

Foundational Learning for All: including the most marginalised is possible, pragmatic and a priority

A think piece from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Girls' Education Challenge on why the most marginalised must be prioritised in the global efforts to ensure foundational learning for all.



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The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of FCDO.

Introduction

The increased global focus on foundational learning provides a welcome and renewed opportunity to ensure that *all* children achieve what they deserve from education. Action to improve foundational learning for all remains critical for the life chances and choices of marginalised children and young people globally. Shining a spotlight on marginalised learners who are both inside and outside the system, will enable all partners – governments, implementers and development partners – to reach these children through foundational learning reforms and interventions. Centralising marginalised learners will also ensure all other children in the system are reached more effectively – what works for the most marginalised will work for all – and therefore ambitions and commitments to improving foundational learning at scale are achieved.

This piece focuses on whether children and young people are learning, to understand who is benefitting from efforts to improve foundational learning, and more importantly, who is at risk of missing out. Acting on this information will enable all children to learn the basics and will ensure progress on foundational learning at scale, globally. The fundamental right to education and global [commitments](#) to improve foundational learning for all, require that delivering foundational learning at scale and delivering for the most marginalised children is not seen a binary choice. Both are needed and are mutually beneficial. However, without setting a clear intention and keeping this front and centre, this will not happen. Inequality in education will increase and quality education for all will not be achieved.

All marginalised children need to be visible and their learning prioritised in any given context. Systems need to start with what works to improve learning for marginalised groups and orientate foundational learning policy and interventions around their needs, rather than starting with the easiest to reach. Targeted support for marginalised young people outside of the system needs to include a focus on learning, as foundational learning is vital in overcoming the barriers they face. Both efforts require an intentional approach, to choose to ensure marginalised children learn the basics, and an expansion of the conceptualisation of foundational learning beyond early grades and formal schooling.



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What is Foundational Learning *for All* and why is it important?

Foundational learning refers to basic literacy, numeracy and transferable skills, such as socio-emotional skills.¹ These are the building blocks required for children to be able to learn and attain quality education, which is a right for every child, and which is enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). To have the biggest impact for children and society, foundational skills are ideally gained in the initial years of primary school. These skills are required to transform the current low levels of learning experienced by the majority of children in low and middle-income countries (LICs and LMICs). However, the reality of poor education systems and challenges faced by young people globally, means that this does not always happen.

Foundational learning is often not gained in the initial years of primary, and therefore is needed by older groups of children, young people and adults, as well as outside the formal school system altogether.² By decoupling the concept of foundational learning from a specific focus on the early years of primary school, we can also see how and why foundational learning efforts must consider marginalised children and young people who are the most at risk of dropping out or who have already been forced to drop out. This also includes refugee and displaced populations for whom foundational skills are the essential building blocks for their future, wherever this may be. Foundational skills will help these marginalised young people to:

- 1. Achieve more learning, knowledge, and higher-order skills.**³ A student needs to be literate and numerate to access new content and subject matter. This is true for a primary school curriculum, secondary school science, a mechanics manual or livelihoods training.
- 2. Navigate and succeed within a labour market**⁴, whether in the formal or informal economy. The ability to read an order or add up prices is vital in many jobs, or for navigating financial services, like mobile money. Research has found a significant association between literacy and earnings in seven lower and middle-income countries.⁵
- 3. Make choices, take care of their families and improve intergenerational outcomes.** There are strong relationships between foundational learning with better education and health outcomes for people's children.⁶ At a minimum, being able to read a medicine packet is something every parent should be able to do. Evidence shows that the impact of basic education (on child mortality, fertility, women's empowerment and financial practices) is much higher when foundational skills are achieved – three times larger than the impact of attending school on its own.⁷
- 4. Support and strengthen their community and society.** In the longer term, literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills relate to more positive outcomes for society. There are strong correlations between a lack of literacy and greater youth unemployment, deeper levels of poverty⁸ and a propensity for conflict.⁹ Ensuring foundational learning for all is the best way to build the human capital that drives development.
- 5. Increase resilience against shocks.** Education has the potential to keep children safe in times of crisis as well as providing structure, a sense of normality and hope. Foundational learning can also be lifesaving in the face of disasters, building resilience against the growing number of shocks – whether from a pandemic, conflict or climate.¹⁰ Over the longer term, educated children and young people can help their families and communities to reduce vulnerability to disasters and build resilience and adaptive capacity to climate and environmental change.¹¹

The social, economic and security benefits of education are magnified when the most vulnerable and marginalised build foundational skills. And these benefits can be long lasting. For example, a longitudinal cohort study in Somalia demonstrated significant outcomes six years *after* marginalised girls were supported to strengthen their foundational learning. This included marriage/children at a later age, increased likelihood of employment, and reduced tolerance of violence.¹²

Instinctively, reaching the most marginalised may seem like a daunting and expensive task. This is because supporting marginalised children often requires concurrently addressing the factors that have led to their marginalisation – such as displacement, pernicious gender norms, disability, rurality – in order to level the playing field and enable meaningful learning to occur. Reaching the most marginalised children and young people also often requires education delivery through complementary or non-formal mechanisms and modalities and bringing in non-traditional education partners. This is something that traditional systems approaches and programming do not always consider. However, any additional scope and cost must be considered in relation to the significant benefits that foundational learning yields for the most marginalised, both at an individual level and from a longer-term societal perspective. Acquiring foundational skills can act as a type of inoculation for individuals to overcome barriers, but also for society in terms of social, economic and security outcomes.¹³

Marginalised children in school, those at risk of dropping out, and those not currently in school, including refugee and displaced children and young people, are all at higher risk of not acquiring vital basic skills. The following sections sketch out who exactly these children are and how they can be reached effectively.

