levels, and include content about social-emotional learning to support student wellbeing, safety, and resilience. Priority actions are:

- Ensure schools prioritize foundational learning by adjusting the curriculum across and within subjects
- Consider rebalancing the time allocations for each subject; prioritize numeracy, literacy and socioemotional skills, and prerequisites for future learning – core learning objectives without which other aspects of the curriculum cannot be mastered
- Construct multi-year teaching plans with resources for ongoing remediation built in to address students' curriculum gaps

INCREASE catch-up learning

Education systems should support schools and teachers to set-up appropriate catch-up strategies that have proven impact on improving learning. Priority actions are:

- Employ approaches that help recover and accelerate learning, particularly by aligning instruction to students' learning needs. Such approaches include:
- Structured pedagogy: coordinated interventions for improving instruction; program components include teaching and learning materials (lesson plans, teacher guides) teacher professional development, and assessment
- Targeted instruction: Providing instruction that is appropriate to the learning levels of each child, usually by using assessments to group students by level of proficiency rather than by age or grade, for a dedicated hour or period
- Small group tutoring: complements classroom instruction by offering personalized teaching and guidance to small groups of students
- Self-guided learning: Allows students to progress, incrementally and at their own pace, toward mastery of foundational skills with minimal support from teachers; can serve as complement to regular instruction and can leverage (digital) technology when conditions are appropriate.

- Support teachers to develop subject-specific pedagogical and digital skills by providing continuous teacher training and coaching. Expand the number of and support teacher coaches and peer learning forums.
- Increase instruction time by extending the school year, school week, school day or by offering summer school; utilize this time to employ approaches for catch-up learning

DEVELOP psychosocial health and wellbeing

The wellbeing of students and teachers should be secured through comprehensive programs that address health, nutrition, physical safety, and psychosocial needs. Priority actions are:

- Support teacher wellbeing and resilience through peer support groups, as well as remote and in-person interventions
- Build teachers' capacity to support their students' wellbeing and identify students in need of specialized services
- Prioritize communication, including campaigns and messaging about COVID-19 and mental health
- Promote children and adolescent's participation: provide opportunities for them to exercise their agency in the decisions that affect them
- Promote meaningful collaboration between the school, family and community to build a safe and nurturing learning environment that creates a sense of belonging for every child.
- In coordination with other sectors, guarantee access to early intervention and mental health services and psychosocial support for children and adolescents

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Box 1: Ongoing actions to accelerate learning recovery in the State of Gujarat in India:

In the State of Gujarat in India, the following interventions, aligned with the RAPID framework for Learning Recovery framework, are being implemented.

- **Assessing learning**: Pre-pandemic, the government introduced Periodic Assessment Tests (PAT), formative weekly tests for each subject linked to time-tables and mapped to learning outcomes. In 2020, the government also introduced centralized learning assessments across grades 3 - 12. The data from these centralized assessments is used to track the academic progress of every child in the State and ensure children achieve grade appropriate learning outcomes.

- **Targeted instruction**: The use of PAT allows for monitoring of student learning outcomes and adapting learning to students' levels. During the pandemic, PAT results have been used to circulate material and personalize remote education to the level of each student.

- **Psycho-social support**: The government rolled out a program in which students were provided with daily education material including stories, songs, physical and mental activities, shared through Whatsapp.

- **Inclusive education**: Disability-friendly content has been disseminated through several channels during the pandemic to ensure learning for students with disabilities.

- **Parent engagement**: Covid risk outreach campaign to 17 million parents through various channels (jingles, videos, posters, calls from teachers etc.)

- **Remedial learning programs**: In July 2021, the Gyansetu remedial programme was launched to provide grade level learning support to the students of grades 2 to 10, in Gujarati, English and Mathematics. It included a class readiness program for grade 1. Each grade workbook included content mapped to learning outcomes and class readiness competencies. Gyansetu video content was developed. The program included capacity building for teachers on how to use the material. **Syllabus rationalization**: plans are in place to consolidate the syllabus

- **Revision of academic calendar** to lengthen the school year to align with Right To Education standards of 200 days for grades 1-5, and 220 for grades 6-8.

Medium to long-term actions for addressing the learning crisis

Addressing the root causes of the learning crisis requires transforming what and how we teach and learn – rethinking curriculum content and pedagogies to be learner-centred and responsive to current and future demands for competencies. Such transformation cannot take place without reconceptualizing the role of teachers to be facilitators of learning, equipping them with the necessary skills and confidence to ensure that all their students are effectively learning. It will also require improving the quality of school management, governance and leadership and system-level monitoring.

