COVID-19 highlights an opportunity for out-of-school children

The response of education during the pandemic has revealed the possibilities, both digital and non-digital, to reduce the number of out-of-school children, including those who were already excluded before the COVID-19 crisis.

Wongani Grace Taulo, Suguru Mizunoya, Garen Avanesian, Frank van Cappelle, Jim Ackers

The COVID-19 pandemic has had potentially very serious consequences for many children whose education and development have been badly affected by repeated and/or protracted school closures. At its peak, nationwide school closures impacted more than 1.5 billion learners, or over 90 per cent of the world's student population, from pre-primary to higher education. Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for most of the last academic year, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The actual number is much greater if we include countries like India, for which exact numbers are not available due to partial sub-national

re-opening of schools at different times of the year – but where 276 million children and youth were out of school for much of 2020. School closures have posed extraordinary challenges in terms of continuity of learning for many children, particularly those from marginalized groups. While COVID-19 has suddenly pushed huge extra numbers of children 'out of school', we must remember that the concept of out-of-school children is not new. For millions of children, schooling has always been a dream they will never realize, solely because of who they are, where they are, where they were born, and the social and economic circumstances they find themselves in.

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168 million

children worldwide for most of 2020.

Globally, the COVID-19 education response has focused on ensuring continuity of learning for those children who were in school at the onset of the pandemic. Little or no attention has been focused on continuing the services that catered for children who were out of school before COVID-19 – the accelerated learning and non-formal education programmes, for example.

Despite COVID-19 appearing to have made the circumstances worse for the children who were already out of school, there is a new opportunity to address their needs, and those of the children who may not return because of the impact of the pandemic.[1] This opportunity rests in exploiting the creativity that has emerged in how education can be delivered through more differentiated approaches while ensuring a targeted focus on the most marginalized children.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, there was already a learning crisis. Traditional approaches were often not working because they were of poor quality and didactic in nature; even children in school were often not learning. There is now an emerging consensus that we need to rethink how we design and deliver education and skills programmes to ensure that all children and adolescents acquire the learning they need to thrive as well as to survive. We need to build on the emerging concept of education being delivered any place, any time, to anyone – to reach as many children as possible.

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The scale of the problem

In 2018, the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that over 258 million children, adolescents and youth were out of school – one fifth of the global population of this age group. Of this total, 59 million children were of primary school age, 62 million were of lower secondary school age and 138 million were of upper secondary age. Furthermore, data from the institute show that, although the numbers of children, adolescents and youth excluded from school fell steadily in the decade to around 2010, progress has stagnated in recent years. In 2000, the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals and the corresponding Education for All goals provided a stimulus for action to reduce the global numbers of out-of-school children. The declaration of universal access to education opened doors for many children, as governments around the world adopted policies to remove barriers to education based on the principle that basic education should be free. UNICEF contributed to this through the School Fee Abolition Initiative. Indeed, these bold decisions seem to have paid off and the number of out-of-school children has reduced significantly, as shown in Figure 1. Despite these advances, most worryingly, from around 2010, the global number of children out of school at primary and secondary levels has stagnated with a slight increase at the primary level. This reflects the fact that reaching the most marginalized children, who often have multiple deprivations, requires novel, flexible and creative responses.

When the Millennium Development Goals were adopted, global efforts focused on expanding access and making quality primary education universal. The international education community believed that opening up access to schooling through strategies to remove barriers such as school fees, and to enact free education and related policies, would translate into all children being able to access school. Experience has shown, however, that while

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1   Lessons from the Ebola epidemic-related school closures in West Africa show that when learners lose their connection with school/learning, they are likely not to return as they become increasingly exposed to child labour, early marriage, unplanned pregnancies, and so on. Watt, Ewan, 'From Ebola to Coronavirus: Education must not be forgotten in a health crisis', Theirworld, London, 2 April 2020, <https://theirworld.org/news/ebola-to-coronavirus-education-vital-in-health-crisis>, accessed 22 April 2021.