¹ *Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning* (2022).

² *Should Governments and Donors Prioritize Investments in Foundational Literacy and Numeracy?* (2019)

³ *EFA Global Monitoring Report (2012) Youth and skills: Putting education to work*

⁴ *Education and Employability: The Critical Role of Foundational Skills* (2022)

⁵ Valerio, A. (2016) *Are There Skills Payoffs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries? Empirical Evidence Using Step Data*

⁶ Mensch, B.S. et al. (2019) "Evidence for causal links between education and maternal and child health: systematic review," *Tropical Medicine & International Health*, 24(5), pp. 504–522

⁷ *Women's Education May Be Even Better Than We Thought: Estimating the Gains from Education When Schooling Ain't Learning* (2020)

⁸ *Illuminating Disadvantage: Profiling the Experiences of Adults with Entry Level Literacy or Numeracy Over the Lifecourse – NRDC* (2007)

⁹ Hanemann, U., (2005) *Literacy in conflict situations*

¹⁰ *Poverty and Vulnerability in the Ethiopian Lowlands: Building a More Resilient Future* (2019)

¹¹ *Addressing the climate, environment, and biodiversity crises in and through girls' education* (2022)

¹² *Six years later, what has become of them? A cohort study of Somali women and girls who participated in the Somali Girls Education Promotion programme* (2022)

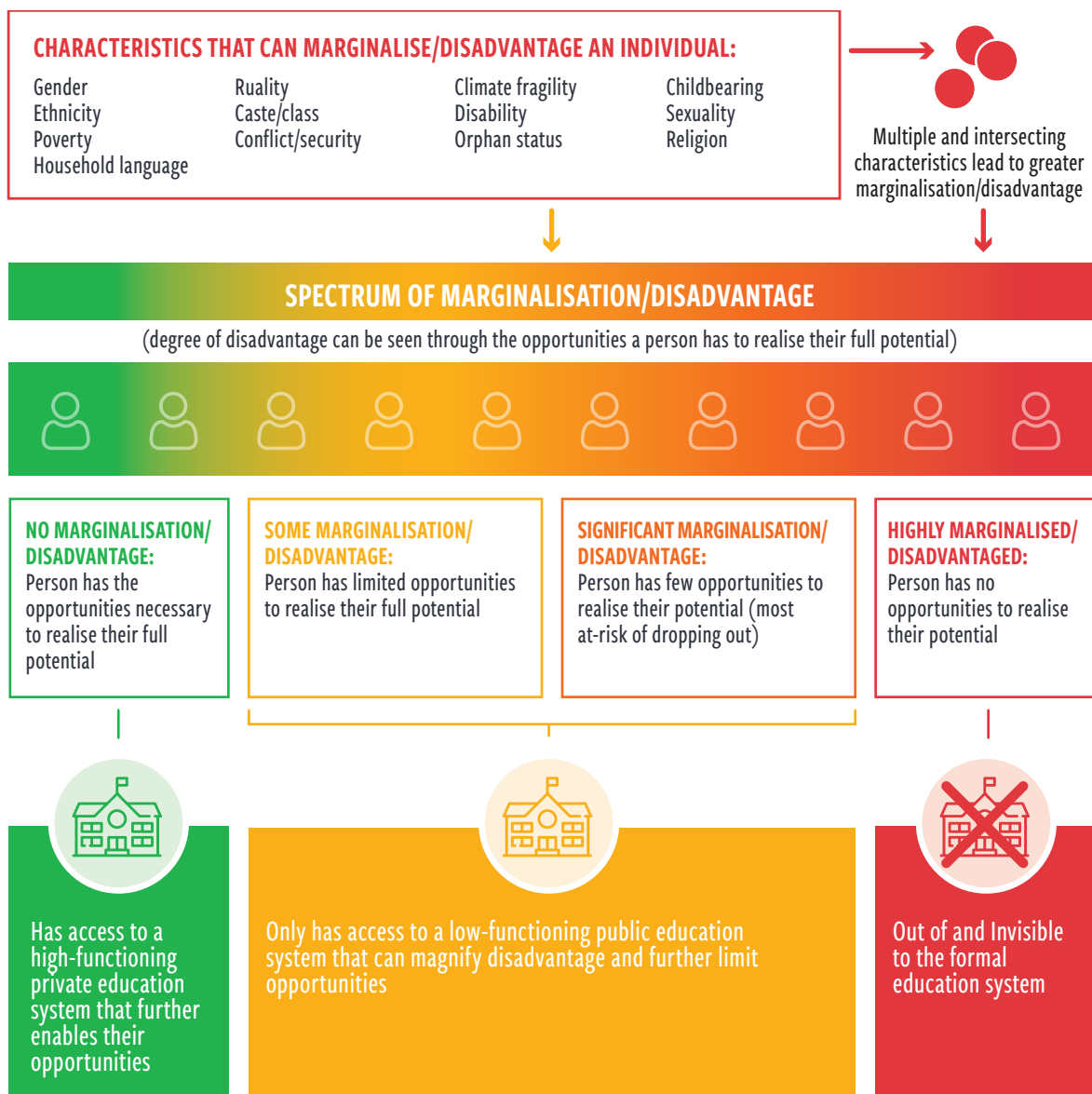
¹³ *The relationship between reading age, education and life outcomes* (2019)

Foundational Learning for All – who does ‘All’ include?

