

A young African woman is the central focus, wearing a light-colored headwrap with a dark stripe. She has a warm, smiling expression. The background is blurred, showing other people in a similar setting. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text 'AFRICA SPECIAL FOCUS' is centered in white, bold, sans-serif font.

AFRICA SPECIAL FOCUS

Looking Past Recovery to Transformation: Building Resilient, Adaptive Education Systems in the Wake of COVID-19





Rachel Christina Ph.D.
Director of International
Basic Education,
Education Development Center

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As the everyday threat of COVID-19 waned, 2022 was heralded as a year of education system recovery from drastic declines in enrolment and learning outcomes over the prior two years. Progress has been slow, however, and even among the best-resourced systems, the effects of school closures, learning disruption, and the psychosocial toll of the pandemic will linger for years. For education systems already challenged by constraints of poverty, violence, and other crises, the burden of recovery is even heavier.

Indeed, recovery, if defined as the restoration of the status quo, is an unachievable and less than satisfactory goal, as many systems, ante COVID-19, were simply not meeting the needs of learners and their communities or broader national and global development goals. What is needed, post-pandemic, is a rethinking of the aims of education at all levels, and a recalibration of content and delivery that promotes resilience, adaptation, and opportunity. COVID-19 is only one of many threats to the continuity of education; systems must be able to address continued health risks, climate change, forced displacement and migration, and altered patterns of conflict and violence within and across states. Education systems must become more flexible and responsive as they rebuild after the pandemic and consider the costs of learning posed by these other threats.

The cost to learners and families, if change is not made, will simply be too great. Simulations from 2022 indicate that rates of learning poverty (the proportion of children who cannot read a simple text with comprehension by age 10) have surged by more than 15 points since 2019 to an estimated 70 per cent in low- and middle-income countries.¹ As a result, the gains made since 2015 have effectively been

lost. Traditionally marginalised and excluded populations, which had less access to the supplementary technology and learning spaces with which governments experimented during the pandemic, have fallen further behind.

COVID-19's impact on education is seen in sharp relief in Commonwealth countries like Uganda and Zambia. In those contexts, progress in reducing learning poverty through significant investment in foundational literacy over the past 15 years was reversed, and in some cases erased, by the pandemic. In Uganda, 2022 reading scores plummeted to a low not seen since 2016. In some languages, declines in the percentage of learners meeting national benchmarks were greater than 40 per cent from their 2018 high.² In Zambia, where performance improvements in literacy across the seven national languages were uneven but persistent over the last decade, the percentage of Grade 2 students reading at minimum proficiency in 2021 was half that of 2018, and no students met the national benchmarks for reading fluency.³ Performance gaps in 2021 between the roughly two-thirds of primary learners in government schools and the one-third in community schools were stark, with community school learners performing even more poorly than their public school peers.

Learning loss undermines children's opportunities to succeed in higher levels of education, access the foundational skills necessary for employment, and ultimately contribute meaningfully to their communities as responsible and productive citizens. Fundamentally, children have been deprived of their right to learn and of the opportunities that flow therefrom.

Restoration of the right to learn for the millions of children who have lost schooling during the pandemic and the protection of that right for those who come after them must be prioritised as part of recovery. The RAPID framework put forward by the multi-actor group behind The

State of Global Learning Poverty, of which the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is a member, promotes access and inclusion as essential. Support for more adaptive and resilient education systems is also crucial and should be prioritised. Uganda's learners returned to school after one of the longest and most stringent Covid closures in the world, only to face another shutdown to control an Ebola outbreak. In other contexts, post-pandemic teacher strikes interrupted instruction and unbalanced the school year. Conflict continues to close schools and fracture communities worldwide. The global COVID-19 pandemic was unique in scale but not in localised impact, and education systems need to focus on adaptation⁴ of delivery strategies and learning tools to better manage future shocks.

Adaptation for resilience can occur across the socio-ecological system within which learning is embedded. Classroom instruction for individual learners must be made more responsive to learner needs, based on more formative assessment. Communities

must be able to respond to stresses with more flexible alternatives to traditional schooling, as in the example of community-led COVID-19 learning groups in Uganda, which drew on idled capacity within communities to keep learners engaged with literacy instruction. Low-cost, robust use of technology can support the extension of learning during schooling interruptions, as seen in the example of interactive audio instruction and remote teacher training in Zambia. These same adaptive strategies can be institutionalised at the system level, with attention to lessons learned from COVID-19 in terms of cost, quality, and equity of implementation.

Improved delivery of education must be paired with attention to its content and purpose. Expanding the understanding of foundational skills to address broader habits of mind that promote critical thinking, collaboration, complex problem-solving, judgement, effective expression, and cognitive flexibility is also essential to individual and societal adaptation and resilience. Mechanics of literacy and numeracy

must be balanced with the flexible application (including through early and active exposure to science teaching and learning) of those foundational competencies that support and reinforce social-emotional learning and empower learners to make meaning of and contribute effectively to the world around them.

Finally, pandemic recovery provides a touch point for education system transformation. Better investment in and more effective coordination of education resources is critical to ensure that all children experience a continuum of schooling that leads to opportunities for work in changing economies vulnerable to a variety of shocks or stressors. Indeed, shifts towards knowledge and service economies can be positively influenced by schooling that supports environmental conservation, attention to biodiversity, and climate-responsive growth. Building resilient, adaptive education systems that can leverage the lessons of the pandemic and reorient in their wake is in the interest of all. ■

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1. World Bank, UNICEF, UK FCDO, USAID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and UNESCO (2022). *The State of Global Learning Poverty, 2022 Update*.

2. USAID Uganda Integrated Child and Youth Development Activity (2022). *Cohort 2 Early Grade Reading Assessment*.

3. USAID Education Data Activity (April 2022). *Zambia Early Grade Reading Assessment 2021 Midline Report*.

4. A framework for education adaptation focused particularly on the most vulnerable in Africa is found in the Global Center for Adaptation's *State and Trends in Adaptation Report 2022*.