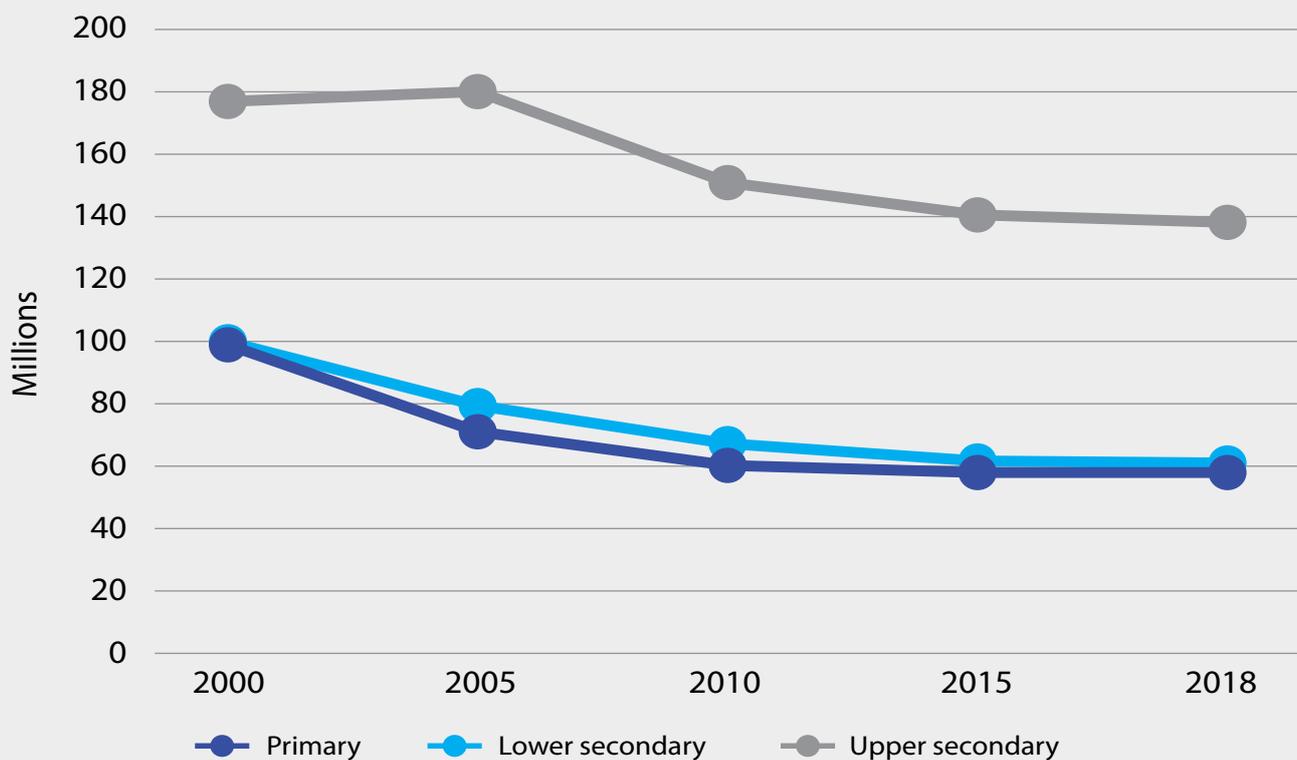**Figure 1. Number of out-of-school children (millions) by level of education**
Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics Global Database, 2021

removing financial costs is effective in getting children into school, that alone is not enough. A combination of approaches is needed to address the multiple barriers that keep children out of school. Attempts have been made to enhance the quality of education, such as teacher education programmes and enhanced quality assurance, and such approaches will still be needed, but initiatives have often failed to scale up or be sustained. Demand has sometimes not been strong due to a perceived lack of relevance – dated formal curricula have often failed to respond to the need for twenty-first century skills set out in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

Opportunities as well as challenges presented by COVID-19

While the scale of closures due to COVID-19 is alarming, education has, for the first time, been increasingly reinforced with private sector actors and other partners mobilizing and sharing resources to ensure continuity. These partnerships have highlighted the potential for private sector support to education delivery. There is also a growing recognition and consensus that while schools provide a safe space for learning, education can happen anywhere, and that blended approaches need to be acknowledged and adopted.