In this piece, we refer often to marginalised learners. Marginalisation comes in varying degrees and is a product of an individual’s identity characteristics (for example, socio-economic status) in relation to the context in which they live. These characteristics have an enabling or constraining effect on an individual’s ability to learn to their fullest potential. Poverty has a constraining effect in most contexts; a poor child is less likely to reach their full learning potential than a more wealthy child. A child with a variety of constraining identity characteristics (for example a poor child from a socially excluded ethnic minority, in an overlooked rural area, who is a girl subject to highly unequal gender norms) faces overlapping barriers and is further marginalised. This disadvantage will increase with any additional constraining characteristics, such as displacement and disability.

Figure 1 depicts this spectrum of marginalisation, showing several characteristics that can have constraining effects on a child’s opportunities to realise their full potential. At one end of the spectrum is a person experiencing no marginalisation – which can be viewed as privilege – in that she has all the opportunities necessary to realise her full potential. At the other end of the spectrum is a person who experiences multiple and intersecting characteristics that combine to constrain any, if not all, opportunities that she might have. In between these two extremes lies the majority of the population who, experience some form of disadvantage to differing degrees.¹⁴

Figure 1: The marginalisation spectrum and how the education system can magnify or mitigate disadvantage



¹⁴Marginalisation/disadvantage can also vary at different points in a person’s life. For girls, disadvantage increases as they grow older and become more vulnerable to sexual violence, early marriage and norms that dictate unequal domestic chores.

Importantly, Figure 1 also demonstrates how an education system interfaces with the different degrees of marginalisation. In a high-functioning system,¹⁵ a school can have a positive effect by addressing any disadvantage that may occur and creating even more educational opportunities for children. In a low-functioning system (which can be the case in many LMICs), children's opportunities to learn are limited. This is not only due to poor teaching and a lack of resources. Limitations also occur through the magnification of their marginalisation/disadvantage by school and community actors, as schools are often a reflection of the society/norms in which they are located.¹⁶ This acts to further limit children's opportunities to realise their potential.

The following sections elaborate on the marginalised children who are not learning and why and how to meet their needs – whether it is due to a poor-performing education system, significant marginalisation, or both. It also discusses the *most* disadvantaged children who are ostensibly invisible to education systems because they have dropped out or never enrolled.

Children in school but who are not learning

Unfortunately, in many LMICs, the vast majority of children in school are not learning. Therefore, even if the most marginalised children were all enrolled and regularly attending, they would likely still miss out on learning the basics. In contrast, the majority of the poorest students in High Income Countries do gain the basics.¹⁷ This has a number of impacts, especially for marginalised children. Education systems which lead to low learning levels are costly for governments, families and individuals. Low learning drives high levels of repetition in the early grades, slow progression through later grades and ultimately drop out.¹⁸ These low learning levels are often not noticed or prioritised as learning levels are often severely underestimated.¹⁹ Most LMICs lack regular, relevant and reliable measures of learning, particularly for primary school.²⁰ Policy makers, district officials, school leaders and teachers may not know which children are learning, nor how much.²¹ Without this knowledge, systems actors cannot implement the necessary reforms or interventions required to support all children at their current level to the next stage.

In the long term, ensuring all systems deliver quality education early for all will be the most sustainable solution to ensuring foundational learning for all. In LMICs, improving equity between the highest and lowest performing groups is necessary, but that alone will not improve foundational learning to the levels and the scale countries are aiming for, nor overcome the different learning trajectories between countries.²² Entire education systems must transform to improve learning levels at scale to ensure all those children in school get a chance to learn the basics. Actions from the 2022 Transforming Education Summit and the 2023 Global Education Advisory Panel (GEEAP) report provide the most up to date recommendations on how to achieve this.

It is possible to see tangible improvements in learning achieved within a matter of years for marginalised children, even with significant economic constraints. One such example is Sobral in Brazil.²³ Sobral rose to become one of the country's top-performing areas despite also being one of the poorest. This kind of result is possible only when leadership truly commits to improving educational outcomes and is willing to adapt its approach based on feedback and evidence. It shows what is possible when there is a real intentionality, focus and commitment from leadership and amongst all stakeholders to reach all children and ensure they gain the basics.

Starting with the needs of the most marginalised learners in the system (i.e., those with 'significant marginalisation/disadvantage' from Figure 1), rather than the easiest to reach will raise the bar for all learners. For example, evidence shows that there is a positive spill-over effect for boys when focussing on marginalised girls. Not considering the most marginalised and starting with the easiest to reach will continue to exclude and magnify inequalities.

In practice though, in many contexts, systems are orientated around coverage of difficult and dense curricula or rolling out large-scale, end-of-phase examinations, as opposed to being matched to children's actual learning levels and progress. This means many children fall further behind. These approaches often focus on the elite, at the expense of ensuring all children gain basic literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills.²⁴ The first step is believing that all children can learn²⁵, and thus providing the most support to children who are furthest behind.

¹⁵For illustrative purposes in this figure, we refer to high-functioning systems as 'high-cost, elite private schools', however we note that globally there are many high-functioning, public education systems as well.

