ICAN-ICAR Report 2025 SPOTLIGHT #2

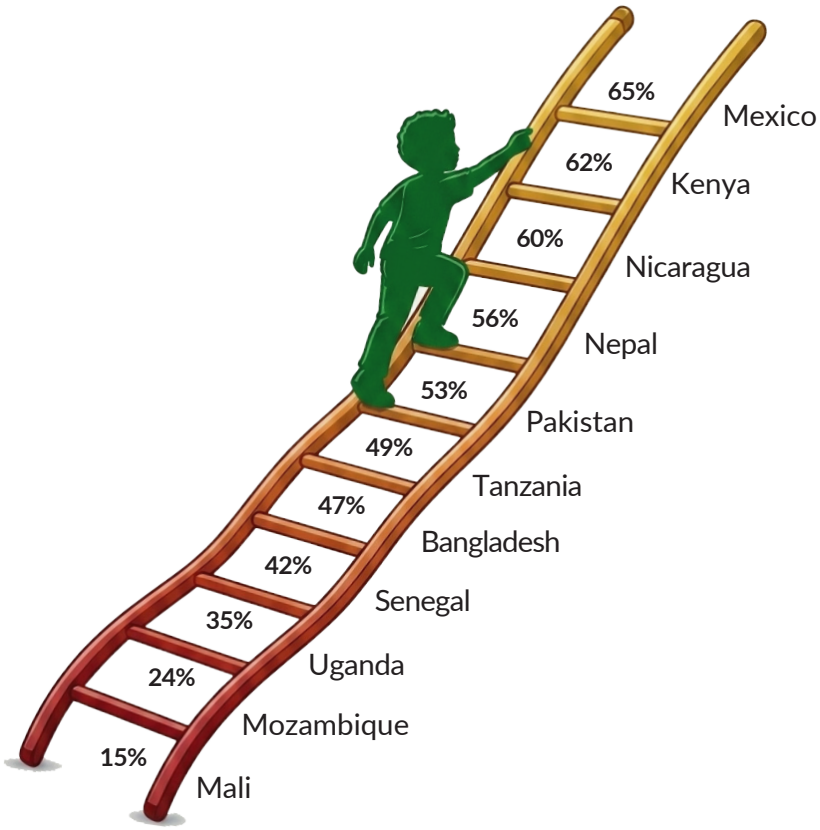
LEARNING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH:
Evidence from the PAL Network

FOCUS ON MATH LEARNING

ICAN-ICAR 2025 assessed over 89,000 children across 11 countries using household-based assessments - reaching children at home, including those never enrolled or frequently absent. This spotlight examines performance of children in 11 countries on Minimum Proficiency Level in math (MPL).

PAL NETWORK
People's Action for Learning

BASIC MATH SKILLS REMAIN OUT OF REACH FOR MANY CHILDREN



Percentage of children (aged 5-16) meeting Math MPL - all children surveyed

MPL = Minimum Proficiency Level in math (equivalent to Grade 2 competencies).

Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025 assessments.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In more than half of participating countries, fewer than half of children achieve basic Grade 2 math proficiency.
- Learning outcomes vary enormously across contexts, ranging from 15% in Mali to 65% in Mexico.
- Large cross-country differences highlight both the scale of the challenge and the potential for improvement.

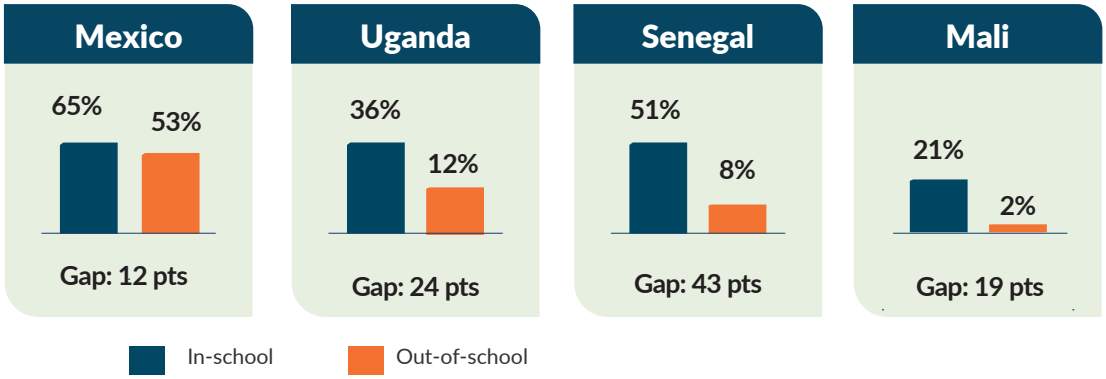
Explore results for all 11 countries in our interactive dashboard.