Has COVID-19 offered a window of opportunity to rethink how the problem of out-of-school children can be addressed? Can the emergency solutions to educate learners wherever they are and whoever they are provide longer-term solutions for every child and adolescent to learn? The answer has to be yes – if we can build on the momentum triggered by the current global response.

The energy that has been put into finding innovative ways to keep children learning during the current school closures can be harnessed to design solutions for out-of-school children. It is obvious that education delivery will never be the same again post COVID-19.

But the school closures have shown us that we need multipronged approaches to meet the various needs of children to learn from wherever they are. Information and communications technology (ICT) can be one of the key elements that help to enhance learning as well as improve educational governance. While there are immediate issues in connecting all children for learning, initiatives such as UNICEF's Reimagine Education, including Giga aim to connect all schools in the near future. Beyond schools, universal access to the internet will be a force for enhancing equity and realizing the right to lifelong learning – the pinnacle of SDG 4. ICT has a key role to play as a tool and enabler.

Distance education is not a panacea, however, and a there is still a critical need for face-to-face learning and the services that schools bring to children and communities, including for health, nutrition and well-being. If children are able to access learning only remotely, it will continue to be a priority to address how to deliver cross-sectoral support to children, including the most marginalized.

As school reopen in many countries, the following proposals offer some quick-win solutions but also suggest some medium- to long-term solutions and policy shifts to significantly reduce the number of out-of-school children.

Extend enrolment to children who were out of school before COVID-19

Governments and schools must allow school reopening to extend to children who were out of school pre-COVID-19, through bold decisions to inform schools to reabsorb these children into the formal system wherever possible. Similarly, non-formal

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education programmes and institutions, including alternative, or accelerated, learning programmes (ALPs), should be supported to accommodate the out-of-school children who wish to follow such pathways. Schools and other relevant institutions must be supported to absorb these children so that they can catch up with their peers. This will be particularly key for children for whom a return to formal schools may be impeded due to age or a lack of foundational learning. Mapping all the available opportunities and pathways will help to inform where children should be placed.

Incentivize the enrolment of children who were out of school pre-COVID-19

We need to incentivize the enrolment of pre-COVID-19 out-of-school children. Working together, government, schools, parents, caregivers, communities and new partners, including the private sector, have the opportunity to identify these out-of-school children and to bring them back to school or into ALPs. Governments can incentivize the enrolment of out-of-school children by removing financial barriers, providing learning resources, being flexible with registration requirements, and offering flexible programmes both in school and in non-formal programmes, among other strategies tailored to meeting the needs of out-of-school children. Interventions must consider the diverse profiles and age groups of out-of-school children and adolescents. Initiatives such as Generation Unlimited, for example, offer opportunities to focus on the most marginalized and to bring all adolescents into education, training or work.

Mobilize communities to reach out-of-school children

As countries work on back-to-school campaigns, targeted strategies and messages could be integrated for children who were out of school before the pandemic. Messaging should focus on opportunities to enrol them in both formal and alternative programmes and on where to get relevant information for such services. Messages should be tailored to the various groups of out-of-school children, including those with disabilities or linguistic minorities, and programmes should be identified, developed or adapted to address their various needs. As well as academic support, other services may be needed that address their well-being, such as for health, psychosocial support and nutrition. Campaigns must also be accompanied by the tracking of out-of-school children, led by schools and communities.

