Pacific learning environments

External factors' impacts on schools, school closures, learning continuity, and school infrastructure and resources.

The PILNA 2021 programme collected a great deal of information about the learning environments that students, teachers and education leaders operate within.

The sections below describe the effects of a range of external factors on school instruction, school closures and their related continuity of learning measures, school and classroom resources, and teachers' confidence in teaching.

Several external factors were investigated – pandemics, epidemics, natural disasters and factors specified by respondents. School leaders identified the extent to which these factors affected instruction in their schools. Pandemics affected the learning of nearly half of the students (43%) in the region. A lower proportion of students attended schools where natural disasters (33%) and epidemics (22%) affected instruction. The effects of these types of events varied across countries in the region.

Given the large proportion of students who attended schools that were moderately affected by these factors, it is critical that any links between these factors and student performance need to be identified. Identifying any associations between these events and social outcomes, such as student and teacher well-being, would also be valuable.

By understanding the effect these events had on educational outcomes, education stakeholders may plan for and implement strategies to reduce the negative effects of similar events in the future.

A common consequence of these external factors was school closures and, across the region, pandemics were the most common cause of school closures during 2020 and 2021. Pandemic-related school closures affected 66% of students.

This was compounded by the fact that the pandemic-related school closures had the longest duration of the external factors; 26% of students attended schools that were closed for more than eight weeks because of pandemics.

Natural disasters affected a similarly large proportion of students (67%), but for much shorter periods than pandemics, mostly for less than two weeks. School closures caused by epidemics varied across countries; they affected, on average, a smaller proportion of students and for shorter duration.

To mitigate the effects of school closures, schools throughout the region implemented learning continuity measures to support student learning. Physical learning continuity methods, such as the provision of learning materials, were the commonest measures (40–51%), although there were significant efforts by some schools to ensure learning continuity through social media and email (36%). Small proportions of students attended schools with other non-physical learning continuity measures, such as digital distribution of materials (20–24%).

This may highlight difficulties with implementing digital learning measures in the region and it appears that physical learning materials are still key to the learning experience in many countries. A future focus of research would be the exploration of any differences in the learning attainment of students who were taught by the various learning continuity measures.

A significant proportion of students in the region attended schools with resource constraints; 29–53% of students had school leaders who reported that a range of resource challenges had a moderate effect on instruction at their school. These included challenges with the school's infrastructure, such as shortages or inadequacies of classrooms; shortages of or inadequate instruction materials; and challenges with teachers, such as shortages and absenteeism. Inadequate instruction materials affected schools the most. Half the students in the region attended schools where this was a challenge. All these challenges were experienced across the region, although some countries are experiencing greater challenges in acquiring sufficient, good quality teachers.

At the classroom level, only one in three students have access to their own textbook and one in three teachers felt that they did not have enough time to work with students who are slow learners. The effect on learning attainment that these resource challenges present could be a key focus for further analysis and research.

A high proportion of students in the region have a teacher who is confident in teaching numeracy (77–94%) and literacy (70–88%). A slightly higher proportion of students had teachers who were confident in teaching numeracy. Larger proportions of students had teachers who were confident in all aspects of numeracy and literacy compared to PILNA 2018. However, a smaller proportion of students had teachers who were confident in teaching unstructured literacy subjects (such as quality of ideas in writing) as opposed to literacy subjects with more structured teaching and learning (such as spelling and vocabulary).

This suggests that, while most teachers were confident in teaching literacy and numeracy, there may be professional development needs for teaching unstructured literacy subjects.