

ADAPTING THE CURRICULUM

APRIL 2021

Even before the pandemic, most national curriculums were characterized as overambitious, designed for ideal teachers and students, and ignoring the realities on the ground. COVID-19 has exacerbated this problem by further reducing the instructional time students receive. Given this challenge, countries should consider condensing the curriculum to focus on core subjects and fundamental competencies within those subjects. They can also help teachers by providing detailed lesson plans. Lockdowns and confinements have also increased children's stress and depression, highlighting the importance of incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Countries can integrate into the curriculum certain social-emotional competencies that will help students cope and thrive in this new world.

Reasons for Countries to Adapt Their Curriculum

In many countries, entry into teacher preparation programs lacks selectivity, and teacher qualification standards are much lower than other professions. Unprepared and poorly trained teachers are expected to teach a complex curriculum, even as they have a weak grasp on it. At the same time students also face difficulties, such as not receiving the necessary caloric intake, not speaking the language of instruction, or not having the proper support at home, among others. Consequently, too many underprivileged students across the world meet with unprepared teachers to go through complex curriculums. Many drop out. These students have spent the most important part of their brain development years having learned little, while countries fail to recognize the costs of inaction. In parallel, a growing body of evidence has found that condensing the curriculum and targeting teaching by learning level are effective methods to increase learning (Banerjee et al., 2016; Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020) when classes contain a wide variety of learning levels and students fall below grade-level curriculum targets.

A Crisis within a Crisis

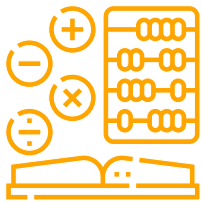
COVID-19 represents a crisis within a crisis and has exacerbated the need to modify the curriculum. Before the pandemic hit, we were already in a learning crisis. The learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was [53%](#)—meaning that over half of all 10-year-old children could not read and understand a simple text. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure was close to 90%. COVID-19 has only deepened the learning crisis, and the impacts on

this generation could be long-lasting. At the peak of the pandemic, [94% of students](#) worldwide were out of school. Many students were unable to receive schooling, worsening not just the learning crisis but also inequality. Even as countries start vaccination campaigns, instructional time is expected to decrease substantially compared to pre-pandemic years. Without dramatic remedial action and acceleration in education access and quality, this generation will experience major long-term costs in human capital accumulation.

A Need for Social-Emotional Competencies

Even before the pandemic, a consensus was growing among academics and policy makers that developing students' abilities for the work of the future requires more attention to students' social and emotional competencies, such as perseverance, adaptability, collaboration, and autonomy. With the arrival of the pandemic, the need to meet children's social-emotional needs while also preparing them for unpredictable combinations of remote learning, blended learning, and face-to-face learning has become stronger. In the last decade, there has been increasing awareness that social-emotional competencies in themselves are important outcomes of schools (e.g., Jones and Kahn, 2017). In addition, social-emotional development has been found to play an important role not just in academic achievement but also in adult outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Corcoran et al., 2018). For example, Jackson (2018) [found](#) that teachers' influence on social-emotional competencies and longer-run outcomes are much stronger than their impact on test scores.

Ways for Countries to Adapt Their Curriculum



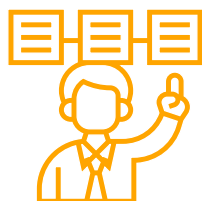
Focus on Core Subjects

Most countries have responded to limited instructional time by focusing on literacy and numeracy as priority subjects. For example, in Chile, all schools have been instructed to dedicate the same amount of time to language and literacy and mathematics as in the pre-pandemic curriculum, while they have also been granted flexibility to reduce content in other subjects. In South Africa, schools are prioritizing mathematics, local language, and English language. In Pakistan, the condensed curriculum covers a little over half the original curriculum with a focus on language, mathematics, and science. More information on how to devise a process to condense the curriculum can be found [here](#).



Focus on Fundamentals

For most countries, focusing on core subjects is not enough; they must prioritize fundamental skills and competencies. For example, in South Africa, for mathematics primary curriculum, the government prioritized counting, ordering, representing, and place value; performing all operations with whole numbers; common and decimal fractions; and number sentences, among other skills. This approach implies that some other topics, such as data handling, were omitted from the condensed curriculum. More information on how to focus on fundamentals while condensing the curriculum can be found [here](#).



Provide Clear Guidelines on How to Teach the Curriculum

In cases where teachers lack content knowledge and pedagogical ability, structured lesson plans—along with training on how to use them—lead to learning gains equivalent to an additional half year of learning (Piper et al., 2018). For example, Mozambique and Angola are developing structured teacher guides as a strategy to strengthen instructional coherence by aligning the curriculum with supports for teachers to implement the curriculum and assess learning to monitor student progress. By developing an integrated package, countries are able to provide guidance while allowing some flexibility based on the results of initial assessments. In countries where teachers have already mastered subject content knowledge, detailed guidance is accompanied by even more flexibility. In Chile, for example, teachers receive [guidance](#) on day-to-day activities, but schools and teachers are given flexibility to depart from the prescribed steps if they identify better ways to reach the intended outcome. More information on how to evaluate existing lesson plans and enhance or create new ones can be found [here](#).



Introduce Social-Emotional Competencies

Countries have quickly moved to emphasize the social-emotional competencies in their curriculums. For example, in Chile, the modified curriculum includes a daily block of activities to cultivate students' social-emotional competencies. At the beginning of each day, students engage in activities that help them adapt to the current pandemic and foster adaptability and persistence, as well as practice [mindfulness](#). In the United States, schools devote between 30–60 minutes per day to social-emotional learning at all education levels. The focus is on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These activities do not require the expenditure of large amounts of resources, as they can simply involve devoting time to build student relationships or cultivate empathy for others. Examples of activities can be found [here](#).

Useful Resources



Focus on Core Subjects

- [COVID-19 Pathways for the Return to Learning: Guidance on Condensing a Curriculum](#)

Focus on Fundamentals

- [COVID-19 Pathways for the Return to Learning: Guidance on Condensing a Curriculum](#)

Provide Clear Guidelines on How to Teach the Curriculum

- [Effectiveness of Teachers' Guides in the Global South](#)
- [Resources for Teaching and Learning Early Grade Reading \(including guidance on content and design of teacher's guides\)](#)
- [Compendium of Structured Lesson Plans](#)
- [Teacher's Guide Diagnostic Tool Manual](#)

Introduce Social-Emotional Competencies

- [Step by Step Toolkit Promoting Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) in Children and Teens](#)
- [State Efforts to Elevate Social and Emotional Learning during the Pandemic](#)
- [Everyday Anxiety Strategies for Educators \(EASE; for parents and caregivers to work with children experiencing anxiety and isolation\)](#)
- [WE Well-Being with WE Schools \(curriculum resources for educators to use to help students develop social-emotional learning skills\)](#)

Cross-Cutting Resources

- [World Bank Website for Teachers](#)
- [Supporting Teachers during the COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Pandemic](#)
- [Overview of Emerging Country-Level Response to Providing Educational Continuity under COVID-19: Best Practice in Pedagogy for Remote Teaching \(includes free teaching and learning materials\)](#)

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