Enrol all new entrants into school, regardless of age

One of the most effective strategies to eliminate the problem of out-of-school children is to ensure that all children can enrol in school regardless of age. Monitoring the enrolment of grade/class one entrants will be particularly critical. Countries apply different age requirements to enrol in school, focusing on enrolling children at the right age. While this remains ideal, allowances should be made so that all children can enrol in school or ALPs, even if they are above the normal age. COVID-19 may affect parents' and caregivers' decisions about school enrolment, either because of fears of transmission in schools or because of because of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and subsequent difficulties to financially support children's return to school. Back-to-school campaigns must, therefore, emphasize the importance of enrolling new entrants, as well as advocacy to limit the burden of the cost of schooling on households. In some countries, government officials and school staff make door-to-door visits to get all children enrolled. This practice remains effective in countries such as Albania and Kazakhstan where there is a systematic, digitized process to triangulate information from health centres, civil registries and schools. Such efforts must be encouraged to get as many children as possible into school.

Extend and incentivize enrolment. Mobilize the community. Accommodate pregnancy and all ages and groups of children.

Allow pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa saw the incidence of teenage pregnancy spike as a result of school closures and the increased vulnerability to sexual violence and early marriage; school closures under COVID-19 are likely to have similar impacts on girls. In some contexts, policies continue to ban pregnant girls from attending school. Governments must ensure that pregnant girls and young mothers are encouraged to return to school and to stay in school. The Government of Sierra Leone recently overturned a long-standing ban on pregnant girls being in school. The solutions must go beyond schooling and include alternative approaches to deliver education that are relevant and inclusive for girls, pregnant girls and young mothers.

Accommodate all groups of out-of-school children

It is important to recognize that there are different groups of out-of-school children, and targeted strategies may be required to meet their diverse and multiple vulnerabilities. Some strategies may work, for instance, for children from poor households, but additional approaches may be needed for children with disabilities. When strategies are planned for getting out-of-school children into learning,

reasonable accommodations are important to include various groups of children, including but not limited to children with disabilities, children on the move, children living in urban slums, children in remote areas, and children from ethnic and linguistic minorities. Similarly, it is important to distinguish children who have never entered schools from those who have entered late and those who are likely to drop out, and to develop strategies that respond to their unique needs.

Recommendations for medium- to long-term solutions and policy shifts

Adapt remote learning to the needs of out-of-school children

While nothing can replace face-to-face learning, the COVID-19 education crisis has shown the possibility to deliver education beyond the school, and that learning can take place anywhere, any time. Capitalizing on these remote-learning initiatives, stakeholders in education can look at similar initiatives to deliver education to out-of-school children (see Box 1).

The out-of-school children's initiative has supported a significant number of countries not only to generate and analyse data on out-of-school children, but also to develop profiles of out-of-school children. Using such data,

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Box 1. Three examples to inspire innovative learning solutions

Storyweaver by Pratham Books is an open online resource that learners can access for self-directed educational content. It is available in 153 languages, with topics ranging from mathematics to life skills. Out-of-school children can access content that is appropriate to their age and reading ability.

EkStep in India is another open digital learning solution that provides access for millions of children and youth as well as teachers. Materials are available to both in-school and out-of-school children using a computer or mobile device.

Learning Links is a promising example being piloted in Liberia to improve numeracy and literacy for girls who are out of school due to pregnancy. The community-based educational model includes the tracking of learners' progress through text message surveys.

and with the support of ICT, solutions can be tailored to meet the specific needs of out-of-school children at various levels of learning. Countries developing remote-learning models need to respond to their contexts – each country needs to choose the best medium, or mix of media, based on access, technical infrastructure and feasibility (in Chad, for example, radio education has been provided for children affected by conflict). Offline strategies must also be explored alongside the online opportunities. The adaptation of existing approaches may help to accelerate provision.

