

COVID-19: Trends, Promising Practices and Gaps in Remote Learning for Pre-Primary Education

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INTRODUCTION

The first years of a child's life are critical to building the foundations of learning that help them succeed in school and beyond (UNICEF, 2017). Investment in early childhood education results in positive returns, not only for individual children, but also for building more efficient and effective education systems (UNICEF, 2019). Recent analysis estimated that every US dollar spent on pre-primary education results in US\$9 of benefits to society (Muroga et al, 2020).

This brief summarizes the key findings and observations from a report on the remote learning options – be it online, television, radio, paper- or mobile-based – that countries around the world have made available for pre-primary students and their families while schools are closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nugroho et al, 2020). The report was informed by the joint UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey of national education responses to COVID-19 and emerging good practices from 10 country case studies.

1. ENSURE PRE-PRIMARY LEARNERS ARE MEANINGFULLY INCLUDED IN COVID-19 REMOTE LEARNING RESPONSES.

The early years are a critical window for children's development, but while almost all countries introduced remote learning support during COVID-19 school closures, only 60 per cent did so for pre-primary education (UNICEF, 2020).

As of October 2020, over half a billion learners were still affected by country-wide school closures (UNESCO, 2020a; World Bank, 2020). In many countries, school closures are expected to continue, at least intermittently or locally, and, in most countries, schools are reopening with a combination of distance and in-person learning (UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, 2020). There is,

therefore, an urgent need to ensure that the youngest learners are not neglected and receive the stimulation they need to set the foundation for learning in their future. Additionally, the remote learning resources and platforms for pre-primary children will better prepare countries for future crises and high-quality, alternate modes of early learning support can complement the continued efforts to expand pre-primary education.

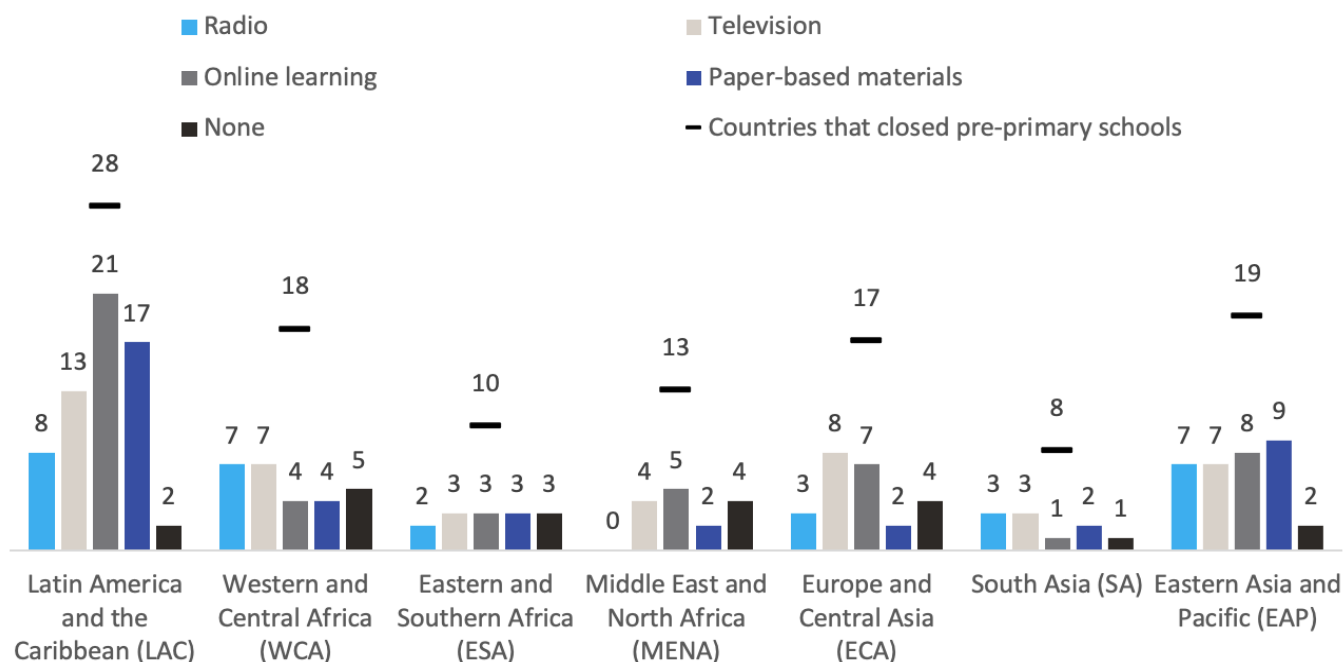
In Kosovo, for example, the number of families actively engaging with the new Edukimi në Distançë online platform for young children and their caregivers in the first two months exceeded the size of the country's preschool enrolment.

