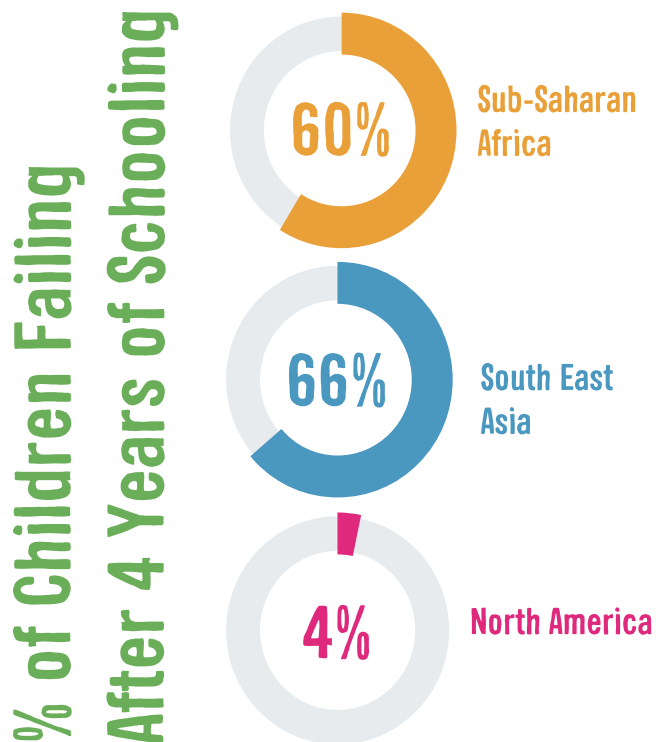


The issue

Today over 90% of the world's primary age children attend school. But sadly for many children across the globe, the education they are receiving is failing to equip them with even the most basic skills. In some parts of the world up to two-thirds of children are failing to reach the minimum benchmarks of learning.

In many schools throughout the developing world, education environments are not conducive to learning, and provide few opportunities for child-led discovery or play. Rote-learning pedagogy - where classroom time is teacher dominated and lecture-driven - remains prevalent throughout the world.



(UNESCO, 2014, Paris)



In addition to pedagogy and quality of teaching, many classrooms are severely overcrowded, leaving teachers unable to manage lessons, and students with little to no meaningful teacher interaction. In Malawi, there are 130 children per class in grade 1. In South Sudan, pupil/teacher ratios are as high as 145:1 in some areas. In Yemen, schools with 500 students were found to have as few as four teachers. (UNESCO, 2015, Paris)

Outside of school, there are a myriad of barriers to play for children in the developing world. Urbanization is fast crowding out any free spaces once open to children. For low-income families, household duties or help with family agriculture or businesses often consume children's time outside of school. In many areas of the world, the burden household chores and care of younger children often falls unequally heavy on girls. For millions of children, these factors leave little time or space for free play.

While the "Right to Play" is recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international development community very rarely addresses play provision in development goals and activities. Thanks to efforts such as the Millennial Development Goals, there is much emphasis on the importance of education, in particular on enrollment, but less consideration is given to the quality of environment students experience once they are in school. Schools without playgrounds are more common than not and funding is narrowly directed towards literacy and numeracy programs.

In the developed world, with smaller families, and greater affluence, young children now spend much less time in groups of children of mixed age, and instead have parents who provide more structured activities that replaced much of the time that was previously spent in social play with other children.

The long blocks of time devoted to free play in many early childhood programs are disappearing, crowded out by a focus on pre-academics as the foundation for school readiness. Free play happens in the leftover time, when there is nothing 'more important' to do. (Hewes J, 2010) This widespread phenomenon of academic early education in place of free play experiences is, as Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor emerita of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., puts it,

"a profound misunderstanding of how children learn."

The effect, over decades, has been a continuous and ultimately dramatic global decline in children's opportunities to play and explore in their own chosen ways. (Gray P, 2013) Expanding access to play could make an enormous contribution to learning outcomes for millions of young people.

