

Webinar Briefing Paper

Reopening the Future: Prioritizing Pre-primary Education

Date: 27th July 2021

Hosted by: UNICEF, UNESCO, The World Bank Group

Partners: Sightsavers, Theirworld, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti



Event Overview

This webinar highlighted the need to prioritize Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the COVID response-recovery, exploring the challenges and opportunities presented in schools re-opening.

Through a multi-perspective panel of education researchers, experts, and practitioners, the case for prioritizing ECE in the context of school reopening was explored using cost-of-inaction analyses, country case studies on the use of the Global Guidance on Reopening ECE Settings (Uganda, Mongolia, Malawi, Senegal), and successful adaptations for children with disabilities and their inclusion in ECE.

Speakers

- Robert Jenkins, Global Director of Education, UNICEF
- Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO
- Jaime Saavedra, Global Director, Education, The World Bank Group
- Amanda Devercelli, Global Lead for Early Childhood Development, The World Bank Group

Panelists

- Moderator: Gwang-Chol Chang, Chief of the Education Policy Section, UNESCO
- Abdallah Sow, ECE Programme Coordinator, Directorate of preschool Education, Ministry of Education in Senegal
- Ajwok Mary Valentino, Global Youth Ambassador, Theirworld - Uganda
- Ben Chikaipa, Early Childhood Development Specialist, Sightsavers - Malawi
- Myagmar Jadamba, Head of Pre-Primary Education Department, Ministry of Education and Science - Mongolia
- Anindita Nugroho, Education Research Consultant, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti

Key Highlights

- > According to new research released from the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, COVID-related pre-primary school closures in 2020 are estimated to cost \$1.6 trillion USD in lost future earnings¹ – the equivalent of 12 years of total international aid for development.
- > Young children’s learning opportunities have been severely limited during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences with extended school closures can have significant long-term effects, with pre-school-aged children in middle-income countries bearing the greatest risk of negative impact.
- > Among LMICs, pre-primary students lost an average of 106 in-person instruction days in 2020, more than any other levels of schooling².
- > We have a “once in a lifetime” opportunity to build back resilient ECE systems. The ripple effects of investing in ECE as schools reopen will be felt long into the future. Prioritizing ECE now will get more children learning (in school earlier and for longer), build stronger links with families, boost economies, contribute to gender equality, and, in the long run, help create more sustainable, peaceful, and resilient societies.
- > Evaluations show that even short, low-cost transition programmes (such as accelerated, bridging and remedial programmes), can support children’s readiness for school. They can be led by trained teachers or volunteers. Ongoing supervision and mentoring for educators are critical.
- > UNICEF, UNESCO, The World Bank, and education partners encourage governments, donors, and implementers, to prioritize the reopening of pre-primary schools, resource recovery measures that systematically incorporate pre-primary, and roll out transition programs to support children left out of pre-primary education in 2020.

¹ *It's Not Too Late to Act on Early Learning: Understanding and recovering from the impact of pre-primary education closures during COVID-19*. Nugroho et al. UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti (2021)

² *Ibid*

Opening Remarks

Robert Jenkins, Global Director of Education, UNICEF

"We have a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to build back resilient ECE systems. Prioritizing ECE now, will get more children learning (in school earlier and for longer), build stronger links with families, boost economies, contribute to gender equality, and, in the long run, help create more sustainable, peaceful, and resilient societies".

"At UNICEF we are prioritizing Early Childhood Education – because we know that when we prioritize early learning it has lifelong benefits for children and societies now, and in the future".

"The undeniable cost of inaction, the learning gaps, but also the opportunities and very specific steps we can take are clear. That is why we call on our partners, donors, and governments to invest in ECE and schools reopening. Together, we can stop the learning loss if we act now, and ensure that through early childhood education, no child is left behind."

Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

"The first one thousand days of our lives are decisive for future wellbeing. If we get it right from the start, we stand a much better chance of building more inclusive societies in the long run."

"It's not by chance that SDG4 includes a specific commitment to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development care and pre-primary education. These programmes carry an equalizing and preventive force. We have good knowledge of what makes a difference, and we need to build on that."