2. COMBINE MULTIPLE REMOTE MODALITIES TO INCREASE REACH AND IMPACT.

The selection of remote modality to deliver learning to pre-primary children should be based on what is available and already used by the target population. Most countries have taken measures to increase access to online learning during the pandemic (UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, 2020). Considering the scale of the digital divide between and within countries, however, most ministries that had introduced remote learning for pre-primary children were relying on more than one modality (*see Figure 1*).

Online learning is the most used modality, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is often combined with paper-based, take-home materials. Radio is least commonly used globally but can have significant reach in Western and Central Africa (UNICEF, 2020). While broadcast and online modalities can reach more children, paper- and mobile-phone-based supplements can be used to reach children and families without access to technology, who are more likely to be more marginalized even before this crisis.

Figure 1: Countries' use of remote learning modalities for pre-primary schools, by region



Source: Joint UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 (June 2020)

Note: For each modality, the total number of countries using it is depicted. Many countries use more than one modality.

In Argentina, for example, the Ministry of Education’s Seguimos Educando program broadcast educational TV and radio content, also made available on an online platform. To support households without access to the required technology, this was supplemented with printed learning resource booklets, accessed by more than 600,000 preschool children.

3. LEVERAGE EXISTING EVIDENCE-BASED, EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES.

This report showcases quality resources and approaches across different delivery modalities that align with the evidence base of what works in remote, early childhood education. A rich evidence base links television programming such as Sesame Street, Akili and Me, the use of Interactive Radio Instruction and mobile-phone-based messaging to parents with a range of children’s developmental outcomes, including cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. Some countries were able to respond quickly by using these resources as a starting point for their pre-primary remote learning offerings.

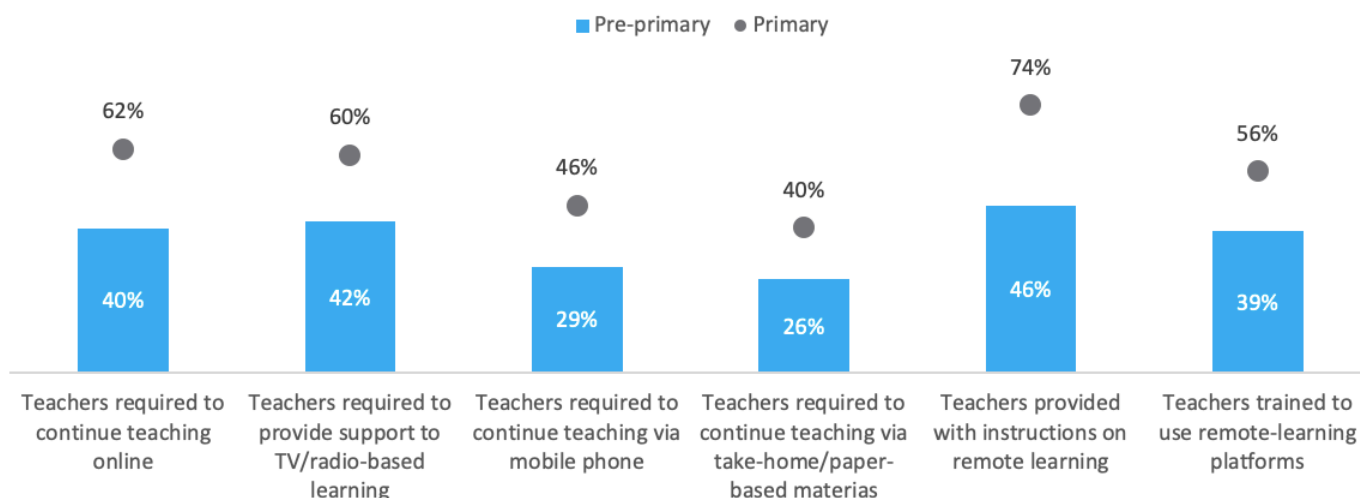
In Indonesia, for example, the Government’s Belajar dari Rumah television programming for pre-primary children initially relied heavily on Sesame Street’s localized content, which in subsequent weeks was combined with in-house-produced content.

4. ENSURE THAT PRE-PRIMARY REMOTE LEARNING OFFERINGS ARE PEDAGOGICALLY SOUND.

Regardless of the modality, remote learning support for pre-primary students should carefully consider how children in this age group learn. Quality content is defined by age-appropriateness, the extent of engagement expected from the child as well as the help or support of caregivers (Kuzmanović, 2020).