¹⁶Peppin-Vaughan, R. (2007), 'Measuring capabilities: an example from girls' schooling'. In M. Walker and E. Unterhalter (eds), *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education* (pp. 109-130). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷Quality Education for Every Girl for 12 Years: Insights from RISE Programme Research (2020)

¹⁸The Role of Low Learning in Driving Dropout: A Longitudinal Mixed Methods Study in Four Countries (2021)

¹⁹Understanding Education Policy Preferences: Survey Experiments in 35 Developing countries (2021)

²⁰How Many Children Know How to Read with Meaning? The Path towards Regular, Relevant, and Reliable Measures of Learning (2023)

²¹Understanding policy preferences: Survey experiments with policymakers in 35 developing countries (2021)

²²Measuring, visualising and simulating the learning crisis: New evidence from learning profiles in 18 countries (2021)

²³Responsive Reforms Can Lead to Learning Gains: How Brazil's Municipality of Sobral Turned Around Its Education System (2023), and Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support. Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya (2020)

²⁴Ending Learning Poverty: What Will It Take? (2019)

²⁵Deficit-oriented teacher beliefs inhibit poor students' learning and wellbeing (2023)

Children in school but at most risk of dropping out

Even before they enter school, ‘significantly marginalised/disadvantaged’ students (see Figure 1) experience constraint on their opportunities to learn. Unfortunately, these constraints are often magnified by a low-functioning system, thereby leading to these children falling further behind, repeating grades and/or dropping out. For example,

- Opportunities to consistently engage in school are often affected by unequal gender norms. During COVID-19 school closures, girls’ ability to engage in remote learning and schoolwork was significantly constrained due to gendered demands on their time, including increased housework, care for siblings and income-generating activities.²⁶ These constraints existed before and continue after COVID-19 and, unfortunately, are compounded by other constraints and intensify as girls grow older.²⁷
- Temporary or protracted displacement due to conflict and climate shocks also lead to significant constraint on opportunities to consistently engage in school. Constraints include saturated school capacity, destroyed infrastructure, exacerbated poverty, non-recognition of past qualifications and discrimination.²⁸ This situation is likely to worsen. Climate shocks alone continue to disrupt an estimated 40 million children’s education per year.²⁹
- Difficulties with the language of instruction can be associated with socially excluded groups, both of which can constrain opportunities to meaningfully participate and learn during class. In Nepal, girls from the excluded Musahar caste speak a minority dialect, which makes participation difficult and compounds the wider discrimination they experience from teachers and peers.³⁰
- Students with disabilities are disproportionately excluded from attending and/or participating in school. For example, during COVID-19, only one in three LICs took measures to acknowledge and support learners with disabilities with their distance learning efforts.³¹

Addressing the constraints may appear overwhelming. But if these disadvantaged children have made it into the system already, that is a significant first step. To keep them there and learning, there are adaptations to foundational learning pedagogy and resourcing that can be made. Adaptations also need to consider the needs of adolescents still in the early grades who may have different pedagogical, safeguarding and facility needs.³² The degree of effort and cost of these adaptations also lie on a spectrum, and can thus be pragmatically incorporated. By doing so the education system can act as a mitigator, not a magnifier, of disadvantage.

Children out of school and invisible to the system

Despite improvements in access to education, globally there are still an estimated 244 million children and young people out of school.³³ These highly marginalised/disadvantaged children (see Figure 1) contend with multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation that compound and intensify over time to push them out of the system. Of this group, the most marginalised are precluded from even enrolling in the first instance. For example, only 6% of Musahar girls in Nepal are able to enrol in primary school.³⁴ Either way, if a child has been out of school for six months or six years, they are not visible to the formal education system and, as such, will not benefit from systematic efforts to build their foundational skills. Not only are their opportunities to realise their potential severely limited irrespective of school, but without the foundational learning that school can give them, their opportunities are limited even further.

There are partners and delivery mechanisms that do provide non-formal education (NFE) opportunities to these out-of-system children and young people.³⁵ This NFE provision is paramount in providing the foundational learning these children need to return to school; or if a return to school is no longer relevant,³⁶ the foundational learning they need to do livelihoods training, start a business, take care of their family, and a take leadership role in their community.

Most general education systems are tacitly the *formal* education system and do not see the provision of NFE within their remit. If formal system efforts to improve foundational learning can adapt and coordinate with NFE partners and efforts, foundational learning for the most marginalised would be acknowledged, budgeted for, and more systematic. This would require analysing budgets and education sector plans, to understand which children are included in both formal and non-formal policies and plans, and to determine how much funding reaches the most marginalised to acquire foundational learning. With better alignment and coordination between formal and non-formal budgets, policies and plans, out-of-school children will no longer be out of the system.

The following sections will elaborate on the existing foundational learning commitments and programming, and how thoughtful adjustments can be made to ensure that Foundational Learning is for All.

²⁶*The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (2021)

²⁷This is often why performance between girls and boys in grades 1-3 appears equal – girls begin to take on more significant chore burdens as they get older, which limits their ability to engage in school

²⁸*How climate change and displacement affect the right to education* (2023)

²⁹*Safe Schools: The Hidden Crisis* (2018)

³⁰*Girls’ Education and language of instruction: An extended policy brief* (2022)

³¹*The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (2021)

³²*Slow Progression: Educational Trajectories of Young Men and Women in Ethiopia* (2021)

³³*Out-of-school numbers are growing in sub-Saharan Africa* (2022)

³⁴*Participatory Ethnography Research for Musahar Girls’ Education* (2023)

³⁵Generally speaking, *non-formal modalities* are short-term, flexible, take place in a community space/centre and can be delivered by relevant community members, depending on the objective or transition pathway of the programme.

³⁶This is often the case for adolescents who have been out of the system for several years, and who may have parenting responsibilities.

