

# Addressing Learning Crisis at the Foundational Level: Evidence from ASER

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As the global education systems forge ahead into the final decade to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, the case for investing in Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a key foundational pillar is stronger than ever. Early childhood (ages 0-8) is a critical period for cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Optimal development provides the foundation for future physical, emotional and mental health. The Sustainable Development Goals highlight pre-primary education for all as a key global target (4.2) to address learning, equity and inclusion. The economic case for support of early years education is also strong. Evidence suggests that children who experience sub-optimal development may have a 26% reduction in potential earnings as adults.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this evidence, recent estimates suggest that as many as 250 million or 43% of children in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential<sup>2</sup>. Poverty, nutritional deficiencies, poor health care, and insufficient learning opportunities are cited as the key factors underpinning these failings. These failings have been exacerbated with the onset of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, leading to school closures and uprooting the basic pedagogical structures that are central to early years learning. The pandemic-induced lockdowns had the adverse effect of making ECE inaccessible to a significant number of children. According to UNESCO estimates, last year, more than 1.6 billion students in over 180 countries, of whom 155 million children are at pre-school level, were affected by COVID-19. There has been an observable trend of pre-primary education being relatively neglected compared to other levels of education during school closures.

This neglect is particularly pronounced in Global South settings where young children from marginalized families and communities bear a heavy 'pandemic burden', the consequences of which are yet to be fully measured. It is against this context that large-scale datasets such as ASER have to be utilized to assess and document the short- and medium-term effects of COVID-19 on early learning. More specifically, the data will help identify and understand the extent to which parents and caregivers have been able to support development of their children at home, the kind of resources they had access to and the level of preparedness of schools and teachers to respond to the pandemic.

## Early Learning during COVID-19

Despite a wide range of reforms and policies, there have been lags in the country with regards to implementation of these reforms and subsequently early learning delivery, outcomes, and infrastructure. These have been further magnified with the onset of COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, only an estimated 39% (rural) and 53% (urban) children (3-5 years) were in a formal ECE setting<sup>3</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic only intensified this lag.

Due to Pakistan's proximity to China where the COVID-19 outbreak was first discovered, it was among the first countries to institute widespread school closures<sup>4</sup>. Schools began closing in Sindh province in February 2020, and by March 14, 2020 all schools were closed. Six months later, schools

1. [https://gh.bmj.com/content/4/Suppl\\_4/e001302](https://gh.bmj.com/content/4/Suppl_4/e001302)

2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7295453/#R5>

3. ASER 2019

4. Geven & Hasan, 2020

began a staggered reopening, with early childhood education starting up again on September 30. The rising COVID-19 cases resulted in the provincial governments again closing schools in November<sup>5</sup>.

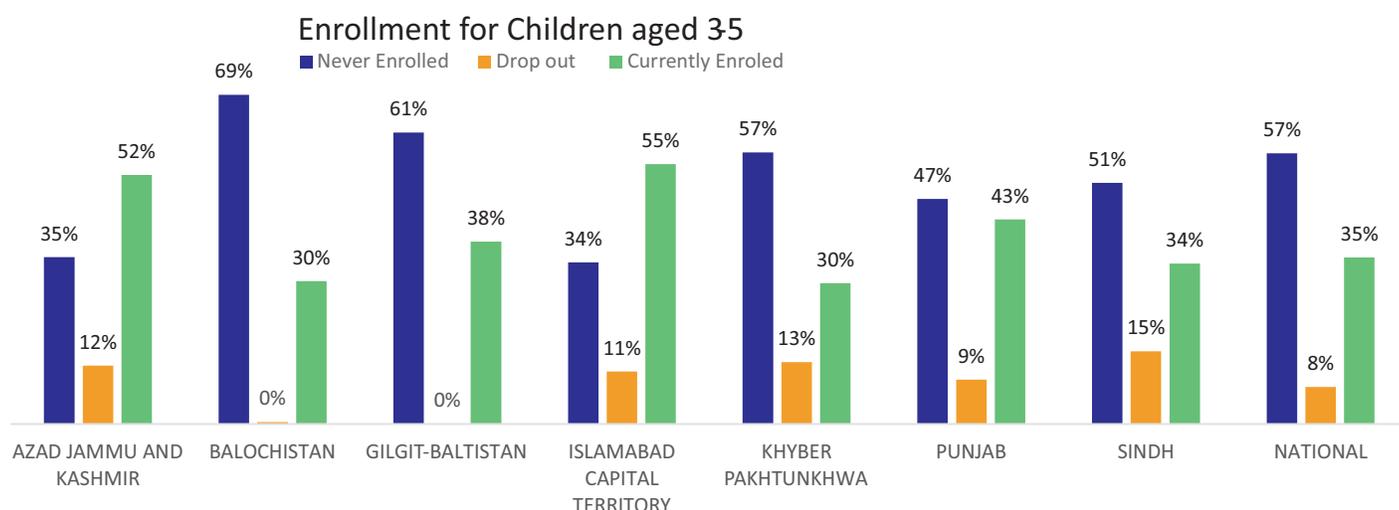
According to the Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training (MoFE&PT)'s estimates, at least 40 million children across all grade levels were impacted by the pandemic<sup>6</sup>. The majority affected were the younger ECE/lower primary aged children who ended up being provided with far lesser options of distance learning and home schooling, as both service-providers and parents were unprepared for the task of supporting children in ECE. For instance, in the MoFE&PT's Resilience Plan for Education in June 2020, there was no mention of ECE and nor was there any concomitant increase in funding for ECE in the province.