Pre-primary remote learning should incorporate pedagogical considerations, comparable to face-to-face learning. This includes clear learning goals, logical sequencing and coverage of all key development domains (including cognitive, language, physical and socio-emotional). Content should also be engaging for young learners and caregivers, relate to their daily life and maximise opportunities for interactivity. These principles can be applied in all remote learning modalities, even one-way mediums.

In Malawi, for example, Interactive Radio Instruction began broadcasting to facilitate continued learning for preschool children, with children being supported by caregivers who were trained by the Government or development partners. The recorded lessons include pauses to allow children to respond to questions or requests for actions.

Figure 2: Countries' support for pre-primary teachers, compared with primary teachers


Source: Joint UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 (June 2020)

5. ENGAGE AND SUPPORT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF PRE-PRIMARY CHILDREN AT HOME.

The role of parents and caregivers in supporting learning at home is particularly important for the youngest learners. Researchers have argued that meaningful interaction with adults is how children develop cognitive skills (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Pianta et al, 1997). The pandemic has placed parents and caregivers even more directly as first-line responders for children's care and learning as well as the family's well-being. Although families can be the greatest source of resilience for children (e.g., UNICEF, 2020b), only one in four countries were providing psychosocial support to caregivers.

The promising practices highlighted here recognise caregivers' crucial role and recognise that they are not trained teachers. Across different modalities, having set or proposed schedules were found to help parents in creating a routine for themselves and their children. Support for caregivers was also built into the offerings through guides for caregivers to reflect on children's learning, opportunities to provide feedback or seek further support.

In the Bahamas Ministry of Education's online platform, for example, each week's page includes a form for caregivers to report on how their children are using the resources. In the El Salvador Ministry of Education's online platform, weekly parent guides include a guide of expected learning outcomes and indicators for caregivers to reflect on whether they have been met.

6. SUPPORT PRE-PRIMARY TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS IN THEIR NEW ROLE.

With their training and pre-existing relationships with children and their families, pre-primary teachers and educators are well placed to undertake outreach to caregivers in supporting children's learning. Research from K-12 virtual schools in the United States found that the role of teachers is focused on curating the curriculum and providing regular feedback, coaching and support, including reaching out to connect with struggling or disengaged students (Reich et al, 2020).

The new aspects of their role rely on competencies that may be different to those that were central to their training. Some of the case studies presented in this brief include examples of how pre-primary teachers and educators are supporting children's learning through calls, texts and social messaging applications. However, pre-primary teachers were often left out of countries' training and support programs. Most respondent countries in the first wave of the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank joint survey did not provide training and instructions for pre-primary teachers on remote learning use, even though most did so for primary teachers (see Figure 2).

7. MONITOR HOW REMOTE LEARNING OFFERINGS ARE BEING USED BY CHILDREN AND CAREGIVERS.

While a growing evidence base exists to underpin many of the promising practices included here, there is much still unknown about the impact of remote learning support for pre-primary education. It is important, therefore, for providers to monitor how children and

caregivers are using and being supported to use learning supports and the effects they have on children's developmental outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation readiness include capacities to monitor processes, track access and engagement – including monitoring differences in the levels of student participation of engagement – and assess learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

There were some examples of governments and other providers monitoring access and use and utilizing the information to improve their pre-primary remote learning offering. In Turkey, for example, feedback from parents who participated in UNICEF-led community ECE programming led to new content developed targeting fathers. In a few case studies included in the report, educators or caregivers were asked to observe and report on children's progress against intended learning and development outcomes. However, there were few examples of independent tracking of objective measurements.

WHAT'S NEXT? FROM CRISIS TO RESILIENCE

With many children still affected by school closures and many countries combining remote and in-person teaching and learning as schools reopen, there is an urgent need to ensure that pre-primary learners are not left out. Making quality pre-primary remote learning resources available will better prepare countries for future crises. The unique nature of the pre-primary subsector means that broad education responses such as digitizing textbooks might not be as effective or relevant to children in the age group it serves. Careful attention is needed to meaningfully include pre-primary learners in the remote learning. This can also complement efforts to expand pre-primary education, with some of the good practices rolled out this year being mainstreamed into subsector plans. To do this, however, financing for the pre-primary education subsector should be protected or, in many instances, increased to at least 10 per cent of all national education budgets (UNICEF, 2017).

Recent studies and evidence from past experiences suggest the impact of the pandemic will be greatest for children and families who were already more vulnerable prior to the crisis. It is important, therefore, that pre-primary education responses reach all learners. While some promising practices in the report illustrate how support can be adapted or enhanced for children of vulnerable groups, systematic data on the provision of learning support to pre-primary children with disabilities

is lacking. Additionally, while there were some examples of providers monitoring access and use, there is need for the monitoring and tracking on children's progress against intended learning and development outcomes.

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