

# The Trajectory of our Education Systems is the Trajectory of our Future. We Must Start Treating it as Such.



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The acceptance that the majority of children, especially those from the most marginalised communities and countries, are failing to grasp basic literacy and numeracy skills – the foundation on which all learning is built – is the tragic reality of schooling globally.

Under-resourced schools, underpaid and underqualified teachers, over-crowded classrooms and archaic curricula have been undermining children’s ability to reach their full potential for decades. COVID-19 has simply exposed and exacerbated the failure of education systems worldwide.





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25 years. That is how long it would take for just 70 per cent of primary school children in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo to learn basic reading skills. These are skills that should be acquired in just two years. While these two countries are extreme examples, the rate of learning in other countries is nowhere near what it should be. Data from 32 countries show that it would take an average of seven years for schoolchildren to learn to read at the level expected of a child in second grade. When looking at numeracy skills, the situation is far worse, with an average 11 years required for just 70 per cent of

schoolchildren to grasp what they should in two years of primary education.

Another analysis of data from 34 low- and middle-income countries found that three-quarters of schoolchildren in grade 4 are not obtaining foundational numeracy skills. Data from 79 middle- and high-income countries show more than a third of 15-year-old schoolchildren have yet to achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics.

The data point to a dire pre-existing learning crisis. With up to two years of disruption to schooling for millions of schoolchildren worldwide, the latest estimates show the situation today is

likely far worse. It is estimated that only a third of 10-year-olds globally can read and understand a simple written story – the minimum marker for reading proficiency, down from half pre-pandemic.

So why has education failed children across the world on such a large scale? Arguably, there is an acceptance that children from certain communities and countries will never learn how to read, write, or do basic math, despite spending years in school. There is an uncomfortable assumption that schoolchildren from the poorest communities, schoolchildren from



rural communities and schoolchildren from marginalised groups have never learnt these skills, and therefore they should not be expected to. Children who cannot read, cannot learn effectively. It is as simple as that.

The world, and the skills needed to thrive in it today, requires more from this generation of children than ever before. Yet, with the acceptance of low levels of learning, governments have created a perfect storm for unproductivity, at the detriment of their children and at the detriment of their societies and economies. On the flip side, advances in technology and advanced levels of learning in a handful of places comparatively have pushed some children's abilities to the highest level, further deepening inequality. As a result, rather than the greatest equaliser, education in its current form is becoming the greatest divider.

We need a complete transformation of education systems. There are quick, cost-effective ways to reform education entirely and get children on track. We must start with the foundations. Focusing on foundational remediation initiatives at scale will help us get there. Part of this includes the frequent assessment of every child's learning, which will enable qualified teachers

to differentiate their needs, while helping track progression. We know that changing the curricula slightly to allocate just two hours a day to literacy and numeracy is hugely beneficial, easily implemented, and cost-effective.

UNICEF is working with governments and partners on five key interventions to address the learning crisis. The first and foremost is to reach every child and retain them in school. Rising poverty, insecurity and conflict, and the impact of the climate crisis, coupled with the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic closures have made this even more complex. UNICEF is on the ground providing cash transfers, setting up temporary schools, advocating for safe schools, providing school supplies, and supporting back-to-school campaigns to try and address the barriers that keep children out of the classroom.

We are also working with education ministers to ensure that children in school are regularly assessed on where their learning levels are at. This involves training teachers to execute these assessments and building the infrastructure to ensure the results are documented and monitored.

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teaching the foundational skills upon which all future learning depend – literacy and numeracy skills. We have to go back to basics to ensure children have a strong foundation for learning.

UNICEF is working on increasing catch-up learning to progress beyond what was lost during the pandemic. We have seen children return to the classroom unable to recognise letters and numbers. Accelerated, intensive catch-up classes are the best way to get children where they need to be in their learning.

And finally, we are developing psychosocial health and well-being in schools so that they create a safe and supportive environment conducive to learning. This includes providing mental health support to students, healthcare including immunisation, and school meals for the most vulnerable children.

When children are given the tools to learn, they thrive. Their confidence builds, and along with it, so does their ability to learn. It also supports their mental well-being. But during the early decades of life, children's confidence can be fragile, especially in school, and when they feel like they are falling behind, it leads to a domino effect that is much harder to overcome. ■

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