This had a larger impact with regards to how ECE teachers were supported, how parents were engaged, how home learning took place during lockdown, how a systems-level strategy was devised, and ultimately how the learning losses incurred in early years during the pandemic will be mitigated moving forward. This may be changing gradually after one year of the pandemic.

### Evidence from ASER

#### Enrollment

At the national level, ECE enrolment improved slightly during 2015-19 but has reduced further in 2021. It has dropped from 39% in 2019 to 35% in 2021. The onset of COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns it ensued have had an impact on the enrolment status of young children. There are wide intra-provincial disparities with some regions such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan containing a significant proportion of young children out of school. At the same time, other regions such as AJK and ICT show higher enrollment figures for children aged 3-5.



#### School Preparedness

School preparedness of young children can be gauged via learning levels. The ASER data has a specifically designed tool that quantifies learning levels for children in all grades within two specific domains:

- i. reading skills
- ii. arithmetic skills

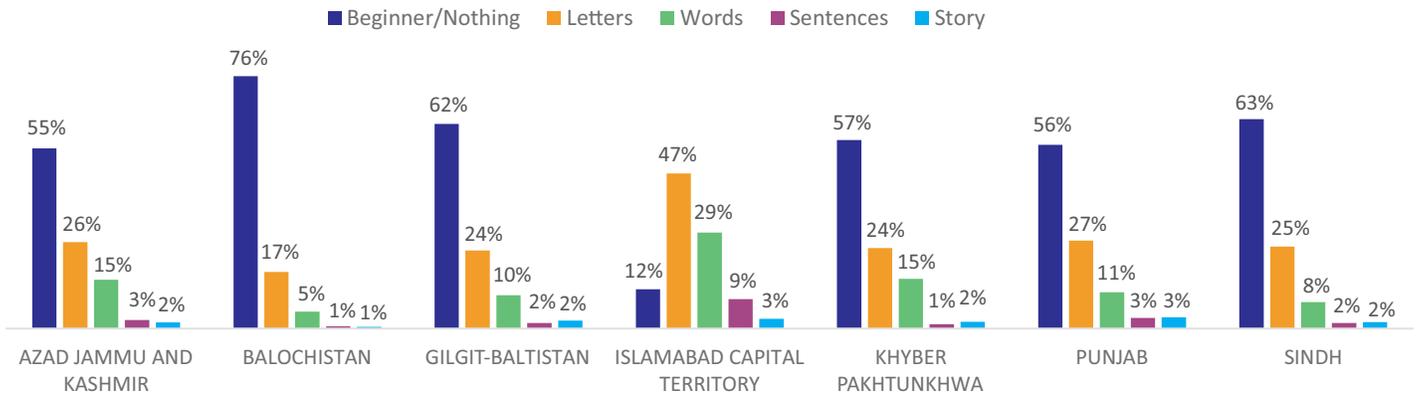
5. Ejaz et al., 2021

6. [http://mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/0\\_%20NERRP%20COVID-9%20MoFEPT%204%20May%202020%20Ver%2001.pdf](http://mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/0_%20NERRP%20COVID-9%20MoFEPT%204%20May%202020%20Ver%2001.pdf)

