

Meeting the Moment: New Data on Learning Loss and What We Can Do About It

The [Evidence for Gender and Education Resource \(EGER\)](#) program, under the Population Council's [Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning \(GIRL\) Center](#), hosted a virtual webinar titled “**Meeting the Moment: New Data on Learning Loss and What We Can Do About It**” on October 7th, 2021. The webinar shared the significant impact of closed schools on learning levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, striking disparities when we intersect poverty, as well as the crucial need to get children back to school and for evidence-based approaches to support learning, such as aligning teaching to the level of the child.

Panel Discussion

Moderated by **Nicole Haberland, Senior Associate at the Population Council**, the webinar brought together panelists to share just-emerging data and provocative perspectives on the significant impact of closed schools on learning levels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Paul Atherton, economist and Founder of Fab Inc., presented data on learning outcome changes during school closures between 2019 and 2021 in Kenya and Nepal. Evidence suggested that students had not been able to learn new things and also had forgotten things they previously knew.

- Substantial learning losses were found among girls in Kenya in reading (18 percentage points) and smaller, but significant, losses in math (7 percentage points). Similar losses were found in Nepal, with 18 percentage point declines in both reading and math, including for material previously learned.
- Both Kenya and Nepal saw that losses were not uniform across the country, highlighting inequalities not visible in national estimates of COVID-19's impact on learning.
- While the main mode of remote learning was radio and cellphones, girls infrequently listened to radio lessons and were often out of cellphone service range. Girls also expressed concern about the lack of support while learning remotely, uncertainty of school reopening, and leaving school due to marriage (in Nepal) and pregnancy (in Kenya).

Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate at the Population Council, presented findings from a study in rural Bangladesh of girls' experiences with remote learning during the pandemic and changes in learning outcomes between 2018 and 2021.

- Girls in the poorest quintile had three times greater learning loss than girls in wealthier quintiles. However, some wealth indicators – owning a television or smartphone – did not significantly mitigate learning loss.
- Socially distanced learning during COVID-19 via community mentorship with small group WhatsApp chats seemed to lessen learning loss, especially in math and analytical scores.
- Student engagement worsened during school closures, with 10% reporting not studying at all and a third no longer following the government's classes on TV. Reasons included not having a smartphone, and not having a routine or schedule conducive to taking remote lessons.

Rukmini Banerji, CEO of Pratham, focused on teaching at the right level and its potential for catch-up learning following COVID-19 school closures. She presented data on COVID-19 impacts on learning, especially for younger learners, based on ASER data from Karnataka, India.

- Even prior to COVID-19, there were concerning learning trends: in 3rd grade, three quarters of students were already not at grade level for reading; in 5th grade, 50% of students could not read at a 2nd grade level.
- Teachers faced complex challenges, expected to teach based on national plans and grade-specific textbooks irrespective of student learning levels.
- Teaching at the right level addresses this by grouping students by skill level rather than grade level and utilizing assessment tools to track progress. Applying this practice in Uttar Pradesh in 2018 and 2019 increased reading proficiency in just over 2 months.
- This approach may help address the learning impact of COVID-19 school closures, especially for students aged 7 and above.

Michelle Kaffenberger, Research Fellow at RISE and University of Oxford, shared that emerging data confirm concerns about the severity of learning loss and the need to take evidence-based action to support children.

- Modelling the long-term impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning outcomes showed that missing a third of a year could reduce long term learning by a full school year by grade 10. Missing a half year could reduce long term learning outcomes by 1.5 years.
- Younger learners stand to lose the most: running the same model for first graders indicated missing a half year could mean as much as 2.2 years of learning loss by grade 10.
- In addition to remediating COVID-19-related learning loss, implementing catch-up programs long term can help education come back better than before COVID-19.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the discussion, panelists agreed that the current evidence, while concerning, can allow us to prepare for similar shocks in the future based on better understanding of how such shocks differentially effect people and communities. At the same time, the gender and education community must seize this moment to make long overdue improvements and leverage this new focus on learning to push for change and reform. Participants echoed the crucial need to get children back to school and learning with evidence-based approaches, such as aligning teaching with the varied needs and learning levels of the child, while paying special attention to the gender disparities and patterns that are under-cutting re-enrollment.

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