"The COVID pandemic has demonstrated the strong ties between education, health, nutrition, protection, and wellbeing. As the lead agency for SDG 4, UNESCO's ambition is to mobilise countries and partners to achieve the early childhood target of the 2030 agenda. This has implications for governance, right down to the community level for how policies are developed and financing."

Jaime Saavedra, Global Director, Education, The World Bank Group

"In 2020, our young children experienced our biggest shock to the education system in 100 years; almost all schools and early childhood institutions have closed. Children are missing opportunities to build strong foundations for lifelong learning."

"The most profitable social investment is early childhood education. Those investments vanished for the last sixteen months. That is why it is crucial; it is urgent to return to the classrooms."

"Taking all the precautionary measures, returning to school is possible. Even a partial return has an immense impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of young learners and also, on the mental health of learners and their parents."

New Research Findings

The cost of pre-primary school closures is significant

Pre-primary school closures in 2020 are estimated to cost today's young children \$1.6 trillion USD in lost earnings over their lifetimes. Children in middle-income countries are likely to be the hardest hit due to prolonged school closures. On average, the impact of pre-primary school closures in 2020 is equivalent to over 2.5 per cent of middle-income countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or close to two-thirds of average government expenditure on education among this group. In comparison, the impact on high- and low-income countries is estimated to be around 1 per cent of GDP on average. Pre-primary school children in low-and-middle income countries (LMICs) lost an average of 106 instruction days in 2020, more than the days lost in primary and secondary schools.

Pre-primary education is often left out of responses to COVID-19

Although they missed out on more in-person learning days compared to older students, pre-primary students in low-and-middle-income countries were often left out of their countries' responses to COVID-19. In 2020, the youngest learners were less likely to access distance learning during closures. When schools reopened, they were less likely to return to in-person learning. Countries were also less likely to be assessing learning losses and introducing remedial support measures at this level.

While many countries reported increased total spending for the education sector, this was less likely to be the case for the pre-primary sub-sector. It is important to note here the low starting point of spending at this level, with more than a third of countries investing [less than 2 per cent of their education budgets on pre-primary education](#). Donor spending on the sub-sector is similarly low and [prone to volatility](#).

Proven successful interventions can reverse the learning loss

Evaluations show that even short, low-cost transition (such as accelerated, bridging and remedial) programmes can support children's readiness for school. They can be led by trained teachers or volunteers, but ongoing supervision and support or coaching for educators is beneficial in either case and can be done by [linking with existing systems](#). Engaging families and the local community can help [reach the most vulnerable children](#) and [support sustainability](#).

Through these types of transition interventions, countries can better prepare for, or transition to, universal pre-primary access. Accelerated curricula can inform the development of full pre-primary curricula and can also be harnessed to respond to future crises.

Key highlights of good practices and experiences in ECE and School Reopening

Senegal

- Senegal reopened all their preschools on November 12th, 2020. The anti-COVID-19 protocol was adapted for pre-schools, which strengthened parents' willingness to send their children to pre-school. Key implementers in school reopening included the Ministry of Education, the national agency for ECD, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Family, Women, Gender and Child Protection, the national unit against malnutrition; decentralized governmental entities, community volunteers operating the ECD structures, and community-based organizations.
- The enrollment rate did not decrease between 2019 and 2020. The learning environment was improved in most ECD facilities as they were supplied with COVID-19 protection kits and handwashing devices. Major activities for quality improvement were carried out, in particular teacher inspection and capacity building.
- The actions taken increased the country's abilities to maintain services to children and their families, thus potentially reducing the negative impact of the pandemic on early childhood development in Senegal.
- It is important to **invest in cross-sector dialogue at all stages (i.e., planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation) and all levels**. For instance, health facilities were frequently in touch with parents and communities while school were closed. The health sector is able to more easily grasp people's attention during pandemics. A joint communication from traditional sectors (e.g., health and education) may have a stronger impact than a communication from ECE sub-sector alone.