These two domains are also comparable to and coherent with the national and provincial curriculums. According to the Single National Curriculum Framework, there are certain competencies children are expected to have by the end of Grade 1 including, but not limited to:

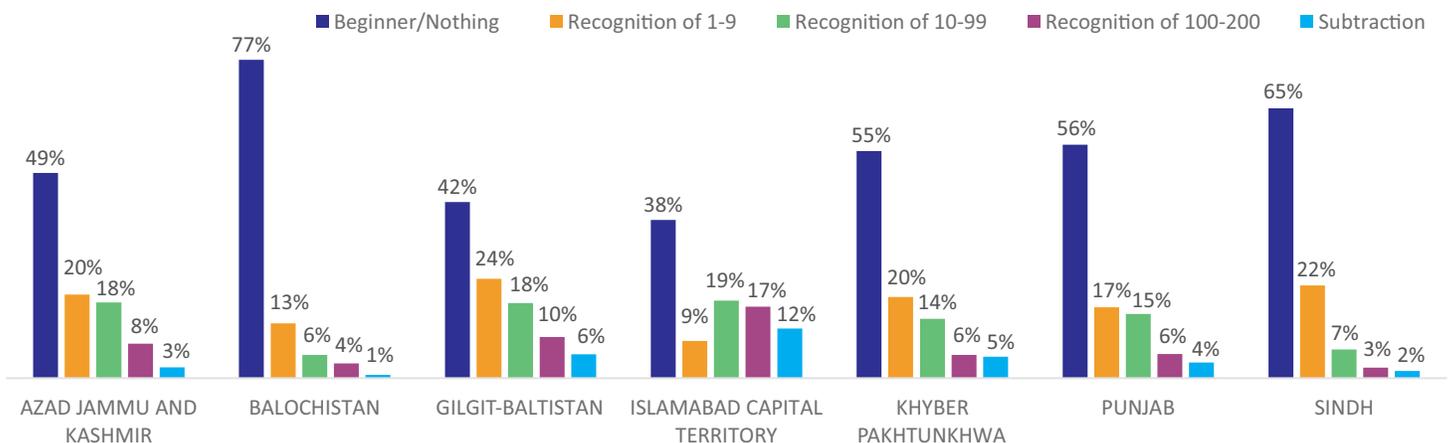
- i. ability to read and understand basic sentences, and short stories in a local language
- ii. ability to read letters, words, sentences and short stories that the student is familiar with
- iii. recognize numbers up to 100, add and subtract two-digit numbers, and be familiar with abstract concepts like time and date.

## Reading Highest Level



Similar to enrolment, here too young children show clear disparities across regions. In some regions, such as Balochistan, more than three-fourth of the children aged 3-5 have reading skills at the beginner/nothing level and only one percent can read sentence and/or stories. The percentage of children who can read sentences or stories remains low throughout all regions.

## Arithmetic Highest Level



Similarly for arithmetic, only a small percentage of young children across all regions recognize numbers above 100 and can-do simple functions such as subtraction. With the exception of ICT and GB, the majority of the children across Pakistan are at the beginner level for arithmetic.

## Conclusion

Overall, enrollment and school preparedness figures have indicated some troublesome aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth investigating the specific reasons for the lower performance across the country to understand why reforms towards learning levels are not producing required outcomes. Additionally, the low-enrolment districts in all provinces—also highlighted in some of the latest sector plans—should be targeted for increased enrolment. However, this provides limited data on early learning in Pakistan, and particularly with regards to out-of-school children, transition rates, gender, and specific learning environments. To inform better policy, there is a need to collect data and figures on these themes.

Other research initiatives that address these data gaps including the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Phase II household survey should be utilized along with ASER to gather information on household conditions, learning and development outcomes, and the role the pandemic has played in bringing about this situation.

