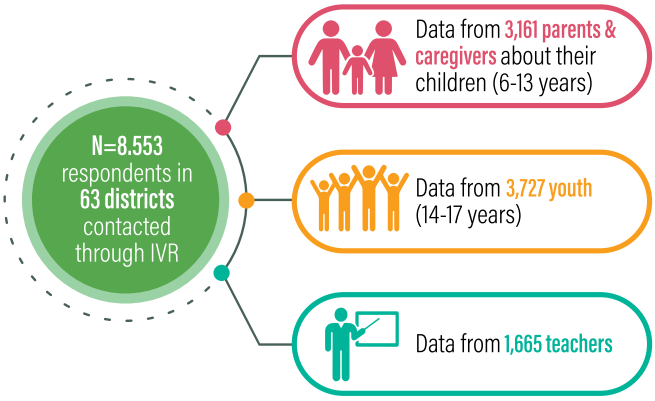
BRIEF ON LEARNING CONTINUITY AMIDST **COVID-19** SCHOOL **CLOSURES IN PAKISTAN**

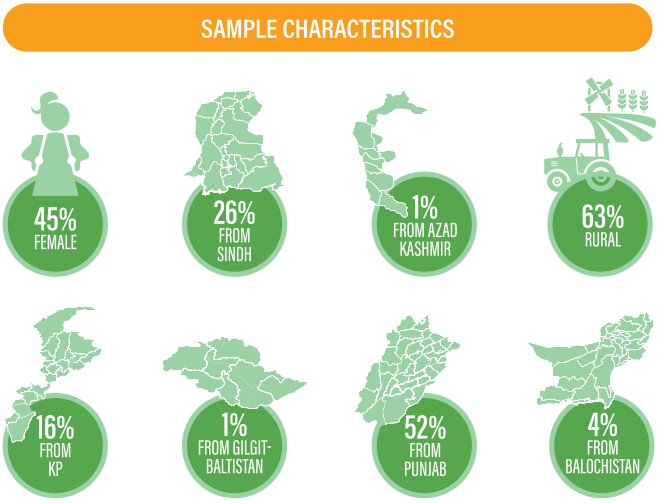
Country profile and COVID-19 impacts on schools

COVID-19 induced school closures in Pakistan began with schools in Sindh closing from February 27, 2020, and then in the rest of the country starting March 14, 2020. School closures disrupted learning for approximately 40 million students in the country. Staggered re-opening of different classes began in September 2020. During this time, students are likely to have experienced significant declines in their academic learning. However, even before schools closed, learning levels were low in the country. In 2019, 57% of grade 5 students could solve a 2-digit division problem, 59% of grade 5 students could read a simple story in Urdu/ Sindhi/Pashto, and there were large differences in learning levels between the poorest and wealthiest quartiles, as well as gender gaps in favour of boys for both literacy and numeracy (ASER Pakistan, 2019).

The Government of Pakistan designed learning continuity programs to disseminate learning materials and content through radio, TV, print, and mobile applications. Investigating the reach and effectiveness of these programs can guide ongoing learning remediation efforts on school re-opening, inform future considerations accompanying efforts to digitize learning and education in the country, including for those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), and design strengthened preparedness plans for any future disruptions.

The four key messages in this data brief are informed by a UNICEF-led rapid assessment about learning continuity in Pakistan conducted in August 2020, through Interactive Voice Response (IVR) calls conducted by Viamo. This assessment examined learners' access to and engagement with remote learning and draws on data from parents, students, and teachers, and includes teachers and learners in public and private schools. The data was weighted to ensure the representativeness of the population regarding gender and geographic location (rural-urban, and province-level). Where possible and appropriate, data have been disaggregated by gender, school-type, and geography.





KEY MESSAGE 1:

Access to technology may not translate into its use for learning

Children and youth report television and phones as the most common devices they can access

- Among children and youth, TV was the device they could access most frequently and conveniently (34% for youth and 32% among children), followed by basic phones for children. For youth, smartphones were the second most easily accessible device at 20%, while this was only 10% for children.
- 15% of youth reported having no access to technological devices.