Uganda

- For over a year, ECE has been suspended in Uganda and continues to await permission and protocols for reopening. [appears to be missing a sentence on the use of remote modalities in some centers]. However, the situation of refugee settlements is different from education settings in urban areas, where there is access to internet, iPads and smart phones for remote learning. In the refugee setting, early learners do not have digital support.

- There were a number of adaptations made to keep families and communities engaged in ECE opportunities in the Kiryandongo refugee settlement camp. This included teacher training in integrated co-teaching, to prepare teachers for the “new normal” as learning has shifted online; teachers providing ‘door-to-door’ engagement with early learners and their caregivers, particularly important as many caregivers are illiterate in the refugee settlement camp; keeping children in sports to assist young learners to overcome issues of stress and trauma; and engaging refugees who have knowledge of ECE to work as advocates, engaging families and encouraging caregivers through their outreach.
- **Youth-led advocacy through these advocates, specifically from those with lived-experience, was critical in realizing every child’s right to ECE** and why leaders need to prioritize it in the COVID recovery plans.

Malawi

- The impact of COVID-19 on ECE included the premature and persistent closure of centers in Malawi, which is still ongoing. Children are not able to access learning and social interaction and limited access to health services accessed through the centers – particularly important for children with disabilities who are more likely to benefit from early intervention. When schools reopened, there were high levels of fear due to COVID-19, leading to high absenteeism. At the community level, there were reduced interactions, networking, and collaboration among ECE stakeholders.
- Adaptations for re-opening included engaging caregivers, parents, and ECE center management committees’ members in training on COVID-19 preventive measures; splitting children into groups to facilitate safe attendance; requiring all adults in ECE centers to wear masks, ensure social distancing, and wash hands frequently.
- **One of the key elements of the ECE reopening programme was training of caregivers to equip them better to work with children with disabilities.** The Ministry of Education worked with the Association of Early Childhood Development, which provides training for all caregivers, to specifically embed inclusion in the training of caregivers more broadly across Malawi beyond ECE services.

Mongolia

- In Mongolia, the education cluster led by UNICEF and Save the Children was activated in March 2020 and supported the development of an emergency plan for the pandemic, which was then implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). The MoES has an approved procedure to reopen ECE centers and schools starting September 1, 2021, incorporating the 10 principles from the Global Guidance on Reopening Early Childhood Education Settings.
- The MoES has developed printed guidance on implementing the ECE and primary education curriculum for the reopening in collaboration with UNICEF Mongolia. **Procedures for reopening also include guidance on supporting children’s mental health and preparing the environment to be supportive for children.** All ECE center managers have been trained for the reopening, and they in turn have trained their staff
- While ECE centers and schools were closed, the MoES, in partnership with UNICEF Mongolia, developed a short five video series on integrated ECD for parents, which were broadcast over the television. For example, [one video was about how to wear a mask and its importance](#). In May 2021, the MoES also reprinted a workbook for 5-year-old children and their parents regarding school preparedness and included additional information on handwashing, which was disseminated to 81,000 children nationwide. An e-content platform was developed to continue ECE and ECD at home over the 2020-2021 school year, including 221 modules covering 103 days of distance learning, with a professional group providing guidance and support. An e-learning website was also developed, with included interactive lessons for ECE children that were translated into sign language and two minority languages, along with five audio stories that were disseminated with radios for 650 remote herders’ children. Examples from the workbooks, e-content platform, and e-learning website can be accessed [here](#).

Questions and Answers

Q: Given the importance of early childhood education as all speakers are highlighting very well, do panelists agree that donors need to spend more on ECE, given less than 1% of education aid is currently allocated (approx. 34 cents for each child in a low- and lower-middle income country). If so, what can be done to mobilise funding?

A: UNICEF has called on governments to allocate 10 per cent of education budgets and for donors to allocate 10 per cent of international education investments to pre-primary education. [A recent report from Theirworld](#) found that while the overall share of donor spending on pre-primary schooling has increased between 2015 and 2019, it still only accounts for 0.9 overall spending in education.

Q: How is pre-primary education guaranteed in international regulations, standards of UNESCO during crisis such as current pandemic or in post crisis situations?