Curriculum and pedagogical reform: Curriculum design should reflect transferable and 21st century competencies and be highly responsive to adapt to future trends in the economy and society. There needs to be a fundamental curriculum review so that learners acquire key knowledge and skills as the basis for lifelong learning, including technical and entrepreneurial skills, and cross-cutting capabilities. Pedagogical approaches also require rethinking to keep pace with evidence-based practices on how learners learn and emphasize autonomous learning of relevant competencies for the future. Learning standards and achievement levels need to be developed, to define what students should learn and at what level, and how learning can be assessed. Countries should also carefully consider how the curriculum shall be implemented and provide training, guidance and adequate tools (e.g. examples of lesson plans and activities, assessment tools) to teachers and schools:

- In Viet Nam, in October 2021, the Ministry of Education released detailed guidance on curriculum implementation that encourages schools to adjust teaching plans to their specific needs, in large part by focusing instruction on the most important material. For

each content area, the guidelines define expected learning outcomes and suggests how to consolidate and focus teaching and assessment from the official curriculum. Suggestions for focused teaching include having students read before class (there is an explicit expectation that children complete reading assignments as self-study before class); having teachers select among the lessons that cover the same content/skills; and streamlining duplicate content within and between subjects. There is also guidance on how teachers can work with parents to help children learn; for instance, parents are encouraged to help students practice reading and spelling skills at home.

Teacher professional development and support: Education systems and schools need to foster teacher development through the provision of opportunities to enhance pedagogical knowledge and practice. This includes the provision of quality pre- and in-service professional development so that teachers can use flexible teaching approaches, including digital tools, social-emotional learning, differentiated teaching and formative assessment (UNESCO, 2022; USAID, 2020). Teachers need more support to develop adaptive teaching practices, including the use of blended learning pedagogies. To reduce teacher workload, additional resources and tools, such as online learning hubs and lesson preparation videos could be provided.

- In the Republic of Korea, an online community of 10,000 teachers across almost every school has successfully supported each other by sharing best practice pedagogy through real-time, interactive communications.
- A Comprehensive Support Portal for School Records (Republic of Korea) provides training videos that explain guidelines and examples of distance learning.
- Ministerial and Provincial Model Courses (China) provide high-quality teacher resources to support the delivery of the Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning approach to support learning continuity.

Digital transformation to support flexible learning: Education systems need to support the development of flexible learning practices to reach all learners. This especially relates to blended learning resources, such as digital platforms, protocols, resources, and support for online teaching and learning. With the appropriate development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment tailored for blended learning, it need not be a temporary solution during emergencies, but can continue to support learning progress in the longer term.

To advance digital inclusion and close the digital divide, school technology and connectivity implementation plans should be consistent with aspirational teaching and learning modalities, ensuring all students have sufficient access. Plans should prioritise infrastructure and connectivity (especially in rural areas), funding for devices, capacity building for the use of digital technology, and financial aid for vulnerable students and their families, including for example through subsidized internet data plans. Furthermore, in most Asia-Pacific countries, greater investments are required to develop online learning content for students at different stages of learning.

- In Samoa and Tonga, evidence suggests that the use of online platforms could help increase student retention, particularly for male

students who found online lessons more motivating than face-to-face delivery.

- Japan's Leave No One Behind approach focusses on narrowing the digital divide, such as supporting access to mobile routers for households that do not have internet access.

School governance and accountability: Improving teaching and learning also requires strengthened school governance and accountability measures, based on recognised standards of quality. School assessments (e.g school self-evaluation, school inspections or reviews) should integrate both qualitative and quantitative approaches in reviewing the quality of school processes and outcomes, with a focus on teaching and learning practices.

Community engagement: Children's learning is enhanced if they are supported by the community, not just their classroom teachers. Schools need to actively engage with the community so that households and community organisations support education, with resources, encouragement and assistance. To achieve this, school leaders need to regularly communicate with families and community groups, potentially leading to co-developed school and community-based programmes that build greater community support for students' health and wellbeing, both in and out of school as well as combating gender-based violence.

- To promote the education of girls in PNG and parts of India, specially created parenting packs support positive parenting, gender equality and an encouraging home learning environment.

Monitoring learning outcomes: Governments need to invest in robust education monitoring systems, including monitoring student progress and student disengagement, to support learning for all. Large scale assessments, national or regional programs, can be used to provide systematic and periodic data to monitor the efficacy of the education system overall. To inform education system reform, such large-scale assessments should focus on monitoring the learning progress of overall student cohorts, whilst also enabling analysis by sub-groups, such as region, gender, or socio-economic status.

To support the achievement the SDG4, data specifically related to the associated minimum proficiency level indicators need to be collected. In many Asia-Pacific countries, such data are either not collected or infrequently so. Data relating to systematic and comparable skills and learning outcomes across different life stages (i.e., Indicators 4.1.1., 4.2.1., 4.4.1., and 4.6.1.) have the least amount of data collected, and it is not easily disaggregated (e.g., by gender or location). Furthermore, education monitoring should collect data (e.g., assessment, enrolment, attrition, and ongoing attendance data) to inform retention programs and teaching initiatives.