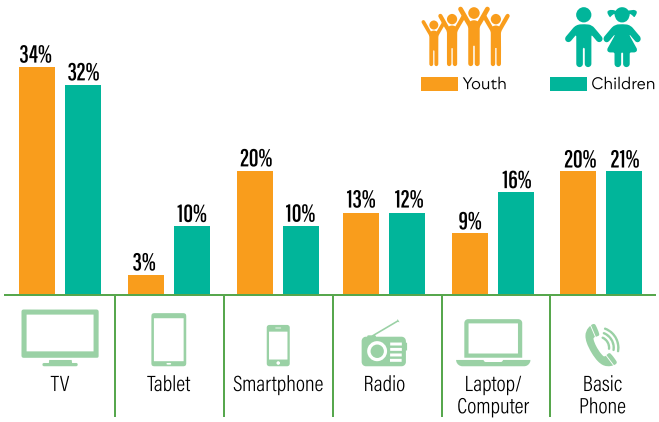


Fig. 1.1: Device children (n=3161) and youth (n=3727) had the most frequent access to

Students across age groups access different devices but actually use a diverse combination of remote learning modalities to learn

- Children and youth do not always use the devices they have access to for learning.
- Parents reported that their children used printed packs and textbooks (19%), TV programs (17%) , parental/ caregiver support (13%) and mobile phones (11%), as the most frequently used remote learning modalities. For youth, the most frequent learning modalities used were TV programs (30%), printed packs and textbooks (11%) and parental/caregiver support (10%).
- Comparing rural and urban areas, there were notable differences in terms of use of TV programs by youth for learning (32% rural, 25% urban), mobile phones (16% rural and 24% urban), and textbooks and printed packs (10% rural and 13% urban). No such rural-urban differences in parents' reports of their children's use of learning modalities were observed.

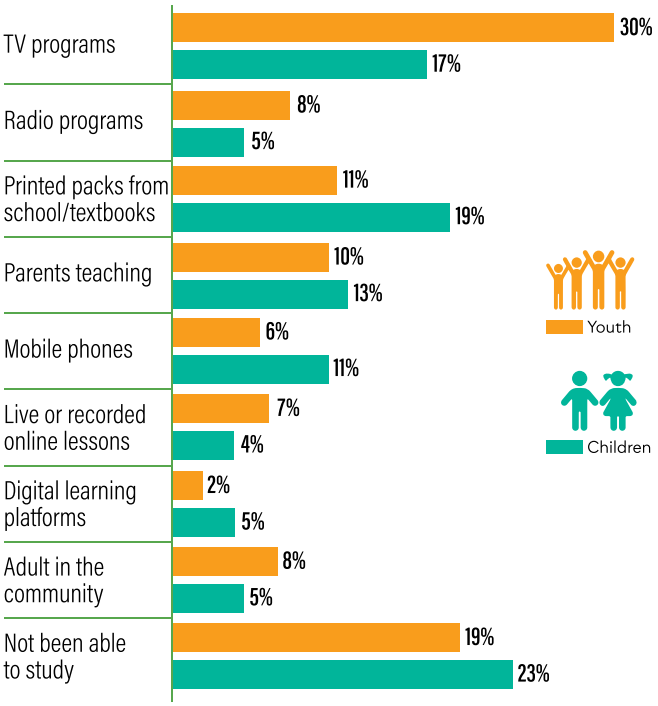


Fig. 1.2: Children (n=3161) and youths'(n=3727) methods of learning remotely

KEY MESSAGE 2:

Gaps in student-teacher communication and relationships need to be addressed

There were significant differences in the proportion of students who received learning content from their schools and how they received this content by location and type of school

- Under 1/3rd of sampled parents in urban and rural areas reported their children receiving learning content from their schools in the week before the survey. More rural youth (41%) reported receiving learning content in the week before the survey than urban youth (33%). No gender differences were found in our data.
- 38% of youth in public schools reported receiving learning materials from their schools. In contrast, only 29% of youth in low-cost private schools (fees < PKR 3,000) reported receiving learning materials.

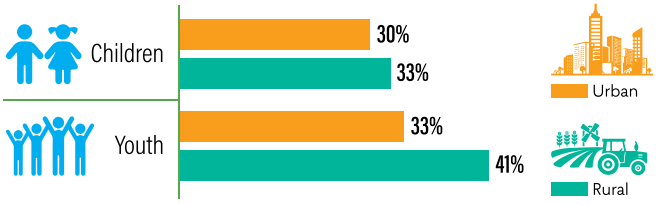


Fig. 2.1: Children and youth (total n=1,409) who received remote learning content in the last week

Basic phone calls are an important delivery mechanism for remote learning

- Regardless of their enrollment in a particular type of school, of the youth who received learning content (n=1409), across rural and urban areas phone calls were reported as the most common way of receiving learning content (29% rural and 28% urban), followed by SMS (25% rural and 20% urban). Messages through community members were also reported as a way of receiving learning content (20% rural and 22% urban). Online platforms (13% rural and 16% urban), followed by WhatsApp (13% rural and 16% urban), were the least common method.