A: This question is very timely as UNESCO, building on the COVID 19 crisis, launched a Global Partnership Strategy (GPS) for ECCE. One key dimension of that GPS is to adopt normative instruments to make early childhood education compulsory for all children, which is not the case right now. Second, is to work on a global normative instrument to protect all education from attacks and crisis and ensure that ECE is included.

Q: What is the future view of pre-primary education in both poor countries and countries with rigid political situations?

A: A solid body of evidence shows that the foundations for learning are largely built in the early years of life, before a child ever crosses the threshold of a primary school. In low-income countries, 78 per cent of preschool-aged children are not enrolled in pre-primary education pre-covid. Countries need to pursue smart, proven strategies that can help stakeholders embark on the path towards quality universal pre-primary education while remaining sensitive to present realities. By setting priorities and navigating trade-offs, it is possible to build education systems that will put millions of children today on the path to fulfilling their potential.

Q: After COVID -19, ECD children have not been able to go to ECD centers to play and learn. If a child was of ECD age when the lockdown began, the child or girl's ECD age has passed. In such cases, their learning and physical, social, mental and emotional development are not developed, and those children do not experience ECD in this situation what is the appropriate alternative in such a situation?

A: The [new brief by UNICEF Innocenti](#) highlights examples and lessons from three types of programmes that have been shown to successfully support children transition to primary school when they had not had the opportunity to complete a full ECE programme. These are: accelerated school readiness programmes (usually run in the weeks before Grade 1), bridging programmes (usually run in the first few weeks of Grade 1), and remedial programmes (focusing on those implemented in the first two years of primary school). There is some diversity in the design of these programmes and the most appropriate response would depend on the context, including the number of children who missed out on ECE and the duration of time missed.

Q: Did you develop a curriculum for the bridging program?

A: In Cambodia's bridging programme, the curriculum was specifically created to reflect both the pre-primary and Grade 1 curriculum to bridge the two. Other programmes' curriculum for the most part was based on existing pre-primary curriculum, although in instances where there is not one the programme's curriculum was instead used as a basis of developing a full curriculum. For further reading on these programmes, including the curricula used, [the brief referred to can be found here](#).

Q: What specific intervention/support is being provided for parents/caregivers who have low level of education/illiterate, in doing development and learning activities at home while learning centers are still closed?

A: We can use picture cards where visuals share key messages and engage them through phone calls/WhatsApp and where it is safe, through socially distant meetings in the community.

A: Research has also found that even parents and caregivers with low levels of literacy can be supported to provide a rich early literacy environment for their children. For example, a study in Kenya found that providing storybooks increased children's literacy levels even among those with caregivers who were illiterate. These references and other examples of remote learning support at the pre-primary level can be found in the report '[COVID-19: Trends, Promising Practices and Gaps in Remote Learning for Pre-Primary Education](#)'.

Q: Pre-primary schooling is quite different from the other levels of education. ECE involves a lot of physical contact and interaction to help child build cognitive and emotional learning. Reopening ECE institutes need more prevention measures especially against the Delta variant. Could you share more ground cases in practice of maintaining minimum health protocols for the children while ensuring that play-based curriculum is still implemented when schools reopen?

A: Specific protocols involving both health and education sectors can help minimize physical contact and transmission in the classroom. Key steps we can take to implement health protocols, include engaging and informing parents and family on vaccination campaigns, when to keep children at home if illness is noted in the family, setting up hand washing stations, sanitization of play equipment, and appropriate training for caregivers and teachers.

Q: Do we have any toolkits for parenting and ECD for rural, mountainous areas?

A: There are some examples from remote/hard-to-reach areas that may be useful:

- [Yurt kindergartens in Kyrgyzstan.](#)
- [Community-based pre-primary education in Sylhet, Bangladesh.](#)

Q: There are many supplemental supports implemented for early learners during COVID, such as TV lessons, the use of broadcast media. To what extent has this contributed to children learning achievement? What kinds of support is the most effective?

