

IS THERE LEARNING CONTINUITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? SIX LESSONS

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An effective education response to the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be built on solid evidence and data. For example, what do you know about your population? How many families own radios and televisions? Do children use — and actually learn from — online learning platforms? How much time — if any — do learners spend studying at home?

While the edtech landscape has drastically changed in the past decade, research on edtech has not kept pace (<https://edtechhub.org> ). At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was initially very little data on efforts to ensure learning continuity during school closures. However, a number of research groups have recently conducted surveys and collected data on the education response to COVID-19. Here, we take a look at some of the emerging evidence and summarise this data in six initial lessons.

The six lessons are:

- Lesson 1. Only a minority of children in low- and middle-income countries have access to learning continuity
- Lesson 2. Current provision of learning continuity is not equitable
- Lesson 3. Students are not using national online learning platforms
- Lesson 4. Access to a device does not mean learning

- Lesson 5. The schedule of educational programming matters, especially for children from low-income families
- Lesson 6. Don't ignore parents

LESSON 1. ONLY A MINORITY OF CHILDREN IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES HAVE ACCESS TO LEARNING CONTINUITY

Where surveys have been undertaken in low- and middle-income countries, they appear to indicate that few children have access to learning continuity. A phone survey in Senegal found that less than 11% of children have used radio, television and online courses to study since schools closed (↑ [Le Nestour, et al., 2020](#)). A survey in Kenya suggested that only 22% of children have access to learning (↑ [Uwezo Kenya, 2020](#)).

What does this evidence mean for policymakers? The above insights suggest that the current technology-focused approach seems to reach a minority of children; this approach appears to leave the majority of young learners behind.

LESSON 2. CURRENT PROVISION OF LEARNING CONTINUITY IS NOT EQUITABLE

School closures have disproportionately affected children from less affluent communities. In Kenya, 16.5% of primary school students in government schools have access to digital learning resources (↑ [ibid.](#)). This percentage rises to 48.1% when we focus on children from private primary schools (↑ [ibid.](#)).

In Ecuador, learners from the lowest wealth quartile are more than twice as likely to have completed no schoolwork than learners from the highest wealth quartile (↑ [Asanov, et al., 2020](#)).

At a time when some governments are forced to extend school closures to 2021, attempting a rapid shift to digital learning will exacerbate existing inequities and further disadvantage the poorest students. Policymakers should consider how they can make long-term investments to improve learning and teaching rather than pursuing short-term digital interventions that will only benefit a small minority of children (↑ [Haßler, 2020](#)).

LESSON 3. STUDENTS ARE NOT USING NATIONAL ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORMS

Many governments have quickly developed and promoted national online learning platforms to mitigate the impact of school closures. However, it appears that these platforms have reached only a few students. In Senegal, a phone survey suggested that only 1% of learners have accessed online courses since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (↑ [Le Nestour, et al., 2020](#)). In Kenya, less than 10% of the few children who can access digital learning resources have actually used materials from the national online repository (↑ [Uwezo Kenya, 2020](#)). This low level of engagement stems partly from poor internet connectivity and a lack of devices (↑ [ibid.](#)).

Even when students can access online courses, they may not use a national learning platform. In Ecuador, a World Bank phone survey found that only 8% of high-school students used the Ministry of Education's Educa platform in April (↑ [Asanov, et al., 2020](#)). By contrast, 48% of learners accessed educational content on YouTube in the same month (↑ [ibid.](#)).

Prior to building a bespoke online learning platform, policymakers should consider whether learners can access there is a case for using online learning and if so, whether utilising existing platforms may be more effective than establishing a new national online learning platform.

LESSON 4. ACCESS TO A DEVICE DOES NOT MEAN LEARNING

A recent analysis suggested that the Ubongo television series is the most popular edtech product among children in sub-Saharan Africa (↑ [Crawford, 2020](#)). In Kenya, 42% of children who have access to learning continuity have watched educational television classes (↑ [Uwezo Kenya, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, only 19% of Kenyan students have listened to radio lessons.

This difference is notable as 62% of Kenyan households own a radio while 45% of Kenyan households own a television set (↑ [Ibid.](#)). In other words, device ownership does not correlate with device usage or continuity of learning. Policymakers must not just consider what affordances there, but must also consider what platforms are most likely to be used.

LESSON 5. THE SCHEDULE OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING MATTERS, ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

The timing of educational programming is important as learners may have other responsibilities while schools are closed. For example, 71% of children in Uganda and 59% of children in Sierra Leone need to help with household tasks when out of school (↑ [BRAC, 2020](#)). In Bangladesh, a phone survey found that children in rural areas are currently spending 80% less time on learning than before the COVID-19 outbreak (↑ [Asadullah, 2020](#)). In the same period, the amount of time that children spend doing chores and paid work has doubled (↑ [ibid.](#)).

In Ecuador, the World Bank found that the majority of children spend time studying in the morning (↑ [Asanov, et al., 2020](#)). Although learners continue to study in the afternoon, many children from low-income families need to work or complete household chores (↑ [ibid.](#)). In This means that children who need to work could miss out on radio lessons in the afternoon.

Policymakers need to carefully schedule educational programming to avoid disadvantaging students from low-income households. Messaging to communities and parents is needed to ensure time is reserved for learning.

LESSON 6. DON'T IGNORE PARENTS

Much of the discussion on 'distance learning' has focused on children. What technology can children access? What is the best mobile application for self-directed learning? While these frequently asked questions are important, they implicitly assume that parents and caregivers are not interested in — or capable of — leading educational activities in the home.

However, the evidence suggests otherwise. Since schools closed in Senegal, parents have played a greater role in education delivery than teachers, television, radio and online courses (↑ [Le Nestour, et al., 2020](#)). In Kenya, more children have accessed learning materials via their parents than directly from text messages, radio or the national online learning platform (↑ [Uwezo Kenya, 2020](#)). Similarly, learners in Bangladesh have relied on their families more than the internet and television broadcasts as a source of educational support (↑ [Asadullah, 2020](#)).

These examples suggest that policymakers need to consider how to engage and support parents and caregivers. Parents can — and are — playing an important role in facilitating home-based learning. Instead of focusing on technology that children are not using, policymakers should consider how they can strengthen and build on the contribution that parents can make.

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A full list of references and links can be found in [↑ our reference library](#).

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