Progress and challenges so far to improve Foundational Learning for All

An increased national and global focus on foundational learning is reflected in the [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#), which was one of seven global initiatives launched at the Transforming Education Summit, in 2022. It created a shared understanding and commitment to improving foundational learning as a key element to transform education in line with SDG4 and other international commitments to education.³⁷ Within its first year, this commitment has been endorsed by 26 countries and 30 organisations, with regional events in Latin America, Africa, Middle East and South Asia where national governments have convened peers to push forward the agenda. The Commitment to Action includes a target ‘to reduce by half the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten, *starting with the most marginalised*, and evidenced based action’.³⁸ This demonstrates agreement over the need to be front and centre is theoretically agreed. However, there is a risk that it may not be sufficiently prioritised in the implementation of reforms and interventions. Ensuring that this approach is implemented will require a deliberate approach to interventions, building up education systems for all enrolled children, whilst ensuring that those who are not enrolled are not ignored.

An increasing body of evidence on what works to improve foundational learning supports implementing the Commitment to Action, including [RISE’s](#) systems-level research, GEEAP’s recent [Smart Buys](#) report and the World Bank’s [Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration: Using the RAPID Framework to Address COVID-19 Learning Losses and Build Forward Better](#). This latter document accompanies the Commitment to Action and sets out policy and intervention strategies to help address low learning and learning losses exacerbated by COVID-19 school closures. Ministries of Education are encouraged to select and adapt any of the evidence-based strategies that may be relevant to their context. These strategies are located within five key areas, which comprise the acronym RAPID:

1. Reaching every child and keeping them in school
2. Assessing learning levels regularly
3. Prioritising teaching the fundamentals
4. Increasing the efficiency of instruction including through catch-up learning
5. Developing psychosocial health and wellbeing

The strategies within each area provide examples of how to move from commitment to action. However, there is a risk that with as the threat of COVID-19 has receded, there has been a shift from focusing on ‘reaching all children’ who were not in school due to national closures, towards strengthening the instruction, assessment and priorities within the system – but only for those who are included in the system. Although the RAPID framework’s ‘reach’ strategies generally relate to school re-openings after COVID-19, the single-minded focus on reaching all children does not have to recede with COVID-19. The same applies to ‘developing psychosocial health and wellbeing’, a vital prerequisite for meaningful learning for marginalised (and all) learners. COVID-19 brought this relationship into sharp relief, and strategies to maintain this effort should also not recede.

Therefore, an updated vision of the RAPID framework, along with other foundational learning frameworks, is required. One that reprioritises R and D strategies, and builds on the A, P and I approaches through pragmatically adapting and supplementing them with low-cost and evidence-based strategies that support the most marginalised. The following section provides concrete examples of how to adapt the RAPID framework so that marginalised children are put front and centre of coordinated efforts on foundational learning.



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How to implement Foundational Learning for All: Building on the RAPID framework

To meaningfully prioritise marginalised learners, their needs must be embedded in all reforms and interventions. As discussed, this can be done through intentional and practical adaptations to plans for strengthening foundational learning. For example, the Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration provides straightforward steps for establishing a multi-year plan for post-COVID-19 learning recovery (see page 31).

Table 1 outlines suggested adaptations to each of these steps to bring the invisible children not currently reached by the system into this planning. One significant adaptation to note, is the need to coordinate with NFE colleagues and implementors, as these are the actors who were providing foundational learning to marginalised groups prior to, during, and now after COVID-19 national school closures. Depending on context, the remit for NFE can sit within a Ministry of Education, but in many cases, it is the responsibility of another ministry (e.g., Youth, Gender and/or Refugees) and is often implemented by non-governmental organisations and actors.³⁹ Either way, in order for more out of school children and young people, particularly girls, to glean the individual and societal benefits of foundational learning, NFE needs to be seen as an important component of the general ‘education system’ (which is tacitly the formal education system), particularly with regard to implementing a foundational learning (recovery) plan.

Another significant adaptation is the shift towards tailoring all RAPID strategies for two particular target groups:

1. Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out, which includes those within and beyond the early grades (these are the ‘significantly marginalised/ disadvantaged’ from Figure 1).
2. Those who are currently out of the system (the ‘highly marginalised/disadvantaged’ from Figure 1).

This adaptation has a two-fold effect. For those children who are still in school, particularly girls, adaptations would aim to address constraints related to their marginalisation, which would not only enable these children to better acquire the foundational learning being taught, but it would also act to pre-empt their eventual drop-out. For children and young people who are currently outside of, and thus invisible to, the formal education system, adaptations would also aim to address constraints related to their marginalisation and entail delivery via a non-formal modality. Although adding NFE delivery may increase the scope of any foundational learning (recovery) plan, NFE programmes can run with considerable efficiency and effectiveness to complement formal schooling and ensure that investments in reaching the most marginalised are well made.



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³⁹Although it is helpful to have multiple non-governmental implementers of NFE, this should not preclude the government’s responsibility or leadership for provision. Indeed, a government could/should harness the efforts of all non-governmental NFE implementers to ensure alignment with need. This will also mitigate the fragmentation, overlap and duplication that occurs when there is a lack of government vision or leadership.