A: Firstly, it's important to reach families with the mode of communication that they can access and in a language that they understand whether it be through TV, radio, community speakers (such as through speakers at a mosque), WhatsApp messages/phone calls or printed materials. Secondly, there is emerging evidence that mass media, such as the TV or radio broadcasts, should be followed up by personal contact to understand parents' needs and any challenges in applying those activities/practices with their children.

A: The strategies examined in the '[It's Not Too Late to Act on Early Learning: Understanding and recovering from the impact of pre-primary education closures during COVID-19.](#)' report were designed and implemented prior to COVID-19 but have relevance to the current crisis. In Ethiopia, for example, this is already taking place with the accelerated learning programme being used as a catchup programme following COVID-19 reopening.

Q: Due to the crisis, the digital environment is the main platform for learning. What are the safeguards protecting children from the harms of the digital environment?

A: UNESCO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are working hand in hand to issue a normative instrument to adopt an online child protection as well developing a set of tips for parental education in that area. [A guide has already been developed.](#)

Q: What are the special efforts being made for children with disabilities in Senegal?

A: In pre-primary, there is no specific programme developed for children with disabilities. This is a weakness in our education system. However, within the framework of inclusive education, traditional pre-school facilities cater for children with disabilities. In this context, the project to Strengthen

Support for the Protection of Children in Education in Senegal co-financed by the State of Senegal, UNICEF and Plan Senegal supported awareness-raising, information and education actions for members of local child protection committees (CLPE) in the fight against COVID-19 in preschool structures. This project also financed the development of a Comic Strip aimed at raising children's awareness and learning the hygiene measures essential to the fight against covid 19.

For elementary level, in order to ensure the pedagogical continuity of Students with Special Educational Needs (EBES) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Directorate of Elementary Education, in collaboration with its partners, has taken some initiatives including:

- Establishment of a support and supervision system for EBES in cm2 classes of inclusive schools in Dakar in partnership with Sightsavers;
- Establishment of a support system for deaf CM2 students with Humanity and Inclusion (HI);
- Sharing of experiences adopted in the care of pupils during the period of suspension of classes with the National Institute for Education and Training of Blind Young People (Inefja) of Thiès;
- Coordination with UNICEF, HI, Sightsavers, the Italian Cooperation, the National Institute for Education and Training of Blind Youth, the UNICEF Head of Inclusive Education in Kolda for the establishment of a system for the care of other levels of education.

Q: Is it possible to link up Ministry of Health to provide health interventions and early screening of children with disabilities or developmental delays in ECE. Ben, what has been experience in Malawi?

A: The Inclusive ECDE project has links with Ministry of Health. It works with some health facilities such as Ntcheu District Hospital, Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital-ENT department and Beit Cure Hospital. The project organizes screening camps whereby medical personnel from these facilities are used. Children requiring further support are referred to the facilities and the project arranges for transport. Many children have benefited from arrangement.

Participant Comments

"Covid 19 influences not only the students and teachers but also the parents. as the teaching and learning process shifted from face to face to online learning. It needs support from the parents of the children. problems emerged not only limited access to internet connection but how to motivate their children to have a teaching and learning as required by the school."

"It would be useful to develop a teacher survey for pre-primary education and how young children have coped and what teachers can do to support these kids given the importance of foundational skills (academic and social-emotional) for long-term outcomes".

Blogs

- > [Advancing early learning for a better tomorrow](#). UNICEF, UNESCO, and The World Bank.
- > [Why we can't afford to let early childhood education fall through the COVID-19 cracks](#). Anindita Nugroho, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

Resources

- > [It's Not Too Late to Act on Early Learning: Understanding and recovering from the impact of pre-primary education closures during COVID-19](#) [NEW REPORT]
- > [What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) [NEW REPORT]
- > [COVID-19: Trends, Promising Practices and Gaps in Remote Learning for Pre-Primary Education](#)
- > [How are Countries Preparing to Mitigate Learning Loss as Schools Reopen? Trends and emerging good practices to support the most vulnerable children](#)
- > [Global Guidance on Reopening Early Childhood Education Settings](#)

Event Recordings in [English](#) & [French](#)