

UNICEF EDUCATION

Education Case Study

SRI LANKA

Minimising learning gaps among early-grade learners

19 August 2021

In 2020, students across Sri Lanka lost up to 141 school days due to COVID-19-related closures, with the number going up to 178 lost days in some regions. Uva and Central Provinces were particularly hard hit, with 63.2 per cent of learning days lost for first through fifth graders. About 67 per cent of students lacked access to online learning and were at risk of falling behind their peers. Provincial education authorities knew that children needed to reclaim their lost learning immediately.

When schools reopened in August 2020, the provincial government rolled out the [Learning Recovery Programme](#) to minimise the learning gap between where the learner actually is and the grade requirement. To assess students' learning levels, a task-based, diagnostic learning achievement test was the first step. Test results informed curriculum adaptation and a blended approach of classroom-based, teacher-led as well as home-based, parent-led remedial activities. Both of these packages [integrated formative assessment](#), a range of formal and informal assessment procedures conducted by teachers during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student attainment.

In the classroom, educators taught remedial activities through a hands-on approach, where students interacted with their environment in order to adapt and learn. Formative assessments were assigned at the end of each task, and if a student did not achieve the expected competency after completing the task, teachers modified their approaches and provided alternative tasks matching the level of the student to target the same competency. Students repeated those alternative tasks until they attained the desired level. At home, parents or caretakers, who were oriented by teachers on the implementation of remedial activities, followed a similar plan: they guided their boys and girls through hands-on activities, with a simple formative assessment at the end of each task. Parents, prepared with their completed assessment sheets, then

met with respective class teachers every two weeks to discuss the progress of their children.

In early April 2021, schools in Sri Lanka closed again due to increased COVID-19 infections and mortality, and they remain closed to date. The Government is hoping to reopen in August 2021; as of now, many of the remedial activities and corresponding formative assessments to gauge student learning are undertaken at home and led by parents or caregivers.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

Although UNICEF and the provincial governments experienced various challenges—for example, diagnostic assessments could not be completed as planned due to protracted school closures—preliminary results are promising.

- In Uva and Central Provinces, the Learning Recovery Programme has targeted 1,859 schools to date with 297,094 students (151,231 girls) in Grades 1 to 4.
- UNICEF helped distribute 320,000 teaching and learning materials—including workbooks for students as well as printed guidelines for both teachers and parents—for blended learning. Around 60 *per cent* of parents are sharing the given formative assessment sheets with the teachers regularly.
- UNICEF helped train 7,600 teachers in the two provinces on how to implement remedial learning in school and how to orient parents at home. This included training on formative assessment principles.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Shifts in attitudes and greater flexibility of teachers and principals are needed.** Transforming the attitudes of teachers and principals from strictly following the syllabus to

more learning-centred approaches, including the use of formative assessment, remains a hurdle. In response, provincial education authorities issued guidance in September 2020 for all principals and teachers to adhere to the learning recovery initiative, embedding it into school architecture.

- **Overall teacher capacity must be beefed up.** Formative assessment and differentiated instruction require teachers to change how they teach and intensify demand on their abilities, skills and expertise. Underlying challenges to teacher capacity, coupled with their lack of access to devices and technology that could ameliorate their ability to assess student achievement, must be addressed.
- **Monitoring and reporting remain a challenge.** Due to strict travel restrictions related to the pandemic, teachers cannot go to school and in some cases experience difficulties in meeting with parents as needed. In remote areas, connecting with parents virtually remains an obstacle, weakening communication channels between parents and teachers that are essential to the success of the country's learning recovery initiative. In April 2021, UNICEF conducted a training session for 256 teachers on the use of technology, such as WhatsApp and Zoom, to help spur better communication between teachers and parents, improve monitoring and reporting and support remote learning.

NEXT STEPS

On 20 April 2021, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education have agreed to scale up the Learning Recovery Programme to the other five provinces. This work is underway, and UNICEF is helping to develop and distribute teaching and learning materials related to the initiative to reduce learning gaps among all of the country's primary students.

Cost effectiveness: From 2020 to date, UNICEF invested approximately US \$40,000 in Sri Lanka's Learning Recovery Programme in Uva and Central Provinces, benefitting nearly 300,000 primary students. These funds leveraged another US \$45,000 from provincial departments of education as this work is expanding to the country's other five regions.

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