Reassess requirements for school enrolment

Every child has a right to education, and enrolment requirements must not hinder this. Too often, though, children fail to register for school due to strict registration requirements that they cannot fulfil. Even where there is a policy enabling children to enrol without documentation, schools may not be aware of it, or may have concerns about the repercussions of allowing registration. Migrant children, refugees, internally displaced children and children from ethnic minorities often face the challenges of a lack of documentation

in the form of national identity, proof of legal migration, residence permit or transfer documents from previous schools, or related requirements such as birth certificates, immunization histories or the presence of parents. Even when they are enrolled in school, undocumented children may not be included in education statistics, school grants or other forms of school financing.

Allowing flexibility in the enrolment requirements could open doors for all children. Where documents are lacking, flexibility is key – children should be allowed to enrol and then be supported in referrals to the appropriate authorities to obtain the required documentation.

Use early warning systems on dropout

It is better to prevent dropout than to address the problem afterwards. Effective strategies to reduce the number of out-of-school children must include a system for monitoring children's educational participation, achievement and general well-being at school. The system needs to identify and address issues as early as possible in order

- *Adapt* remote learning
- *Reassess* enrolment
- *Identify* dropout factors
- *Innovate* alternatives
- *Rethink* curricula and assessment
- *Engage* parents and caregivers
- *Expand* partnerships

to develop interventions that minimize the risks of dropout. Early identification systems can prevent dropout by monitoring multiple student-level indicators that are proven to be strongly associated with dropout. For example, monitoring absenteeism and having protocols in place to respond to different levels of absenteeism can significantly reduce dropout. This can be paper-based, such as in the case of some states in India, or digitized, as in the Maldives, where UNICEF supported the development of a system for digitally recording absenteeism and the reason, with automated alerts for different thresholds of absenteeism and truancy.

Innovate alternative pathways for out-of-school adolescents

The responses to COVID-19 have revealed several innovative ways to offer education that do not necessarily undermine the importance of the institution of schools. They show that there are possibilities to complement school-based education through alternatives and equivalents for children who do not make it through the school system. If the focus is on developing skills for work, such alternatives are particularly relevant for children of secondary school age, as many adolescents fail to transition from primary to secondary, and even fewer to upper secondary, due to the filtering in most education systems. Providing innovative, diversified and flexible educational pathways could be a solution to addressing the needs of such young people. Governments currently provide alternative, non-formal education systems mostly at the basic education level, such as ALPs for out-of-school children aiming to integrate them into formal schools. Such programmes are often poorly resourced and lack clear transition routes to formal education. The experience from the remote-learning approaches deployed during COVID-19 could help to make them more responsive to the needs of out-of-school children and young people.

ALP approaches remain critical for foundational learning, but these are not enough. Young people lack alternative and flexible pathways to give them the skills they need for work after these programmes. A range of online, TV, radio and mobile-based approaches can be deployed with a focus on developing transferable and job skills. Similarly, ALP approaches can be expanded to address the gap in the non-formal sector equivalents to lower and upper secondary school. Again, UNICEF initiatives such as Generation Unlimited and Reimagine Education can be explored for solutions to increase alternative pathways.

Rethink schedules, curricula and assessment

Globally, 30 per cent of girls and 20 per cent of boys aged 10 to 19 years have never attended school, according to a UNICEF study. As discussed above, the best strategy to reduce the problem of out-of-school children is to stem the risk of dropout at the point of entry, by being flexible about age and so on. The reasons for dropping out include but are not limited to poverty, remoteness, disability, disenchantment with school, lack of support at home, negative learning experiences, and having to repeat grades because of poor performance. In rethinking curricula, learning needs to be made more attractive, not just to academically inclined learners, but also to those who seek more practical pathways with effective links to the world of work. Such reforms must be accompanied by strategies to improve the relationship between teachers and learners through the skills of teachers to better support them to do well and to stay in learning. Flexible school schedules that include evening classes have also proven to be effective in reducing dropout or the number of out-of-school children.

Learning needs to be made more attractive, not just to academically inclined learners, but also to those who seek more practical pathways.

