

Why Early Childhood Education must be a National Priority in the Post-pandemic Era with Increased Inclusion?

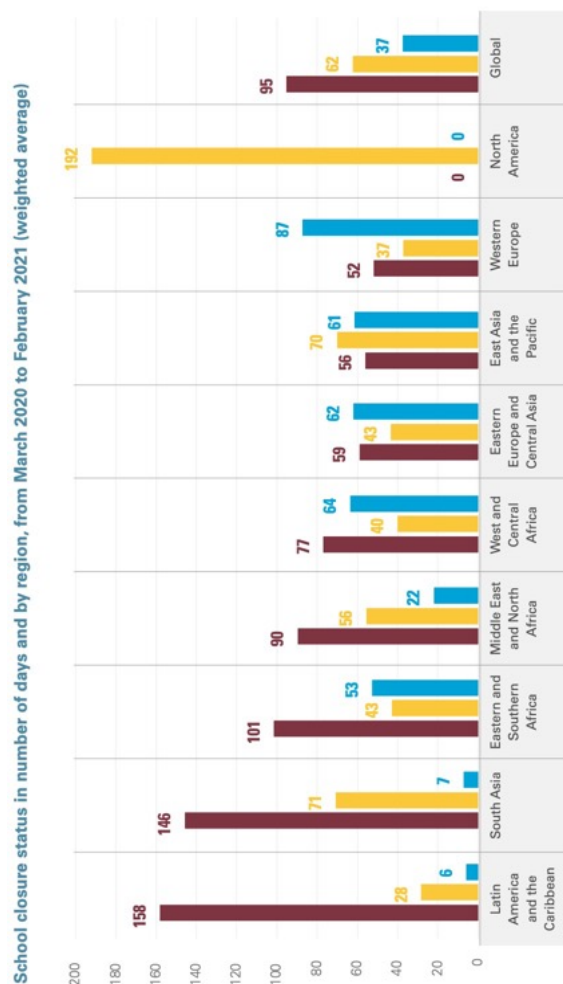
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Before we answer the question “Why” let us build a perspective on the current status of the havoc wreaked by COVID-19 on children’s education globally.

Spanning from March 11, 2020, to February 2, 2021, schools were closed for an average of 95 instruction days all over the world – this makes up for ~50% of the classroom time allocated for instructions. On a global scale, 214 million students from pre-primary to higher secondary education missed 75% of their classroom instruction time since March 2020. Of these 214 million, a whopping 168 million kids missed school altogether due to closures. As of February 2, 2021, 196 million kids hailing from 27 countries (~13% globally) had their schools still closed. Of these schools, ~80% of classroom instructions had been missed in the eleven months starting March 2020!

Figure 1: Source -UNICEF, COVID19-and-school-closures.pdf



Here’s how much each continent was impacted in the process:

As is visible in the chart above, kids in South Asia were the second most affected strata globally. With further school closures, the impact is expected to be aggravated, with the worst affected kids being the ones who are most vulnerable a.k.a. the primary students. The impact on them has been unprecedented.