Table 1: Adaptations to make a Foundational Learning Recovery Plan inclusive of the most marginalised

Steps for a learning recovery plan	Activities for each step	Adapted activities to ensure inclusion of the most marginalised
1. Diagnosing learning losses and system capacity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Diagnose pre-pandemic learning goals and average attainment 2. Diagnose pandemic learning losses 3. Diagnose education system's capacity (strengths/weaknesses) to assess what's feasible 4. Understand policy options that could be used 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Diagnose pre-pandemic learning goals and average attainment for out-of-school children and young people, in addition to those enrolled in formal school. An example of this is the PAL Network's Citizen-Led Assessments. Literacy and numeracy assessments are conducted in homes. Thus, representative samples automatically include children who are and who are not, enrolled in school. Data is disaggregated by gender, disability and socio-economic status. 2. Diagnose pandemic learning losses where relevant, and apply these analyses to potential future shocks, especially for the most marginalised. 3. Adjust what is viewed as the education system to include the ministry/colleagues/implementers involved with NFE. Then diagnose the formal/non-formal education system's capacity (strengths/weaknesses) to assess what is feasible. 4. Understand what NFE policy options currently exist and that could be used. Address gaps to reaching the most marginalised, out-of-school groups.
2. Setting a vision for learning and goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine learning goals to respond to learning losses as well as a period to recover learning losses 2. Determine long-term learning goals and what structural reforms need to be made for the long term (may include making permanent policies to recover pandemic learning losses) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine learning goals to respond to learning losses recognising a need to prioritise learning for out-of-school children and young people who experience incredibly low learning levels and losses irrespective of shocks. 2. Determine long-term learning goals that are tied to children and young people's relevant needs and aspirations. This may include return to formal schooling, but also includes vocational skills training, livelihoods training and empowerment plans.⁴⁰ 3. Determine what structural reforms need to be made, such as adjusting what is viewed as the 'education system' to include the ministry/colleagues/implementers involved with NFE.
3. Selecting, adapting and developing policies and strategies to achieve those goals (via RAPID framework)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select the mix of policies and strategies to recover learning losses and 'build back better' among those in the RAPID framework 2. Adapt the selected policies to country context 3. Develop specific implementation plans for each policy and programme. Programmes should be multi-year, multi-phased endeavours, including urgent initial phase 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select the mix of policies and strategies to recover learning losses and 'build back better' among those in the RAPID framework. Ensure all selected RAPID strategies are adapted for: 1) the children still in school who are most at risk of not learning or dropping out (both within and beyond the early grades); and 2) those who are currently out of the system. 2. Adapt the selected policies to country context. 3. Develop specific implementation plans for each policy and programme. Programmes should be multi-year, multi-phased endeavours, including urgent initial phase. Out-of-school groups will be included in these implementation plans if RAPID strategies are adapted as noted above.
4. Monitoring progress and adjusting where needed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish a plan to monitor implementation and early results 2. Ensure the plan is adaptable, allow regular adjustments and maintain a healthy tolerance for failure 3. Engage policymakers consistently to ensure timely decision making. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coordinate with NFE partners to establish a plan to monitor implementation and early results in order to ensure out of school children and young people are also part of this monitoring system. 2. Ensure the plan is adaptable, allow regular adjustments and maintain a healthy tolerance for failure. 3. Engage policymakers consistently to ensure timely decision-making.

As noted in Step 3, adapting and developing RAPID strategies for children in school who are most at risk of dropping out, and for children who are currently out of the system, is tantamount to a twin-track approach. This is to ensure that the formal system is responsive to the most significantly disadvantaged, whilst also providing targeted support to those outside of the system, often through non-formal modalities that are relevant and flexible for highly marginalised/disadvantaged children. Such an approach requires explicitly considering gender equality and social inclusion in materials, structured lesson plans and teacher training on foundational learning. This also requires removing silos between the technical experts who focus on gender or foundational learning, to make these adaptations meaningful.

⁴⁰Community-based education: informal and invaluable (2023)

Table 2 below provides illustrative examples of such adaptations. It first outlines how RAPID strategies can be adapted for the most marginalised who are both in and out of school (i.e., ‘significantly marginalised/disadvantaged’ and ‘highly marginalised/disadvantaged’ – see Figure 1). It then provides real-world, low-cost⁴¹ examples of how these strategies and adaptations have been implemented in different contexts.⁴²

Table 2: How to adapt the RAPID framework to support the most marginalised within and outside of school

RAPID framework	Target group	Adapted RAPID strategies (from the ‘Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration’)	Examples of what these adapted strategies could look like
Reach every child and keep them in education	Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen systems to identify students at risk of dropping out 2. Ongoing campaigns to pre-empt the drop-out of the most vulnerable 3. Involve parents in vulnerable children’s education 4. Consider targeted strategies to pre-empt drop out 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu, Kenya: SMS warning system: SMS alerts are sent to community health volunteers (CHVs) if there are more than three days of unexplained absence. CHVs visit the families to talk through the reason for absences and troubleshoot issues to prevent drop-out. Each CHV is connected to an average of 20 vulnerable households. 2. Making Ghanaian Girls Great, Ghana: Community radio campaigns to pre-empt drop out: Back-to-school messages were broadcast through community radio stations and information centres. In addition, teams of school leaders and facilitators visited churches, mosques and homes to educate parents and caregivers. 3. ENGAGE, Nepal: Parent action plans: Parents developed individual six-month action plans which focused on social emotional learning (SEL) and practical life skills actions, and enacted them, together with their children. 4. CAMFED Learner Guides: Female graduates who volunteer for 18 months in their local schools to identify girls most at risk of drop out, mentor these girls to build their resilience and deliver a life skills curriculum.
	Children and young people who are already out of the system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open/expand non-formal education options 2. Find the most marginalised, convince guardians of need for foundational learning 3. NFE system to identify those at risk of dropping out 4. Involve parents and communities in children’s education 5. Consider targeted strategies to retain 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speed School Programme, Ethiopia: The Ministry of Education established a new unit devoted entirely to the nationwide implementation of the Speed School Programme, aiming to reach 2 million out-of-school, primary-aged children (p.143 in the RAPID Guidance). 2. Tugane Ishuri, Rwanda: Activist volunteers: Youth volunteers work with children in their communities who have dropped out of school and encourage them to re-enroll and complete their studies. 3. TEAM Girl, Malawi: Community facilitators that prevent NFE drop out: Community facilitators act as early warning and problem-solving system whenever inconsistent attendance at a learning centre is noted. 4. Education for Life, Kenya: Strategies to retain pregnant and parenting girls: Families were supported to come up with their own ideas, which included husbands looking after children, relieving girls of some domestic work, older family members helping out and neighbours rotating responsibility for looking after several children at once. This improved attendance, with over 90% of girls attending the catch-up centres regularly. 5. Sisters for Sisters’ Education, Nepal: Peer mentors from the same marginalised community: Older girls from the same highly marginalised Musahar community were given SEL training to help the support ‘Little Sisters’ to navigate many barriers/constraints to their education.

