

175 million children are not enrolled in pre-primary education ^[1]

UNICEF's first-ever global report dedicated to early childhood education highlights a lack of investment in pre-primary by the majority of governments worldwide

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EXCERPTS

More than 175 million children - around half of pre-primary-age children globally - are not enrolled in pre-primary education, missing a critical investment opportunity and suffering deep inequalities from the start, UNICEF warned in a new report released today. In low-income countries, the picture is much bleaker, with only 1 in 5 young children enrolled in pre-primary education.

"Pre-primary schooling is our children's educational foundation - every stage of education that follows relies on its success," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "Yet, too many children around the world are denied this opportunity. This increases their risk of repeating grades or dropping out of school altogether and relegates them to the shadows of their more fortunate peers."

A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education - UNICEF's first ever global report on pre-primary education - reveals that children enrolled in at least one year of pre-primary education are more likely to develop the critical skills they need to succeed in school, less likely to repeat grades or drop out of school, and therefore more able to contribute to peaceful and prosperous societies and economies when they reach adulthood.

Children in pre-primary education are more than twice as likely to be on track in early literacy and numeracy skills than children missing out on early learning. In Nepal, children attending early childhood education programmes were 17 times more likely to be on track in their early literacy and numeracy skills. In countries where more children attend pre-primary programmes, significantly more children complete primary school and attain minimum competencies in both reading and math by the time they finish primary school.

The report notes that household wealth, mothers' education level and geographical location are among the key determinants for pre-primary attendance. However, poverty is the single largest determining factor. Some key findings:

Role of poverty: Across 64 countries, the poorest children are seven times less likely than children from the wealthiest families to attend early childhood education programmes. For some countries, the rich-poor divide is even more apparent. For example, children from the wealthiest households in the Republic of North Macedonia are 50 times more likely to attend pre-primary education than those from the poorest.

Impact of conflicts: More than two thirds of pre-primary-age children living in 33 countries affected by conflict or disaster are not enrolled in early childhood education programmes. Yet, these are the children for whom pre-primary education has some of the greatest benefits. Pre-primary education helps young children affected by crises overcome the traumas they have experienced by giving them a structure, a safe place to learn and play, and an outlet to express their emotions.

Cycle of educational achievement: Across countries with available data, children born to mothers who have completed secondary education and above are nearly five times more likely to attend an early childhood education programme than children whose mothers have completed only primary education or have no formal education.

In 2017 an average of 6.6 percent of domestic education budgets globally are dedicated to pre-primary education, with nearly 40 percent of countries with data allocating less than 2 percent of their education budgets to this sub-sector. In West and Central Africa, 2.5 percent is allocated to pre-primary education, with 70 percent of children missing out on early education in the region. Across Europe and Central Asia, governments dedicate the highest proportion - more than 11 percent of their education budgets - to pre-primary education.

This lack of worldwide investment in pre-primary education negatively impacts quality of services, including a significant lack of trained pre-primary teachers. Together, low- and lower middle-income countries are home to more than 60 percent of the world's pre-primary-age children, but scarcely 32 percent of all pre-primary teachers. In fact, only 422,000 pre-primary teachers currently teach in low income countries. With expanding populations, assuming an ideal pupil-teacher ratio of 20 to 1, the world will need 9.3 million new pre-primary teachers to meet the universal target for pre-primary education by 2030.

“If today’s governments want their workforce to be competitive in tomorrow’s economy, they need to start with early education,” said Fore. “If we are to give our children the best shot in life to succeed in a globalized economy, leaders must prioritize, and properly resource, pre-primary education.”

UNICEF is urging governments to make at least one year of quality pre-primary education universal and a routine part of every child’s education, especially the most vulnerable and excluded children. To make this a reality, UNICEF urges governments to commit at least 10 percent of their national education budgets to scale up early childhood education and invest in teachers, quality standards, and equitable expansion.

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