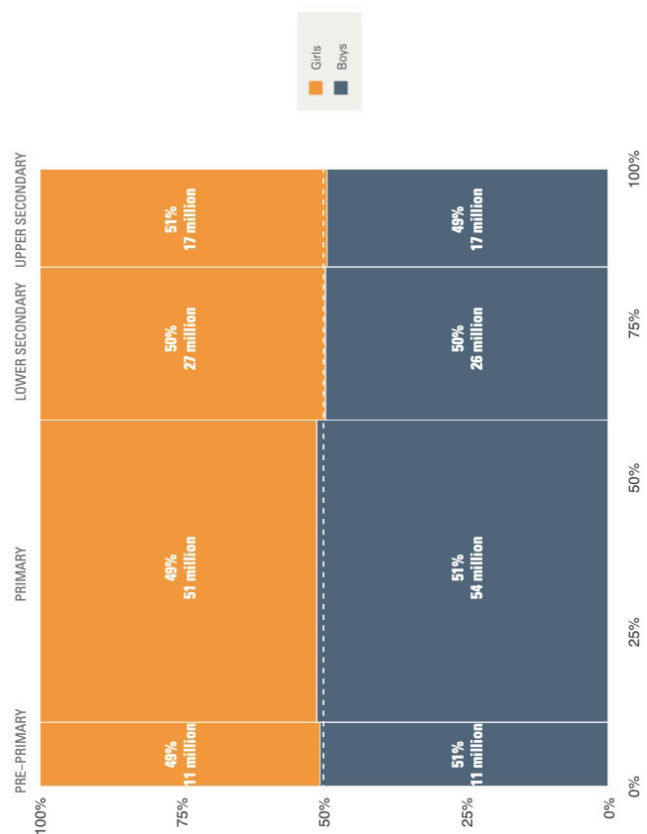
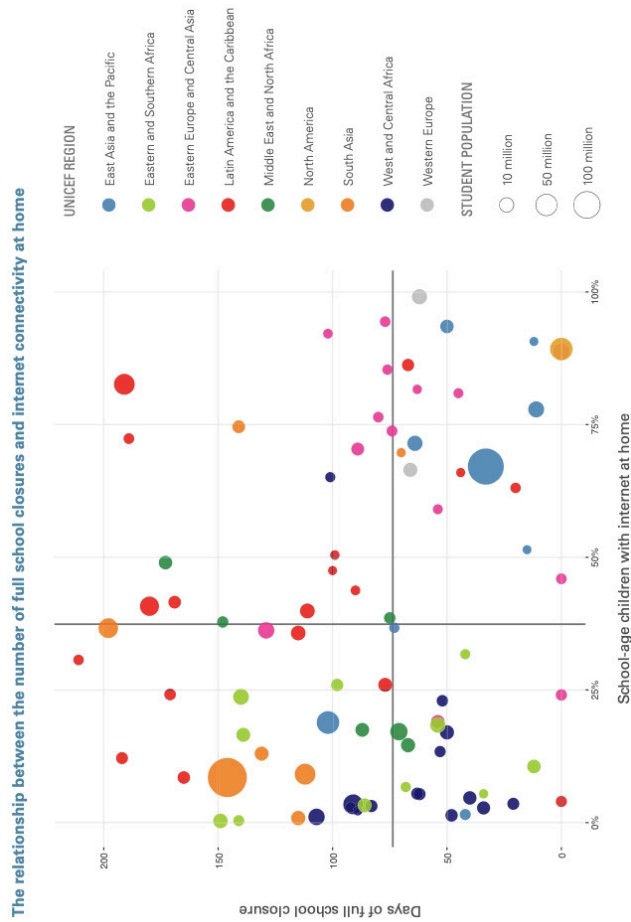


Figure 2: Source – UNICEF COVID19-and-school-closures.pdf

Primary students also constitute the largest fragment of the affected 214 million students and are therefore also the majority of those who missed 75% of their classroom instruction time (105 million)!

Here’s where the problem worsens. Even more distressed are the students who belong to the lesser privileged sections of society with no access to the basic learning infrastructure.

Figure 3: Source UNICEFCOVID19-and-school-closures.pdf



Tackling this problem requires a two-pronged approach from two different stakeholders the government / other partners and the parents of these children.

Here is what governments & related partners can do:

- On a war footing basis, invest in enhancing the services that provide the little ones with a befitting start to their lives. E.g., 10% of the education budget can be dedicated to pre-primary education. This will give more children access to learning opportunities as well as requisite facilities.
- Significantly improve access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) services (be it at home or school). E.g. regular health screening, nutrition support, antenatal care, etc.
- Introduce more family-friendly ECD policies immediately and issue private sector directives. These must enable parents or guardians to provide the best possible start to the lives of their kids. This can also be effectively sustained by implementing better workplace policies. Gather data on the key metrics of ECD& monitor progress. In order to

track progress, we must first figure out a way to measure the children’s development with respect to the following aspects social, cognitive and emotional. This must be compared with global data to arrive at a comparison and progress report.

- Establish competent and dedicated leadership to manage ECD programs & strategize efforts across ancillary sectors. Related sectors include education, health, nutrition, sanitation and hygiene. Policies can be set up and a certain ministry can oversee the initiatives as well as drive progress.
- Bolster the demand for high-quality ECD services. Awareness must be created among parents, guardians and caretakers to better apprise them of what Early Childhood Development entails. Informed decisions will undoubtedly drive demand and give the ECE sector a boost.

Here is what parents can do:

- Unfailingly establish a routine together with your kid. Factor in education, playtime, reading and other activities. Try to arrive at these plans together and include your kid in the decision.
- Promote open and transparent conversations. The little ones need to be encouraged to ask more questions and easily express their emotions. Invite them to conversations and reinforce their knowledge of the importance of good practices.
- Be patient with the kids. Begin learning sessions that are shorter in duration and gradually make them longer. E.g., for a 30- minute study target, start with a 10-minute session.
- Keep in touch with the kids’ educating faculty. This is aimed at learning more about the child than monitoring him or her. Try and get some guidance from them to facilitate the process of learning and improving the quality of your interactions.

Most countries in the Asia Pacific region have not implemented 1 year of cost-free & compulsory pre-primary education. At the same time, household incomes have dwindled throughout the pandemic causing a direct impact

even on student enrolment. The ECCE (Early Childhood Care & Education) sector became the most vulnerable since a large portion of it is privately funded and operated. With the right

policies and efforts, we can give these kids a brighter tomorrow irrespective of their socio-economic background.

References

COVID19-and-school-closures.pdf

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