

# Resilience & Resolve for Reforms: ASER Rural Pakistan 2021 on Education & Learning

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Schools in Pakistan have been shuttered intermittently since February 2020 (Sindh) and, the rest of the country since mid-March 2020. The longest school closure across Pakistan was from March to August 2020. Two years of the pandemic has witnessed extraordinary actions both by the government and the households; these are vital spaces where the child's best interests are likely to be recognized, nurtured and served. Emergencies, especially prolonged ones teach many lessons especially when data is available at scale to inform and design actionable initiatives. It is thus critical to highlight evidence-based challenges and trends that speak to the elements of resilience and resolve for reforms at a system level to bolster learning nationwide. These trends continue to be informed by data, country reports and surveys about 'learning losses' (WB/ITA/CDG 2020/21)<sup>1</sup>, persistent learning gaps over time due to emergencies (Andrabi et. Al 2020)<sup>2</sup>, equity concerns across poorest and richest households with respect to technology access, gender and inclusion.

ASER Pakistan 2021 (rural) is the first dataset at scale since March 2020, covering 152 districts of Pakistan as a National Education Survey during an unprecedented emergency. It reached 247,978 children 3-16 in 87,415 households, 4420 villages and 5698 schools (4096 government) through 11,000 volunteers and 20 civil society organizations including the National Commission of Human Development (NCHD). This survey is unique as it was conducted during a rare window of relative stability when schools remained more or less opened between September to November 2021. This was the largest of seven surveys conducted by ITA during the pandemic (ECE/4, Learning Losses/1, Urban Slums pilot and ASER 2021). Of these, three were virtual/telephonic, one face to face on an app entry and two with pen and paper face to face. Compared to the 'learning losses' survey in 16 districts in four provinces during February -March 2021, the ASER Pakistan 2021 (rural) is a nationwide survey at a time when children had a longer contact time in school with perhaps more established home and school routines. The results are interpreted against this backdrop.

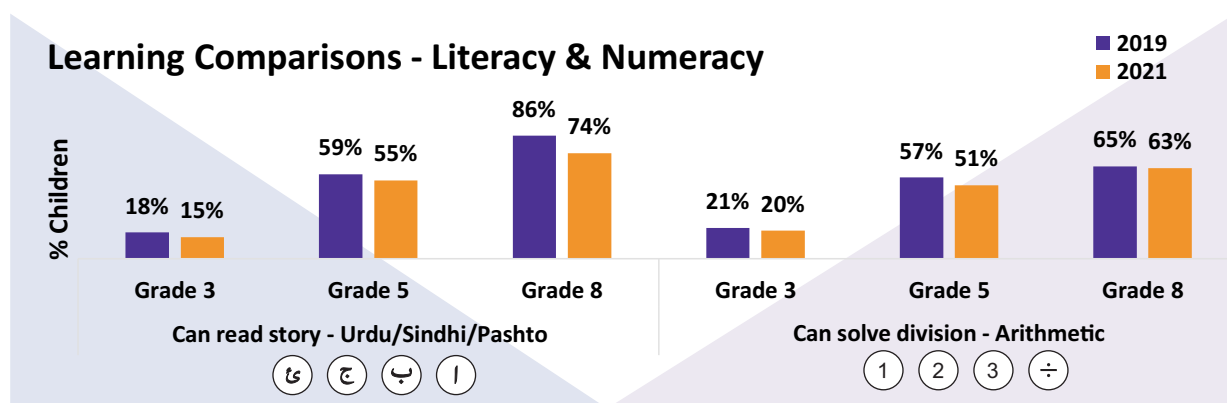
What do learning trends tell us? Did we maintain, drop or exceed 2019 learning levels? Learning levels of children (in class 5 and class 3) mapped to grade 2 competencies have declined especially in Urdu/Sindhi and Pashto by 3-4% compared to 2019, whilst English competencies have been maintained and/or exceeded from 2019 level (1-4%) and Arithmetic competencies declined from 1-6 percent in grades 3 and 5 respectively. The score card on learning for grades 3, 5 and 8 highlights learning bottlenecks that persist when not supported at foundational levels in grade 3.

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## Percentage of Children in Grades 3, 5 & 8 who could perform Grade 2 level competencies



The crisis of learning that pre dates the pandemic with only 15% and 20% children having some foundational literacy and numeracy for grade 3 points towards 'lost generations' in the making. This age group needs urgent action at scale covering lower primary levels (K-3) or 3-8 years to bridge the gaps early not just for learning, but also gender and equity.

The private school edge over government schools was maintained for literacy (61% vs. 54%) whilst in arithmetic both government and private schools were at par (38%).

### What did children have to say about their learning support systems?

**Children's response on Learning Support at home.** The citizen led methodology has core principles of ensuring that learning measures are taken one on one from the child for direct light tough assessments. The COVID-19 ASER national survey gathered information from children (5-16 years old) directly on 'learning support' at home. The results are illuminating with the highest support attributed to 'family members'

### Support on Learning at Home (%): response by children across Pakistan

	National	Sindh	Balocistan	Punjab	KP	ICT	GB	AJK
Family Members	68	79	65	63	70	71	68	65
TV/TeleSchool	57	69	39	68	45	89	45	52
SMART Phones	37	31	29	45	41	62	34	39
Computer	29	20	35	31	37	95	37	14
Digital Learning	14	14	05	12	21	21	14	10
Radio	06	05	03	11	08	67	04	03
Paid Tutions	27	27	11	35	20	25	18	21