Evidence shows that learner progression based on academic achievement can lead to dropout at lower grades and affects the rate of transition from one schooling level to the next. Academic performance has also been strongly linked to socioeconomic status in that it tends to accelerate the progress of children who have already had the best start in life. Evidence also shows that the most marginalized children have lower learning outcomes compared with their peers, meaning that they may be disproportionately disadvantaged. For example, data from the latest round of the UNICEF-supported Multiple Cluster Indicator Surveys suggest that the shares of the children in the age group 7–14 years with foundational skills in reading and mathematics are substantially lower for the poorest households than for those with higher socioeconomic status. Based on the most recent data, the biggest divide between the rich and poor is observed in Madagascar for the percentage of children aged 7–14 years with foundational reading skills. While around 60 per cent of the children in this age group from the richest households demonstrate foundational reading skills, the number drops to only 5 per cent for these children living in the poorest households. The anticipation of failing an assessment or repeating a class can push children over the edge, causing them to quit school. It is important, therefore, that academic assessments are tailored to the diverse needs of learners and geared to reducing inequalities. Ensuring that programmes for early childhood care and education reach all children can be a critical strategy to developing foundational skills. This should be a major focus beyond COVID-19.

Harness parental and caregiver engagement

Evidence shows that weak support at home can hold children back from attending school or learning effectively. For children from marginalized backgrounds, a lack of parental or caregiver support can be a big barrier to their education. Reasons range from having no parents, or illiterate ones, to neglect due to disability, poverty and other gender and socioeconomic factors. Yet these are the groups of children for whom parental or caregiver support could make the most positive difference. School closure due to COVID-19 has shown how learning can happen anywhere, any time, giving parents, caregivers, family and close friends the roles of teachers. Within this context, it is important to consider what education systems expect from parents and caregivers, and to provide them with the policy framework and resource support for the roles.

Getting out-of-school children into education, either in formal school settings or through alternative and non-formal pathways, will require the effective engagement of parents, caregivers and communities. Identifying out-of-school children, understanding the available channels to get them into education, and sustaining both their stay in education and their performance will all need parents to be well informed of their role and of the services available. Coordinated approaches should involve the relevant community partners to reach the parents and caregivers of out-of-school children with appropriate information, tools and resources, and there needs to be investment in making these accessible and easy to understand. The Speed School programme in Mali is a good example of engaging parents, caregivers and community members to support out-of-school children.

Expand partnerships to address out-of-school children

New partners have emerged in the context of COVID-19 school closures, including technology companies, non-profit organizations and corporations. The emergence of these new partners to support the continuity of learning

> *Without education, training and work for all, we risk creating disenfranchised societies and further exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities.*

while children are at home is an opportunity to engage them in the discourse on out-of-school children. Big tech companies such as Microsoft have come to the fore to support online education. Similarly, media, mobile and other private sector companies have also worked with governments and development partners to address the COVID-19 education crisis. These emerging partnerships have the potential for engagement of the private sector beyond the pandemic. For out-of-school children, the potential of this could be to adapt effective remote learning, both online and offline, to develop education programmes that meet their specific needs. Non-profit organizations can also be engaged, especially the community-based institutions that support the provision of services or work as facilitators to reach out-of-school children, including those in the remotest and poorest areas. Out-of-school children are not a homogeneous group, and the engagement of such partners could be useful in ensuring that programmes are tailored to their diverse needs.

Seize the opportunity

While these proposed strategies are not exhaustive and may not completely address the problem of out-of-school children, we must be reminded that education for all children is a fundamental human right that must be fulfilled at all costs. Quality and inclusive education for all will be key to the recovery from COVID-19 and to securing the current generation's future. Without creating new opportunities to ensure education, training and work for all, we risk creating disenfranchised societies and further exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities.

We must seize the opportunity now to invest in effective alternative models to school learning, including the development of both digital and non-digital learning modalities, to help reach out-of-school children and provide them with access to quality education wherever they are, whoever they are.

Resources

For more information on UNICEF's work to support out-of-school children visit:

https://www.unicef.org/education

https://www.allinschool.org

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