Filter by country, enrolment status, age, and more.

scan this to access the dashboard

SCHOOL ENROLMENT MATTERS FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES

Gaps in Math MPLs for in-school and out-of-school children for selected countries



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In every country examined, out-of-school children are substantially less likely to achieve basic math proficiency.
- The learning gap between in-school and out-of-school children ranges from 12 to 43 percentage points.
- Exclusion from school and learning deprivation reinforce each other.

BEING IN A HIGHER GRADE MATTERS MORE THAN BEING OLDER

Among same-age children across 11 countries, being in a higher grade multiplies the likelihood of reaching minimum proficiency.

BEING IN HIGHER GRADE
(holding age constant)

4.11X

More likely to
meet Math MPL

VS

BEING ONE YEAR OLDER
(in the same grade)

1.45X

More likely to
meet Math MPL

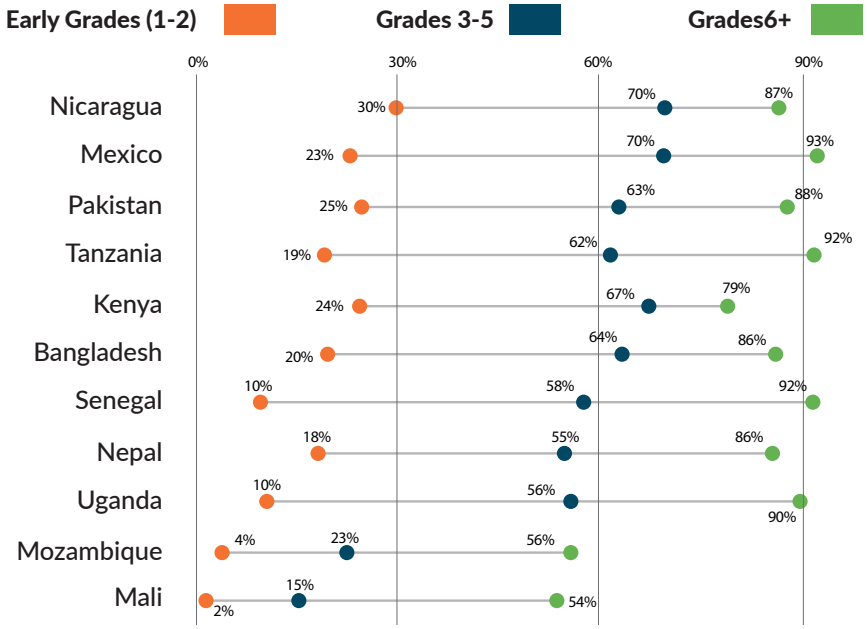
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Being in a higher grade has a much larger association with learning than simply being older.
- Staying in school matters more than age itself for foundational learning outcomes.

*Survey-weighted logistic regression with country fixed effects. Outcome: binary Math MPL (0/1). Odds Ratios (ORs) are for a 1 SD increase in grade and age respectively, holding the other constant. Grade OR = 4.11"**, Age OR = 1,45***, *** p < 0.001.*

MATH PROFICIENCY IMPROVES WITH GRADE PROGRESSION BUT COUNTRY GAPS PERSIST

Percentage of in-school children achieving Math MPL



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Learning progression differs substantially across countries: some show steep improvement across grades, while others show much flatter trajectories.
- In countries such as Mali and Mozambique, proficiency remains low even among older students, indicating that additional years of schooling alone are not sufficient to ensure learning.
- Progress during Grades 3-5 appears to be a critical predictor of later learning outcomes.
- Strong early performance does not always translate into sustained gains: Nicaragua starts ahead in early grades but experiences relatively slower gains afterwards; whereas countries with lower starting points (such as Senegal and Uganda) show steeper learning growth over time.

OPERATIONS REMAIN THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN FOUNDATIONAL MATH

Share of in-school children reaching each math sub-domain for selected countries

MATH SUB-DOMAIN	GRADE 2				GRADE 4			
	Bangladesh	Nepal	Mozambique	Mali	Bangladesh	Nepal	Mozambique	Mali
Number recognition (1–9)	95%	93%	67%	51%	99%	97%	87%	76%
Two-digit number recognition (11–99)	65%	65%	33%	26%	91%	81%	71%	58%
Number operations	31%	15%	7%	4%	58%	43%	18%	17%

This is the 2nd edition of a series of spotlight briefs showcasing evidence generated by the 2025 ICAN-ICAR common assessments of children´s foundational learning in the Global South.

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