Policy pointers

The policy pointers are presented thematically, all of which are related, directly or indirectly, to curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. Most of the policy pointers have some relevance across student, school and/or system levels, and time periods. Initial or immediate actions are urgent or readily implemented; they are most focused on supporting the learning recovery. Medium to long-term policy actions are necessary for addressing the learning crisis (as described further below),and tend to require a greater degree of education system transformation.

Key priority	System level	School and student level
Immediate actions for the learning recovery		
Safety and hygiene in schools	• Set-up school health and safety standards adapted to the COVID crisis • Allocate adequate funding to help schools meet health and safety standards	• School policies and planning prioritize health and safety • School engages students, youths, parents and local community and communicates about school safety and health measures
Access to education and reaching the most vulnerable students	• Set-up back to school campaigns • Monitor and track re-enrolment and attendance, especially for the the most vulnerable students – children with disabilities, children in remote or hard-to-reach places, ethnic minorities, and others • Rolling out early warning systems to identify at-risk students and prevent drop-out	• Reintroducing social protection measures such as school meal programs • Cash transfers, scholarships and other incentives are used to encourage re-enrolment
School assessments and remediation	• Provide schools with adequate assessment tools and guidance to identify individual learning needs • Train teachers on assessing students' learning level, differentiated and remediation strategies	• Use a diagnostic assessment to identify students' levels, competences and learning needs • Implement adequate remediation strategies based on individual learners' needs • Use formative assessment of students throughout the year and use information to inform teaching and learning
Adapting the curriculum to focus on learning recovery programmes to address students' learning needs	• Indicate priority learning content for the recovery phase • Review the school year and/or length of instruction time to allow more time for catching up	• Prioritize core competencies in learning recovery programmes • Prioritize foundational learning and prerequisites for future learning, including literacy, numeracy, and socioemotional skills
Well-being of students	• Take stock of needs and resources available throughout different sectors • In countries where poverty has increased and stunting prevalence is high, establish or expand school meals	• Set up adequate detection and referral mechanisms in schools for counselling and psycho-social services

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Key priority	System level	School and student level
	• Provide guidance to schools on how to develop students' socio-emotional skills • Build the capacity of the teaching workforce to deliver support to students, while addressing teachers' own mental health and wellbeing • Set regulation and enforcement mechanisms to address cyberbullying and harmful online content and practices	• Prioritize students' and teachers' well-being in school plans • Prioritize communication, including community messaging about COVID-19 and mental health
Teachers support	• Support teacher resilience, instructionally and technologically • Support them with psycho-social support and training, provide them with diagnostics tools, methods to prioritize the teaching and learning of the core fundamentals, and strategies to recover and accelerate learning. • Support teachers' access to Education Technology and capacity to use it • Set-up professional learning communities, peer-to-peer groups etc	• Set up adequate counselling and psycho-social services for teachers • Explore possibilities of using volunteers, retired teachers, educated youths and community members etc, to support teachers in managing catch-up learning activities
Medium to long-term transformations of education to address the learning crisis		
Curriculum and pedagogical reform	• Introducing transferable and 21st century competencies in curriculum and learning standards • Providing guidance on how to transform pedagogical approaches in schools • Set achievement standards to monitor learners' progress vis-à-vis learning standards	• Review teaching and learning practices to ensure that they are learner-centred and integrate 21st century competencies
Teacher professional development and support	• Provision of quality pre- and in-service teacher professional development to enhance teachers' ability to use flexible teaching approaches, including digital skills, social-emotional learning, differentiated teaching and formative assessment • Providing adequate guidance, tools and examples to teachers to transform their teaching and learning practices such as online repository and learning hubs	• Supporting teachers' professional development by setting up in-school peer learning and encouraging participation in professional learning networks
Digital transformation to support flexible learning strategies	• Develop curriculum content, pedagogical materials and tools adapted for blended and distance learning • Ensure that online learning solutions are fully inclusive, equitable, and remain free for all students, so that digital divides are	• Access to digital tools and connectivity for all – especially rural areas and vulnerable learners

Key priority	System level	School and student level
	not further widened. Complement those with adequate offline solutions for those without access. • Regulate online learning platforms and engagement with private EdTech providers and enforce regulations to protect learners from the commercialization of education.	
School governance and accountability	• Prioritize quality of teaching and learning in school standards and keep schools and relevant local authorities accountable for quality of learning • Train and prepare school leaders to be instructional leaders	• Prioritize improvement of teaching and learning in school planning • Organize regular school self-assessment to monitor quality of teaching and learning in the school
Community engagement		• Engage parents and the local community in students' learning
Monitoring learning outcomes	• Develop large scale assessment tools to monitor students' learning outcomes overtime • Develop capacity to analyze and utilize learning assessment data to inform policies	• Build in-school capacity to use data on learning outcomes to inform school improvement

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