From 2020 March to December 2021 there is a clear support mix at household level for continuity of learning that has set aside the myth or perception that parents are passive and/or disinterested in their children's learning; even in low literacy households there is evidence of mothers engaging in active storytelling and other activities with their children (ITA, 2021). There is hope for bridging the traditional notion of 'home-school divide' where homes are simply considered vacant inactive spaces when it comes to learning support. This is a significant positive trend captured during the ASER Pakistan 2021 survey in rural areas. On the one hand it provides us

room for optimism with respect to household resilience on providing multi-level learning support, and on the other, households must be considered a vibrant partner for continuity of learning. The learning support at home ranges from a high of 68% by family members to technology supported measures including: TV/TeleSchool 57%, Smart phones 37%, Computer 29%, other Digital learning 14% to radio 06%. It is heartening to know that TeleSchool is continuing to see a higher engagement from 35 % in March 2021 to almost double by November 2021 in rural areas. What can be done to build on these positive trends within households at the system level?

**Classroom Observations:** Classroom observation was marked yes if children have their textbooks available for at least of one subject. For government schools, 86% of grade 2 children reported to be have reading textbooks against 91% of children enrolled in grade 8 Whilst the figures stand at 93% and 92% for private school children, respectively.











But coaching/tuitions reveal a rising trend and burden on households. What remains of concern from children's responses on learning support at home is that almost one third of are resorting to coaching/paid tuitions (27%). The ASER 2021 rural survey highlights that whilst children in private schools taking tuition has remained at the same level (22%) as in 2019, paid coaching has recorded a massive jump for children in government schools from 6% in 2019 to 20% in 2021! This cost adds to households' economic burden at a time when 16% HHs have been affected adversely by more than 50% income losses! For the poorest households this is a huge dent in disposable incomes and it is the poorest and poor children who are most likely to be enrolled in government schools.



**Is Technology Equal?** The presence of technology in households (cell /android phones, computer, digital learning, TV radio and smart phones) has been on the rise. Digging deeper, there are bound to be patterns of inequity within and across households; who gets, how much support and when/what time of the day? Is it more boys than girls, is it children without disabilities among siblings? How big are the differences by wealth quartiles and gender? These patterns have been traced in earlier surveys by ITA on early learning partnerships /ECE in 2020-2021). These are challenges of 'who has access to technology at home by gender?. Do girls have ready access or do they wait out their turns (Malala Fund 2021). Of the surveyed Households (HHs) 16% reported negative impact on incomes during COVID by more than 50% and 30% over all reported that their psychological wellbeing was negatively affected during COVID. Given these trends, 68% engagement of family members with children of school going age remains a sign of resilience and hope that has been validated repeatedly in other studies as well in Pakistan and many other countries (LLs/ELPs 2021). Can family support be a key building block in building forward better? Will the outreach of schools to homes and families be more positive as partners in learning?

The case for technology and its use in HHs may be important for industry partners, it is also a critical consideration for public policy to support vulnerable HHs through social safety nets instruments that offset low tech availability, but more importantly with tech enabled skills. The technology profile of households is changing rapidly. Compared to 2019 when 66 % of HHs (rural) who had cell phones, there are 77 % households in 2021. The evidence on technology in households must be factored in the initiatives for not just continuity of learning but also on content development and delivery options. The content must cover not just academics (K-12) but also make sufficient room for life skills that is fit for purpose for both students and household members. This is an opportunity for systems reforms that cannot be missed when it comes to the architecture of hybrid learning in the 'new normal'.

## % Households of Tech Availability

	Electricity Connection	Solar Panel	TV	Radio	Computer/Laptop	Internet Connection	Mobile	Smart Phone	SMS	Whatsapp Usage
										
<b>National</b>	89.3	37.0	64.5	17.5	17.8	22.7	76.6	61.9	63.7	89.2
<b>Punjab</b>	96.7	21.3	81.4	17.9	24.3	29.1	77.2	71.5	68.0	92.1
<b>Sindh</b>	77.3	51.9	73.4	9.8	8.7	14.0	69.3	39.0	47.2	83.6
<b>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa</b>	90.8	49.9	55.6	19.6	15.9	20.4	79.9	67.7	65.8	88.9
<b>Balochistan</b>	84.9	39.5	47.3	21.3	13.8	22.0	76.6	55.1	63.2	97.2
<b>Azad Jammu Kashmir</b>	96.6	18.3	78.1	27.6	33.8	30.7	85.3	78.3	76.7	78.2
<b>Gilgit-Baltistan</b>	94.3	28.9	58.5	8.5	17.7	20.3	75.2	68.2	67.3	80.1
<b>Islamabad</b>	98.9	14.1	94.9	17.5	53.4	59.9	59.3	93.4	83.3	95.0

**Social Safety Nets Provision:** Targeted social safety nets for vulnerable groups providing relief for unmet needs and services has increased. In 2019, the ASER study found that 10% of the surveyed households were recipients of support from social safety nets (such as the Benazir Income Support Programme, Ehsaas, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, Akhuwat or others). However, in 2021 the percentage of households benefiting from these forms of support has risen to 16 per cent.

With better and regular data generation, it remains critical to ensure that disadvantaged and under-served regions, provinces, districts and households are compensated with targeted support. Proactive and bold public policy together with multi-level partnerships across homes, schools, government, industry and development partners for education and learning in Pakistan can accelerate actions for meeting targets for 25 A and SDG4. The promise of resilience has to be translated to a hitherto unprecedented resolve for reforms in Pakistan that can be tracked by citizens and government alike.

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