- For youth who received learning content, the methods of receiving learning content did not differ across gender or geography (rural/urban). Phone calls were the most common way of receiving learning content for both rural and urban youth (about 29% for both groups).

KEY MESSAGE 3:

A better understanding is required of how teachers can be more engaged in distance learning and supported in doing so

Less than half the teachers in urban and rural areas taught remotely. Those who did used a variety of strategies to reach their students

- About 47% of teachers in rural and urban areas reported teaching remotely. Approximately 1/3rd of this group of teachers used live or recorded sessions to teach. Further study is required to understand which students were reached through teachers' live or recorded sessions.

- No teachers reported using phone calls and SMS specifically for teaching. However, 31% of rural teachers and 28% of urban teachers, who are currently teaching, used phone calls to reach their students. It seems that phone calls & SMS are used by teachers for communication with students and providing learning content or exercises (see above), but not for teaching and learning purposes.

- 17% of urban-based teachers and 15% of rural-based teachers reported having no contact at all with students or their parents. Moreover, of the teachers indicating that they continued to teach remotely, only 17% of urban-based teachers and 13% of rural-based teachers were able to contact and reach their students all past 5 days of the week. Further research is required to examine how learners in Pakistan were spending their time while schools were closed, how teachers were teaching, and the barriers teachers faced in reaching and supporting their students.

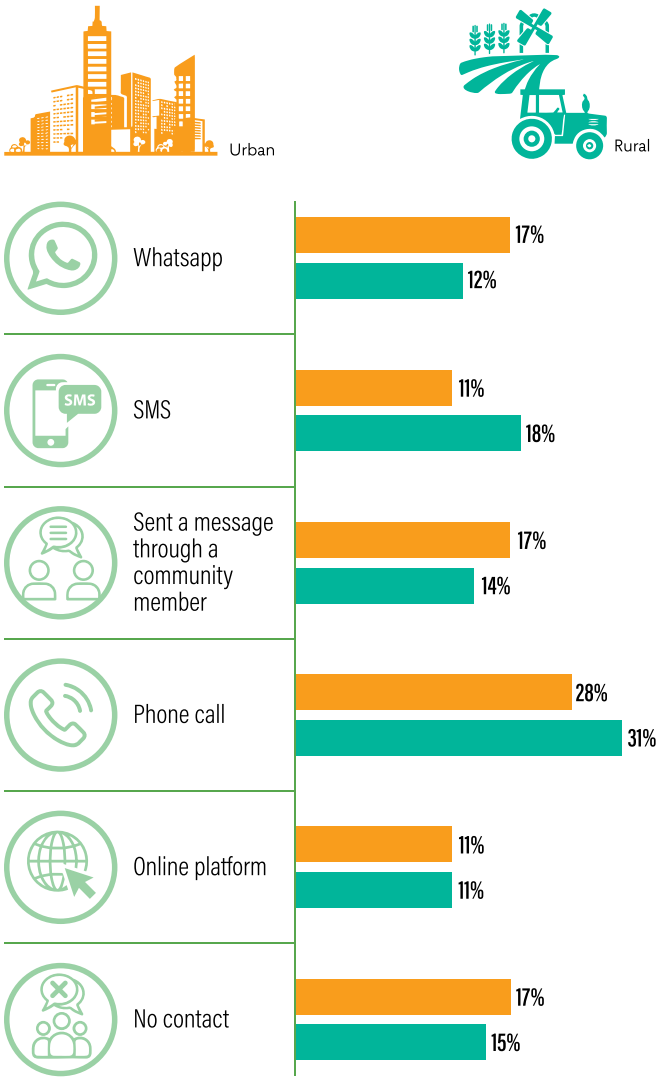


Fig. 3.1: Teachers' (n=785) methods to reach their students during school closures

KEY MESSAGE 4:

Address the technological, social and psychosocial barriers children and youth confront in learning during school closures

Differences emerge in the barriers children and youth face in spending more time on their learning during school closures

- About 1/3rd of all children and youth reported lack of access to technology as an obstacle to their learning. In addition to the lack of access to technology, other obstacles emerged that prevented children and youth from spending more time on their studies:
  - Among youth, three additional important barriers preventing them from spending more time on their

studies included: a) not feeling motivated to study (19%); b) helping in domestic chores at home (17%); c) working outside the home (15%). There are no discernible differences by gender. 34% of youth enrolled in public schools reported being unable to access technology compared to 27% of youth enrolled in low-cost private schools.