⁴¹It should be noted that many low-cost strategies entail revising/modifying strategies from the *Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration* that have unsustainable costs (such as cash transfers) so that their core aim remains (ie., addressing reasons for non-attendance), but the way it is achieved is at a lower cost.

⁴²Examples are illustrative only have been selected based on results/findings from evaluations conducted by external non-project partners for the Girls’ Education Challenge and other organisations, such as GEEAP and UNICEF

RAPID framework	Target group	Adapted RAPID strategies (from the 'Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration')	Examples of what these adapted strategies could look like
Assess learning levels regularly	Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess learning losses at national/ sub-national level with a focus on the most vulnerable who need support 2. Provide teachers with tools for class-level measurement that focuses on the most vulnerable who need support 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthening Education Systems for Improved Learning (SESIL), Uganda: Assessments: The programme supported system actors to conduct district-wide assessments that included the most at risk in school as well as out-of-school children. 2. Luminos: Teacher-led assessments: Informal, easy to implement, 'low-tech, high-touch' assessment strategies are done consistently and often so that differentiated support can be given as children progress.
	Children and young people who are already out of the system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess learning levels of out-of-school children and young people at national/ sub-national level (to feed into national system) 2. Provide NFE teachers with tools for classroom-level measurement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PAL Network's Citizen-Led Assessments, 14 countries: Literacy/ numeracy assessments are conducted in homes. Thus, representative samples automatically include children who are and who are not enrolled in school. 2. Marginalised No More, Nepal: Adapted use of TARL: Marginalised girls who had never enrolled or had limited experience of school were grouped by ability and teachers used methods and materials that were targeted for their level. Girls then progressed through each level throughout this non-formal education programme.
Prioritise teaching the fundamentals	Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adjust curriculum across and within subjects 2. Prioritise numeracy, literacy, socio-emotional skills (SEL is important for the most vulnerable) 3. Focus instruction on closing the gaps between desired and actual student learning 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vietnam's commitment to foundational numeracy: Despite its low level of GDP per capita, Vietnam's mathematics Pisa outcomes in 2012 and 2015 surpassed those of the USA and the UK due to prioritised and specific inputs and policies. 2. IGATE, Zimbabwe: Inclusion of SEL in teacher professional development: Teachers were trained to explicitly teach and integrate SEL across all subjects as delivering SEL in one-off lessons can lead to tokenistic, superficial and fragmented interventions. Students applied skills across all subjects as well and observed them being practiced by adults and peers. 3. Closing the Gap, Sobral, the Brazilian state of Caera: A prioritisation of instruction reforms and interventions were centred on ensuring that all students, irrespective of age, were literate at a Grade 2 level.
	Children and young people who are already out of the system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adapted curriculum to meet the needs of out-of-school groups 2. Prioritise numeracy, literacy, socio-emotional skills 3. Focus instruction on what is relevant to their desired transition pathway (which may not be a return to school) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sisters for Sisters' Education, Nepal: Adaptation of the curriculum for out-of-school girls: Girls were consulted on their priorities and the content and curriculum was adapted to relate foundational learning to their livelihoods. 2. GEC learning regarding foundational learning for the most marginalised: Successful projects leveraged girls' pre-existing knowledge and life experiences to make sessions meaningful and engaging. 3. EAGER, Sierra Leone: Practical and relevant content: Literacy, numeracy and SEL skills were located within Girls' Empowerment Plans, which entailed their goals for themselves, their livelihoods and communities.