- Parents perceived the following three additional important barriers that prevented their children from spending more time on their studies: a) not feeling motivated to study (20%); b) no quiet place to study at home (13%); c) helping in domestic chores at home (11%).

– For both children and youth, there are differences in barriers to learning based on location. 26% of youth in urban areas reported not having access to technology as a barrier to learning, compared to 34% of youth in rural areas. For the sample of children, 25% of parents in urban areas indicated being unable to access technology, compared to 34% of parents in rural areas.

– Mirroring the views of parents and youth, teachers also believed a lack of access to technology (31%) and students' low motivation levels (26%) were the top two reasons preventing their students from spending more time on education during school closures.

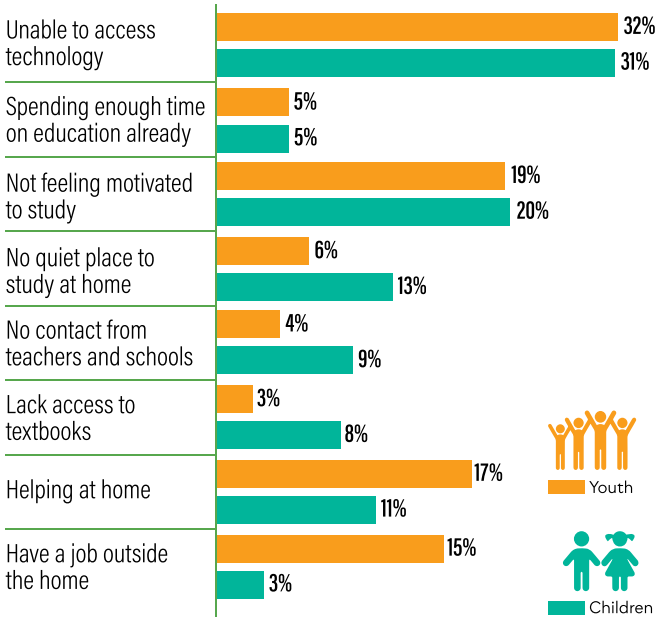


Fig. 4.1: Barriers faced by children (n=3161) and youth (n=3727) in learning during school closures

Recommendations for national-level actors

1. **Address the underutilization of devices children and youth have access to:** The devices children and youth have access to, such as smartphones, or TV, are often not being utilized for learning. To address this, strategies need to be developed both at the government and at the school level to most effectively leverage these devices, accounting for the fact that children and youth often use a combination of modalities rather than just one. For example, the use of self-study modalities such as TV and textbooks can be guided and supported through WhatsApp, phone calls and/or SMS based messaging from teachers. Children and youth also access different sets of devices and therefore, distance learning strategies must take these considerations into account.
2. **Establish monitoring systems to regularly monitor the reach, effectiveness, and quality of distance learning:** Frequent monitoring can be helpful and effective in informing the form and substance of distance learning modalities. In future, learning continuity could be monitored more systematically, with timely data collection and analysis to inform decisions around the design of remote learning. Teachers and school leaders should also be familiarized with strategies to monitor and course-correct at the school-level. This is particularly relevant since access and usage will differ by geography, school-type, gender, and learners are likely to use a combination of learning modalities.
3. **Strengthen school leaders' and teachers' professional development with respect to blended and distance learning as well as general ICT skills:** Blended and distance learning are here to stay, and thus becoming well-versed in these modalities needs to become an integral part of pre-service and in-service teacher training, as well as continuous professional development activities. Such training should go beyond skills in traditional ICTs, to include concrete and easily implementable strategies for teachers to use in their teaching so as to cover the range of technologies students have access to at home during school closures, such as basic phones, smartphones and social messaging applications. Teachers, as well as school leaders, also require training on strategies to teach using multiple learning modalities in a complementary way, as well as on developing flexible approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students.
4. **Identify and address inequities brought about by reliance on technologies for learning:** Girls, children with disabilities, speakers of minority languages, children and youth lacking access to technology, and other disadvantaged groups each face particular challenges with remote learning which need to be identified, acknowledged and addressed in teaching and learning strategies. Deeper understandings of the barriers these different groups face are required, with specific evidence-based strategies and interventions to address them as well as the structural inequities that prevent or limit engagement with remote learning.

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