RAPID framework	Target group	Adapted RAPID strategies (from the 'Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration')	Examples of what these adapted strategies could look like
Increase efficiency of instruction, including through catch-up learning	Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use approaches that align instruction with learning needs, paying attention to the most at risk of dropping out (TARL, structured pedagogy, tutoring and self-guided learning) 2. Support teachers continuously. Build practical pedagogical skills that include the incorporation of SEL 3. Expand instructional time through remedial classes for the most vulnerable 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SESL, Uganda: Community-led learning remedial model targeted the most behind/vulnerable who were enrolled in school. This model augmented teaching teams with community-hired staff, which has been proven to be cost-effective in many contexts. 2. Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu, Kenya: Teacher communities of practice: Supported continuous teacher coaching and training, particularly for gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches. 3. IGATE, Zimbabwe: Remedial catch-up framework: This framework was based on a review of non-formal education programmes and a short course tailored to marginalised young people was developed. Teaching and learning materials based on this have been approved for use in all schools by the Ministry of Education. 4. Pratham's TaRL approach in India: Teaching basic numeracy and literacy in small groups to meet students at their learning level rather than their grade level.
	Children and young people who are already out of the system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use approaches that align instruction with learning needs of out-of-school students (TARL, structured pedagogy, tutoring and self-guided learning) 2. Support NFE teachers continuously. Build practical pedagogical skills that include incorporation of SEL 3. Adjust instructional time to what is appropriate for out-of-school students 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. GEC lessons from aligning instruction with learning needs: Even though older out-of-school learners may be learning the same foundational skills as young learners in formal school, the pedagogical approach should be age and context appropriate. They also used a real-world approach which focused on every-day problem solving, and active learning methodologies such as project-based work, peer-to-peer learning and questioning with a focus on developing higher order thinking skills. 2. SAGE, Zimbabwe: Support to community facilitators: Virtual and in-person trainings were provided and followed up with mentoring linkages with District education officials and reflective Communities of Practice. 3. EAGER, Sierra Leone: Flexible timetabling: NFE sessions were scheduled around what was doable and supportive for the out-of-school girls as many were parents and self-employed.
Develop psychosocial health and wellbeing	Children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build teachers' capacity to support their students' wellbeing and identify students in need of specialised services 2. Support teacher wellbeing and resilience 3. Invest in strategies to support student wellbeing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. KEEP, Kenya: Teacher training on psychosocial wellbeing in refugee camp schools: Female counsellors set up communities of practice in which the counsellors trained teachers and mentors to provide support to students on issues such as stress and conflict. 2. IGATE, Zimbabwe: Support for teacher wellbeing: As a first step in training teachers on supporting students' SEL, teachers were provided support in safeguarding their own emotional wellness and health, which supported integration of SEL into their classrooms. 3. SOMGEP, Somalia: Teacher training to reduce school-related, gender-based violence (SRGBV): Teacher training on non-violent classroom management, including pedagogy training and critical self-reflection where teachers reflect on their own experiences of corporal punishment as a child and the impact of abuse.
	Children and young people who are already out of the system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build NFE teachers' capacity to support students' wellbeing and those in need of specialised services 2. Support NFE teacher wellbeing and resilience 3. Invest in strategies to support student wellbeing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aarambha, Nepal: Teacher training to support the needs of married, out-of-school girls: Gender-sensitive teaching methods and non-violent class management methods aimed to support the wellbeing and retention of highly marginalised adolescent girls. 2. STAGES, Afghanistan: Support to NFE teacher wellbeing and resilience: Teacher Learning Circles allowed for peer-to-peer and specialist support for teachers' professional and personal needs. 3. TEACH, Pakistan: Parental awareness to support girls' wellbeing needs: Sessions for parents included topics of their own emotional management and learning to strengthen communication and develop empathy with their daughters.

Conclusion and next steps

This paper sets out the clear necessity of supporting the most marginalised children and young people to achieve Foundational Learning for All. This means reaching children who are in school and not learning, those at risk of dropping out, and those who are out of and invisible to the system, by adapting successful strategies to put them at the heart of foundational learning efforts.

Reaching the most marginalised may entail additional effort and cost. However, given the social, economic and stability counterfactuals of not providing foundational learning to all children and out-of-system children and young people (which implicitly demonstrates what happens when people are left behind), the case for investment and a revised consideration of effort and cost are clear. That said, inclusion of the most marginalised in foundational learning efforts does not need to be exorbitant or arduous. There are low-cost adaptations that can be made to strategies, which will help Ministries of Education and organisations deliver foundational learning to the most vulnerable children both in and outside of formal school. It starts with intention and commitment.

Ministries of Education, development partners and organisations who want to ensure that their commitment to Foundational Learning for All is meaningful and actioned, should take the following steps:

- 1. Explicitly consider gender equality and social inclusion** in any investment – through curricula, textbooks or training – starting with the needs of the most marginalised in the system. This will not be straightforward as ‘the most marginalised’ is not a homogeneous group, and there are many competing and intersecting issues and priorities. However, a conceptual and political commitment to broaden foundational learning efforts beyond formal schooling is an important start.
- 2. Considering children who are not currently in school**, through ensuring that any foundational learning strategies are adapted for: 1) children still in school who are most at risk of dropping out (this will enable a better acquisition of the foundational learning being taught, but it will also act to pre-empt eventual drop-out); and 2) children and young people who are currently out of the system (adaptations will address constraints related to marginalisation and could entail delivery via a non-formal modality).
- 3. Removing siloes between technical experts**, for example foundational learning and gender, and creating more inclusive materials and programmes that can strengthen foundational learning for all. It also requires a commitment to seeing non-formal education as an important delivery mechanism for the general education system, particularly with regard to implementing a Foundational Learning Recovery Plan. This requires short or longer-term structural shifts that aim to include, coordinate and align with NFE ministries, colleagues and non-governmental implementers, including emergency clusters.
- 4. Analysing budgets and education sector plans** to understand which children are included in formal policies and plans (for example out of school children and young people), and how much funding to education reaches the most marginalised to acquire foundational learning.
- 5. A relentless focus on improving learning for all children by all stakeholders, including in low resource environments**, built on increased evidence on how to best reach marginalised learners.

By actioning these recommendations, together we can build on the current momentum on foundational learning whilst significantly increasing its benefits. It is only after such an effort that we can make sure Foundational Learning truly is for All

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